

# Myths and Legends: The trials of Hercules

By Thomas Bulfinch, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.01.16

Word Count **1,080**

Level **1010L**



TOP: An illustration showing one of the labors of Hercules as he kills the Hydra. MIDDLE: A bronze statue of Atlas at New York City's Rockefeller Center. BOTTOM: Astronomical chart showing the centaur Sagittarius with bow and arrow. Getty Images.

*Greek and Roman mythology began thousands of years ago. There was a need to explain natural events, disasters and events in history. Myths were created about gods and goddesses that had supernatural powers, human feelings and looked human. These ideas were passed down in stories. The Romans took their myths from the Greeks. The Roman hero Hercules was half god and half human. The Greeks called him by the name Heracles.*

## **Half God, Half Human**

Juno, the sister and wife of Jupiter, king of the gods, hated Hercules because he was the son of Jupiter and a human woman. Juno sent two snakes to kill Hercules in his cradle, but he strangled them with his own hands. Then, Juno made the king of Argo order Hercules to go on dangerous missions and these adventures came to be called the "Labors of Hercules." The first was to fight and kill the Nemean lion. Hercules strangled the animal.

## **Many More Tasks To Come**

His next labor was to kill the nine-headed monster, Hydra. Every time Hercules struck one of its heads with his club, two new ones replaced it. With the help of his half-brother, Iolaus, they burned away the heads of the Hydra. However, the middle head that could not be killed was buried under a huge rock.

Next, the Augean stables that held 3,000 oxen for 30 years had to be cleaned. Hercules brought the two rivers through them, cleaning them thoroughly in one day.

His next labor involved the daughter of the king of Argos, who wanted the magical belt of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. The Amazons were a nation of warlike women who only brought up female children; the boys were either sent away or put to death. Hippolyta agreed to give Hercules the magic belt. However, Juno, disguised as an Amazon, told her women that Hercules was going to kidnap Hippolyta. The Amazons attacked Hercules and his men, which ended when Hippolyta was killed and Hercules sailed homeward with the magic belt.

Another task was to bring a herd of Spanish oxen back to the king of Argos. On the way from Africa, Hercules split one mountain into two, forming the straits of Gibraltar, or Pillars of Hercules. The oxen were guarded by a giant with three bodies and his two-headed dog, but Hercules killed the giant and his dog and brought the oxen to the king of Argos.

### **The Hardest One Of All**

The most difficult labor of all was getting the golden apples, which were a wedding gift to Juno from the goddess of the Earth. They were hidden away and guarded by daughters of the goddess of the Earth and a watchful dragon. Hercules went to Mount Atlas in Africa, where Atlas was being punished for starting a war against the gods. His punishment was having to hold the heavens on his shoulders. Atlas was the father of the goddesses guarding the apples, and Hercules thought Atlas knew where the apples were hidden. Hercules offered to hold the heavens on his shoulders, while Atlas went off to find the apples. Atlas returned with the apples and unhappily put the weight of the heavens back on his shoulders and let Hercules return with the apples to the king of Argos.

Next, Hercules had to wrestle Antaeus, the son of the god of the Earth. As the wrestling match went on, Antaeus kept getting larger and stronger every time Hercules threw him to the earth. Hercules realized Antaeus got this new strength from the earth, so he lifted Antaeus up and strangled him in the air.

The giant, Cacus, stole part of the herd of Spanish oxen, while Hercules slept. He dragged them backward by their tails to his cave, but as Hercules was driving the remainder of the herd past the cave of Cacus, the stolen oxen called out to them. Hercules found them and killed Cacus.

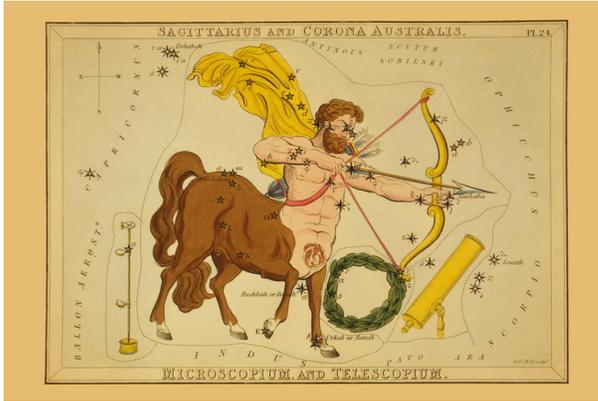
Hercules got permission from Pluto, god of the lower world, to carry Cerberus, the three-headed dog to the upper air, if he could do it without the use of weapons. Though the monster struggled, he succeeded.

