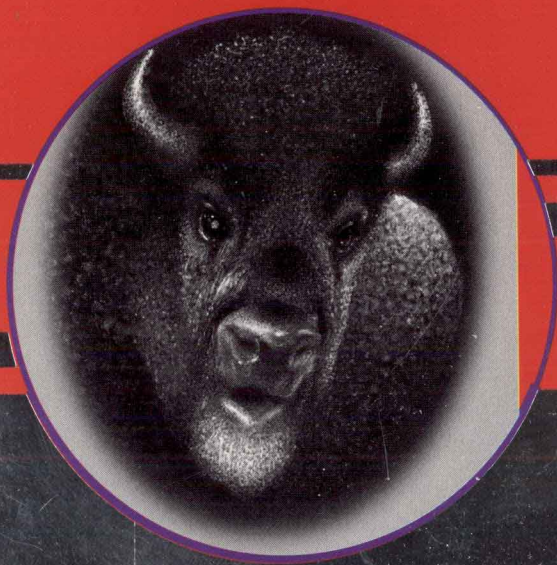


Pleased with yourself? Can you look back
with pride at what you've achieved?
Or are there deeds you wish you could undo?
Even a Hero, blessed with wit and wisdom,
can make the most terrible mistakes – and bring
down the anger of the gods on his head ...



theseus

told by **GERALDINE McCAUGHREAN**
Winner of the Blue Peter Award

Theseus

Geraldine McCaughrean



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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Bangkok Buenos Aires

Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Hong Kong Istanbul

Karachi Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai

Nairobi São Paulo Shanghai Taipei Tokyo Toronto

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First published 2003

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN 0 19 274199 3

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by AFS Image Setters Ltd, Glasgow

Printed in Great Britain by

Cox & Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire



I

The Oracle and the Sorceress

The singers sing of a time before Theseus was born. Then, men stood like candles on the table of the earth, and their lives melted quickly away. The wild and unkempt gods roared round the world, howling and blustering like the four winds, and with little care for the men they trampled, the candles that flickered and died. A man's life was soon forgotten.

A man's memory could only be kept alive by storytellers (and the memories of storytellers are small and overcrowded) or by his own children and by their children after them . . .

King Aegeus longed for a child—a son who could keep alight his memory in the windy halls of history, and inherit the crown of Athens, too. Oh, and a son to love him, as only a son can love his father!

But Aegeus had married once and his wife had died. He had married again, but after a time, his second wife, with her narrow waist and narrow eyes looked at him and shrugged. 'The gods clearly don't mean us to have children, my dear.'

Day after night he prayed to the gods for the gift of a

son. But still the only sound in his courtyard and streets was of other people's children, other people's sons. Without warning, without a word, King Aegeus got up one day and left Athens in a chariot, bound for Delphi.

There, where the earth had cracked open a little like lips cracked by the wind, wisps of smoke from the Underworld leaked out into a cave. The smoke was a sickly yellow. The smell was an acrid ache in the nose—a headache—a dizziness—a clouding of the brain. For carried in the fumes were words and numbers, nightmares and dreams. They stung the eyes. They muddled the brain.

Within the swirling smoke, seated on a three-legged bronze platform higher than a man's head, a girl sat rocking to and fro. Her head rolled on her shoulders and her eyes rolled in her head. And out of her mouth fell words as wild as nonsense. This was the Delphic Oracle, doomed by her gift of prophecy to sit in the foul vapours of the Underworld with a head full of visions. This was *Xenoclea-Who-Knows-All-That-Was-And-Is-And-Will-Be*. Her lids were shut. But inside her head lay all the answers to every question, and far more than Man dared to ask.

The floor was trodden hollow and the step in front of the tripod was pitted where a thousand knees had knelt. For a man could come to the Oracle and ask for knowledge only the gods should know. And the Oracle could see, with her closed eyes, clear into the future.

Aegeus, when he reached the door of the temple, almost turned on his heel and left. He had been so certain on his journey, so sure of his reason for coming. Here he might have an answer to the question that bored through his pillow each night to lodge in his brain. But now he wondered.

