# How to be a good Centaur

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

§0. In today’s popular thinking, it is all too easy to assume that the Centaurs of Greek mythology are bad, one and all. And such an assumption seems justifiable when we consider the myths that I analyzed in two previous essays posted in Classical Inquiries, 2019.04.19 and 2019.03.22. Yes, Centaurs must be bad, since they are misfits who disrupt society. But the whimsical question posed in the title of this essay, "how to be a good Centaur," challenges the assumption that all Centaurs are bad. I will argue that Centaurs in myth can in fact be good so long as they are not in a group—so long as they are not members of a gang. To be good, a Centaur must be solitary. A prime example is the Centaur named Cheiron, who becomes a mentor of Achilles, initiating the boy hero into adulthood. While the myth about this solitary Centaur is obviously a positive model of initiation, I will argue for something more, something that is far less obvious: there is a complementarity to be found in myths about Centaurs as a gang. Such myths, in anthropological terms, are negative models of initiation, and they actually complement the positive models.
§1. In the Homeric Iliad, 11.832, Cheiron the Centaur is described as a mentor of Achilles: it is from Cheiron, as we read in this context, that the young hero learned the art of healing, 11.831. And, in this role as mentor of Achilles, Cheiron is also described as dikaiotatos Kentaurōn (δικαιότατος Κενταῦρων), 11.832, which I translate this way: ‘the one who, among the Centaurs, was supremely righteous [dikaios]’. It is not that Cheiron had been ‘the most righteous [dikaios] of the Centaurs’, as if the other Centaurs had also been righteous: no, the syntax of the original Greek here is saying not only that Cheiron was righteous—that he was an exponent of dikē or ‘righteousness’—but also that the other Centaurs were devoid of any sense of dikē. In Greek poetry, the conventional opposite of dikē ‘righteousness’ is hubris in the moral sense of ‘outrageousness’, and the Centaurs as a group are in fact regularly described as exponents of hubris. At verse 181 in the Herakles of Euripides, for example, the existence of Centaurs as a species of monsters is pictured as the very essence of hubris, the derivative word for which here is hubrisma. I translate this way: they are ‘the essence of outrageousness’. Here is another example: in elegiac poetry attributed to Theognis, verses 541–542, it is said that the Centaurs were ultimately wiped off the face of the earth, and that their extinction was a direct consequence of their persistent hubris, 541.

§2. These Centaurs of myth, then, reveal a split personality. When they band together, they are beastly toward humans, as when they disrupt the wedding feast of Peirithoös. But they are humane when they interact alone with a single human, as in the case of Cheiron.

§3. Here I find it useful to apply an anthropological model once developed by Arnold van Gennep (1909/1960) in his attempt to describe cross-culturally a world-wide social phenomenon that he called “rites of passage,” applying this general term to various specific rituals used in a vast variety of societies, both small-scale and large-scale, for the ostensible purpose of processing human “life-crisis.” In line with the modeling developed by van Gennep, there are three phases to be found in rites of passage:
1. separation
2. transition (marginality or liminality)
3. incorporation (in the original French, agrégation).

§4. In cases where such phases involve initiation from a lower age-class to a higher age-class, the “novices” undergo the following kinds of experiences:
1. They get separated from their society as represented by their parents and family at home.
2. They get bonded with (a) initially unfamiliar groupings of peers, who can be seen as substitute siblings, and/or with (b) an initially unfamiliar adult, who can be seen as a substitute parent.
3. They get ultimately reintegrated with their society, but now they belong to a higher age-class.

§5. In the case of “phase 2,” van Gennep (1909/1960:114–115) highlights various patterns of initiation, found in a wide variety of societies all over the world, where adolescent “novices” are temporarily exempted from social norms that would otherwise apply across the board to ordinary adults—and where such exemptions confer on such “novices” the license to commit acts of violence, including sexual violence, that would otherwise be condemned as intolerable and in fact unlawful behavior.

