

MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

Apollodorus: The Library (Bibliotheca)

Vol. 7 Heroines, Lovers, and the Road to Troy

Chapters 25-28

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

This is original Mythopouch wording. It is not the ancient Greek text and not the 1921 Frazer translation.

© 2026 Mythopouch. All rights reserved. Mythopouch™ is a trademark of Mythopouch.

Contents

This volume

Vol. 7 Heroines, Lovers, and the Road to Troy

Chapter 25: Atalanta, Orion, and Other Tales of Love and Hubris

Chapter 26: Helen of Sparta - The Face That Launched the Suitors

Chapter 27: The Marriage of Peleus and Thetis: The Birth of Achilles

Chapter 28: Theseus of Athens - Hero-King, Murderer, Exile

All volumes in this retelling

Vol. 1 Cosmic Beginnings

Vol. 2 The Divine and the Earthly

Vol. 3 Thessaly and the Golden Fleece

Vol. 4 Perseus and the Age of Monsters

Vol. 5 Heracles: The Greatest Hero

Vol. 6 Crete, Thebes, and the Cursed Houses

Vol. 7 Heroines, Lovers, and the Road to Troy (this file)

Vol. 8 Appendix and Reference

Chapter 25: Atalanta, Orion, and Other Tales of Love and Hubris

Not every hero who changed the world ruled a city or slew a monster. Some lived in the margins, in forests and mountain passes, and their stories were told around campfires rather than in palace halls. This chapter belongs to the hunters, the outcasts, and the proud souls who refused the roles the world assigned them - and paid the price for their pride.

The She-Bear's Daughter

In the highlands of **Arcadia**, where oak forests climb towards the sky and streams run cold even in summer, a king named **Iasus** received a daughter when he had prayed for a son. Disappointed, he took the infant to the mountainside and left her there, as unwanted things were left in those days. The child's name was **Atalanta** (*at-a-LAN-tuh*).

The story should have ended there. But **Artemis**, goddess of the wilderness, looked with favour upon the abandoned girl. She sent a she-bear, fresh from losing her own cubs to hunters, to find the child. The bear nursed the infant as she would have nursed her own. Days later, a band of hunters passing through the glade discovered the impossible sight: a human baby, alive and well, in the care of a bear. They killed the beast, as hunters do, and carried the child down to their village.

The girl grew up among men who tracked and killed for a living. She learned to run faster than the deer, to loose an arrow before her target knew she was there, and to move through the forest in silence. When two centaurs, **Rhoecus** and **Hylaeus**, tried to assault her in a mountain pass, she did not scream for rescue. She shot them both, one arrow apiece, and continued on her way.

Atalanta was not interested in marriage. She had seen what became of women who accepted domesticity: the closed rooms, the waiting, the gradual narrowing of the world. She took no such vow formally, but she made her position clear to anyone who asked. The forest was her home. The hunt was her purpose. A husband would be a chain, and she had already escaped one death. She would not accept another.

The Beast of Calydon

Oeneus (*EE-nee-uhs*), king of **Calydon** in **Aetolia**, made a mistake that many rulers had made before him. In the annual sacrifices to the gods, he forgot one. **Artemis**, whose domains include the hunt and the untamed places, received no offering that year. Perhaps Oeneus simply overlooked her. Perhaps he thought her less important than the gods of sky and sea. Either way, the omission was noted.

Artemis does not forgive oversights. She sent a boar to Calydon, but this was no ordinary beast. It stood taller than a horse at the shoulder. Its tusks were curved swords of ivory. It uprooted orchards, crushed vineyards, and trampled anything that moved. The farmers fled their fields. The hunters who pursued it did not return.

Oeneus had a son, **Meleager** (*mel-ee-AY-jer*), who was among the finest warriors of his generation. Meleager decided that the boar would be the quarry of the greatest hunt ever assembled. He sent messengers across Greece, inviting every hero of note to join him. They came in numbers that would not be seen again until the Trojan War itself.

