

The Third Labor – Capturing the Cerynian Hind

Heracles' third labor was to capture the Cerynian Hind. A hind is a female red deer. This one was gigantic, had golden antlers and hoofs of brass, and was sacred to Artemis (Diana), goddess of the hunt. The creature was so quick it could outrun an arrow, which in those days was about the fastest thing imaginable.

Upon waking from a deep sleep, Heracles just caught a glimpse of gold glinting off the hind's antlers, but that set him off in pursuit. He chased it to the ends of the earth for a full year. Finally it began to tire and sought refuge in a mountain sacred to Artemis. Heracles was able to wound it there with his arrow. Then he caught up to it and carried it back to Eurystheus to prove he had accomplished his task. On the way he encountered Artemis herself, and had to beg her forgiveness for capturing her sacred deer. He then took it back to the king, but when he gave it to him it escaped and ran like lightning back to the goddess.

It continues to amaze me when I read up on these labors that almost everyone is content to simply describe them, as if they have no meaning. The only exceptions are the curious book I mentioned in the Introduction, *Sacred Mythoi of Demigods and Heroes*, edited and published by The Shrine of Wisdom, and of course the good Dr. Mees in his *Revelation in the Wilderness*. While shaky on some of the facts, such as making the hind here out to be a stag, which is male, *Sacred Mythoi* at least aims at revealing the significance of the labors to a seeker of hidden meanings, and it coordinates their order with the zodiac—originally a symbolic depiction of the spiritual path—in a sensible way. It is heartening to have its anonymous author as a compatriot in the exegesis of this fascinating group of myths.

The third labor paints a picture of seeking a spiritual goal in life. The hero wakes from a deep sleep to catch a glimpse of gold flashing in the distance, which is a call to begin the hunt. The obsession with getting along in the world of mundane necessities has often been characterized as a profound sleep in which we are

oblivious of the sublime delights that surround us on all sides. We must arise from that state of ignorance before we can begin a search for truth, or for what we might simply call creative expression. We begin life trying to please others, and often lose ourselves in the process. Reclaiming our true nature is often characterized in myths and legends as waking up.

Heracles starts out with only a nebulous idea in his mind of what he is going to go after, suggested by the alluring glint of gold. This reminds us that many of our best ideas come to us as a flash of inspiration. Awoken by the flash, we begin the quest with only a vague intimation of what we're about, often more imaginary than realistic. Yet the mere hint is enough to impel us forward. In the spiritual context, we suspect there must be more to life than getting and spending. Once we start searching for what is calling us, we begin to discover more and more about it. At first we comprehend only the barest trace of what the idea means, but it is already so attractive we want to pursue it and capture it.

Arrows symbolize directed thoughts or intentions, and a worthy goal keeps well ahead of what we imagine we have to do, therefore it outruns our ordinary "idea-arrows." A goal continues to recede for a long time as we chase after it, because our original inspiration was necessarily lacking. It was an imaginary fragment of a dream of a simpleton, but it served to get us going. We are drawn forward by our ever-improving conceptualizations. The history of science looks like this also, with each discovery opening up new regions to explore. What begins as a mere inkling becomes a full-fledged realization if it is worthy of the hunt.

It takes a long time to overcome the difficulties of actualizing our dreams. Heracles chases his vision through all the seasons and all the countries of the world, until it is worn out. In other words, the full panoply of techniques of seeking are all pursued and found to be inadequate. Our thoughts are too slow, too bogged down with practical considerations to keep up with pure inspiration. They must be refined! So we press on despite our inadequacies, if we are truly committed to accomplishing the task. If we are diligent

enough, our quarry will eventually slow down enough for us to grasp it.

Put another way by a master artist, “No matter how slow the film, Spirit always stands still long enough for the photographer It has chosen.” Minor White (*Mirrors Messages Manifestations*)

According to the myth, after trial and error has eliminated all the commonplace methods of capture, the object of the quest ascends a sacred mountain. This tells us that the goal becomes sublimated, spiritualized. What began as a presentiment has become a vibrant calling. At this stage Heracles can strike it with his best arrow, his best intention, arising from the depths of his soul. As *Sacred Mythoi* tells us, in its theosophical style that adores capitalization:

It is easy and natural for the Soul to aspire, but purely natural aspirations do not necessarily lead the Soul to a realization of those Ideals which are above and beyond Nature....

