

**He was
the strongest
of all the
heroes . . .**

The Labors of Hercules

retold by Rex Warner

Hercules suffered much during his life, but after his death he became a god. His mother was Alcmena,¹ his father was Jupiter, and he was the strongest of all the heroes who lived in his time.

All through his life he was pursued by the hatred and jealousy of Juno, who tried to destroy him even in his cradle. She sent two great snakes to attack the sleeping baby, but Hercules awoke, grasped their necks in his hands, and strangled them both.

Before he was eighteen, he had done many famous deeds in the country of Thebes, and Creon, the king, gave him his daughter in marriage. But he could not long escape the anger of Juno, who afflicted him with a sudden madness, so that he did not know what he was doing, and in a fit of frenzy killed both his wife and his children. When he came to his senses, in horror and shame at what he had done, he visited the great cliffs of Delphi,² where the eagles circle all day and where Apollo's oracle³ is. There he asked how he could be purified of his sin, and he was told by the oracle that he must go to Mycenae⁴ and for twelve years obey all the commands of the cowardly king Eurystheus,⁵

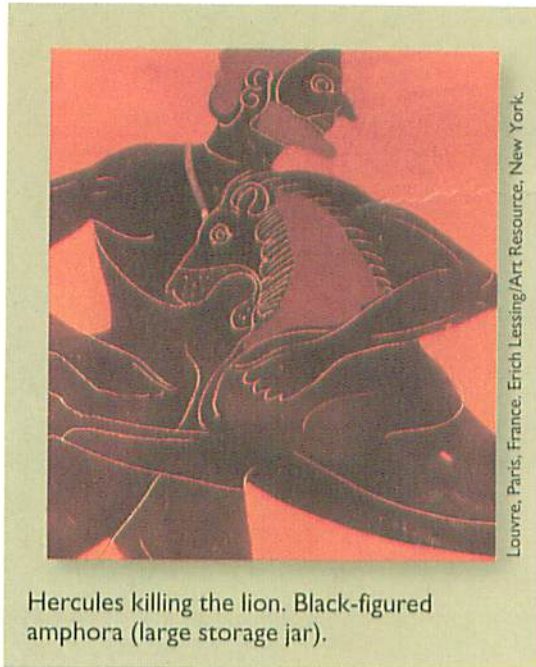
his kinsman. It seemed a hard and cruel sentence, but the oracle told him also that at the end of many labors, he would be received among the gods.

Hercules therefore departed to the rocky citadel⁶ of Mycenae that looks down upon the blue water of the bay of Argos. He was skilled in the use of every weapon, having been educated, as Jason was, by the wise centaur Chiron.⁷ He was tall and immensely powerful. When Eurystheus saw him, he was both terrified of him and jealous of his great powers. He began to devise labors that would seem impossible, yet Hercules accomplished them all.

First he was ordered to destroy and to bring back to Mycenae the lion of Nemea, which for long had ravaged all the countryside to the north. Hercules took his bow and arrows and, in the forest of Nemea, cut himself a great club, so heavy that a man nowadays could hardly lift

it. This club he carried ever afterwards as his chief weapon.

He found that his arrows had no effect on the tough skin of the lion, but as the beast



Hercules killing the lion. Black-figure amphora (large storage jar).

He found that his arrows had no effect on the tough skin of the lion . . .

1. **Alcmena** (alk·mē'nə).

2. **Delphi** (del'fī).

3. **oracle**: person through whom the gods were consulted. The oracle at Delphi was a woman who would go into a trance and then utter strange sounds. Temple priests interpreted these as words of the god Apollo.

4. **Mycenae** (mī·sē'nē): See map on page 498.

5. **Eurystheus** (yūō·ris'thē·əs).

6. **citadel** (sit'ə·del'): fortress.

7. **centaur** (sen'tōr') **Chiron** (kī'rān'): A centaur is a mythical creature with the body of a horse and the torso, arms, and head of a human. (Jason was another legendary Greek hero.)

