

Theseus and Heracles:  
Their Unique Intellects and Associated Cultures

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Today, Theseus is often regarded as a wise, intelligent hero, while Heracles is deemed to be brutish and dimwitted. In a description of Theseus, the popular website *GreekMythology.com* states, “While having all the qualities of a traditional hero, such as strength and courage, he was also intelligent and wise.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Heracles is described as displaying a “noticeable lack of intelligence or wisdom.”<sup>2</sup> However, a careful examination of the ancient Greek heroes’ stories reveals that both men possess superior, though flawed, intellect. The main difference lies in the type of intelligence each man displays. Theseus is calculated, careful, and proactive, while Heracles is cunning, witty, and reactive. The type of intellect each hero possesses reflects the culture that adopted him. Founder of Athens and its democracy,<sup>3</sup> Theseus demonstrates the type of wisdom most ideal for a political leader. Heracles, idolized by the Spartans during times of war,<sup>4</sup> possesses the quick-wittedness needed to survive in battle. Despite being adopted by these cultures, Theseus and Heracles do not display perfect intelligence. Both heroes fail to act rationally when manipulated by the gods or overcome by emotion, which effectively humanizes them. Ultimately, Theseus and Heracles each display different types of superior, yet flawed, intellect that reflect the cultures most closely associated with them.

The Greek hero Theseus is son of Aegeus, King of Athens, and Aithra, princess of Troezen. However, Theseus’s paternity is kept secret during his childhood, and rumor spreads that he is actually the son of Poseidon. Upon Aegeus’s request, Theseus does not discover his birthright and cannot travel to Athens until he is strong enough to lift a rock beneath which

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1. “Theseus,” *GreekMythology.com*, accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Heroes/Theseus/theseus.html>.

2. “Heracles,” *GreekMythology.com*, accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.greekmythology.com/Myths/Heroes/Heracles/heracles.html>.

3. W. R. Connor et al., *The Quest for Theseus* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 42.

4. Emma Stafford, *Herakles* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 139-141.

Aegeus has placed sandals and a sword. During his journey to Athens, Theseus earns fame by murdering several villains who menaced innocent travelers. Theseus further elevates his heroic status by capturing the Marathonian Bull. His crowning achievement, however, is killing a monster called the Minotaur and escaping the complicated labyrinth that imprisoned it.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, Theseus becomes a renowned king of Athens. He is credited with consolidating the city-state and establishing its democratic political system.<sup>6</sup>

The Greek hero Heracles is the son of Alcmena and great-great-grandson of the hero Perseus. Heracles is conceived when Zeus disguises himself as Alcmena's husband Amphitryon and impregnates her. That same night, Amphitryon himself impregnates Alcmena with Heracles's twin, Iphikles. Consequently, Zeus is Heracles's biological father, but the hero is raised by Amphitryon. Because Zeus's wife Hera is enraged by Zeus's infidelity, she frequently causes Heracles to suffer. Nonetheless, Heracles becomes the most famous hero in ancient Greece. Heracles is most remembered for successfully completing twelve tumultuous labors ordered by his older cousin Eurystheus. Heracles also helps the gods defeat the Giants, children of the Earth who attempt to overthrow the Olympians. When Heracles is on his deathbed, he is raised to heaven and receives immortality.<sup>7</sup>

Theseus's unique intelligence is evidenced by the strategic approach he takes to earning *kleos*, or glory. Theseus deliberately chooses to perform feats that have the potential to earn him fame. He often performs labors that benefit the general populace, aware that doing so will win its

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5. Apollodorus and Gaius Julius Hyginus, *Apollodorus' Library and Hyginus' Fabulae*, trans. R. Scott Smith and Stephen M. Trzaskoma (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), 70-73.

6. Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (London: William Heinemann Limited, 1914), accessed December 8, 2015, <http://www.archive.org/stream/plutarchslives01plutuoft>.

