

# THESEUS

retold by Edith Hamilton

## BACKGROUND

Ancient Greece is known for being the place where democracy was born. The mythical Greek hero Theseus is credited with founding the first democratic city-state in Athens. According to myth, Theseus is the son of Aegeus, king of Athens, and Aethra, princess of Troizen, a city in southern Greece.

## A LANGUAGE COACH

Look at the word *Athenian*. An Athenian is a person from Athens. What is the suffix of this word? What do you think the suffix means? List some other words that use this suffix.

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The great Athenian hero was Theseus. **A** He had so many adventures and took part in so many great enterprises that there grew up a saying in Athens, “Nothing without Theseus.”

He was the son of the Athenian king, Aegeus. He spent his youth, however, in his mother’s home, a city in southern Greece. Aegeus went back to Athens before the child was born, but first he placed in a hollow a sword and a pair of shoes and covered them with a great stone. He did this with the knowledge of his wife and told her that whenever the boy—if it was a boy—grew strong enough to roll away the stone and get the things beneath it, she could send him to Athens to claim him as his father. The child was a boy, and he grew up strong far beyond others, so that when his mother finally took him to the stone he lifted it with no trouble at all. She told him then that the time had come for him to seek his father, and a ship was placed at his disposal by his grandfather. But Theseus refused to go by water, because the voyage was safe and easy. His idea was to become a great hero as quickly as possible, and easy safety was certainly not the way to do that. Hercules, who was the most magnificent of all the heroes of Greece, was always in his mind, and the determination to be

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just as magnificent himself. This was quite natural, since the two were cousins. **B**

He steadfastly refused, therefore, the ship his mother and grandfather urged on him, telling them that to sail on it would be a contemptible<sup>1</sup> flight from danger, and he set forth to go to Athens by land. The journey was long and very hazardous because of the bandits that beset the road. He killed them all, however; he left not one alive to trouble future travelers. His idea of dealing justice was simple but effective: What each had done to others, Theseus did to him. Sciron,<sup>2</sup> for instance, who had made those he captured kneel to wash his feet and then kicked them down into the sea, Theseus hurled over a precipice. **C**

Sinir, who killed people by fastening them to two pine trees bent down to the ground and letting the trees go, died in that way himself. **D** Procrustes<sup>3</sup> was placed upon the iron bed which he

1. **contemptible** (KUHN TEHMP TUH BUHL): hateful; worthy of contempt; disgraceful.
2. **Sciron** (SY RAWN).
3. **Procrustes** (PROH KRUHS TEEZ).

## **B** LITERARY FOCUS

In what ways does the story already fit the definition of a myth?

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## **C** VOCABULARY

### Word Study

Use context clues to write a definition for the word *precipice*. Use a dictionary to check your answer.

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## **D** LITERARY FOCUS

Heroes often reflect the qualities valued by the cultures that created them. What does the character of Theseus suggest about what the ancient Greeks might have valued?

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**A** READING FOCUS

Summarize the information in this paragraph.

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**B** QUICK CHECK

Why does Medea want to poison Theseus?

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**C** VOCABULARY

Selection Vocabulary

*Endear* means "inspire affection." Use the word in a sentence of your own.

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used for his victims, tying them to it and then making them the right length for it by stretching those who were too short and cutting off as much as was necessary from those who were too long. The story does not say which of the two methods was used  
40 in his case, but there was not much to choose between them and in one way or the other Procrustes' career ended. **A**

It can be imagined how Greece rang with the praises of the young man who had cleared the land of these banes<sup>4</sup> to travelers. When he reached Athens, he was an acknowledged hero, and he was invited to a banquet by the King, who of course was unaware that Theseus was his son. In fact, he was afraid of the young man's great popularity, thinking that he might win the people over to make him king, and he invited him with the idea of poisoning him. The plan was not his, but Medea's, the heroine of  
50 the Quest of the Golden Fleece, who knew through her sorcery who Theseus was. She had fled to Athens when she left Corinth in her winged car, and she had acquired great influence over Aegeus, which she did not want disturbed by the appearance of a son. But as she handed him the poisoned cup, Theseus, wishing to make himself known at once to his father, drew his sword. The King instantly recognized it and dashed the cup to the ground. Medea escaped, as she always did, and got safely away to Asia. **B**

Aegeus then proclaimed to the country that Theseus was his son and heir. The new heir apparent soon had an opportunity to  
60 endear himself to the Athenians. **C**

Years before his arrival in Athens, a terrible misfortune had happened to the city. Minos, the powerful ruler of Crete, had lost his only son, Androgenes,<sup>5</sup> while the young man was visiting the Athenian king. King Aegeus had done what no host should do: He had sent his guest on an expedition full of peril—to kill a dangerous bull. Instead, the bull had killed the youth. Minos invaded the country, captured Athens and declared that he would raze it to the ground unless every nine years the people sent him