WORDS TO OWN

afflicted (ə·flikt'id) v.: caused pain or suffering to.

ravaged (rav'ijd) v.: ruined; violently destroyed.

sprang at him, he half stunned it with his club; then, closing in with it, he seized it by the throat and killed it with his bare hands. They say that when he carried back on his shoulders to Mycenae the body of the huge beast, Eurystheus fled in terror and ordered Hercules never again to enter the gates of the city, but to wait outside until he was told to come in. Eurystheus also built for himself a special strong room of brass into which he would retire if he was ever again frightened by the power and valiance⁸ of Hercules. Hercules himself took the skin of the lion and made it into a cloak which he wore ever afterwards, sometimes with the lion's head covering his own head like a cap, sometimes with it slung backwards over his shoulders.

The next task given to Hercules by Eurystheus was to destroy a huge water snake, called the Hydra, which lived in the marshes of Argos, was filled with poison, and had fifty venomous heads. Hercules, with his friend and companion, the young Iolaus,⁹ set out from Mycenae and came to the great cavern, sacred to Pan, which is a holy place in the hills near Argos. Below this cavern a river gushes out of the rock. Willows and plane trees surround the source, and the brilliant green of grass. It is the freshest and most delightful place. But as the river flows downwards to the sea, it becomes wide and shallow, extending

8. **valiance** (val'yəns): courage; determination.
 9. **Iolaus** (i'ō-lā'əs).

into pestilential marshes, the home of stinging flies and mosquitoes. In these marshes they found the Hydra, and Hercules, with his great club, began to crush the beast's heads, afterwards cutting them off with his sword. Yet the more he labored, the more difficult his task became. From the stump of each head that

he cut off, two other heads, with forked and hissing tongues, immediately sprang. Faced with an endless and increasing effort, Hercules was at a loss what to do. It seemed to him that heat might prove more powerful than cold steel, and he commanded Iolaus to burn the root of each head with a red-hot iron immediately after it was severed from the neck. This plan was successful. The heads no longer sprouted up again, and soon the dangerous and destructive animal lay dead, though still writhing in the black marsh water among the reeds. Hercules cut its body open and dipped his arrows in the blood. Henceforward these

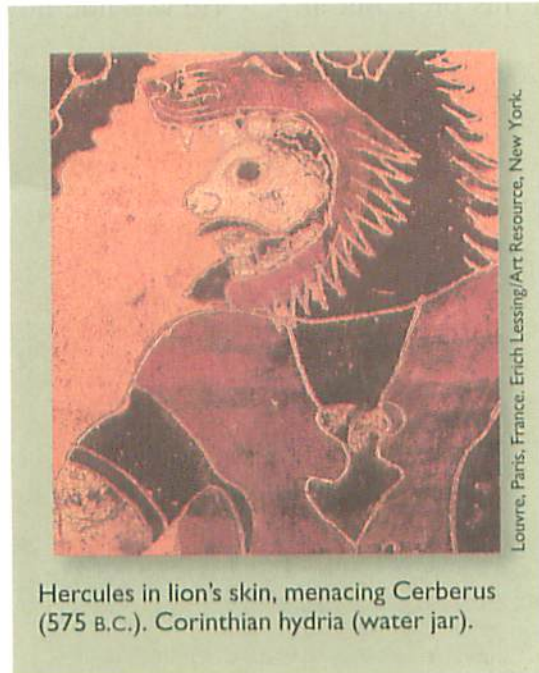
arrows would bring certain death, even if they only grazed the skin, so powerful was the Hydra's poison.

Eurystheus next ordered Hercules to capture and bring back alive a stag¹⁰ sacred to

10. **stag**: full-grown male deer.

WORDS TO OWN

venomous (ven'am·əs) *adj.*: poisonous; malicious.
pestilential (pes'tə-len'shəl) *adj.*: causing disease; deadly.



Hercules in lion's skin, menacing Cerberus (575 B.C.). Corinthian hydria (water jar).

Hercules himself took the skin of the lion and made it into a cloak which he wore ever afterwards . . .