The Calydonian Boar Hunt

Hunter	Origin	Fate / Notable Action
Meleager	Calydon	Delivered killing blow; later died when Althaea burned the brand
Atalanta	Arcadia	Drew **first blood** with her arrow; awarded the boar's skin by Meleager
Peleus	Phthia	Survived; later married Thetis and fathered Achilles
Telamon	Salamis	Survived; father of Ajax the Greater
Jason	Iolcus	Survived; leader of the Argonauts (Ch. 10 - 12)
Castor & Polydeuces	Sparta	The Dioscuri; survived; later became patrons of sailors
Theseus	Athens	Survived; would later abduct Helen (Ch. 26, 28)
Ancaeus	Tegea	Killed by the boar while reaching for his wine cup
Plexippus & Toxeus	Calydon	Meleager's uncles; killed by Meleager in the dispute over the skin
Idas & Lynceus	Messene	Survived; quarreled with the Dioscuri on other occasions

Note: Ancient sources vary on the exact list of participants. Apollodorus names many of the above; other poets add additional hunters. The table reflects the most consistent tradition.

Atalanta was the only woman in the company. Some of the heroes resented her presence. Others, like Peleus and Jason, had fought alongside enough unusual companions to withhold judgment. The hunt lasted for days, tracking the boar through thickets and ravines where no horse could pass.

The moment came in a clearing on the fifth day. The boar charged, and the hunters scattered. Atalanta, calm as a statue, drew her bow and sent an arrow into the beast's

flank. It was the first blood drawn, and it slowed the animal enough for Meleager to close in. He thrust his spear into the boar's heart, and the great creature fell.

Fire and Family

Meleager fell in love with Atalanta that afternoon, if he had not already. In the flush of victory, he insisted that she receive the boar's hide as her prize, since her arrow had drawn first blood. She accepted it with the same quiet grace with which she did everything.

Meleager's uncles, the sons of **Thestius**, objected. A woman should not receive the trophy of a heroic hunt. They tried to take the skin from Atalanta by force. Meleager, whose temper was as quick as his spear arm, killed them both on the spot.

His mother, **Althaea**, heard the news and felt her heart split in two directions. The dead men were her brothers. The killer was her son. But Meleager's fate had been sealed at his birth. The **Moirai**, the three Fates, had appeared in the birthing chamber and announced that the child would live only as long as a certain brand on the fire remained unconsumed. Althaea had snatched that brand from the flames and hidden it away, preserving her son's life against every danger he had faced since.

Now, grieving for her brothers, she made a different choice. She retrieved the brand and threw it onto the fire. Meleager, miles away in the forest, felt a sudden pain in his chest. He weakened as the brand charred and blackened. By the time the fire consumed the wood entirely, Meleager was dead. The greatest hunter of his generation was undone by the same magic that had protected him, and by a mother's grief that outweighed her love.

> **Mythology Note: Female Hunters in Greek Myth** Atalanta is unique among Greek heroines for her participation in male heroic activities on equal terms. Unlike Amazons, who exist as a separate female warrior society, Atalanta hunts alongside men and surpasses them. Her story explores a question that Greek culture rarely asked: what happens when a woman refuses domestic confinement and succeeds in the masculine sphere? The answer - transformation into a lion rather than acceptance of a human marriage - suggests the cultural limits within which even the greatest female hero operated.

The Race That Was Not a Race

After the death of Meleager, Atalanta returned to Arcadia. Word of her skill and her beauty had spread. Suitors arrived, and she turned them all away. Eventually, she announced a condition: any man who wished to marry her must defeat her in a footrace. Losers would forfeit their lives.

Many young men accepted the challenge, confident that no woman could outrun a man. They were wrong. Atalanta ran like the wind itself, and one by one, the suitors fell behind and were executed. The pile of graves beside the racing ground grew higher.

Then came **Hippomenes** (also called **Melanion** in some accounts), a young man who understood that he could not win by speed alone. He prayed to **Aphrodite**, goddess of love, who gave him three golden apples from the garden of the **Hesperides**. Atalanta, when she saw Hippomenes at the starting line, barely regarded him. She had outrun proud men and strong men and desperate men. This one looked like all the others.

The race began. Atalanta took an immediate lead, her feet barely seeming to touch the ground. Hippomenes dropped the first golden apple. It rolled to the side of the track, gleaming in the sunlight, and Atalanta's eye caught the flash of gold. She stopped to pick it up. By the time she straightened, Hippomenes had closed some of the gap. She passed him easily, but when he dropped the second apple, she stopped again. The third apple fell just before the finish line, and this time her pause was long enough. Hippomenes crossed the line one step ahead of her.

She married him, though whether she loved him or simply honoured the terms of her contest is a question the stories do not answer. What happened next is clearer, and sadder. The couple made love in a sanctuary of **Zeus** (some say of **Cybele**, the mountain mother). The offended god transformed them both into lions. In Greek belief, lions could not mate with one another, only with leopards. The punishment was poetic and permanent: they would remain together but could never again consummate their union.