'They all hesitate,' said a voice from inside the temple. 'They all come as far as the door and wonder, "Would I

rather not know?" You are right, King Aegeus. For all the good it will do you, you would do better not to ask, not to know.'

But Aegeus shook himself like a dog and ducked inside the doorway. 'Of course I must know! I'm a king, and unless I know, how shall I make plans for Athens? Will I ever . . . shall I ever . . . '

'Have a son? Ah, how many times have I heard that question? I am bored with it. Profoundly, boundlessly bored. Before I heard you coming, I saw your question written in the air. "Will I have a son?" The world's air is stale with that kind of question. "Will I have a child? Will I have a husband? Will I have a crown?" But *you*, Aegeus, *you* have a choice.'

'A choice? I don't want a choice, I want a son!' cried Aegeus, overbalancing off his knees so that his hands splattered the floor, wet with holy libations.

The tone of the Oracle's voice never changed. She did not even know what words spilled from her drooping, open mouth. Even childless kings could not move her to pity. 'The Sorceress Medea can give you the magic. But beware. Listen to my words, O foolish king, and let Theseus remain unborn. Accept the fate of the gods and do not bring yourself unhappiness.'

The king stumbled out of the cave, wiping his face with his dripping hands. His head was full of reechy smoke. His heart was jumping with amazement. But all the warnings rolled away and were lost. His brain was full of the name Theseus—'Theseus. Theseus! My son, Theseus!' he said, and knotting the long reins of his chariot around his waist, he whipped up his horses to a gallop.

It was all his outriders could do to catch up with him. 'To Athens, my lord? Not this road for Athens, surely?'

‘No! To Corinth! I must see Medea the Sorceress.’

For the magic of a son, Aegeus would have ridden to the pit of the sea and prised it from the tendrils of an octopus. He would not have cared if the Sorceress Medea lived in the heart of a volcano and was as ugly as a sloth. Aegeus had never seen her and he was prepared for almost any sight—except for the one he saw.

Medea lived in a tower of pink stone, and her hair was braided with silver. Her white gown was tinged with the colours of sunset, and her hands were as white as the long wing pinions of a flying swan. She greeted Aegeus as though all her life had been spent waiting for him, and she gave him cakes and perfumed wine and the marinated meat of turtle doves.

‘And what service can I do my lord Aegeus to bring him joy?’

The king asked at once for the magic that would give him a son and heir. ‘I have a thousand pieces of gold to pay you with, but if you need more I can pay you in yearly tributes of cattle and sheep and white ground flour.’

Medea held up her hand and smiled. ‘You are welcome to my magic, my lord—more than welcome. All I ask is a welcome in your house if ever I should come to Athens. Now—show me yourself.’

Aegeus shuffled his feet awkwardly, spread his arms and looked down at the floor, blushing. He felt a shabby sort of a king, traipsing his dirt into the rosy drapery of her chamber. His sandals were white with dust. His tunic was sweaty. His breastplate was covered in fingermarks. Suddenly he leapt backwards as she flung a chalice of wine against his chest. It trickled down his armour, through his clothing, and dripped off his large knee-caps.

‘Listen, King Aegeus, the very next time you hold a

woman in your arms, she will bear you a son,' said Medea softly.

'Oh, Medea! Oh, thank you! Thank you! I'm so very sorry—I'm dripping on your rug,' he said. Indeed he was not sorry; he would willingly have stood and dripped on her rug for ever. Because the longer he looked at Medea, the more beautiful she seemed. His body leaned forward from the ankles, his hands lifted from his side. He took one step towards her. Surely, one kiss was no more than he owed her for the favour she had granted him.

Medea, too, spread her arms, welcoming. Her fingers touched his . . .

Outside there was a clatter of metal against stone. The king's outriders burst into the room.

'Your chariot, my lord!'

'The horses are bolting!'

'We couldn't hold them, sir. They're out of hand!'

Aegeus ran outside to quieten his horses: they steadied at once, at the sound of his voice, and stood stock still while he wound their long reins once more round his waist. Medea came to the door to wave the king farewell. She was frowning a little.