§6. For an in-depth study of such patterns of initiation as they play out in a specific mythological tradition, I recommend a book bearing a most relevant title, The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition, by Joseph F. Nagy (1985). I focus here on the author’s analysis of medieval Irish myths that tell about violations of rules pertaining to both smaller and larger units of society, to both fine ‘family’ and tuath ‘people’. Such violations, as the author shows in detail, are licensed in the narrative context of three words in particular: fénnid / ‘outrawry’ / fénnid / ‘outrawr’ / fían ‘band of outlaws’. I find this formulation particularly relevant (J. F. Nagy 1985:20–21):

An adult becomes a fénnid [‘outrawr’] when his rights have been violated and no means of redress other than violence are available. Having lost his social status, the new fénnid [‘outrawr’] can find a life and identity in the world of fellow fénnidi [‘outrawrs’] and
In presenting this most insightful formulation, the author signals at (endnote 11) a comment about a special term he uses in referring to the process of transitioning. That term is liminality, and here is what he says about it in his comment (Nagy 1985:235, anchored via (endnote 11)):

The concept of liminality that I employ throughout this study owes a great deal to the formulations of the anthropologist Victor Turner, especially as represented in his article "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in Turner [1967] 93–111. As other sources of inspiration I gratefully acknowledge Mary Douglas’s Purity and Danger [1966] and van Gennep’s Les rites de passage [1909/1960].

For my own sources of inspiration in putting together my short essay here about Centaurs, I too need to cite Turner and Douglas as well as van Gennep. But my ultimate source of inspiration is the book by Joseph Nagy himself, The Wisdom of the Outlaw. In a future essay, I hope to make further comparisons between narratives about outlawry in Celtic and Greek traditions. But for now I bring to a temporary close my open-ended analysis not by returning to the old theme of a split personality as revealed in ancient stories about a solitary humane Centaur who needs to be contrasted with an unruly gang of beastly Centaurs. Rather, I end by introducing a new theme that is comparable, surely in unintended ways, to the old theme.

I am thinking here of the film Rebel Without a Cause, released in 1955, featuring James Dean, who died violently just days before the time of release, and Natalie Wood, who was at the time sixteen going on seventeen years of age. They take on the roles of Jim and Judy, privileged suburbanite adolescents who are alienated from conventional society, especially from their parents. Of special interest, besides Jim and Judy, is Jim Backus in the role of Frank, father of Jim, who tries to be a “pal” to his son and keeps relocating the family from one suburbanite community to the next in a vain effort to keep Jim out of trouble. Also of interest is Edward Hopper in the role of Judy’s father, who, as Judy reports, cannot stand her “friends.” Among the “friends” are Dennis Hopper in the role of “Goon,” Corey Allen in the role of “Buzz,” and Sal Mineo in the role of “Plato.” All these “friends,” together with Jim and Judy, are “juvenile delinquents,” despite their privileged upbringing. Also featured in the film is Ed Platt in the role of Ray, whose official title is “Juvenile Officer” at the local suburban police station. Not coincidentally, I think, the name of the director for this film is Nicolas Ray. The adult Juvenile Officer Ray becomes a substitute parent for the juvenile delinquent Jim, just as the “adult” director Nicholas Ray became in “real life” a substitute parent of sorts, it is reported (Wood 2000), for James Dean as a “method actor” noted for seemingly juvenile outbursts. By contrast, Jim’s real father, who hoped to be a “pal” for his son, could never relate to him until the death of “Plato” helped Jim and Judy get past a phase of transition and arrive at the phase of incorporation into conventional society. Jim’s last words in the film are: “Mom, Dad, this is Judy. She is my friend.”

(To watch the whole sequence below, which climaxes in the line “You’re tearing me apart,” click once and then click the underlined text “Watch this video on YouTube.”)
About a defeat of the Centaurs, and how to imagine such an event in Olympia »

Bibliography


Tags: Arnold van Gennep, Centaurs, Cheiron, hubris, Joseph F. Nagy, Mary Douglas, Peirithoös, Rebel Without a Cause, Victor Turner

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