Diana and famous for its great fleetness of foot, which lived in the waste mountains and forests and never yet had been approached in the chase. For a whole year Hercules pursued this animal, resting for the hours of darkness and pressing on next day in its tracks. For many months he was wholly outdistanced; valleys and forests divided him from his prey. But at the end of the year the stag, weary of the long hunt, could run no longer. Hercules seized it in his strong hands, tied first its forelegs and then its hind legs together, put the body of the beast, with its drooping antlered head, over his neck, and proceeded to return to the palace of King Eurystheus. However, as he was on his way through the woods, he was suddenly aware of a bright light in front of him, and in the middle of the light he saw standing a tall woman or, as he immediately recognized, a goddess, grasping in her hands a bow and staring at him angrily with her shining eyes. He knew at once that this was the archer goddess Diana, she who had once turned Actaeon¹¹ into a stag and who now was enraged at the loss of this other stag which was sacred to her. Hercules put his prey on the ground and knelt before the goddess. "It was through no desire of my own," he said, "that I have captured this noble animal. What I do is done at the command of my father Jupiter and of the

11. Actaeon (ak-té'ōn).

oracle of your brother Apollo at Delphi." The goddess listened to his explanation, smiled kindly on him, and allowed him to go on his way when he had promised that, once the stag had been carried to Eurystheus, it would be set free again in the forests that it loved. So Hercules accomplished this third labor.

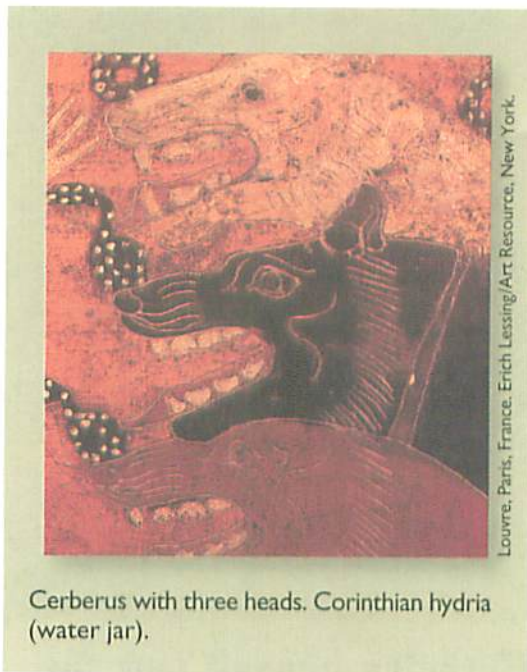
He was not, however, to be allowed to rest.

Eurystheus now commanded him to go out to the mountains of Erymanthus¹² and bring back the great wild boar that for long had terrorized all the neighborhood. So Hercules set out once more, and on his way he passed the country where the centaurs had settled after they had been driven down from the north in the battle that had taken place with the Lapiths at the wedding of Pirithous.¹³ In this battle they had already had experience of the hero's strength, but still their manners were rude and rough. When the centaur Pholus offered Hercules some of their best wine to drink, the other centaurs became jealous. Angry words led to blows, and soon Hercules was

forced to defend himself with his club and with his arrows, the poison of which not only caused death, but also the most extreme pain. Soon he scattered his enemies in all directions, driving them over the plains and rocks. Some he dashed to the ground with his club; others, wounded by the poisoned arrows, lay writhing

12. Erymanthus (er'ō-man'thās).

13. Pirithous (pī-rith'ō-ās).



Cerberus with three heads. Corinthian hydria (water jar).

From the stump of each head that he cut off, two other heads, with forked and hissing tongues, immediately sprang.

Louvre, Paris, France. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

in agony or kicking their hooves in the air. Some took refuge in the house of the famous centaur Chiron, who had been schoolmaster to Hercules and who, alone among the centaurs, was immortal. As he pursued his enemies to this good centaur's house, shooting arrows at them as he went, Hercules, by an unhappy accident, wounded Chiron himself. Whether it was because of grief that his old pupil had so injured him, or whether it was because of the great pain of the wound, Chiron prayed to Jupiter that his immortality should be taken away from him. Jupiter granted his prayer. The good centaur died, but he was set in Heaven in a constellation of stars which is still called either Sagittarius or else the Centaur.