In his longing to be home—to take his wife in his arms and give her a son—he whipped up the horses and left Medea's pink tower far behind him, dirtied by his flying dust. The sorceress, before she turned to go back inside, stamped her foot angrily and spat on the parched ground. She had meant that son to be hers.

It was a long journey from Corinth to Athens—too far by far to travel in one day. Aegeus decided to stay the night at the house of an old friend, in the village of Troezen. He was happy to the point of foolishness, hugging the servants

and throwing his arms round his friend. 'Do you know what, Pittheus? Shall I tell you the most wonderful thing? No, it would be wrong to speak of it. My wife must be the first to know! Great news, though, Pittheus! The greatest news of all! The greatest news for Attica since that young bear Hercules was born! Hello, who's this young beauty?' Pittheus's daughter, Aethra, was standing at his elbow with a jug to refill his goblet of wine. 'Is it really little Aethra? By the gods, you've grown! Pittheus, she's *beautiful*! Have you found a good husband for her yet?'

Aethra blushed and hurried away to fetch more food to table, and while the wine flowed and Aegeus's hands waved as he sprawled in his chair and drew great cheerful shapes in the air with his cup of wine, the beautiful young Aethra watched the king through long, lowered lashes. She thought him the most lovely sight she had ever seen. When Aegeus finally dropped his cup altogether, in an excess of good cheer, she was the first to run and pick it up.

The first to run, the first to slip in the puddle of spilled wine, the first to fall and the first to be caught up in Aegeus's two arms to keep her from falling.

He set her on her feet again and smiled, his eyes loose in his head from drinking and his lids heavy. Suddenly, all the blariness left his eyes, like a sky blown clear of clouds, and the lids parted wider and wider still. 'I didn't, did I? I couldn't have.'

'What, my lord?' asked Aethra shyly.

'Never you mind, girl. Never you mind. I didn't . . . No, of course I didn't.' His mouth gave a small, anxious tug to one side, and very soon afterwards he said his goodnights and went to bed.

He slept heavily. His good mood was restored in the morning, and he climbed into his chariot, looped round with the end of his reins as happy as the crack at the end

of a whip. At the last moment, he caught the eye of Aethra and whispered teasingly over the side of his chariot, 'I have left a present for you. At least, it's a present for your son, if you should ever—one day, you know—in the future—have a son. He'll find my sword and sandals under that rock—when he's man enough to lift it.'

Aethra cast bewildered eyes at the rock he pointed out—a boulder so huge that an oxen team could hardly have moved it. She shook her head, meaning that she did not understand his joke or why he should make fun of her. As he rode away, however, she still thought he was the most beautiful sight she had seen since she had seen a forest fire ravage the crown of a wooded hill and set all the wild birds flying.

As soon as Aegeus arrived home, he opened his arms to his wife and clasped her to his breast. 'Your armour's hard,' she complained, and pushed him away.

A few days later, she caught a fever and died.

Aegeus was too disappointed to be angry. He simply supposed that the Oracle at Delphi had made a mistake. Or perhaps the sorceress's magic had splashed off his hard breastplate.

More years arrived at the gates of Athens, one year after another. Years raced through the streets, through Aegeus's palace, and trampled over him like stampeding horses, leaving a sprinkling of grey in his hair, a network of lines on his face, a stoop.

Then Medea the sorceress arrived one day from Corinth, in a chariot drawn by two winged serpents. Aegeus thanked the gods for sending her. All she asked for was a place to shelter, out of the wind and sun. But Aegeus took her into the shelter of his palace, even into

the shelter of his bed. He married her. And there was more magic: she gave birth to a little boy—a prince for Athens . . . and called him *Medus*.



2

The Club and the Sword

'**W**here do you want me to put the basket of bread, mother?'

'Oh, in the middle of the table, I think, Theseus, where everyone can reach it. Though Hercules will eat it all, of course, as usual. When your cousin Hercules comes to dinner, nobody else gets much to eat.'

Theseus, who was seven years old, could not wait to see his cousin for the first time. People said he was the strongest man in the world. 'If I asked him, would he teach me how to wrestle, mother?'

The lady Aethra frowned. 'Fighting! Must you always be talking about fighting?'