The Bear in the Sky

Atalanta was not the only hunter transformed for love. **Callisto** (*kal-IS-toh*) was a companion of Artemis, a nymph who had sworn the same vows of chastity that the goddess demanded. **Zeus**, seeing her alone in the forest, disguised himself as Artemis and approached her. When Callisto discovered the deception, it was too late. She was with child.

Artemis, discovering the pregnancy, drove Callisto from her company. Some say Artemis transformed her into a bear herself. Others say **Hera**, Zeus's ever-watchful wife, performed the transformation out of jealous rage. Either way, Callisto became a bear and wandered the forests for years, her human mind trapped in an animal's body.

She bore a son, **Arcas**, who grew up to be a skilled hunter. One day in the forest, Arcas came face to face with a bear. He raised his spear, prepared to strike. The bear looked at him with eyes that held more than animal awareness. Zeus, watching from Olympus, intervened before a son could kill his own mother. He transformed them both into

constellations: Callisto became the Great Bear, **Ursa Major**, and Arcas became the Little Bear, **Ursa Minor**.

Hera, still unsatisfied, persuaded **Oceanus** and **Tethys** to forbid the bears from ever sinking below the horizon to bathe. This is why the two constellations circle the northern sky and never set, even as the seasons turn.

The Giant Hunter

The last story belongs to the sky itself. **Orion** was a giant, the son of **Poseidon**, who had gifted him the ability to walk on water as if it were solid ground. He was the greatest hunter in the world, stronger and taller than any mortal, and his pride matched his stature.

Orion courted **Merope**, daughter of King **Oenopion** of Chios. The king, unwilling to part with his daughter, devised a cruel solution. While Orion slept, Oenopion had his attendants blind the giant and abandon him on the shore. Orion stumbled to the east, guided by a boy who led him towards the rising sun. When dawn's light struck his face, his sight was restored.

But Orion's hubris was not cured along with his blindness. He boasted that he would kill every animal on Earth. **Gaia**, the Earth herself, heard the threat and sent a scorpion to stop him. The scorpion's sting killed the giant hunter, or, in another version, **Artemis** shot him for his arrogance. Still another version says that Apollo, jealous of his sister's affection for Orion, tricked Artemis into shooting him by challenging her to hit a distant target in the sea - which was Orion's head.

After his death, Orion was placed among the stars as a constellation. The scorpion became **Scorpius**, positioned on the opposite side of the sky so that the two never meet. Orion rises as Scorpius sets, and vice versa, an eternal chase across the heavens.

Orion's belt points the way to the **Pleiades** (*PLEE-a-deez*), the seven daughters of **Atlas** who were transformed into stars to escape the hunter's pursuit. They shine still, a cluster of sisters huddled together in the dark, beautiful and distant and cold.

The Pleiades gleamed in the night sky, but on earth, in a quiet palace in **Lacedaemon**, a girl was growing into a woman whose beauty would reshape the world more thoroughly than any boar or scorpion ever could. Her name was Helen.

Discussion Questions 1. Atalanta sets a condition for marriage that dooms most of her suitors to death. Is she morally responsible for their deaths, or does each suitor bear responsibility for choosing to compete? 2. Meleager's mother Althaea

chooses to avenge her brothers by killing her own son. How does this moment compare to other impossible choices faced by parents in Greek myth (e.g., Agamemnon and Iphigenia)? 3. Callisto is punished for a deception committed against her by Zeus. What does this pattern of divine injustice towards mortal women suggest about how Greek myth understood the relationship between gods and mortals?

Chapter 26: Helen of Sparta - The Face That Launched the Suitors

Some faces are remembered for wisdom. Others for courage. **Helen**'s face was remembered for starting a war. But before the ships and the siege and the ten years of blood, there was a girl growing up in a palace on the banks of the **Eurotas River**, and she had no idea what her own reflection would cost the world.

The Swan and the Egg

Leda (*LEE-duh*), queen of Sparta, was married to **Tyndareus**, a good king of a small but proud kingdom. Into their marriage came a god. **Zeus** took the form of a swan - white wings, long neck, the whole elegant production - and approached Leda. The stories vary on how willing she was. Some versions call it seduction. Others call it something closer to divine intrusion. In Greek myth, the line between the two is often difficult to locate.