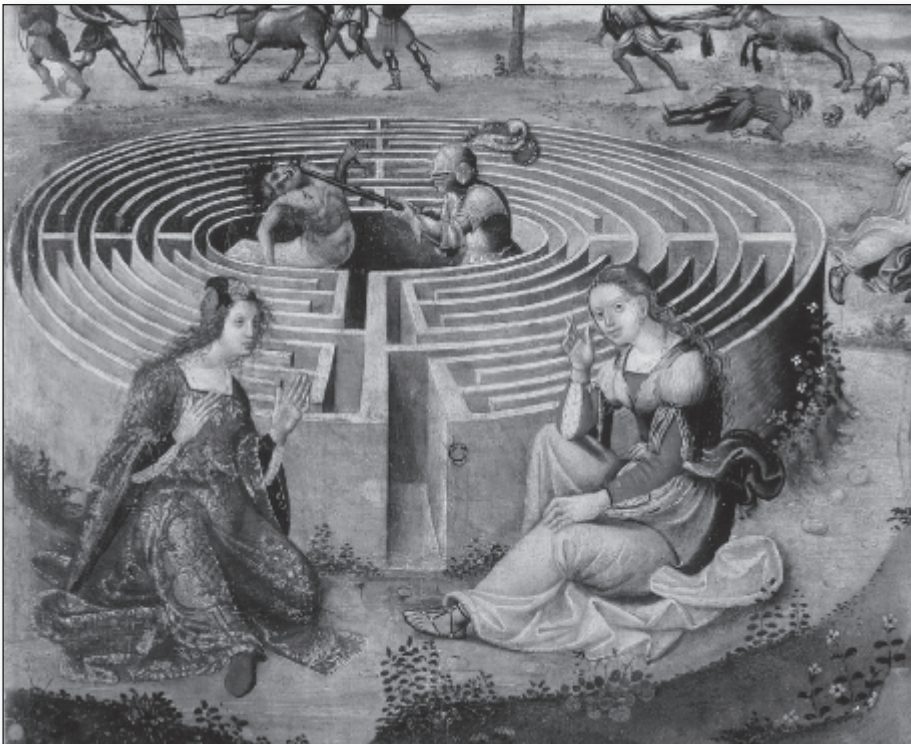
4. **banes:** causes of destruction or ruin.  
5. **Androgenes** (AN DRAW JUH NEEZ).

a tribute<sup>6</sup> of seven maidens and seven youths. A horrible fate  
70 awaited these young creatures. When they reached Crete they  
were given to the Minotaur to devour.

The Minotaur was a monster, half bull, half human, the  
offspring of Minos's wife Pasiphaë<sup>7</sup> and a wonderfully beautiful  
bull. Poseidon<sup>8</sup> had given this bull to Minos in order that he  
should sacrifice it to him, but Minos could not bear to slay it and  
kept it for himself. To punish him, Poseidon had made Pasiphaë  
fall madly in love with it. **D**

80 When the Minotaur was born, Minos did not kill him. He  
had Daedalus,<sup>9</sup> a great architect and inventor, construct a place  
of confinement for him from which escape was impossible.  
Daedalus built the Labyrinth, famous throughout the world.  
Once inside, one would go endlessly along its twisting paths

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- 6. tribute:** something paid by one nation or ruler to another as an acknowledgment of submission.
  - 7. Pasiphaë.** (PUH SIHF UH EE).
  - 8. Poseidon:** (POH SY DUHN) god of horses and of the sea; brother of Zeus.
  - 9. Daedalus.** (DEHD UHL UHS).



Musée du Petit Palais, Avignon, France/R.G. Ojeda/  
Réunion des Musees Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

**D** READING FOCUS

Summarize the "terrible  
misfortune" of Athens.

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**A** QUICK CHECK

Who is Daedalus and what is the Labyrinth?

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**B** VOCABULARY

Academic Vocabulary

How does Theseus exhibit, or display, his courage in this paragraph?

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**C** LITERARY ANALYSIS

What can you infer about Theseus's feelings toward Ariadne from this sentence?