7. Apollodorus and Hyginus, *Library and Fabulae*, 28-42.

admiration. Shortly after traveling to Athens to claim his birthright, Theseus sets out to capture the Marathonian Bull. Plutarch explains, “Theseus, desiring to be at work, and at the same time courting the favour of the people, went out against the Marathonian Bull, which was doing no small mischief to the inhabitants of Tetrapolis.”<sup>8</sup>

Theseus similarly chooses to face challenges that have the potential to earn him glory during his journey to Athens. Although the sea route to Athens from Theseus’s childhood home is known to be safer and faster than the land route, Theseus travels to Athens by land along the Saronic Gulf, wishing to undertake a journey suitable for a hero. During his travels, Theseus meets seven perverse murderers whom he kills in the same way the murderers killed their victims. First, he kills Periphetes, the Club-Bearer, by beating him to death with his club, just as Periphetes beat his victims to death.<sup>9</sup> Next, he faces Sinis, a man who forced travelers to bend pine trees to the ground, causing the travelers to be catapulted to their deaths. Theseus kills Sinis by forcing him to bend a pine tree.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Theseus kills Phaia, a wild sow, and Sceiron, a man who kicked travelers off a cliff while they were washing his feet. Theseus also wrestles and kills Cercyon, who frequently forced travelers to face him in a deadly wrestling match.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, Theseus kills Damastes, also known as Polypemon. Damastes made travelers fit perfectly in his bed by hammering and stretching short travelers and sawing parts of the body off of tall travelers. Damastes is killed when Theseus fits him to the length of the bed.<sup>12</sup> By strategically

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8. Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Lives*, 27.

9. Apollodorus and Hyginus, *Library and Fabulae*, 71-72.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Apollodorus and Hyginus, *Library and Fabulae*, 71-72.

choosing to face these murderers and capture the Marathonian Bull, Theseus improves the well-being of the general populace. As a result, he earns its admiration and elevates his status as a hero.

Theseus also takes a proactive role in his hero's journey when he volunteers to fight the Minotaur, a monster that is half man and half bull. Every nine years, King Minos forces seven Athenian men and seven Athenian women to enter the Labyrinth, a complicated maze in which the Minotaur is imprisoned. The victims would either be killed by the Minotaur or starve to death, unable to find their way out of the maze.<sup>13</sup> Plutarch explains, "These things troubled Theseus, who, thinking it right not to disregard but to share in the fortune of his fellow-citizens, came forward and offered himself independently of the lot. The citizens admired his noble courage and were delighted with his public spirit...."<sup>14</sup> Once again, Theseus wisely chooses to undertake a challenge that will result in admiration and glory.

Theseus also demonstrates his intelligence when he devises a plan before entering the Labyrinth. First, he disguises two Athenian men as women. By doing so, he is able to take nine men and five women with him into the Labyrinth, rather than seven and seven.<sup>15</sup> This strategic plan provides Theseus with extra man power when he faces the Minotaur. Additionally, Theseus receives a clew from King Mino's daughter, Ariadne. Upon her suggestion, Theseus decides to use it to mark the path to the entrance of the maze. Consequently, Theseus undertakes the

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13. Ibid., 72-73.

14. Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, 33.

15. T.K. Seung, *Plato Rediscovered: Human Value and Social Order* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), accessed December 8, 2015, <https://books.google.com/books?id=gcKOjRdfi9AC&printsec>.

challenge with a well thought-out plan and succeeds in strangling the Minotaur and escaping the Labyrinth.<sup>16</sup>

While Theseus takes a strategic, proactive approach to his hero's journey, Heracles tends to be more reactive. Rather than choosing to undertake challenges that will earn him glory, Heracles is thrown into his hero's journey. He is forced to perform his twelve famous labors either to purify himself from the blood-guilt of killing his children or because he is ordered to by his elder cousin Eurystheus.<sup>17</sup> Heracles also rarely devises plans on how to complete feats in advance, as Theseus did when fighting the Minotaur. Instead, Heracles develops witty plans in the moment, cleverly reacting to whatever hardships he is forced to face. For instance, Heracles encounters Antaios, a Libyan King who kills travelers by forcing them to wrestle. Because Antaios is son of Ge, the Earth, he becomes stronger when he touches the ground. Heracles cleverly defeats Antaios by lifting him in the air and breaking his back.<sup>18</sup>

Heracles devises several other clever tricks when performing the aforementioned twelve labors. During his first labor, he faces the Nemean Lion and discovers no weapon can pierce its skin. When the lion flees into a cave with two mouths, he barricades one of the entrances and attacks the lion as it escapes through the other, strangling it to death.<sup>19</sup> Heracles displays similar wits while completing his second labor, in which he faces the Lernaian Hydra. The Hydra has nine heads, one of which is immortal. When Heracles is attempting to kill the monster, he discovers that every time one mortal head is cut off, two grow back in its place. He promptly

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16. Apollodorus and Hyginus, *Library and Fabulae*, 72-73.