Therefore, natural aspirations must be turned, ultimately, to that which is supra-natural and divine for their ideal realization. (33)

Heracles at last catches up to his goal on the sacred heights. He has had to wound it with his arrow, or it would have continued to elude him forever. This means that the actualities of any spiritual or artistic endeavor inevitably compromise the hypothetical purity of what we hope to achieve. We may have to make compromises, which “injure” the purity of the inspiration, before we can put it to use, but if we keep at it we are sure of success. Success is after all a practical matter, where an ideal is converted into something that works in the so-called real world.

This reminds us that in the beginning our goals quite naturally are idealized, and to make them real we must adapt our theories so that they can fit with the attendant actualities. Yet we must take care not to compromise to the point where we obscure the goal completely. The mystical deer we seek must still be

recognizable for what it is: a beautiful, mythological creature. Someone less than a hero or spiritual champion might wind up with only a steaming pile of dead flesh. The political arena too is famous as a place where idealism is continuously diluted by pragmatic considerations, where professed goals become watered down until they may even be the opposite of the original thrust. But Heracles is steadfast. He does not kill the hind, he lifts it onto his shoulders to carry it back to Eurystheus, the king compelling him to perform the labors. We use the phrase shouldering a burden even today for the moment we take up the task of actualizing a vision.

Meeting the goddess en route to delivering the goods teaches us that we must be humble and acknowledge the sacred source of our mission. We are not to personally take all the credit. Creative inspiration comes from a depth that is not ours to claim. We are simply one part of a grand scheme, the tip of an iceberg.

Lastly, in spiritual matters we cannot directly pass on our achievement to another. It is ours alone. Even less can someone who has not pursued the goal be qualified to receive its fruits. We cannot act as a proxy to anyone else, much as we might want to, nor can anyone act as proxy for us. Therefore when Heracles tries to give the hind to Eurystheus it vanishes in the twinkling of an eye, returning to its divine mistress, its supernal source. The frustrations of generations of gurus, who watched their wise advice converted into satiric, dim reflections by their disciples, is reflected in this final touch.

There is a parallel in this Labor with the famous Zen story of the seeking of a mythical bull in the forest. The seeker follows its footprints into the jungle, drawn on by expectations. Here's one version: <https://www.deeshan.com/zen.htm> .

Nitya Chaitanya Yati, in his book *In The Stream of Consciousness*, retells the Zen story this way:

The need to know and the imperativeness to be arise from the

very depth of man's soul. They will go on tormenting him until he finds his roots, discovers his path, and is assured of his goal.

The idea of canceling out the seeker and the sought in the seen is typical of Zen philosophy. In "The Taming of the Bull" a man hears of a spectacular bull living deep in the jungle. He goes in search of it. After beating the bush for a long time he notices some footprints. Carefully examining the prints, he infers "There must be some animal around here that makes these kinds of marks." He follows the footprints deeper and deeper into the jungle. Soon he sees some movement in the foliage, and knows that his quarry is getting closer. Creeping in that direction, he comes upon the rear end of the bull. He thinks, "At last, I have found it!" To have a better look he circles around to the front. To his horror, the bull suddenly charges at him. He realizes his search will cost him his life, so he takes the bull by horns. It's a long and desperate fight, but the bull is ultimately conquered and the man climbs on its back. After another long journey, he finally succeeds in bringing the bull home and tying it to a tree. He is so proud to show off his prize to those in his village. Then he takes a good look at the bull. There's nothing there. There is no bull, nor is there anyone who brought the bull.

In the story the symbolic animal disappears, because the goal of the search was always a fantasy. In the third labor it runs back to the goddess, which amounts to the same thing in a world guided by gods and goddesses, as the Greeks imagined it. A spiritual search is only to rediscover what we already are.