Hercules mourned the sad death of his old master. Then he went on to Erymanthus. It was winter and he chased the great boar up to the deep snow in the passes of the mountains. The animal's short legs soon grew weary of plowing through the stiff snow and Hercules caught it up when it was exhausted and panting in a snowdrift. He bound it firmly and slung the great body over his back. They say that when he brought it to Mycenae, Eurystheus was so frightened at the sight of the huge tusks and flashing eyes that he hid for two days in the brass hiding place that he had had built for himself.

The next task that Hercules was ordered to do would have seemed to anyone impossible. There was a king of Elis called Augeas,¹⁴ very rich in herds of goats and cattle. His stables, they say, held three thousand oxen, and for ten years these stables had never been cleaned. The dung and muck stood higher than a house, hardened and caked together. The smell was such that even the herdsmen, who were used to it, could scarcely bear to go near. Hercules was now ordered to clean these stables, and going to Elis, he first asked the king to

14. Augeas (ô-jē'as).

promise him the tenth part of his herds if he was successful in his task. The king readily agreed, and Hercules made the great river Alpheus change its course and come foaming and roaring through the filthy stables. In less than a day all the dirt was cleared and rolled away to the sea. The river then went back to its former course, and for the first time in ten years, the stone floors and walls of the enormous stables shone white and clean.

Hercules then asked for his reward, but King Augeas, claiming that he had performed *the* task not with his own hands but by a trick, refused to give it to him. He even banished his own son, who took the side of Hercules and reproached his father for not keeping his promise. Hercules then made war on the kingdom of Elis, drove King Augeas out, and put his son on the throne. Then, with his rich reward, he returned to Mycenae, ready to undertake whatever new task was given him by Eurystheus.

Again he was ordered to destroy creatures that were harmful to men. This time they were great birds, like cranes or storks, but much more powerful, which devoured human flesh and lived around the black waters of the Stymphalian¹⁵ lake. In the reeds and rocky crags they lived in huge numbers, and Hercules was at a loss how to draw them from their hiding places. It was the goddess Minerva who helped him by giving him a great rattle of brass. The noise of this rattle drove the great birds into the air in throngs. Hercules pursued them with his arrows, which rang upon their horny beaks and legs but stuck firm in the bodies that tumbled one after the other into the lake. The whole brood of these monsters was entirely destroyed, and now only ducks and harmless waterfowl nest along the reedy shores.

Hercules had now accomplished six of his labors. Six more remained. After the killing of

15. Stymphalian (stim-fā'lē-an).

the Stymphalian birds, he was commanded to go to Crete and bring back from there alive a huge bull which was laying the whole island waste. Barehanded and alone he grappled with this bull, and, once again, when he brought the animal back into the streets of Mycenae, Eurystheus fled in terror at the sight both of the hero and of the great beast which he had captured.

From the southern sea Hercules was sent to the north to Thrace, over which ruled King Diomedes,¹⁶ a strong and warlike prince who savagely fed his famous mares on human flesh. Hercules conquered the king in battle and gave his body to the very mares which had so often fed upon the bodies of the king's enemies. He brought the mares back to King Eurystheus, who again was terrified at the sight of such fierce and spirited animals. He ordered them to be taken to the heights of Mount Olympus and there be consecrated to Jupiter. But Jupiter had no love for these unnatural creatures, and, on the rocky hillsides, they were devoured by lions, wolves, and bears.

Next, Hercules was commanded to go to the country of the Amazons, the fierce warrior women, and bring back the girdle of their queen Hippolyte.¹⁷ Seas and mountains had to be crossed, battles to be fought; but Hercules in the end accomplished the long journey and the dangerous task. Later, as is well known, Hippolyte became the wife of Theseus of Athens and bore him an ill-fated son, Hippolytus.

