

Theseus & Icarus: Fight or Flight

By Ric Averill

The Story of the Play

The play opens with the Bard performing for an audience. When a woman requests the story of Theseus the bard obliges and our story begins in the throne room of King Aegeus's palace in Athens. The Pallantides have found out the King's infant son, Theseus, does not descend from pure Athenian blood and they believe he is unfit to succeed. With The Pallantides camped outside the city threatening to attack, Aegeus decides to send his son away to live with his mother in Troezen to be raised anonymously rather than to go to war. Aegeus orders that his sword be hidden under a rock outside Troezen that is so heavy it takes ten soldiers to lift, believing that when Theseus can remove the sword from under the rock himself, he will be ready to return to Athens to claim his right to the throne.

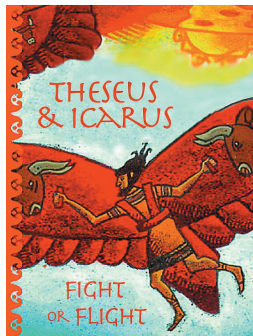
The Bard continues his tale in the throne room of King Minos in Crete. We learn that Minos's newborn son is a hideous monster with the head of a bull. Crete's famous inventor, Daedalus, sends his newborn son, Icarus, into exile in Troezen to keep Minos from destroying Icarus out of jealousy. Minos demands that Daedalus build a Labyrinth for his son, the Minotaur, to live in. Minos learns that as long as the Minotaur lives he will be undefeatable, so he goes to war with King Aegeus and Athens.

Fourteen years later we see Theseus and Icarus have become friends, playing games, trying to best each other in strength and wits. When Theseus discovers how to use a lever to lift the rock at the city gates he finds the sword his father left for him. Theseus decides to return to Athens to claim his place as heir and Icarus goes along with his friend. On the way, the two encounter the cyclops Damastes who kills anyone who attempts to pass through his land. Icarus helps Theseus defeat Damastes and they arrive in Athens as heroes.

When the two reach Athens they learn that Athens fell to King Minos and that as tribute he demands 10 young Athenian women and men be sent to Crete to be fed to the Minotaur. One of king Minos's guards is holding the lottery to see who will be sacrificed. Theseus challenges the guard and draws his sword, revealing his identity. Theseus cannot believe Aegeus would let his people be sacrificed in this manner and



**Parent/Teacher
Study Guide**
by Gwethalyn Williams



tells his father he intends to go to Crete to free Athens from this curse. Aegeus argues with him saying that it is his responsibility as future king not to risk his life. Theseus disagrees saying it is exactly because he is to be king that he must go. He boards the ship with the black flag bound for Crete, Icarus decides to go along in search of his father. Aegeus asks Theseus to fly a white flag on the return journey if he has been successful defeating the Minotaur.

When they reach Crete, Icarus is sent to greet his father and Theseus is stripped of his sword and presented to King Minos and his daughter Ariadne. Theseus boasts to Minos that he can kill the Minotaur even weaponless. Impressed by his bravery, Ariadne returns his sword to Theseus and gives him a ball of thread. She tells him to use it wisely and return to her. Minos plans to send Icarus into the labyrinth with Theseus. Daedalus pleads with Icarus to escape the Labyrinth by using a pair of wings he has designed with magic wax, but warns him not to fly too high. Icarus is reluctant to leave his father but agrees.

Ariadne meets Theseus outside the Labyrinth and holds one end of the thread so Theseus can follow it back through the Labyrinth. Icarus meets Theseus in the maze and questions Ariadne's motives for helping Theseus. Theseus says he intends to marry Ariadne and declines Icarus's offer to carry him away using Daedalus's wings. As he escapes, Icarus likes the feeling of godliness given him by flying so much that he boasts he will fly higher than the gods. As he flies higher the heat of the sun melts the magic wax and he falls to his death. Theseus is even more determined to kill the Minotaur after the death of his friend. He defeats the beast using his strength and wits then follows the thread back to Ariadne.

After his victory, Theseus sails for home with Ariadne. They stop for fresh water at an island and Ariadne shows the men some flowers so beautiful they put the men to sleep. She leaves while they are sleeping. Theseus awakens and sails on to Athens, forgetting to put up the white flag. When Aegeus sees the ship with a black flag he thinks Theseus has died and throws himself off a cliff in grief. Theseus mourns all the losses he has suffered but realizes the lessons he has learned will make him a better ruler.

Vocabulary:

Birthright: A privilege or right one has from birth, such as an inheritance.

