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The Kerynæan Hind

by

Joe R. Christopher

I. A Meeting with Apollo

Apollo stopped the man who carried the deer;
a golden-horned but female hind it was—
“My sister’s loved and sacred beast, that is,
so set her down, and gently—else, you should fear.”

The fearless man replied, “For ‘most a year
this beast I’ve chased throughout Arkadia’s
fair fields, now take her to Eurystheus;
obliged beyond your threat or sister’s tear.”

Apollo in anger cried, “No obligation
beyond my word, beyond my sister’s love,
applies; that hind is never yours to take.”

The man in lion skin replied, “My station
will change, for labors laid by One Above:
the Queen of High Olympos these deeds bespake.”

II. A Meeting with Apollo (II)

“Where go you with golden-hornēd hind,
carrying her so carefully and wise?
I know you well, half-brother, so tell no lies—
Don’t claim you found her, that deer so hard to find.
I know my sister’s beast, I am not blind;
your taking her is like you—it’s no surprise,
no wonder is it for astonished eyes;
so where do you now go with doe that’s tined?”

“Half-brother, yes, I know the deer’s your twin’s;
I chased her down aft many a weary mile,
for I must do twelve labors set for me;
this curse I must endure. For all my sins,
however, your presence, no. Take hence your guile;
I do that which I must until I’m free.”

III. Moral Decisions

Like as an oracle has said,
To pay for shameful actions dread,
You'll do twelve labors publicly:
Your guilt you'll purge 'fore you are free.

But then you find the rules are mixed—
A purging action's also nixed.
Like as a deer that you would hunt
Is not in season for your stunt.

As if two laws were straight opposed,
And you must do them both as glozed;
Either you choose which way to act—
Or choose them both, so kilter-whacked!

IV. A Meeting with Artemis

"O hero, why carry you the hind,
Her body 'round your neck,
Holding still those swiftest hooves—
Yes, holding them in check?"

"O daughter born of Leto fair,
And fair yourself in truth,
I do the task I was assigned,
Nor mean you any ruth."

"O hero clad in lion's skin,
Will not you harm the hind?
You killed the cat whose pelt you wear—
Why with the deer be kind?"

"O goddess, I know your arrows sharp—
I do not seek your wrath;
The hind with golden horns I'll loose,
When finish I my path."

"O hero, be sure your word is kept,
For I can hunt at length—
The boar and stag will weary out
While I'm in my first strength."

"O huntress, I have no quarrel with you,
And I will keep my word—
The hind will wander free at last,
To rejoin your sacred herd."

V. The Hunting of the Dear

The game of hunting takes a plan,
a tracking when the game began,
since long and leisurely it's done
until at last the dear's outrun
and she is captured by the man.

Does she resist and fight at last
with hooves most sharp or words that blast?—
then one has not true gently done

the hunting and the lengthy run,
that she should be at taked aghast.

The dear is noble game, it's true,
and must be nobly sought with coup,
but one that is most gently done
so hunter and hunttee are won
to think that taking's overdue.

VI. A Meeting with Eurystheus

Two cousins, once removed, were most ill matched,
the human ruling, the demigod obeying—
and when remet, then was the human saying,
“Good, good, you’ve brought the hind! How deerly caught!”
He smiled most broadly. “Now that the hind you’ve snatched,
prepare the fire! Lay wood without delaying!
Slaughter this beast! with careful pelt in flaying!
for I like venison, hot taste attached!”

Replied his cousin, “Greetings, O polished king,
gourmet and guide—your thoughts are nicely whirled;
but Artemis might take amiss your breezing,
might lift her strongest bow, draw back its string.”
The human then looked thwarted, and almost snarled,
“Surely she knows when I am only teasing.”

VII. A Question of Honor

In Hades, Heracles was still upset
that he had served a lesser man than he;
the Greeks’ shame culture counted that a loss,
embarrassment, and blot.

But later, entering Olympos’ bounds,
he found strange rules that Greeks had never known—
“The last is first, the first is settled last,”
reversal from all the world.

He learned that his twelve years there counted more
than all heroic deeds in other times;
he served as Delphi’s priestess ordered him,
and so was raised at last.

VIII. What Happened to the Hind?

Euripides has said that Heracles
Did slay the dappled hind with golden horns,
The doe that ravaged crops, escaped with ease
From all but him, from all the high-fenced bourns;

And then he offered unto Artemis
The sacrifice; he burnt the proper parts.
But no one else has this strange emphasis
On the hind's death, on sacrificial arts:

Surely the deer was loosed to self return
To Kerynæa Mount; and there to graze.
To climb on rocky slopes, lowlands to spurn,
Neath moon of Artemis or sun ablaze.

Afterword

The labor of Herakles in capturing the Kerynæan hind is a supernatural episode in that the doe (in some versions a stag) is described as having horns—and, in some descriptions, both golden horns and brazen hooves. (I have not worried about the distinction between horns and antlers in my poetic sequence, although I know that male deer have antlers and male antelope have horns. I have referred to this mythological hind as a deer with horns.) The old interpretation of Herakles as a sun-god viewed the hind as a symbol of the gold-tinted cloud (emphasizing the color of the horns) chased by—so to speak—the sun. But the original myth has two versions. In the more literal, the sacred animal grazes in the area of Kerynæa Mountain in Greece. In the other, told by Pindar in his third Olympian ode, the hind is found far to the north, in the land of the Hyperboreans—in other words, in a version of the land of the dead. (However, a touch of a literal source material for the northern version may lie in the fact that female reindeer do have antlers.) Several of Herakles' labors touch on the theme of immortality, not just the bringing of Kerberos (Cerberus) from Hades. In this sequence of poems, I begin after the capture of the hind with two versions of a meeting with Apollo (suggested by an Etruscan artwork). I have offered various “readings” of the myth in the third, fifth, and seventh poems.