Hercules had now traveled in the south, the north, and the east. His tenth labor was to be in the far west, beyond the country of Spain, in an island called Erythia.¹⁸ Here lived the giant Geryon, a great monster with three bodies and three heads. With his herdsman and his two-headed dog, called Orthrus, he looked after

huge flocks of oxen, and, at the command of Eurystheus, Hercules came into his land to lift the cattle and to destroy the giant. On his way, at the very entrance to the Atlantic, he set up two great marks, ever afterward to be known by sailors and called the Pillars of Hercules.¹⁹ Later, as he wandered through rocks and over desert land, he turned his anger against the Sun itself, shooting his arrows at the great god Phoebus Apollo. But Phoebus pitied him in his thirst and weariness. He sent him a golden boat, and in this boat Hercules crossed over to the island of Erythia. Here he easily destroyed both watchdog and herdsman, but fought for long with the great three-bodied giant before he slew him, body after body. Then he began to drive the cattle over rivers and mountains and deserts from Spain to Greece. As he was passing through Italy he came near the cave where Cacus, a son of Vulcan, who breathed fire out of his mouth, lived solitary and cruel, since he killed all strangers and nailed their heads, dripping with blood, to the posts at the entrance of his rocky dwelling. While Hercules was resting, with the herds all round him, Cacus came out of his cave and stole eight of the best animals of the whole herd. He dragged them backwards by their tails, so that Hercules should not be able to track them down.

When Hercules awoke from his rest, he searched far and wide for the missing animals, but since they had been driven into the deep recesses of Cacus's cave, he was unable to find them. In the end he began to go on his way with the rest of the herd, and as the stolen animals heard the lowing of the other cattle, they too began to low and bellow in their rocky prison. Hercules stopped still, and soon out of the cave came the fire-breathing giant, prepared to defend the fruits of his robbery and anxious to hang the head of Hercules among

16. **Diomedes** (dī'ō·mē'dēz).

17. **Hippolyte** (hi·pāl'i·tē).

18. **Erythia** (er·i·thē'ō).

19. **Pillars of Hercules**: two points of lands reaching out into the water on either side of the Strait of Gibraltar.

his other disgusting trophies. This, however, was not to be. The huge limbs and terrible fiery breath of Cacus were of no avail against the hero's strength and fortitude. Soon, with a tremendous blow of his club, he stretched out Cacus dead on the ground. Then he drove the great herd on over mountains and plains, through forests and rivers to Mycenae.

Hercules' next labor again took him to the far west. He was commanded by Eurystheus to fetch him some of the golden apples of the Hesperides.²⁰ These apples grew in a garden west even of the land of Atlas. Here the sun shines continually, but always cool, well-watered trees of every kind give shade. All flowers and fruits that grow on earth grow here, and fruit and flowers are always on the boughs together. In the center of the garden is the orchard, where golden apples gleam among the shining green leaves and the flushed blossom. Three nymphs, the Hesperides, look after this orchard, which was given by Jupiter to Juno as a wedding present. It is guarded also by a great dragon that never sleeps and coils its huge folds around the trees. No one except the gods knows exactly where this beautiful and remote garden is, and it was to this unknown place that Hercules was sent.

He was helped by Minerva and by the nymphs of the broad river Po in Italy. These nymphs told Hercules where to find Nereus,²¹ the ancient god of the sea, who knew the past, the present, and the future. "Wait for him," they said, "until you find him asleep on the rocky shore, surrounded by his fifty daughters. Seize hold of him tightly and do not let go until he answers your question. He will, in trying to escape you, put on all kinds of shapes. He will turn to fire, to water, to a wild beast, or to a serpent. You must not lose your courage, but hold him all the tighter, and, in the end, he will

20. Hesperides (hes-per'i-dēz).

21. Nereus (nir'ē-əs).

come back to his own shape and will tell you what you want to know."