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without ever finding the exit. To this place the young Athenians were each time taken and left to the Minotaur. There was no possible way to escape. In whatever direction they ran, they might be running straight to the monster; if they stood still, he might at any moment emerge from the maze. Such was the doom which awaited fourteen youths and maidens a few days after Theseus reached Athens. The time had come for the next installment of the tribute. **A**

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At once Theseus came forward and offered to be one of the victims. All loved him for his goodness and admired him for his nobility, but they had no idea that he intended to try to kill the Minotaur. He told his father, however, and promised him that if he succeeded, he would have the black sail which the ship with its cargo of misery always carried changed to a white one, so that Aegeus could know long before it came to land that his son was safe. **B**

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When the young victims arrived in Crete, they were paraded before the inhabitants on their way to the Labyrinth. Minos' daughter Ariadne was among the spectators, and she fell in love with Theseus at first sight as he marched past her. She sent for Daedalus and told him he must show her a way to get out of the Labyrinth, and she sent for Theseus and told him she would bring about his escape if he would promise to take her back to Athens and marry her. As may be imagined, he made no difficulty about that, and she gave him the clue she had got from Daedalus, a ball of thread which he was to fasten at one end to the inside of the door and unwind as he went on. **C** This he did and, certain that he could retrace his steps whenever he chose, he walked boldly into the maze, looking for the Minotaur. He came upon him asleep and fell upon him, pinning him to the ground; and with his fists—he had no other weapon—he battered the monster to death.

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As an oak tree falls on the hillside  
Crushing all that lies beneath,  
So Theseus. He presses out the life,

The brute's savage life, and now it lies dead.

Only the head sways slowly, but the horns are useless now.

120 When Theseus lifted himself up from that terrific struggle, the ball of thread lay where he had dropped it. With it in his hands, the way out was clear. The others followed, and taking Ariadne with them they fled to the ship and over the sea toward Athens. **D**

On the way there they put in at the island of Naxos, and what happened then is differently reported. One story says that Theseus deserted Ariadne. She was asleep, and he sailed away without her, but Dionysus found her and comforted her. The other story is much more favorable to Theseus. She was  
130 extremely seasick, and he set her ashore to recover while he returned to the ship to do some necessary work. A violent wind carried him out to sea and kept him there a long time. On his return he found that Ariadne had died, and he was deeply afflicted. **E**

Both stories agree that when they drew near to Athens, he forgot to hoist the white sail. Either his joy at the success of his voyage put every other thought out of his head, or his grief for Ariadne. The black sail was seen by his father, King Aegeus, from the Acropolis,<sup>10</sup> where for days he had watched the sea with strain-  
140 ing eyes. It was to him the sign of his son's death, and he threw himself down from a rocky height into the sea and was killed. The sea into which he fell was called the Aegean ever after. **F**

So Theseus became King of Athens, a most wise and disinterested<sup>11</sup> king. He declared to the people that he did not wish to rule over them; he wanted a people's government where all would be equal. He resigned his royal power and organized a commonwealth, building a council hall where the citizens should gather and vote. The only office he kept for himself was that of commander in chief. Thus Athens became, of all earth's cities, the

10. **Acropolis** (UH KRAWP UH LIHS): fortified heights in Athens. A huge temple to Athena stands on top of the hill.

11. **disinterested**: fair; impartial. (*Disinterested* should not be confused with *uninterested*, which means "not interested.")

**D** READING FOCUS

Summarize how Theseus escapes from the Labyrinth.

**E** LITERARY ANALYSIS

Why do you think there are two different versions of what happened on Naxos?

**F** LITERARY FOCUS

The Aegean Sea is a real body of water located between Greece and Turkey. What characteristic of a myth connects this part of the story to real life?

**A** VOCABULARY

**Word Study**

In this paragraph, there are several pairs of words that are in the same word family, or have the same root (for example, *governed* and *government*). Identify another pair of words in this paragraph that share the same root.

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**B** LITERARY FOCUS

In a typical **myth**, the **hero** often finds qualities in himself that he didn't know that he had. What kinds of traits do you think Theseus has learned about himself by the end of the story? Explain.

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150 happiest and most prosperous, the only true home of liberty, the one place in the world where the people governed themselves. It was for this reason that in the great War of the Seven against Thebes,<sup>12</sup> when the victorious Thebans refused burial to those of the enemy who had died, the vanquished<sup>13</sup> turned to Theseus and Athens for help, believing that free men under such a leader would never consent to having the helpless dead wronged. They did not turn in vain. Theseus led his army against Thebes, conquered her, and forced her to allow the dead to be buried. But when he was victor, he did not return evil to the Thebans for the evil they had done. He showed himself the perfect knight. 160 He refused to let his army enter and loot the city. He had come not to harm Thebes, but to bury the Argive<sup>14</sup> dead, and that duty done he led his soldiers back to Athens. **A B**

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12. **Thebes** (THEEBZ): chief city of Boeotia, a region in ancient Greece.  
13. **vanquished**: conquered or defeated people.  
14. **Argive** (AHR JYV): another word for "Greek." All of these people were Greek, but they gave allegiance to their separate, smaller kingdoms.