Braggart: a person who boasts about their abilities or achievements.

Dominion: control or rule over territory.

Detestable: deserving of intense dislike.

Firebrand: a person who is passionate about a particular cause or is inciting change.

Forum Square: A public square or marketplace used for judicial business.

Foundling: an infant abandoned by its parents who is found and cared for by others.

Labyrinth: A complicated network of passages in which it is difficult to find one's way.

Levy: something relinquished because of an agreement, such as tax.

Lottery: Drawing of names or tickets to select one or a few from a larger number of people.

Rash: with a lack of consideration for the outcome of an action, hasty.

Steward: A person in charge of taking care of and providing for a group of people or a place.

Vassal State: A state that owes allegiance to a more powerful country.

Characters & Places Mentioned:

Golden Fleece: A golden sheep hide sought by Jason and the Argonauts, to gain the throne of Thessaly.

Hercules: Half-mortal son of the god Zeus, Hercules performed many feats of heroic strength.

Thespis: Creator of the Greek Tragedy form of theater, the world's first famous actor.

Greek City States: Areas of territory on the Greek mainland, each surrounding and ruled by a city.

Attic Plains: Territory of the Greek City State of Athens.

Athens: Ruling city of one of the larger city-states on the Greek mainland.

Crete: An island kingdom off the shores of Greece.

Hypnos: God of sleep.

Pallantides: 50 nobles of the land of Attica, around Athens.

Aethra: Theseus's mother, a princess of Troezen.

Cyclops: A giant with one eye in the center of its forehead.

Poseidon: God of the sea.

The Oracle: A prophet who can speak for the gods.



Isthmus of Corinth: Narrow strip of land that connects the Peloponnesian Peninsula with the Greek Mainland

Mercury: Messenger of the Gods and a powerful god himself.

Apollo: God of the sun, music, and poetry.

Discussion Questions

Use the following sets of questions to discuss the themes of the play:

Why did King Aegeus and Daedalus send their sons away? Do you think this was the right thing to do? Why or why not?

Why did King Aegeus ask Theseus to stay in Athens rather than go to fight the Minotaur? Why did Theseus believe he had to fight the Minotaur?

Can you remember a time when you had to make a decision that was very difficult because the right answer was not clear? How did it make you feel? Do you ever think about what might have happened if you had made a different decision?

What made Aegeus a good or bad king? Why?

What happened as a result of Theseus's decision to go to Crete? Make a list of good things and bad things. Do you think he made the right decision? Why or why not?

What happened when Icarus flew too high? Can you remember a time when you did something fun even though someone told you not to? How did it make you feel? Did you understand why they didn't want you to do what you were doing? How did you feel when that person found out what you had done?

Is there anything the characters could have done to make the story turn out differently? Why do you think they didn't do these things? Do you think their reasons were good ones?

What did Theseus learn?

What did you learn?



Who's Who

(Characters in the Play):

King Aegeus: King of Athens, Theseus's father.

King Minos: King of Crete, he prayed to Poseidon to send him a bull from the sea so he could prove he was the rightful king of Crete. He promised to sacrifice the bull to the god, but when he saw how beautiful it was he did not make the sacrifice. Poseidon cursed Minos, the result was that his next son was born a hideous monster with the head of a bull. The creature became known as the Minotaur

Daedalus: A famous inventor offered sanctuary on Crete by Minos after he was accused of murder in Greece. Minos ordered Daedalus to build a prison of corridors so confusing the Minotaur would never be able to find the way out. Daedalus also constructed wax wings so humans could fly, but vowed never to reveal the secret of flight after the death of his son Icarus.

Icarus: Daedalus's son, he is most famous for using his father's wax wings to fly, not heeding his father's warning not to fly too close to the sun, and falling to his death after the heat of the sun melted his wings.

Theseus: Son of King Aegeus and a great hero most famous for slaying the Minotaur and freeing Athens of Minos's orders to sacrifice their young men and women to the Minotaur.

Damastes: A robber (in this play he is depicted as a cyclops, but traditionally he is human) that lived on the Isthmus of Corinth, the only land passage between the Peloponnesian peninsula and the rest of mainland Greece. He refused to let anyone pass and killed all those who tried. He was defeated by Theseus.

Ariadne: The Daughter of King Minos she fell in love with Theseus and helped him escape her father's labyrinth. Most stories claim she later married the god Dionysis.

The Minotaur: The son of King Minos, he was born human with the head of a bull. He was cursed to be feared by all and have a great hunger that could only be satisfied by human sacrifice.