Hercules followed their advice. As he watched along the sea god's shore he saw, lying on the sand, half in and half out of the sea, with seaweed trailing round his limbs, the old god himself. Around him were his daughters, the Nereids,²² some riding on the backs of dolphins, some dancing on the shore, some swimming and diving in the deeper water. As Hercules approached, they cried out shrilly at the sight of a man. Those on land leaped back into the sea; those in the sea swam further from the shore. But their cries did not awake their father till Hercules was close to him and able to grip him firmly in his strong hands. As soon as the old god felt the hands upon him, his body seemed to disappear into a running stream of water; but Hercules felt the body that he could not see, and did not relax his grasp. Next it seemed that his hands were buried in a great pillar of fire; but the fire did not scorch the skin, and Hercules could still feel the aged limbs through the fire. Then it was a great lion with wide-open jaws that appeared to be lying and raging on the sands; then a bear, then a dragon. Still Hercules clung firmly to his prisoner, and in the end he saw again the bearded face and seaweed-dripping limbs of old Nereus. The god knew for what purpose Hercules had seized him, and he told him the way to the garden of the Hesperides.

It was a long and difficult journey, but at the end of it Hercules was rewarded. The guardian nymphs (since this was the will of Jupiter) allowed him to pick from the pliant boughs two or three of the golden fruit. The great dragon bowed its head to the ground at their command and left Hercules unmolested. He

22. Nereids (nir'ē-idz).

WORDS TO OWN

pliant (pli'ənt) *adj.*: easily bent.

brought back the apples to Eurystheus, but soon they began to lose that beautiful sheen of gold that had been theirs in the western garden. So Minerva carried them back again to the place from which they came, and then once more they glowed with their own gold among the other golden apples that hung upon the trees.

Now had come the time for the twelfth and last of the labors that Hercules did for his master Eurystheus. This labor would seem to anyone by far the hardest; for the hero was commanded to descend into the lower world and bring back with him from the kingdom of Proserpine²³ the terrible three-headed watchdog Cerberus.

Hercules took the dark path which before him had been trodden only by Orpheus and Theseus and Pirithous. Orpheus had returned. Theseus and Pirithous, for their wicked attempt, were still imprisoned.

