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CLST 4: Classical Mythology

Final Project

Theseus and Hekale

Methodology and Notes

In this project I sought to write a personal interpretation of the myth of Hekale, taking my main inspiration from Callimachus' retelling of the tale. The principal challenge that comes with attempting to tell this story is the fragmentary nature of it. The following text relies heavily on the ancient Greek fragments found, with the material either translated from the Greek text (found on Loeb Classics) with aid from the given translation and using definitions from the Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon or influenced and borrowed from the partial translations of the Greek available (namely, the translation from Loeb classics, and Nisetich's). The two main issues that arise from the fragments are (1) an uncertainty of the order of the story, and (2) large portions of the story being missing. To address (1), I referred to Nisetich's translation and followed or erred where I saw fit. To address (2), I used my own judgement and creative thinking skills, attempting to maintain a realistic story line. I would like to state clearly that this is not meant to be an accurate translation or academic reconstruction of the poem. This project stemmed from my personal interest in the poem and my wish to have a fluid story without missing pieces. As this is a work of fiction, I did not think a formal works-cited was necessary, nor appropriate. To cite certain sources in my story might portray the opinions of those publications inaccurately. I would like to note that this story takes heavy influence from Nisetich's and the Loeb Classics' translations of the story, in addition to information from Plutarch's *Life of Theseus* and Euripides' *Medea* (both also from the Loeb Classical Library) and the tenth edition of Morford, Lenardon, and Sham's *Classical Mythology*.

The Story

Background: Medea, having been betrayed by Jason, has fled to Athens to join Aegeus, who had promised her hospitality at an earlier time, and marries him. At some later point, she gives birth to a son, Medus, and has royal aspirations for him.

Theseus arrives to claim his birthright to the throne. However, he realizes that it would be best to remain silent, as Medea will try to get rid of him. Medea recognizes Theseus and acts to protect her interests. She convinces Aegeus to accept Theseus as a dinner guest and, Aegeus not realizing that Theseus is his son, get rid of him by poisoning him.

But in Troezen (where Aegeus met Aethra and Theseus was born), Aegeus had left a sword and soldiers' boots under a rock, for his future son to bring to Athens once he was strong enough.

Aegeus, noticing the sword that he left for Theseus, runs and slaps the poisoned cup out of Theseus' hands and embraces him, formally recognizing him as his son before an assembly of citizens.

After this, a civil war breaks out throughout the town between the sons of Pallas, who had hoped to gain possession of the kingdom when Aegeus died without an heir, not wanting to continue the lineage of foreign rulers (Aegeus himself had been adopted by Pandion, the father of Pallas).

Theseus is victorious, but the town is in disarray.

Itching to adventure once again and court the favor of the people, Theseus sets out to defeat the Marathonian bull...

The air was warm and as far as the eye could see the sky was clearer than brilliant crystal, without even the smallest cloud drifting, with nothing but clear blue sky stretching across the heavens.

But at that time when children run to their mothers for their evening meals, taking their hands from their work, a dark hovering mass appeared overhead, first from above Parnes, and then further over the summit of thyme-covered Aegaleos, bringing torrential rains, and twice as much over rugged Hymettos.

The air darkened, and lightning crashed, with winds whirling with the same ferocity as those over the Ausonian sea or from Merisos, or the swift squall of Boreas.

A white stork bends its delicate knee in preparation, and lizards scurry off to their lairs.

Off in the distance in a little ragged cottage, an old woman watches the snuff thicken on the wick of her burning lamp, sputtering. She moves to shut the window before the incoming storm, but notices a young man, blond, handsome, and well-built, approaching her cottage. Meeting the eyes of the stranger, she welcomes her new guest into her house...

Theseus walks in, graciously thanking his host, leaning his club against wall, and sitting down on a small couch. She walks out of the room, retrieving a scanty rag, stripped from her bed and shaken out.

She fetched down copious logs, a cloud of dust erupting as each one is moved and placing them into the hearty flame under the cauldron. Quickly she removed the boiling pot and poured it out to draw more warm mixed draught.

She retrieved the bread bin and from it produced generous portions of loaves, the same as those that women cook deep in pits of ash for herdsmen, that made from the cheap course brown flour unsifted by the mill women. Following that, ripe and unripe olives, as well as those she'd put away last autumn, to float in brine, served with samphire and sow thistle.

After he had eaten and rested, she asked him about his journeys—where he'd come from, where he was going, and who he is.

“I am Theseus, son of Aegeus the king of Athens and princess Aethra of Troezen, having come from Athens. I am going to Marathon to defeat the wretched and mighty bull, Pallas leading the way. Having heard my story, and learning what you have asked, I find it appropriate, good mother, to wish to hear you speak. Why do you live an old woman, impoverished in an isolated land, seemingly without family?”