### **A Love Spell Gone Wrong**

Juno was angry that Hercules completed all his tasks, so she made him go crazy. Filled with madness he killed his friend and was punished by having to be a slave of a queen for three years. During this time he began to dress as a woman and spin wool while the queen wore his lion's skin.

At the end of the three years, he married a woman and lived in peace for three years. One day, crossing a river, the centaur, who was half man and half horse, tried to kidnap his wife. Hearing her cries for help, Hercules shot an arrow into his heart. The dying centaur quietly told Hercules' wife to keep some of his blood because some day it could be used to save the love of her husband.

His wife did so and soon it seemed Hercules was falling in love with a younger woman.



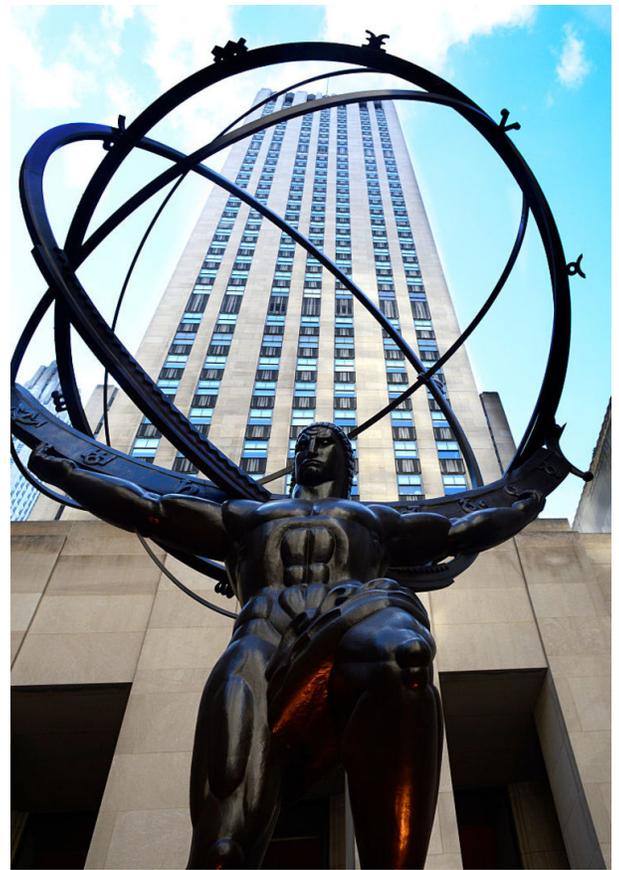
He asked his wife to bring his white robe. His wife, thinking it a good time to try her love spell, sprinkled the blood of the centaur on the robe. She carefully washed out the red color, but the power of the magic stayed in. As soon as it warmed the body of Hercules, pain spread everywhere. He pulled off the robe, but it stuck to him and tore away whole pieces of his body, and he ran off to his ship hoping to go back home to die. His wife, seeing what she had done, killed herself. Hercules made it back home, built a funeral pile of trees and gave his bow and arrows to his friend, who was half man and half goat. His friend lit the funeral pile.

### He Lives Among The Stars

Jupiter looked down and said that Hercules had conquered so much that he could not die, for only half of him is human and the other half lives forever. The gods agreed, but Juno was not happy. Jupiter wrapped Hercules in a cloud, and took him up in a four-horse chariot to dwell among the stars. As he took his place in heaven, Atlas felt the added weight.

Juno calmed down and gave Hercules her daughter Hebe in marriage.

*From "The Age of Fable, or Stories of Gods and Heroes" by Thomas Bulfinch.*



## Quiz

- 1 Which of the following MOST influenced the Amazons to attempt to kill Hercules?
- (A) They only had women and girls in their society.
  - (B) They were a society of soldiers.
  - (C) They were told that Hercules was trying to kill their queen.
  - (D) They were trying to protect Hippolyta's belt.
- 2 Which section highlights the idea that Hercules was eventually rewarded for all of his heroic deeds?
- (A) "Half God, Half Human"
  - (B) "The Hardest One Of All"
  - (C) "A Love Spell Gone Wrong"
  - (D) "He Lives Among The Stars"
- 3 Which piece of evidence BEST explains the cause of Juno's hatred of Hercules?
- (A) Hercules was the son of her husband and another woman.
  - (B) Hercules married her daughter after he was taken into the heavens.
  - (C) Hercules was able to convince Atlas to find the golden apples for him.
  - (D) Hercules dressed as a woman and spun wool for the queen.
- 4 Juno would be MOST likely to agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) Hercules earned his place in the heavens through a lifetime of hard work and sacrifice.
  - (B) Hercules should not be permitted into the heavens because he is half human.
  - (C) Jupiter was a good and faithful husband.
  - (D) Jupiter considers the feelings of all the gods when making decisions.