Theseus and the Minotaur

The Test

It was by lifting a boulder that Theseus, grandson of the king of Troezen, first proved himself a hero. Theseus was sixteen at the time. He had been raised by his grandfather and his mother, Princess Aethra. One day the princess called Theseus to her side. It was time, she said, that he learned of his father, who was the ruler of a mighty kingdom. This was news to Theseus, who had been under the impression that his father was one of the gods. "Before I divulge his identity," said the princess, "you must meet the challenge your father has set you." Years ago, the king had hefted a mighty stone. Underneath he had placed something for his son to find - if he could lift the weight.

Aethra guided Theseus to a forest clearing, in the midst of which was a boulder. Theseus proceeded to lift the stone easily, or so the myth is often told. But Theseus would have had trouble with a task involving brute strength. This may be deduced from the tradition that he invented "scientific" wrestling, the discipline by which even a lightweight can beat a stronger adversary by fancy footwork, trick holds and using the opponent's momentum to advantage. Theseus would have had little cause to invent such tactics if he'd been capable of beating his adversaries by sheer physical strength. So when it came to lifting boulders, he was at a disadvantage. Resourcefulness, another heroic trait, must have come to his aid. He would have looked about for some means to multiply his physical strength.

The Road to Adventure

Beneath the stone Theseus found certain tokens left by his father. His name, Aethra now revealed, was King Aegeus of Athens. Prompted by a sense of heroic destiny, Theseus set out forthwith to meet this parent he had never known. He determined to journey to Athens by land, although his mother argued for the safer route by sea. And in fact the landward route proved to be infested by an unusual number of villains, thugs and thieves. Theseus quickly adopted the credo of doing unto these bad guys what they were in the habit of doing to others.

Periphetes

Setting out from Troezen, his birthplace, the first community of any size through which Theseus passed was Epidaurus. Here he was waylaid by the ruffian Periphetes. Periphetes was nicknamed Corynetes or "Club-Man", after his weapon of choice, a stout length of wood wrapped in bronze to magnify its impact upon the skulls of his victims. Theseus merely snatched this implement from Periphetes and did him in with it. Some say that this incident was manufactured to account for depictions of Theseus carrying a club like his cousin Heracles, one of a number of instances on Theseus's part of heroic imitation.

Sinis

The next malefactor who received a dose of his own medicine was a fellow named Sinis, who used to ask passers-by to help him bend two pine trees to the ground. Why the wayfarers should have wanted to help in this activity is not disclosed. Presumably Sinis was persuasive. Once he had bent the trees, he tied his helper's wrists - one to each tree. Then he took a break. When the strain became too much, the victim had to let go, which caused the trees to snap upright and scatter portions of anatomy in all directions. Theseus turned the tables on Sinis by tying his wrists to a couple of bent pines, then letting nature and fatigue take their course.
Sciron

Then, not far from Athens, Theseus encountered Sciron. This famous brigand operated along the tall cliffs which to this day are named after him. He had a special tub in which he made each passing stranger wash his feet. While they were engaged in this sanitary activity, Sciron kicked them over a cliff into the ocean below, where they were devoured by a man-eating turtle. Theseus turned the tables on Sciron, just as he had turned them on Pine-Bender.

Procrustes

The most interesting of Theseus's challenges came in the form of an evildoer called Procrustes, whose name means "he who stretches." This Procrustes kept a house by the side of the road where he offered hospitality to passing strangers. They were invited in for a pleasant meal and a night's rest in his very special bed. If the guest asked what was so special about it, Procrustes replied, "Why, it has the amazing property that its length exactly matches whomsoever lies upon it." What Procrustes didn't volunteer was the method by which this "one-size-fits-all" was achieved, namely as soon as the guest lay down Procrustes went to work upon him, stretching him on the rack if he was too short for the bed and chopping off his legs if he was too long. Theseus lived up to his do-unto-others credo, fatally adjusting Procrustes to fit his own bed.

Arrival in Athens

When at last Theseus arrived in Athens to meet his father King Aegeus for the first time, the encounter was far from heartwarming. Theseus did not reveal his identity at first but was hailed as a hero by the Athenians, for he had rid the highway of its terrors. In honor of his exploits, he was invited to the palace for a banquet. Serving as hostess was his father's new wife, Medea. This was the same Medea who had helped Jason harvest a crop of armed warriors and steal the Golden Fleece out from under the nose of the dragon that guarded it. Jason had eventually abandoned Medea, and she had grown understandably bitter. Now she sized up Theseus and decided that he was a threat to her own son's prospects of ruling Athens after King Aegeus.

Years before, it was Medea's magic that had ensured the birth of Theseus to Princess Aethra of Troezen. Now Medea played on the king's insecurity. Surely the stranger at the banquet was too popular with the people. He might well seize the throne for himself. The king was persuaded to serve Theseus poisoned wine. And the hero, unawares, would have drunk it had he not paused first to carve his dinner. Or perhaps, more dramatically, Theseus drew his sword not to mince his boar's meat but to reveal his identity. In any case, Aegeus recognized the pattern on the sword's hilt. This was his own weapon, which he had left under a rock for his son to discover. Aegeus dashed the poisoned cup to the ground. Medea stormed out and made her escape in a chariot pulled by dragons.