17. *Ibid.*, 51.

18. *Ibid.*, 35-36.

19. *Ibid.*, 30.

begins burning the stumps of the heads and buries the immortal head beneath a rock.<sup>20</sup> During his fifth labor, Heracles bets King Augeias that he can clear the dung out of his cattle stables in a single day. To do so, he diverts two local rivers, causing them to flow through the stables and wash away the dung.<sup>21</sup> Heracles also displays superior wit during his eleventh labor, in which he must retrieve the Golden Apples from the Hesperides, nymphs who reside on Mount Atlas. Rather than retrieving the apples himself, Heracles sends Atlas, a Titan condemned to hold up the sky. Heracles takes the sky from Atlas, but upon his return, Atlas refuses to take it back. Heracles cleverly promises to continue holding up the sky but asks Atlas to take it from him for a moment so he can place a pillow on his head. When Atlas takes the sky from Heracles, Heracles leaves with the Golden Apples.<sup>22</sup> Heracles relies on his quick-wit to complete the twelve labors, and his clever intelligence win him a heroic status.

The types of intelligence Theseus and Heracles display reflects the different cultures most closely associated with the heroes. Theseus's strategic intelligence reflects the political role he plays in Athenian society. By the fifth century, Theseus is credited with uniting Attica under a centralized government, establishing Athens as the capital, and founding the democratic political system.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it is appropriate that Theseus is portrayed as thoughtful, strategic, and proactive, for these are often seen as ideal traits for a political leader.

In contrast, Heracles is most closely associated with Sparta, especially during periods of war. Heracles is especially idolized by the Spartans during the late fourth century BC, when the

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20. Apollodorus and Hyginus, *Library and Fabulae*, 30.

21. *Ibid.*, 32.

22. *Ibid.*, 35.

23. W. R. Connor et al., *Quest for Theseus*, 42.

city-state is fighting to regain dominance over the Greek peninsula after losing the Battle of Leuktra.<sup>24</sup> Heracles was also prominent in Sparta during the seventh century BC, at which time the poet Tyrtaios describes Heracles “as an apt role-model for a city-state which had been expanding its territory during the eighth century and was fighting to maintain its position in Tyrtaios’ time.”<sup>25</sup> Because warriors in battle must be cunning and reactive to survive, it is appropriate that Heracles is portrayed with such quick-wit.

While Theseus and Heracles possess superior intellects that reflect the corresponding cultures that adopt them, both heroes also fail to act intelligently at times. These moments of irrationality and stupidity humanize the heroes, making them more relatable to the Athenians and Spartans who idolize them. When the gods decide to punish the heroes, both Theseus and Heracles fail to act rationally and murder their children. Theseus’s son, Hippolytus, scorns the goddess Aphrodite by joining the cult of Artemis. In revenge, Aphrodite makes Theseus’s wife, Phaedra, lust for Hippolytus and attempt to seduce him. When Hippolytus rejects Phaedra, she kills herself and leaves a note saying Hippolytus raped her. Theseus immediately condemns Hippolytus to death.<sup>26</sup> Heracles is also driven to kill his children by a jealous goddess. Infuriated that Zeus had an affair with Heracles’s mother Alcmene, Zeus’s wife Hera makes Heracles go insane. Heracles then kills the children he bore with Megara by throwing them into a fire.<sup>27</sup> In line with the ancient Greek belief that the gods ruled above all, Heracles and Theseus’s intelligence is unable to overpower the will of the gods.

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24. Stafford, *Herakles*, 141.

25. *Ibid.*, 139.