What is certain is the result. Leda laid two eggs. From one came **Helen** and **Polydeuces**, children of Zeus. From the other came **Clytemnestra** (*kly-tem-NES-tra*) and **Castor**, children of Tyndareus. The four siblings grew up together in the Spartan palace, but from the beginning, Helen was different. Even as a child, her beauty was unsettling - more than pretty, the kind of beauty that made people stare and forget what they were saying.

Polydeuces and Castor, the **Dioscuri**, became famous warriors and horsemen. They were inseparable, and their devotion to their sister was absolute. That devotion would be tested sooner than anyone expected.

Helen's relationship with her sister Clytemnestra was more complex. Where Helen seemed to float through rooms, drawing attention without trying, Clytemnestra watched and calculated. She would grow up to marry **Agamemnon** and to murder him in his bath upon his return from Troy, a revenge ten years in the making for the sacrifice of their daughter **Iphigenia**. The two sisters, one the cause of the war and the other its most terrible consequence, formed a pair that no playwright could resist. They were bound by

blood and by the catastrophe that beauty, or the lack of it, could unleash upon a household.

The First Abduction

Helen was still a girl when **Theseus** and **Pirithous** came to Sparta. Theseus, the great hero-king of Athens, had made a pact with his friend: they would each marry a daughter of Zeus. Theseus chose Helen, the most obvious candidate, while Pirithous set his sights on **Persephone** herself, queen of the underworld. The plan was insane in proportion to the ambition of the men who conceived it.

Theseus and Pirithous snatched Helen from a temple where she was dancing. They carried her to **Aphidnae** in Attica and left her in the care of Theseus's mother, **Aethra**, while they descended to Hades to fetch Persephone. The underworld did not go well for them. Pirithous was trapped forever on the Chair of Forgetfulness. Theseus was eventually rescued by **Heracles**, but by the time he returned, the Dioscuri had razed Aphidnae to the ground, recovered their sister, and taken Aethra into captivity as a slave.

Helen was home, but the experience left a mark. She had been taken once. She would be taken again. It also left her with an unusual companion: **Aethra**, Theseus's mother, who remained in Sparta as a servant to Helen, a living reminder of the first abduction. Helen treated her with kindness, but the presence of the old queen of Athens in a Spartan palace was a strangeness that guests often remarked upon.

The Problem of the Suitors

When Helen reached marriageable age, Tyndareus faced a crisis that no amount of good governance could solve. Every king and hero in Greece wanted to marry her. The list of suitors read like a directory of the heroic age: **Odysseus** of Ithaca, **Ajax** of Salamis, **Diomedes** of Argos, **Menelaus** of Mycenae, **Idomeneus** of Crete, **Patroclus** (not yet linked to **Achilles**), and dozens more. They arrived at Sparta with gifts and entourages, each one convinced that he was the obvious choice.

The problem was political dynamite. Helen's husband would gain immeasurable prestige, which meant that every rejected suitor would leave Sparta as an enemy. Tyndareus, a practical man, understood that choosing any one of them could start a war right there in his own palace.

Helen's Suitors

Suitor	Kingdom	Notes
Odysseus	Ithaca	Proposed the oath; knew he had no chance; married Penelope (Helen's cousin) instead

Helen's Suitors		
Ajax the Greater	Salamis	Fought at Troy; committed suicide after losing Achilles' armour
Diomedes	Argos	Son of Tydeus; wounded Ares and Aphrodite at Troy
Menelaus	Sparta / Mycenae	Brother of Agamemnon; **chosen husband**; invoked the oath when Helen was taken
Idomeneus	Crete	Grandson of Minos; fought at Troy; survived but suffered a stormy return
Patroclus	Opus / Phthia	Son of Menoetius; later Achilles' beloved companion; died at Troy
Antilochus	Pylus	Son of Nestor; died defending his father at Troy
Protesilaus	Phylace	First Greek to die at Troy; killed before he even set foot on Asian soil
Philoctetes	Meliboea	Possessor of Heracles' bow; killed Paris at Troy
Palamedes	Euboea	Inventor of writing; framed and executed by Odysseus at Troy
Thoas	Calydon	Led the Aetolians at Troy; one of the few leaders to survive the war
Megapenthes	Mycenae (Tiryns)	Son of Proetus; ruled Tiryns; competed but lost to Menelaus

Note: The ancient sources list between twenty and forty suitors. Apollodorus and Hesiod name many; the epic Cypria* adds others. The table includes the most prominent names that appear in multiple sources.*

The Oath

It was **Odysseus** who proposed the solution. Odysseus was a clever man, the cleverest in Greece, and he had two advantages that the other suitors lacked. First, he knew he could not win Helen's hand. He was not the handsomest man, nor the greatest warrior, nor the most powerful king. Second, he wanted to marry **Penelope**, Helen's cousin, and Tyndareus could arrange that as a consolation prize.