King Minos

Theseus was now the recognized heir to the kingdom of Athens. Thus he was on hand when King Minos of Crete arrived to collect his periodic tribute of young men and maidens to be sacrificed to the Minotaur. Because his son had died while in the safekeeping of the Athenians, Minos exerted the power of the Cretan navy to enforce this onerous demand. The Minotaur was a monster, half-man, half-bull, that lived in the center of a maze called the Labyrinth. The beast had been born to Minos's wife Pasiphae as a punishment from the gods. Minos had been challenged to prove that he was of divine parentage, so he called on the sea god Poseidon to send him a sign. The god obliged, and a beautiful white bull emerged from the sea.

Minos liked the bull so much that he neglected to sacrifice it to the gods as he should have done. As a punishment, Poseidon caused the king's wife to fall in love with the bull. She had the master craftsman Daedalus build her a hollow cow in which to approach the beast. As a result, the Minotaur was born. The monster is generally depicted as having the head of a bull and the body of a man. But in the Middle Ages, artists portrayed a
man’s head and torso on a bull’s body. Some say that Theseus expressed his solidarity with his fellow citizens of Athens by volunteering to be one of the victims. Others maintain that Minos noticed the handsome young prince and chose him to be sacrificed. In any case, Theseus became one of the fated fourteen who embarked with the Cretan fleet.

Sponsors for the Quest

The sea upon which they sailed was the domain of Poseidon, who together with his brothers Zeus and Hades were the three most powerful gods of the Greek pantheon. They divided up creation, Zeus taking the sky, Hades the underworld and Poseidon the sea. But there were other deities of the watery depths, notably the "Old Man of the Sea", with his fifty daughters known as the Nereids. When Theseus was en route to Crete, he encountered one of these divinities. King Minos had made rude advances to one of the Athenian maidens and Theseus sprang to her defense, claiming this was his duty as a son of Poseidon. (Theseus, of course, was also the son of King Aegeus, but a true hero required an immortal father, so Theseus had both.)

Minos suggested that if Theseus's divine parentage were anything but a figment of his imagination, the gods of the sea would sponsor him. So Minos threw his signet ring overboard and challenged Theseus to dive in and find it. Not only did the hero retrieve the ring from the underwater palace into which it had fallen, but he was given a jewelled crown by one of the Nereids, either Thetis or Amphitrite. Not long after he arrived in Crete Theseus encountered another sponsor in the form of Princess Ariadne, daughter of King Minos. She fell in love with him at first sight. It was Ariadne who gave Theseus a clew which she had obtained from the master craftsman Daedalus.

In some versions of the myth it was an ordinary clew, which is to say a simple ball of thread. It was to prove invaluable in the quest to survive the terrors of the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth

The Labyrinth was a maze so cleverly and intricately contrived by its builder Daedalus that once thrown inside, a victim could never find the way out again. Sooner or later, he or she would round a corner and come face to face with the all-devouring Minotaur. This was the fate which awaited Theseus. It is clear from the myth that the Labyrinth was a maze from which none could escape because it was so diabolically meandering. Hence the Minotaur was not just its monster but its prisoner. But how exactly this worked as a practical matter with regard to the victims is less clear. Some versions of the myth have it that they were "enclosed" in the Labyrinth, as if it were a box.

But surely if the procedure were simply to push the victims in and then slam the door behind them, they would have cowered by the entrance rather than proceed into the terrors of the maze. Even if the guards threatened them with swords, it seems likely that some would have preferred the known death to being devoured alive by a monster. Nor could the guards have escorted the victims deep into the maze without getting lost themselves, or risking a run-in with the Minotaur. Maybe Daedalus built a roof over his invention, so that the victims could be dropped through a trap door into the very center. But perhaps on the whole it's better not to inquire too closely into the mechanics of the mythological.

When Theseus first entered the maze he tied off one end of the ball of thread which Ariadne had given him, and he played out the thread as he advanced deeper and deeper into the labyrinthine passages. Many artists have depicted Theseus killing the Minotaur with his sword or club, but it is hard to see how he could have concealed such bulky weapons in his clothing. More probable are the versions of the tale which have him coming upon the Minotaur as it slept and then, in properly heroic fashion, beating it to death with his bare fists. Or maybe he broke off one of the creature's horns and stabbed him to death with it. Then he followed the thread back to the entrance. Otherwise he would have died of starvation before making his escape.
**Escape from Crete**

Theseus now eloped with Ariadne, pausing only long enough to put holes in the bottom of her father’s ships so that he could not pursue. But Theseus soon abandoned the princess, either because he was bewitched by a god or because he had fallen in love with her sister Phaedra. Some say that he left Ariadne on the island of Naxos, but others maintain that such was his haste that he left her on the small island of Dia, within sight of the harbor from which they had sailed. The deserted and pining Ariadne has been a favorite theme of artists down through the ages. She was eventually rescued by the god Dionysus, who made her his wife.