26. Euripides, *Hippolytus*, trans. Gilbert Murray (London: George Allen & Sons, 1911), accessed December 8, 2015, <https://archive.org/stream/hippolytuseurip03murrgoog>.

27. Apollodorus and Hyginus, *Library and Fabulae*, 29.



Theseus and Heracles also fail to act intelligently when overcome with emotion. Their actions reflect the common human struggle to resist giving into one's anger and lust. Theseus often acts irrationally when overcome by sexual desire. He and his best friend, Pirithous, pledge to marry daughters of Zeus. Consequently, Theseus kidnaps Helen of Troy, considered to be the most beautiful woman in Greece, to wed. Because Helen is not yet of marriageable age, Theseus leaves Helen poorly guarded and in the care of his mother, Aithra. Theseus and Pirithous then travel to the Underworld to win Persephone, Hades's wife, for Pirithous. Hades, ruler of the Underworld, asks the men to sit down in the chair of Lethe to receive his hospitality. However, the men become bound to the chair. During the time the men are bound, Helen's brothers, the Dioscouroi, rescue Helen and kidnap Theseus's mother Aithra. Pirithous remains bound in the Underworld for eternity, and Theseus only escapes when Heracles happens upon him during his trip to the Underworld and pulls him free.<sup>28</sup> Theseus's actions are incredibly unintelligent, since a mortal attempting to steal the wife of an all-powerful god logically results in the god inflicting severe punishment on the mortal.

Heracles similarly fails to act rationally when overcome by emotion. However, rather than giving in to lust, he gives in to rage. When Heracles is a child, he kills his music teacher Linos by beating him with his lyre. Heracles does so because he is enraged that Linos hit him in punishment.<sup>29</sup> When Heracles is grown, he again acts irrationally out of anger. After murdering a man named Iphitos, Heracles becomes afflicted with disease. Heracles seeks the advice of the Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi, on how to get rid of the illness. However, the Pythia refuses to prophecy for Heracles. Enraged, Heracles attempts to steal the tripod from the Temple of Apollo,

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28. Ibid., 74-75.

29. Apollodorus and Hyginus, *Library and Fabulae*, 28.

where the Pythia is a priestess. Apollo fights Heracles until Zeus sends a thunderbolt between them.<sup>30</sup> Because stealing from and fighting with a god is known to typically result in eternal punishment or death, Heracles's actions are extremely unintelligent. Both he and Theseus fail to act rationally when they are overcome with emotion. This makes the heroes more relatable to the people who idolize them, since every human being struggles to resist giving in to their emotions.

Ultimately, Theseus and Heracles display different types of intelligence, which reflect the cultures most closely associated with them. Theseus, who is a renowned political figure in Athenian society, is strategic, thoughtful, and proactive. This is evidenced by the calculated way Theseus chooses to undertake challenges that will earn him glory. Theseus's strategic intelligence is also demonstrated when he devises a plan for how to defeat the Minotaur and escape the Labyrinth before entering the maze. In contrast, Heracles, who is admired by the Spartans during periods of war, is quick-witted, cunning, and reactive. Heracles's quick-thinking is demonstrated when he devises clever tricks to complete the twelve labors as new obstacles arise. The distinction between the two heroes' types of intelligence is reflected by the language used to describe the men in several modern scholarly articles. In *The Quest for Theseus*, Dr. Ruth B. Edwards describes Theseus, writing, "...that he possessed not only physical strength, but courage and a resolute spirit, combined with *good sense* and *intelligence*."<sup>31</sup> (italics added) In contrast, Dr. Emma Stafford explains that Heracles "...often has to apply *a degree of cunning* when sheer brawn is not enough" (italics added).<sup>32</sup> While both heroes possess superior, albeit different, intellects, Theseus and Heracles's intelligence is flawed. Both men fail to act rationally

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30. Ibid., 37-38.

31. W. R. Connor et al., *Quest for Theseus*, 9.

32. Stafford, *Herakles*, 23.

when they face punishment from the gods or are overcome with emotion. These weaknesses humanize the heroes, making them more relatable to the people who idolize them. Theseus and Heracles serve as role models for different ancient Greek societies. Accordingly, Theseus and Heracles each possess a unique form of superior, although imperfect, intelligence.

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