

Grade 3: Unit 5, Week 4 Heroes

Read Aloud: **Heracles**

A Greek Myth retold by Margaret H. Lippert

Wonderful Words: *gruesome, rouse, persuade, muscular, frantic*

Heracles

The story of Heracles (hār' ə klēz), who is often called by his Roman name Hercules, has been told and retold for more than two thousand years. According to the ancient Greeks, Heracles was the son of the great god Zeus (zūs), king of all the gods. However, the mother of Heracles was not a goddess. She was a mortal, or human being. Heracles was born a man with the godlike strength of his father.

From the time he was an infant, Heracles could do remarkable things. When he was eight months old, he strangled two sea serpents.

When Heracles grew up, an angry goddess made him temporarily insane and caused him to kill his wife and three sons. To work through his grief, Heracles agreed to do twelve labors for his cousin King Eurystheus (ū rēs' thē əs). The King was jealous of Heracles because he was so strong. He ordered Heracles to do more and more dangerous labors, hoping that Heracles would be killed. Over eight years, Heracles completed ten of the labors successfully. Now he is about to be given the eleventh labor.

King Eurystheus looked up. The mighty hero stood before him. Heracles was back, again. And again he had performed his task. King Eurystheus was filled with rage. “I will get rid of this man forever,” he thought.

“Heracles,” he began, “you have killed ferocious beasts. You have overcome gruesome monsters. But you have not yet visited the land of the gods themselves. I have

heard that the gods have a beautiful garden, planted around a tree which bears golden apples. I wish to have three of these golden apples to give to my daughter. Your eleventh labor is this: bring me three golden apples from the garden of the gods.”

Heracles lowered his head. He knew that Eurystheus was desperate. No mortal had ever been to the garden of the gods, which lay at the far western edge of the world. Furthermore, it was said that the golden apples which grew there could be picked only by the gods themselves. If a mortal plucked one, he or she would die. Heracles was silent. He knew he must accomplish this labor, as he had accomplished all the others before it. But he was filled with dread.

Heracles set out with his lion skin over his shoulders and his bow and arrows at his side. He traveled over land and sea. At last he came to the far western edge of the world and approached the garden of the gods.

The singing of birds, beginning so softly that it could hardly be heard, became more distinct as he got closer. The sweet smell of flowers in bloom grew stronger. In front of him loomed a high stone wall. Behind the wall was the garden. Heracles walked along the wall until he came to an open gate.

The first sight of the garden took his breath away. Flowers of every color lined grassy walkways. Trees with ripe fruit arched over the paths. In the center of the garden grew a tree lovelier than the rest. Its branches were bending under the weight of golden apples.

“I am standing where no human has ever been,” Heracles thought, “seeing what humans were not meant to see. I want to turn back, but I cannot. I must complete my labor, though I do not know how to begin.”

A low hiss broke through his thoughts. “What can that be?” he wondered, turning toward the tree hung with golden apples. At the base of the tree he saw a huge dragon head, then another, and another . . . dozens and dozens, more than Heracles could count. The hundred-headed dragon, which was chained to the tree to guard the golden apples, had become aware of the presence of a stranger. It roused itself to protect the treasure. Heracles drew back behind the wall to plan his next move.

At that moment, his eye was caught by a sight more wondrous than the garden, and more frightening than the dragon. A giant stood in the distance, outside the stone wall. His knees were as high as Heracles’ head. Without looking up, Heracles turned to run. But he heard no heavy footsteps behind him. Heracles looked back and was astonished to see that the giant had not moved.

Heracles shaded his eyes against the sun to see why the towering giant had not come after him. He was amazed to see that the giant was supporting the inverted bowl of the sky on his head and uplifted hands.

“That must be the god Atlas,” thought Heracles. “I heard he was ordered by Zeus to hold up the sky forever.” An idea began to take form in Heracles’ mind. “I will die if I pick the golden apples. Only a god can do so and live. Atlas is a god. Perhaps I can persuade him to help me.”

Heracles walked toward Atlas. He cupped his hands around his mouth to make his voice louder. Lifting his head, he looked up at Atlas and shouted, “Atlas, I am Heracles.” “What business have you here?” challenged Atlas.

“I have been sent by King Eurystheus to get three golden apples for his daughter,” responded Heracles politely. “I will take your burden from you for a moment if you will pick them for me.”

Atlas could not believe his good fortune. He looked down, almost toppling the whole sky. Below him stood a man. He was a big man, eight feet tall, with muscular shoulders and a back almost as broad as it was long. His arms were massive, and his hands looked strong enough to overcome man and beast. Yet in spite of his extraordinary size and build, Atlas did not think that the man beneath him could hold the sky. He did not think that any human being could be strong enough to do that. However, no one had ever offered to take his burden, even for a moment. So Atlas could not resist Heracles’ offer.