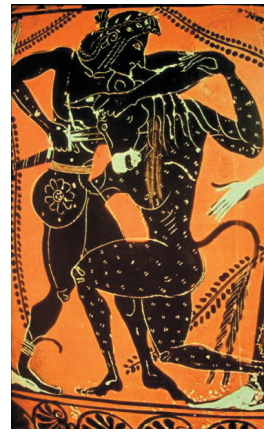
Mythology & Storytelling

(from myth to play):

Mythology literally means an oral retelling of stories a community believes to be true and explain natural phenomena or universal truths.

Since these stories were told orally for hundreds of years for entertainment, teaching, and religious purposes, everyone in the Greek culture knew and recognized the characters and stories. Because the Greek audiences had an understanding of the mythology playwrights and storytellers could use characters and events from other tales in the stories they wanted to tell.

In *Theseus & Icarus: Fight or Flight*, the playwright uses this technique to tell the story he wants to tell. No where in the written record do Theseus and Icarus appear to grow up together as playmates. Why do you think he chose to put the two stories together? What themes in the play arise from the two stories happening together?



The Hero King:

Theseus is a hero in the traditional sense of the word. He uses his strength and wits to defeat many monstrous foes, but he is also depicted as a fighter for justice and defender of the oppressed. Talk with your students about their ideas of what makes a hero. What do they think is Theseus's most important quality as a hero. How is Aegeus different from Theseus? Ask them what they think makes a good leader (in this case, a king). Talk with them about heroes outside the story of the play. Who do they consider to be a hero and why? Talk about fictional heroes and real people. Are there people alive now, or in the past that they see as real life heroes? Why?

Activities to try:

Art:

- Ancient Greek artists often depicted stories of famous myths on vases. Have your students bring in plastic jars (such as peanut butter jars, or coffee containers). Have each student cut a strip of paper so it will fit around the jar, lay the paper flat and draw the scenes they think are most important to the play on the paper. Then tape or glue the paper around the container.

- Many ancient Greek dramas were performed in masks. Have each student make a mask of one of the characters out of construction paper and elastic.

Puzzles:

- The labyrinth made by Daedalus is the earliest maze in written history, but it is believed that mazes and labyrinths were used for religious purposes by many ancient cultures. Give your students some mazes on paper to complete then arrange a simple maze for your students to walk through, using furniture in the room. Talk about how much more difficult the maze you have to walk through is than the mazes on paper, because you cannot see all the different paths laid out when you are walking through them.

- Ariadne helps Theseus find his way through the labyrinth with a thread. Have your students learn some cat's cradle type string puzzles.

Language Arts:

- Myths were ways to explain natural phenomena that had no simple explanation. For instance a rock so large a man could not move it must have been placed where it lies by a giant, or lightning must be thrown to Earth by a god that lives in the sky. Have your students write a short myth

MORE RESOURCES:

On the web:

Mythman: www.mythman.com

Encyclopedia Mythica: www.pantheon.org

Scholastic: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mff/index.htm>

Mythweb: www.mythweb.com

Web English Teacher: Classical Mythology: www.webenglishteacher.com/classmyth.html

Books:

Switzer, Ellen. Greek Myths: Gods, Heroes and Monsters. New York: Atheneum, 1988.

MacKenzie, Compton. Golden Tales of Greece: Theseus. New York: World Publishing, 1972.

Evslin, Bernard. Monsters of Mythology: The Minotaur. New York: Chelsea House, 1988.

Houle, Michelle M. Gods and Goddesses in Greek Mythology. Berkeley Heights: Enslow, 2001.

Gibson, Michael. Gods Men & Monsters from the Greek Myths. New York: Schocken Books, 1982.

Tripp, Edward. The Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology. New York: Penguin, 1970.



explaining a natural phenomena everyone is familiar with, such as the sun rising and setting, or why leaves change color and fall off trees and then grow back.

- Have each student research a different character from Greek mythology and give a short presentation to the class about their character.

Science:

- Theseus uses his shield as a fulcrum to make a lever to move the rock Aegeus hid his sword under. Do simple force and lever experiments with your students.

Geography:

- Learn about the ancient city-states of Greece and how they were governed differently than modern countries. Compare a map of ancient Greece with a current map of the Mediterranean.

- In the play we see Theseus name the ocean he crosses the Aegean Sea, after his father King Aegeus, a mythological character. Many physical features in Greece and around the world are named for mythological characters or places. Study the stories behind mythologically named places in your state. For a list see the Mythman web site listed below. Click on "modern allusions."