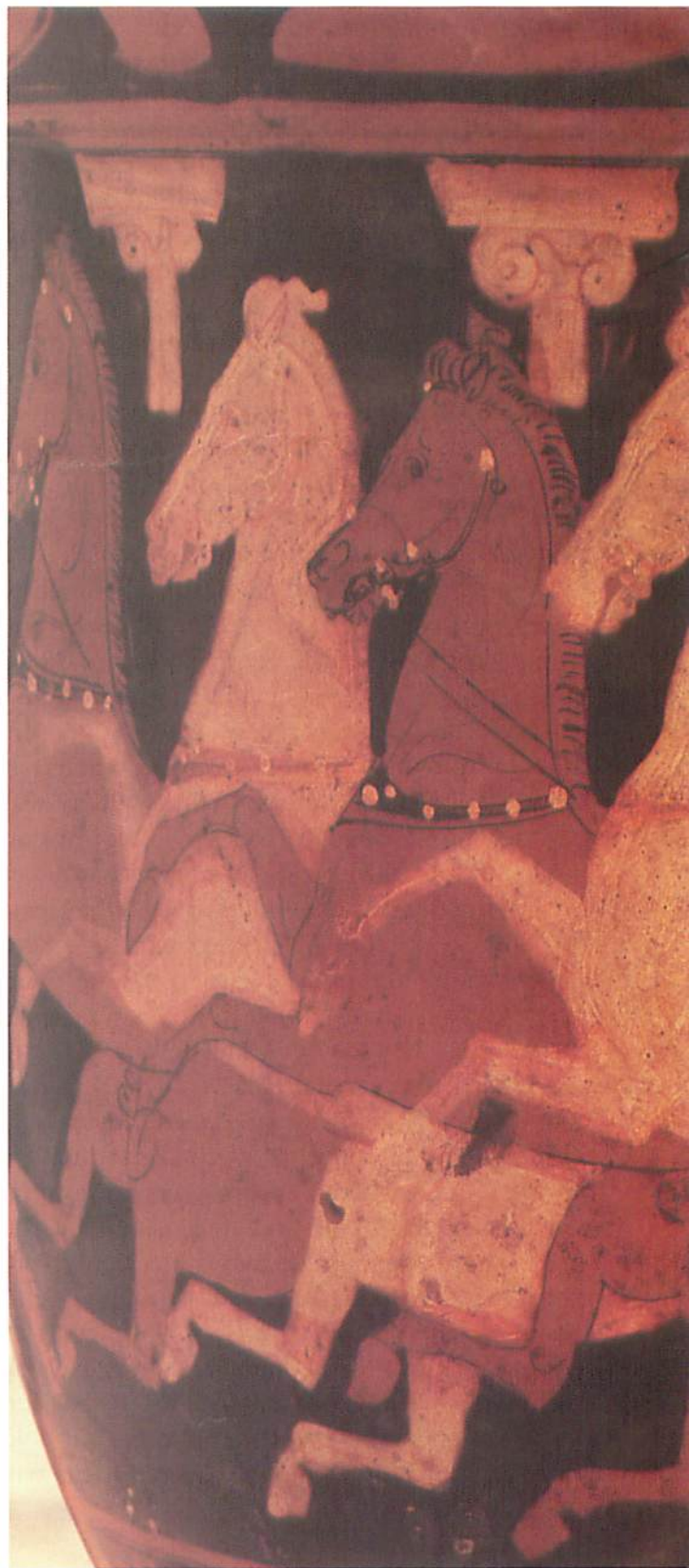
Hercules passed the Furies, undaunted by the frightful eyes beneath the writhing serpents of their hair. He passed the great criminals, Sisyphus,²⁴ Tantalus, and the rest. He passed by his friend, the unhappy Theseus, who was sitting immovably fixed to a rock, and he came at last into the terrible presence of black Pluto himself, who sat on his dark throne with his young wife Proserpine beside him. To the King and Queen of the Dead, Hercules explained the reason of his coming. "Go," said Pluto, "and, so long as you use no weapon, but only your bare hands, you may take my watchdog Cerberus to the upper air."

23. **Proserpine** (prō·sur'pi·nē): Roman name for Persephone. (See "The Origin of the Seasons," page 501.)

24. **Sisyphus** (sis'ə·fəs).

Hercules ascending to Olympus.
Red-figured bell crater (bowl).

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.
Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.





Hercules thanked the dreadful king for giving him the permission which he had asked. Then he made one more request, which was that Theseus, who had sinned only by keeping his promise to his friend, might be allowed to return again to life. This, too, was granted him. Theseus rose to his feet again and accompanied the hero to the entrance of Hell, where the huge dog Cerberus, with his three heads and his three deep baying voices, glared savagely at the intruders. Even this tremendous animal proved no match for Hercules, who with his vise-like grip stifled the breath in two of the shaggy throats and then lifted the beast upon his shoulders and began to ascend again, Theseus following close behind, the path that leads to the world of men. They say that when he carried Cerberus to Mycenae, Eurystheus fled in terror to another city and was now actually glad that Hercules had completed what might seem to have been twelve impossible *labors*. Cerberus was restored to his place in Hell and never again visited the upper world. Nor did Hercules ever go down to the place of the dead, since, after further trials, he was destined to live among the gods above.



Hercules leading Cerberus to Eurystheus (575 B.C.).
Corinthian hydria (water jar).

Louvre, Paris, France. Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.

MEET THE WRITER

Journeys Past and Present

Rex Warner (1905–1986) pursued his dream in many different places around the world. He was born and grew up in England, worked as a teacher in Egypt, ran the British Institute in Greece, taught English in Germany, and finally settled in the United States as an English professor at the University of Connecticut. A respected classical scholar, Warner sought to bring ancient Greece and Rome to life in the modern world.