“Why awaken a sleeping sorrow? Know that my poverty is not ancestral. My grandfathers did not make me poor, nor did my fathers. Had I had even one third, just one third...”

“My name is Hekale, though the people of this land call me Hekaline. I was born into wealth, and enjoyed prosperity for the greater portion of my life. Likewise, my lonely state has not been ever-existing. My husband was the finest of men, and I recall our first encounter:”

“I was watching over my threshing floor, trod around by oxen, when he came driving from Aphidnai, looking like one of the sons of Zeus. I remember his beautiful robe, the work of spiders, studded with golden brooches, underneath it wearing a chiton reaching the ground, his hair coming down in long curls of the deepest blond.”

“His cheeks had a rich new growth of down upon them, as you also seem to have. He had a felt hat on, a new one from Haimonia, surrounding his head and guarding against the noon-day heat. One day, he was set to sail to bring horses from minty Eurotas to wherever they had been sent. The air had grown dark and ravens fell dead into waves. He had set sail as shearwaters flew by. I do not wish to discuss any further, as it is too painful. May I never myself set sail under auspices like that, nor anyone who wishes me well.”

“My dearest sons I reared on delicacies, and no one was so favored in my family as they, not even my fathers who abounded in wealth. In steaming baths, they bathed. No one was more fortunate after I bore my children: They shot up like aspens by a mountain stream, surpassing all and even their father in stature. They grew peacefully and without disease, but death also had an eye on them.”

“Did I refuse to listen when death called me long ago? That I might tear my robe over too, not long after? That wretched Kerkyon, who challenged innocent passers-by to fatal wrestling bouts, seemingly for no reason other than some wicked curse, perhaps the evil stupidities of men, who fled Arcadia and settled here, a bad neighbor to me and all others. At his hands I lost my younger son... May I stick thorns in his shameless eye and him alive to feel it, then eat him raw myself, if it is permitted. Gladly I would die, knowing that he lies dead!”

“An evil fate led me from Kolonai to share this hearth with only myself. My fortune was not fated to improve. Here, evil kings rule with wretched iron fists, dividing all we have at home among themselves. All night long we miserable paupers suffer, and blame our kings for the miseries we suffer.”

She shed a tear, letting it meander down her cheek before wiping it away.

“I apologize, and old woman’s lips are ever wandering...”

“Dearest Hekale, my heart aches to listen to you. I hope I offer some succor with the following story...

The path from Troezen to Athens was filled with many dangers, and many persons suffering at the hands of wicked people. I took it upon myself to eliminate these cursed souls. I first defeated Periphetes, the son of Hephaestus and the wielder of the club, in Epidauria, when he laid hold of me and prevented my progression. From him I received this club that you see over there. From there, I slew Sinis the pine bender, then the Crommyonian sow, Phaea, no insignificant creature. On the border of Megara, I encountered the bandit Sciron, thrusting his feet out to be washed by his victims, only to kick them off into the sea. Then, in Eleusis, I outwrestled Kerkyon the Arcadian, and killed him in his inhospitable wrestling grounds full of blood and gore...”

She turned pale, her eyes glazing over as she looked askance.

“It’s getting quite late,” she said quietly, “I’ll lie within; I’ve made a bed for myself there.”

When she saw that he too had risen, she emerged from her bed and took in the morning’s cool moist air, stepping into the grey light of morning.

You looked fine in your shepherd’s hat, made of felt. Its brim reaching far around your head, and in your hand a shepherd’s stick.

(Theseus, having left the comfort of Hekale’s hut, continues his journey to defeat the Marathonian bull...)

Vainly venting the rage in its horns into the air, the bull was being dragged by Theseus, having had its terrible horns bent into the earth. The one dragged, the other followed, a reluctant traveler with only a single horn now- the club had smashed the other. The villagers saw and trembled. No one dared look at the massive man or monstrous beast until Theseus’ thundering voice met their ears from a distance:

“Don’t be afraid! Don’t run away! Send your fastest runner to Athens to tell my father Aegeus-how relieved he’ll be having heard it!”

“IE PAIEON!” they cheered, pelting him with leaves as he passed, the men circling and crowding around him, the women throwing their sashes.

The parade proceeded, passing through town.

“Whose tombstone are you building here?” he asked curiously.

In remembrance of Hekale’s hospitality, Theseus established a holiday in which citizens would assemble and sacrifice the Hecalesia to Zeus Hecalus and pay honors to Hecale.

“Go, gentlest of women, along the road which heart-gnawing worries do not traverse. Often of you, Mother, will your hospitable hut come to mind, a place where all could rest.”