'Does he have a sword, mother? Does Hercules have a sword?'

'No he doesn't. Just a big club.'

'How big, mother? As big as me?'

'Every bit as big. Now go and get washed. Do you mean Hercules to see you looking like the floor of the Augean stables?'

Before Theseus was washed, his cousin arrived—a man so laden with muscles that his body seemed to be

coiled round with snakes. He wore for a cloak the skin of a lion he had fought and killed with his bare hands—not just the fur, but the head, too, with gaping jaws and staring eyes and creased, velvety cheeks. Hercules flung it over a stool where it happened to fall paws downwards, the head lolling towards the door.

‘Come on! Come on! He’s here! I heard him arrive!’ cried Theseus to all the other children who lived in the house at Troezen. They came running from every direction, and all bundled through the door together.

They took one look at the lionskin—they took another—then they scattered. Screaming and shrieking, they ran for the stairs, they ran to the kitchen, they ran to their mothers and hid their faces and howled in terror that there was a lion in the dining hall. All except Theseus. He looked at the lionskin; he looked at his cousin; he looked at his mother, and then he backed towards the door—slowly, slowly. Between unmoving lips he whispered, ‘Don’t panic. Stay perfectly still.’ After he had closed the door, his sandals could be heard pelting along the corridor.

Hercules laughed out loud, and all the goblets on the table trembled. But he stopped laughing when the noise of sandals came pelting back again. The door opened and in strode Theseus, dragging an axe almost as big as himself.

‘Don’t worry, mother. I’ll deal with it! Shame on you, cousin, for letting a lion walk so close to my mother!’ And he swung the axe with all his might.

Hercules thumped the table with his fist. ‘By all the gods, boy! You’ve killed my cloak! And that stool will never walk again! Aethra, what a little Titan you’ve got there! Introduce me at once.’

So Theseus picked himself up off the floor (where the weight of the axe had thrown him) and shook hands with

his cousin, the mighty Hercules. 'You have your mother's eyes, boy, but where do you get your fire from? Your father, maybe?'

Aethra dropped the plate she was holding. 'Haven't got a father, sir,' said Theseus cheerfully. 'Don't need one. I can look after mother well enough.'

'Theseus! How often must I tell you? Don't brag. I'm sorry, Hercules, but there's a streak of pride in the boy that the gods would frown on if they saw it. *You* speak to him. Tell him there's more to life than fighting and killing and having strong arms.'

Hercules plucked at his beard thoughtfully and slowly nodded. But his mind was somewhere else, and his eyes peered into Theseus's face. 'I've seen this face before. There's a certain noble gentleman in Athens with just the same face. When do you intend to tell the lad exactly who he is, Aunt Aethra?'

'When he's big enough and sensible enough,' said Aethra crossly, covering Theseus's two ears with her hands and hustling him out of the room.

Theseus nagged her every day, after that. 'Who am I, mother? What did Hercules mean? Do I have a father, after all?'

But Aethra only said, 'Soon enough. Soon enough you'll leave me. Soon enough there will be *real* lions lying in wait for you. Be content. There are more good things to be harvested from this world than what you can reap with a sword.'

In the days when Theseus was young, the world was young, too. Only a few ships were sprinkled on the world-encircled sea; only a few houses had grown up along its shores and river-banks. And what houses there were, were bare and barely higher than a man's head. Beds sprawled

legless on the floor, and the grain and grapes rattled by in two-wheeled carts, pulled by small and pale-eared donkeys.

Men, too, were slight and lean, with narrow shoulders, and hips like hunting dogs—quick to look behind them, and narrow-eyed with looking out to sea.

Theseus, too, was lean as a boy. His ribs circled his chest like fingers, and his legs were as thin as grass. But as he grew up, the muscles plaited along his bones and his chest filled out like a ship's sail, and his neck grew from his chest like a thick-rooted tree. His hair shone like an otter's fur, but curled long and loose to his shoulder blades which were as smooth as the bronze plates of a prince's armour. And his eyes were such a turbulent blue that the superstitious peasants of Troezen said, 'There's the sea itself in those eyes. Poseidon the sea god must have fathered that boy!'

