

Pan's Labyrinth

If you lean over the damp, mossy, stone wall that flanks the east side of Central Park between 63rd and 62nd street you will be able to witness my favorite permanent petting zoo residents in all their quiet glory. I can only catch a glimpse of the various goats that call the park home if I stand on my tippy toes and strain against the cold granite. They are immediately comforting, a bucolic representative of farms I would like to visit and the smell of hay. They are also strange, foreigners with alien eyes, each one so unique that they've seemingly sprung from their own gene pool. Often, they too are on tippy toes, leaning from hind-legs and propped up against their own fence towards human hands.

Watching tourists hold out humble offerings of crumbly corn makes me think of the goat as horned deity, a god of ancient living. In my mind, they steady themselves on two hooves with shining crowns that circle their horns, as they sip golden mead and wax post-barnyard poetic. Goats have been with us for a long time and can tell us as much about ourselves as we can say of them.

In the history and legends of early cultures, goats make repeated appearances; the stories we tell and the eccentricities we dole out for the billies and nannies are frequent and notable. In Greek and Roman civilizations, goats were often, unapologetically, linked to sexuality and virility. Though the frenetically productive rabbit may come to mind, goats were considered the poster child of virility and emblem of fertility, in an era that glorified sexual congress.

Throughout mythology, male goats were often represented in wild states of unbridled lust, chasing after nymphs, singing, and dancing. Pan, the Greek god of shepherds and flocks and his Roman counterpart, Faunus, is a noteworthy example of the joyful hedonist. With curly goatee, horns, and hooves but the upper chest of a man, Pan ruled over the woods, groves, and glens. He was a shepherd, a lover, and a troublemaker. His countless attempts of nymphet seduction did not always come to fruition but his efforts were impressive. Pan tried once to sway Syrinx, a water-beauty, whose sisters had to turn her into a thicket of reeds to avoid his advances. The wind whipped through the reeds producing a lonely melody. Pan, unable to identify which was his beloved, cut through the hollow stalks, tied them together fashioning an instrument he carried with him for eternity. These panpipes mimic their goatish artisan, rough and simple, forever embedded in the pastoral.

The she-goat, however, represents a more maternal side to this coin, nurturing with genteel natures. In one such tale Zeus, God of all Gods, was raised by a goat named Amalthea, who's name in Greek means "tender goddess" nursing him in his infancy on her milk. After one of her horns breaks off, Amalthea fills it with fruits and flowers and gives it to Zeus, turning her horn into an icon of plenty, perpetually brimming with abundance. In adoration, Zeus places the goat in the stars as the constellation, Capra. These legends uphold the goat as fertile and as full of possibility as a warm day in Spring, the season that they watch over.

Nevertheless, dichotomies run deep through mythology and goats do not escape. The prolific goat, good-spirited, flirty and frolicking was also represented as a two-headed, fire-breathing beast. The Chimera, with one lion head, one goat head, a goat's body, and a snake or dragon for a tail was born of the union between Earth and Sea, ravaged the countryside in fiery bursts.

She was eventually slain by Bellerophon, a hero riding the flying horse Pegasus. The charming Pan also had dualistic elements; he controlled panikon, the Greek word for panic for the explosive bouts of terror that can encompass animals and humans. Masters of hybridization goats juggle lust and fruitfulness, alarm and fear.

In the ole' Bible, our kids do not fare well. In the book of Matthew our hoofed brethren get cast into lakes of fire while sheep live eternal. Later on, in Leviticus, all of the sins of Israel are placed on the head of a scape-goat and he is cast off into the wilderness to die. This ill treatment is interesting; one could argue that Jesus Christ became the ultimate scapegoat, dying for our sins. Only an innocent can bear the weight of an entire civilization's transgressions. Similarly, during this era and for thousands of years after, goat sacrifice was quite common in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Why the goat and not the sheep, one might ask? Well, sheep were also a sacrificial animal but goats seem more common. Anything that is valuable, necessary and meaningful is a contender for sacrifice. In order to please and placate the gods, you need to show that you are willing to give up an item, or a life, of worth. Goats are simply more badass. They were the Renaissance animal of their time, used for their muscles, skin, milk, meat, and bone: a worthy gift to any god.

Mythology is a landscape of multiplicities. Animals are often given multiple personalities, serving as stand-ins to human beings. Human characteristics, vices and eccentricities are pasted onto animals in order to represent and explain our own behaviors. Men have hooves and goats whittle out melodies.

These mythos of the goat and their various characteristics, make sense in modern terms. Goat are viewed as coarse and rustic, cute, but traipsing far away on some distant farm. To me, what first comes to mind when considering a goat is a steaming bowl of birria, a spicy goaty soup served with a plate of chopped white onion, cilantro springs, and lime wedges—the finest restorative to a night of heavy drinking.

The second thing that comes to mind is how infrequent the goat comes to mind. *Capra aegagrus hircus* remains absent from our collective consciousness, left to roam pastoral hills of some farmer's faint memory. Goats may not bleep on the public realm that often but they do silently tramp through our culture. A cornucopia, the aforementioned broken goat's horn, filled with plenty is a popular Thanksgiving icon. Our practical and self-reliant Capricorn friends have a half goat, half fish, as their zodiac symbol. And at every metal show, goats get a nod from the pumping fists of devil horns. Goatish characteristics and devilish imagery go hand and hoof.

Removed from the fantastic stories, goats become relatable, their polymathic personalities demonstrative of the conflicting and complex lives that we lead. I am a cook, a writer, a doodler, a trumpet player, and a 25-cent Crane Game master. We do it all and then some because we should, can, and love to. Like Pan's numerous inspirations, we are not two-faced but multitalented, spreading ourselves between many disciplines and passions. Outside of myth, goats hold true to their copious attributes. They make tangy cheese and climb slanted trees. They are curious and inquisitive but sometimes scatter like marbles. And us? We paint and make radish pickles. We nuzzle and spit.

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