Atlas looked over the wall into the garden and saw that the hundred-headed dragon had wakened and was alerted to danger. “I will be happy to pick the apples for you, Heracles,” he said, “if you will kill the dragon.”

The hundred-headed dragon did not frighten Heracles. He had killed beasts and monsters much more dangerous than the dragon. He stepped into the garden through the gate and crouched on the grass. He carefully fitted a poisoned arrow to his bow and took aim. Dozens of hissing heads with open mouths stretched out toward him, but because the dragon was chained to the tree Heracles was out of its reach. The dragon shrieked with helpless rage. Streaks of flame shot toward Heracles from the open mouths. Heracles took aim at the closest head and loosed his arrow, which sank deep into the neck. The dragon’s hundred heads roared with agony as the poison took effect. Then the writhing body slipped down to the ground and lay motionless.

Heracles returned to Atlas and stood at his feet. Atlas had witnessed the death of the dreaded dragon. Without another word, he carefully leaned over and transferred the weight of the sky to the shoulders of Heracles.

Heracles could not believe what was demanded of his body. Only the sheer force of his will kept him pressing his hands up against the overpowering weight of the sky. His legs began to buckle, and he knew that his strength would soon give out. He struggled to steady his arms, and pain ripped through his shoulders. Salty sweat pouring down his forehead stung his eyes, but forcing them open he called frantically. “Atlas, have you picked the apples? Bring them to me.”

Atlas was enjoying his unexpected freedom. He stretched and looked around. He had never really noticed how beautiful this garden was, how sweet the flowers, how lovely the songs of the birds, how luscious the fruit. He stepped over the wall and helped himself to three golden apples. Then he returned to Heracles.

“Heracles,” he taunted, “what a fine job you are doing. I have the apples, and I believe I will deliver them to King Eurystheus myself. Then I will return to take up my burden again.”

Heracles knew that Atlas had no intention of returning. He knew that if Atlas left, he would be imprisoned until the end of time under the unbearable weight of the sky. He was in so much pain that he could barely think, but through his distress came a glimmer of a thought.

“Atlas,” he gasped, “I will be glad to share this burden with you. However, I cannot survive unless I place a pad on my shoulders. Take the sky until I can fold my lion skin to cushion the weight.”

Atlas was deceived. He put down the apples and reached up to take the sky for a moment. Heracles relaxed his shoulders, and the full weight of the sky rested once again on the head and upstretched hands of the mighty Atlas. Heracles picked up the apples and ran as fast as his body could go.

Heracles returned to King Eurystheus with the golden apples safely hidden in his tunic. When the king saw him approaching, empty-handed, he was delighted. “Heracles, my cousin, have you failed? Where are the golden apples I ordered you to bring back for my daughter?”

Without a word, Heracles drew forth the apples and held them out to the king. Eurystheus glanced down at them and was overcome with fear. Surely the gods would punish anyone in possession of their golden apples. Suddenly he wished he had never requested them for his daughter. He was afraid to present them to her. “Take them, Heracles,” he said. “They are yours.”

Heracles was too wise to keep the lovely shining apples. He returned them to the shrine of a goddess, so that she could take them back to their rightful place in the garden of the gods.

For the twelfth labor, King Eurystheus ordered Heracles to go to the land of the dead and bring back the fierce three-headed dog that guarded the underworld. No human had ever returned from there alive. But after challenging the king of the dead and capturing the vicious dog, Heracles came back.

The twelve labors prepared Heracles for a life full of further adventure and glory. At his death, he was lifted by the gods to join them in their place on the top of Mount Olympus. Heracles was the only mortal ever to be so honored.

gruesome

Define: If something is **gruesome**, it causes disgust or fear.

Example: I felt badly for the poor animals as I turned my head away from the **gruesome** sight of the two dogs fighting.

Ask: Why might grownups prevent you from watching a **gruesome** movie?

rouse

Define: **Rouse** is to wake up from sleep or rest.

Example: My dog was **roused** by the ringing telephone.

Ask: Describe a time when you **roused** from a dream. Did you remember the dream?

persuade

Define: To **persuade** is to convince.

Example: My teacher **persuaded** me to join the chess team.

Ask: What have you been **persuaded** to do?

muscular

Define: When someone is **muscular**, he or she is strong.

Example: The swimmer's **muscular** arms helped him win the race.

Ask: How could you become **muscular**?

frantic

Define: **Frantic** is when you are very excited because of worry or fear.

Example: Dad was so **frantic** when he could not find my little brother at the amusement park that he called the security force.

Ask: Which might cause someone to become **frantic** while swimming—seeing a fish or seeing an alligator? Why?