When Theseus was about seventeen, a sudden silence fell over Troezen—not the silence of people sleeping soundly in their beds, but the silence of people holding their breath in terror. They could almost hear the thump, thump of each other's hearts.

A monstrous man called Periphetes had come to the district—a man hunched over like a bear. As he walked, he left the splayed print of his left hand in the earth, and from his right hand he trailed a huge, bronze club. His head was the shape of a club; his nose was the shape of a club; even his brain was club-shaped, so much time did he spend thinking about clubbing.

Up and down the Corinth road Periphetes roamed. When he broke into a shambling run, he could keep pace with a horse and club the rider out of the saddle. He would smash down a roadside house and block the road with the rubble. Then when a cart was forced to stop, he would sneak up behind it and shatter the cart and squander the load and

leave only the white-eyed horses to run off between their shafts. He clubbed cows and dogs; he clubbed fences and barns; he clubbed trees and wine vats. But chiefly he loved to club men and women who passed along 'his' road.

Word of Periphetes spread until nobody dared to travel from Corinth to Troezen, from Troezen to Corinth. 'Perhaps now he'll get bored and move on to a different place,' said the people of Troezen.

Periphetes did get bored when no one came along his road, when there was nobody to ambush and nobody to club. 'Betti moob on,' he thought with his club-shaped brain. 'Waygo nowbut? Corinff? Oober yonder-sider Troezen?'

Slowly, like a drip forming below his club-shaped brain, Periphetes formed an idea. 'Ohah! Clubben Troezen Igo! All de walk clubben, ander all de mannen, ander all de roof-underplaces, ander cartes ander animoos—ander prettiladies, ander babys, ander childer—yuck, Periphetes verihate childer.' And delighted with the idea of destroying Troezen brick by brick and bone by bone, the revolting Periphetes gambolled down the road towards the rooftops of the little village. As he ran, he left a groove as deep as a cart-rut, dragging his huge, bronze club.

The first Pittheus knew of the attack was when terrified peasants came hammering on his door. 'Let us in! Let us in! Periphetes is coming! Periphetes is destroying the town!'

They watched him from the roof, pounding the sheep-folds to pieces and pulverizing the cottages. The earth under the vines ran purple with their spilled juice, and the dry-stone walling tumbled in avalanches round the feet of Periphetes.

'Even if we bar the door, he'll club his way through

the walls!’ whispered Pittheus. ‘Aethra, hide yourself and hide the boy. Nothing will keep Periphetes out!’

But when Aethra went looking for Theseus to hide him from the club-man, she could not find him. Suddenly she heard her father calling the boy’s name too, but urgently, distractedly: ‘Theseus! Come back here! *Theseus!* What’s he doing out there? What does he think he’s doing?’

Theseus, his thumbs tucked into his cord belt, was scuffing his feet across the courtyard and out into the sunlight of the road. Past the gate he went, past the lemon tree, past the limes and into the yellow sunlight that dazzled on his tunic. Then he stopped, cocking his head on one side. He called out, ‘Periphetes! Be off with you. You’re not welcome here.’

‘Greep! A verifool childer! A nearlidead bore! Comen closeup, bore! Periphetes grimpen ander grumpen yooz. Heep-eeep-eeep!’ The club-man tossed the handle of his club from hand to hand and bared his teeth—curved as talons—at Theseus. Then he began to throw the club high into the air—higher each time—like a juggler. The sun flashed on the bronze. He caught it first with his right hand, then with his left, and now and then he caught it in both and smashed it down on the ground till there was a long shallow dent in the earth. ‘Bed for bore. Make-I bed for veridead bore!’ And he flung the club higher than ever into the air.

Theseus put down his head and charged. Like a bull he covered the ground, his arms doubled over his head to protect his skull from the jolt. As he rammed Periphetes, dust burst in clouds out of the giant’s clothing and he let out a little, breathless grunt and sat down, hard. His massive club reached the zenith of its flight and began to come down again, still whirling. Theseus reached into the air and, with both hands, took hold of it. Once, twice, three times he brought it down on Periphetes’s head.