**Subsequent Adventures**

As the ship bearing Theseus and his liberated fellow Athenians approached the promontory on which King Aegeus watched daily for his return, Theseus forgot the signal which he had prearranged with his father. The vessel's sails were to be black only if the expedition concluded as on all previous occasions, with the death of the hostages. In the exultation of triumph, or in anguish over the loss of Ariadne, Theseus neglected to hoist a sail of a different hue, and King Aegeus threw himself from the heights in despair. Theseus was now both king and bona fide hero, but this did not put an end to his adventuring. On one occasion he visited the Amazons, mythological warrior women who lived on the shores of the Black Sea.

The Amazons were renowned horseback riders and especially skilled with the bow. They lived apart from men and only met with them on occasion to produce children for their tribe. Some say that Theseus had encountered the Amazons before, on another post-Minotaur adventure in the company of Heracles. Heracles had been challenged to bring back the belt of the Amazon queen. The queen, for all her reputation of man-hating, had willingly given it to him. But the goddess Hera, who despised Heracles, stirred up trouble. A great battle ensued in which many Amazons were killed. Now Theseus visited the Amazons on his own. Their leader, fearless and hospitable, came aboard his ship with a gift. Theseus immediately put to sea and kidnapped her. Unfortunately, the dubious nature of this achievement was matched if not exceeded in another of the hero’s quests.

It was the custom in early Greek historical times for the younger sons of noble houses to embark, in the fine sailing months of autumn, upon the honorable occupation of piracy. When Theseus received word that one such pirate and his crew were making off with the royal Athenian herds at Marathon, he raced to the seaside plain. He grabbed the miscreant by the scruff and spun him around to give him what for. But the moment king and pirate laid eyes upon one another, their enmity was forgotten. "You've caught me fair and square," said Peirithous, for this was the pirate’s name, and he was of the royal house of the Thessalian Lapiths. "Name your punishment and it shall be done," said he, "for I like the looks of you." The admiration being mutual, Theseus named as penance an oath of perpetual friendship, and the two clasped hands upon it.

And so, in the fullness of time, when Theseus decided to carry off young Helen of Sparta, Peirithous agreed to lend a hand. This was the same Helen whose face would "launch a thousand ships" when, as Helen of Troy, the lover and captive of the Trojan Paris, she caused the allies of her husband Menelaus to wage the Trojan War to bring her home. At the time of Theseus's contemplated abduction, however, she was a mere lass of thirteen. And Theseus, having succeeded in spiriting her off with Peirithous's assistance, left her with his mother for safekeeping while he went about his business and she grew of marriageable age. But before this had come to pass she was rescued by her brothers, the hero twins, Castor and Pollux, whose conjoined starry constellation still brightens the night sky between fellow heroes Orion and Perseus.

One day not long after this escapade, Peirithous drew Theseus aside and spoke to him earnestly. "Remember when I agreed to help you with Helen?" he inquired, "and you pledged to help me in turn in any little outing of a similar nature?" Theseus nodded and muttered yes. "Good," responded Peirithous. "Spoken like a true pal. Well, I've picked my little exploit. I've decided to make off with Persephone, wife of Hades, King of the Dead." Theseus was speechless at the very idea of this sacrilege, but a pledge is a pledge. And so the two set off for the Underworld via one of the convenient caverns leading thereto. And at length they fetched up before the throne of
Hades. Lacking any false modesty, Peirithous boldly stated his business, adding that he was sure the god would concede that Persephone would be happier with himself.

Hades feigned consent. "Very well," he said. "If you love her that much and you're sure the feeling's mutual, you may have Persephone. But first, join me in a cordial. Please, take a seat." He gestured at a bench nearby, and the two heroes, little thinking it was bewitched, seated themselves upon it. And here they stuck like glue. Meanwhile, Hades loosed a flock of torments upon them in the form of serpents and Furies and the fangs of the hellhound Cerberus, not to mention the infamous water of Tartarus that recedes as parched lips draw near. And here the two heroes would be stuck today, were it not that Heracles happened to be passing by on one of his Labors. Seeing his cousin Theseus's plight he freed him with one heroic yank, leaving only a small portion of his hindparts adhering to the bench. But Heracles couldn't or wouldn't free Peirithous. And so Theseus's pal pays for eternity the price of his heroic audacity.

Some writers in Classical times considered Theseus to have been a historical, rather than a mythological figure. It was even claimed that the episode in the Underworld actually took place in a real-world kingdom. Its ruler, named Pluto (another name for Hades), had a daughter named Persephone and a vicious Molossian hound named Cerberus. When the heroes tried to carry off Persephone, her father locked up Theseus and set the dog on Peirithous. Historical or not, Theseus was the national hero of Athens. He was said to have united all the feuding warlords of the Athenian countryside into a federation. He was renowned for his sense of justice and his defence of the oppressed. Escaped slaves taking refuge at his altar in historical times could not be taken back into bondage.