Odysseus's proposal was simple. Every suitor must swear a solemn oath, by the waters of the **Styx**, to defend whichever man was chosen as Helen's husband against anyone who might try to take her by force. The oath would bind them all together. No rejected suitor could attack the chosen one without facing the combined wrath of the rest.

Tyndareus saw the wisdom immediately. The suitors, after some grumbling, agreed. They swore the oath one by one, each man invoking the most terrible divine penalties for breaking his word. Then Tyndareus made his choice.

He selected **Menelaus** (*men-eh-LAY-uhs*), brother of **Agamemnon**, king of Mycenae. Menelaus was not the most impressive suitor. He was not the strongest or the bravest or the wisest. But he was solid, reasonably wealthy, and connected to the most powerful kingdom in Greece through his brother. Helen married him, and for a time, life in Sparta was peaceful. She bore him a daughter, **Hermione**. The suitors went home, bound by their oath but apparently content.

The oath was not a trivial matter. In the Greek world, an oath sworn by the Styx was the most binding promise a person could make. Even gods feared breaking such an oath. The suitors understood, as they placed their hands on the altar and spoke the words, that they were binding their honour and their lives to a single woman's safety. Most of them probably never expected to be called upon to fulfil it. Helen was in Sparta, protected by her brothers and her husband. What could possibly threaten her there?

Years passed. The oath faded into memory, the way oaths do when nothing forces men to remember them. Helen raised Hermione. Menelaus governed. The suitors built their kingdoms and fought their local wars. The world seemed stable enough.

The Face That Launched the Ships

Then **Paris** (*PAR-iss*), prince of Troy, came to Sparta.

Paris was not supposed to be a prince. An oracle had warned that he would destroy Troy, so his parents, **Priam** and **Hecuba**, had exposed him as an infant on Mount Ida. He survived, raised by shepherds, and grew into a handsome young man with a talent for judging livestock. That talent would have world-shaking consequences.

At the wedding of **Peleus** and **Thetis**, the goddess **Eris** had thrown a golden apple inscribed "To the Fairest." **Hera**, **Athena**, and **Aphrodite** all claimed it. Zeus, wisely refusing to judge between his wife and his daughters, appointed Paris as the arbiter. Each goddess offered him a bribe. Hera offered power. Athena offered victory in war. Aphrodite offered the most beautiful woman in the world: Helen of Sparta.

Paris chose Aphrodite. It was, by any measure, a catastrophically poor decision. Power and victory in war could have brought lasting advantages. The promise of a beautiful woman is a single transaction that leaves you with nothing afterward except the woman herself, and the hatred of everyone who wanted her.

He sailed to Sparta as Menelaus's guest, which made what followed a violation of **xenia**, the sacred law of hospitality. Menelaus received him with all the ceremony due a prince of

Troy. He offered food and drink before asking his name. He provided baths, fresh clothing, and a place at his table. While Menelaus was away at a funeral, Paris and Helen departed together.

The stories disagree on whether she went willingly or was compelled. The truth probably contains elements of both: a woman whose divine beauty made her the object of every man's desire, caught between a prophecy she did not ask for and a choice she may not have fully controlled. Aphrodite's power was such that even a reluctant heart could be made to feel something like willingness. But Helen's later lamentations at Troy suggest that she understood the weight of what she had done, and that understanding brought her no peace.

What matters is the result. Helen was in Troy. Menelaus, her husband, invoked the suitors' oath.

The response was slow at first. Heroes who had sworn solemn oaths years ago had kingdoms to rule and affairs to settle. But the oath was binding, sworn by the Styx, and the honour of every man who had pledged it was at stake. One by one, the ships began to assemble at **Aulis**. Agamemnon took command. **Odysseus**, who had devised the oath, would have to sail despite his reluctance. **Ajax**, **Diomedes**, and the others made their preparations.

The fleet that gathered was the greatest military expedition the Greek world had ever seen. A thousand ships, by some counts. Warriors from every kingdom and island, bound together by an oath sworn years before for a woman most of them had never met.

