

Paula Tudor

Dr. Angela Hague

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### Theseus: Man of the People

While the tales of many Greek heroes emphasize the fantastical, Mary Renault's account of Theseus and his exploits in *The King Must Die* bring to a life a relatable hero. Though mythology underscores his entire life's journey, it is relayed as Theseus's true beliefs in the gods and their powers. This serves the reader well in their ability to mentally transcend these mythological elements, and allows them instead, to focus on Theseus and the Greek culture that defines him. By walking the reader through Theseus's upbringing and meticulously unveiling the flaws and shortcomings that make him inherently human, Renault depicts the story of a legendary hero that could be almost anyone.

Theseus's heart influences his behavior and the way he views the world. This is exemplified early on in the way he expresses his feelings about the sacrifice of the King Horse. He states, "the blood seemed to tear the soul out of my breast, as if my own heart had shed it" (Renault 11). This same mentality exists, though to a lesser degree, when he has to kill kings himself. This is because he does not kill for glory or fame. He kills out of necessity or a sense of compulsion from the gods. In fact, many times the motivation for killing comes from protecting someone or avenging someone's death. This is a characteristic that is evident in Theseus's childhood, and can be seen in the way he "leaped down on the bull's head" (Renault 22) to save Dexios, and later when he avenged his death in the Isthmus. These actions become all the more

remarkable when one considers that Theseus is not some towering godlike figure, with overwhelming size, stature, or strength.

Though Theseus's lack of physical strength at first makes him seem an unlikely hero, Renault is effective in exploiting Theseus's other attributes to the advantage of the reader. For instance, as a boy Theseus wanted to be able to wrestle, but his size made that seemingly impossible, until he learned how to compensate for his physical limitations. As he said upon observing the other boys wrestle, "I watched them ... heaving each other up and tossing each other down; and a thought came to me, how easily a man is thrown if something strikes the side of his foot just when his weight is coming on it" (Renault 31). The way he studies this wrestling match is the way he eventually begins to study everything, from killing the boar on Broken Mountain, to impending wars, and bull-dancing. This ensures his survival and allows him to become an exemplary leader.

Though Theseus's heart could have been a weakness, it eventually becomes a significant source of strength, playing a vital role in his ability to lead. In fact, it is his heart that convinces him of what type of king he wants to be, after sleeping outside with the goatherds and making them feel safe. "To be a king," he says, "what is it? To do justice, go to war for one's people, make their peace with the gods? Surely, it is this" (Renault 60). This moment tells the reader everything they need to know about the type of king Theseus will eventually become. It also foreshadows and defines his leadership amongst the bull-dancers.

Though Theseus's heart and mind contribute to his ability to lead people and make smart decisions on their behalf, it is his belief and faith in the gods' messages that carry him through his journey. Renault takes care in introducing and reinforcing these mythological aspects, using them primarily to drive the narrative forward so as not to distract the reader. Because of his faith

in the gods, Theseus begins to trust his journey. Even though he sets out for Athens to meet his father, he submits to the temporary detour of becoming King of Eleusis. This is not, however, without a great deal of thought. In fact, the reader becomes quite familiar with Theseus's thought processes throughout the book. This is another way in which Renault is able to maintain a sense of realism in Theseus's story.

Theseus being crowned king provides the reader with the first real glimpse of him as a ruler. It is in these early days as king, that Theseus learns to bring a group of people together to hunt and fight battles. This is significant because, as king, Theseus leads an army called The Companions, which emphasizes the fact that he sees himself as an equal, working with and for the people, not ruling over them. In addition, this makes it easy for the reader to see why, later on, Theseus is compelled to volunteer to become a bull-dancer in Crete. As he tells The Companions when he returns from meeting his father, "I was bred in a house of kings, where the heir is called Shepherd of the People, because he stands between wolf and flock" (Renault 138).

As a bull-dancer, Theseus's primary goal is to return to Athens alive, and ensure that his father's people are also brought back alive. He realizes the only way to do this is by leading them in the same way he led The Companions. Theseus's first interactions with the bull-dancers, whom he eventually dubs The Cranes, show his ability to strategize and think his way through a problem, even when faced with certain defeat. He tells The Cranes, "soon we shall all be bull-dancers, men and girls alike. Since we can't be more than comrades, let us swear never to be less" (Renault 172). This ideology is what keeps them alive in the bull court and eventually leads them out of the Labyrinth and back home.

The Labyrinth, as depicted in *The King Must Die*, is still a maze of sorts that holds the Minotaur. It is not, however, the Minotaur of Greek mythology. The Minotaur in Renault's story

is not half-man, half-beast. Furthermore, the Minotaur is not one creature, but two. Renault ingeniously reconstructs the Minotaur as King Minos of Crete, who wears a bull mask and keeps himself isolated. To make all of this plausible for the reader, Renault offers the explanation that King Minos has leprosy, a disease his son, Asterion, is using to take over the kingdom. Asterion is briefly successful, temporarily donning the mask of the Minotaur after his father's death. However, his reign is short-lived, because like previous kings, and the Minotaur of classic mythology, Asterion must die to ensure Crete's future.

In *The King Must Die*, Mary Renault manages to strike a unique balance between Greek mythology and Greek history. She has essentially woven myth and culture together to form a tapestry, making the two virtually indistinguishable. Festivals for the gods are now traditions based on mythology, with each area emphasizing the worship of a particular god. In Theseus, Renault has created a king and a hero who, despite his potential direct link to Poseidon, never loses touch with the needs of his people. It is through his journey that the reader is able to gain a deeper appreciation for Greek heritage and the mythology that has come to define it.

Works Cited

Renault, Mary. *The King Must Die*. New York: Vintage, 1988. Print.