The fleet that gathered at Aulis included ships from every corner of the Greek world. **Nestor** came from Pylus with eighty ships, bringing the wisdom of two generations. **Ajax** the Greater sailed from Salamis with twelve vessels, his huge frame and blunt courage a comfort to nervous allies. **Philoctetes** brought the bow of **Heracles**, which he had received at the hero's pyre. Even men who had reservations about the war's justice felt the pull of their oath and the chance to win glory that would be sung for centuries.

The gathering had its complications. **Odysseus**, now married to Penelope and father to young **Telemachus**, tried to avoid the call by feigning madness. He yoked an ox and a donkey together and plowed a field sowing salt instead of seed. Palamedes, sent to fetch him, placed the infant Telemachus in the path of the plow. Odysseus swerved to avoid his son, proving that his sanity was intact, and had no choice but to sail. The grudge he bore Palamedes for this trick would have deadly consequences at Troy.

They would sail for Troy. But the greatest warrior among them had yet to join the fleet. His mother was still hiding him, a child wrapped in girls' clothing on the island of

Scyros, because a prophecy said he would die young at Troy, and no mother wants that for her son.

His name was **Achilles**.

> **Mythology Note: Helen's Beauty in Greek Thought** Helen's beauty occupies a peculiar place in Greek philosophy. The fifth-century sophist **Gorgias** wrote a defence speech for Helen in which he argued that her beauty was a form of divine compulsion, a *force* (bia) that operated on those who saw her like a drug or a spell. This rhetorical exercise, known as the *Encomium of Helen*, raised a radical question: if beauty is a form of violence, can its possessor be held responsible for its effects? Greek myth tends to answer no, while Greek tragedy tends to answer yes. Helen's enduring ambiguity reflects this unresolved tension.

> **Discussion Questions** 1. Odysseus proposes the suitors' oath knowing he has no chance of winning Helen. Is this clever diplomacy or manipulative cynicism? How does it reflect the character he will display throughout the Trojan War? 2. The suitors swear to defend Helen's husband "against anyone who tries to take her." When Paris takes Helen to Troy, does the oath morally oblige the Greeks to go to war, or does Agamemnon exploit a technicality to expand his power? 3. Helen's agency in leaving with Paris is left deliberately ambiguous in the sources. Why do you think Greek storytellers were unwilling to make her either purely a victim or purely a willing participant?

Chapter 27: The Marriage of Peleus and Thetis: The Birth of Achilles

Every great war needs its greatest warrior. Before the thousand ships could sail, before the walls of Troy could burn, a boy had to be born on a mountainside in Thessaly and raised to be the most dangerous man alive. This is the story of how that boy came to exist: the marriage of a mortal outcast and a goddess of the sea, and the single golden object that would undo everything.

Blood on the Field

Peleus (*PEE-lee-uhs*) was the son of **Aeacus**, king of **Aegina**, a man so pious that he was later made one of the three judges of the dead. Peleus had a half-brother named **Phocus**

(*FOH-kuss*), a youth of extraordinary athletic ability who threw the discus farther than anyone had ever seen. The brothers were competing one afternoon, the discus spinning through the air, when Peleus threw with too much force and too little care. The discus struck Phocus in the head and killed him instantly.

Whether it was an accident or something darker, the sources disagree. What is certain is that Peleus and his brother **Telamon** fled. Aegina was no longer safe for a man with blood on his hands, even if the blood belonged to his own brother. Peleus travelled to **Phthia**, then to **Iolcus**, seeking purification and a fresh start.

At Iolcus, King **Acastus** (*a-KAS-tuhs*) received him with the generosity that kings were expected to show. Peleus was young, strong, and well-born. He seemed like a useful man to have at court. But Acastus's wife, **Astydameia** (*as-ti-dah-MAY-uh*), saw something else in the exile. She fell in love with him.

Peleus refused her advances. This was not a story that ended well for anyone.

Astydameia told her husband that Peleus had tried to assault her. Acastus, unwilling to kill a guest outright (the gods take a dim view of that), devised a subtler revenge. He invited Peleus to a hunt on **Mount Pelion**. While Peleus slept, exhausted from the chase, Acastus stole his sword - a divine weapon forged by **Hephaestus** himself - and hid it. Then he left Peleus surrounded by centaurs.

The centaurs were not the wise and gentle kind. Most centaurs were violent, lustful creatures who regarded a sleeping, unarmed man as an opportunity. Peleus woke to find himself encircled. He had no weapon. The centaurs closed in.

The Wise Centaur

Chiron heard the disturbance from his cave higher on the mountain. The old centaur, tutor of heroes, was different from his wild cousins. He had trained **Heracles**, **Jason**, and dozens of others in the arts of war and wisdom. He intervened, driving off the hostile centaurs and taking Peleus into his home.

Chiron helped Peleus recover his sword from the place where Acastus had hidden it. Then he did what he always did with promising young men: he took Peleus under his wing, taught him what he knew, and counseled patience over rage. But Peleus was not the patient type. He returned to Iolcus, reclaimed his honour with the sword Hephaestus had made, and killed both Acastus and Astydameia. Justice, in the heroic age, was usually personal and always final.

Peleus was now a murderer twice over, but he had also proved himself a man of strength and will. The gods were watching. One god in particular had been watching for some time.

The Nymph Who Would Not Be Caught

Thetis (*THEH-tis*) was a sea-nymph, one of the fifty **Nereids**, daughters of the ancient sea-god **Nereus**. She was beautiful, powerful, and elusive. **Zeus** had desired her. But **Prometheus**, even in his chains on the Caucasus, had managed to deliver a prophecy: any son born to Thetis would be greater than his father.

This was the one prophecy Zeus could not ignore. He had overthrown his own father, Cronus. He would not risk being overthrown in turn. With the memory of the succession curse burning in his mind, Zeus arranged for Thetis to marry a mortal instead. A mortal's son could be greater than a mortal father without threatening the king of gods.

Peleus was chosen. Chiron, ever the matchmaker, advised him on how to proceed. Thetis would not come willingly. She would resist with every power at her disposal. Peleus must hold on, no matter what form she took.

He found her on the seashore at dusk, combing her hair while the waves murmured around her. She saw him coming and began to transform. First she became fire, burning with heat that should have consumed any mortal. Peleus held on. Then she became water, slipping and flowing through his fingers. He held on. Then a lion, roaring and clawing. Then a serpent, hissing and striking. Through every transformation, Peleus kept his grip, following Chiron's advice, refusing to let go.

Finally, exhausted, Thetis returned to her own form and submitted. The wedding was arranged. Every god on Olympus was invited. It would be the greatest divine celebration since the marriage of Cadmus and Harmonia.

Divine-Mortal Marriages in Greek Myth

Divine Partner	Mortal Partner	Result / Significance
Zeus + Alcmena	Amphitryon's wife	Heracles, greatest hero, achieved apotheosis
Zeus + Danae	Princess of Argos	Perseus, slayer of Medusa, founder of Mycenae
Zeus + Leda	Queen of Sparta	Helen and Polydeuces, beauty that launched a war
Poseidon + Tyro	Salmoneus's daughter	Pelias and Neleus, founders of rival dynasties
Aphrodite + Anchises	Trojan prince	Aeneas, Trojan survivor, ancestor of Romans

Divine-Mortal Marriages in Greek Myth		
Thetis + Peleus	Exiled Aeginetan prince	**Achilles**, greatest warrior of the Trojan War
Eos + Tithonus	Trojan prince	Son Memnon fought at Troy; Tithonus granted immortality without eternal youth

Note: Divine-mortal marriages in Greek myth almost always produce extraordinary offspring, either heroes of unparalleled ability or figures whose beauty or power becomes world-altering. The pattern reflects the Greek belief that greatness requires divine parentage.

The Apple

The wedding of Peleus and Thetis took place on Mount Pelion, in the meadow outside Chiron's cave. The gods arrived in splendor. Zeus and Hera, Poseidon and Demeter, Apollo and Artemis, Hermes and Hephaestus, Ares and Aphrodite were all present. The **Muses** sang. The **Hours** danced. **Ganymede** poured the nectar. It was the kind of celebration that mortals would remember for generations, even though they had not been invited.

But one goddess had not received an invitation. **Eris**, the personification of discord and strife, was deliberately excluded. Weddings are occasions for harmony, and Eris brings the opposite. Someone, Hera most likely, had decided that her presence would be inappropriate.

Eris did not take the snub gracefully. She crafted a golden apple and inscribed upon it a single phrase: **"To the Fairest."** Then she rolled it into the middle of the divine feast.

The effect was instantaneous. **Hera**, queen of Olympus and protector of marriage, claimed the apple as her right. **Athena**, goddess of wisdom and strategic warfare, argued that fairness of mind and character mattered more than conventional beauty. **Aphrodite**, goddess of love and desire, laughed and said that everyone knew who the fairest was, and the answer was obvious.

The argument grew heated. The wedding celebration teetered on the edge of violence. Zeus, faced with the impossible task of choosing between his wife and two of his daughters, made a decision that seemed clever at the time. He appointed a mortal to judge. The mortal was **Paris**, prince of Troy, the same shepherd-prince who would soon sail to Sparta and take Helen.

Zeus dispatched **Hermes** to lead the three goddesses to Mount Ida, where Paris waited with his flocks. Each goddess offered her bribe. Each made her case. Paris, young and vain and not especially wise, chose Aphrodite and her promise of Helen.

The golden apple had done its work. The seed of the Trojan War had been planted at a wedding feast, which is the kind of irony that only the gods appreciate.

> **Mythology Note: Thetis and Achilles, and Why She Tried to Make Him Immortal** Thetis's attempts to render Achilles immortal reflect a deep maternal anxiety rooted in prophecy. Thetis knew that her son was fated to die young at Troy, and every action she took, from the burning to the Styx-dipping to the hiding on Scyros, was an attempt to delay or defeat that fate. In this she resembles other mythic mothers: Demeter hiding Persephone, Alcmena protecting the infant Heracles, Rhea saving Zeus from Cronus. The Greek gods, for all their power, cannot override what the Moirai have decreed. Thetis's desperate ingenuity is the most moving expression of this limitation.

Fire and Water

Achilles was born in the cave on Mount Pelion, where Chiron had delivered him. Thetis looked at her son, this half-mortal infant with his father's strength and her own immortal blood, and she knew what waited for him. Troy. A short life. Glory that would outlast the stones of cities.

She could not accept it. By night, she anointed the infant with **ambrosia**, the food of the gods. By day, she held him in the fire, burning away the mortality he had inherited from his father. This was the method the gods used to make mortals immortal: fire to burn away the human, ambrosia to replace it with the divine.

Peleus caught her one morning. He saw his wife holding their son in the flames, the baby's skin darkening, and he cried out in horror. He snatched the child from her grasp. Thetis, furious and heartbroken, fled back to the sea. She would not return to the mortal world for years.

Peleus, left alone with a son he could not make immortal, sought another solution. He took Achilles to the **River Styx** in Arcadia, the river by which even gods swore their unbreakable oaths. He dipped the infant into its waters. Every part of Achilles that the river touched became invulnerable, impervious to any weapon.

But Thetis had held him by the heel when she dipped him. The heel remained dry. It was the one point of vulnerability in an otherwise invincible body, and it would be enough.

The School of Heroes

Peleus gave his son to Chiron. The old centaur accepted the charge, as he had accepted so many boys before. On Mount Pelion, Achilles grew up not in a palace but in a cave, surrounded by forests and peaks. Chiron fed him the entrails of lions and bears to build his strength, the marrow of wild boars to harden his bones. He taught the boy to track, to hunt, to throw a spear with deadly accuracy, to play the lyre, to speak with precision and think with clarity.

Achilles grew into a youth of extraordinary beauty and terrifying capacity for violence. He was swift as a deer and strong as a lion, with a voice that could charm or command. Other heroes trained by Chiron had been great. Achilles was different. There was something in him that burned brighter and hotter, a flame that consumed everything it touched, including eventually himself.

Thetis, watching from the sea, tried one last time to save him. When the Greek recruiters came looking for him, she disguised him as a girl and hid him among the princesses of Scyros. But **Odysseus**, ever the detective, found him out. A rack of weapons placed among feminine goods was all it took. Achilles reached for the sword instinctively, and his cover was blown.

He chose to go. His mother had offered him two fates: a long, obscure life in peace, or a short, glorious life at Troy that would end in death. He chose the short life without hesitation. Glory, for Achilles, was worth any price.

The fleet was assembled at Aulis. The greatest heroes of Greece waited for the wind to change. And now their greatest warrior was among them, young and beautiful and doomed, sitting by the shore with his lyre and his beloved companion **Patroclus**, unaware that the rage that would define his life had not yet found its cause.

Troy waited. The gods had already chosen sides. And somewhere in the city, in a palace of high towers, Helen looked out at the sea and wondered what she had done.

Discussion Questions 1. Zeus withdraws his interest in Thetis because of a prophecy about her son. How does this decision reflect the same pattern of behaviour we have seen from every generation of divine fathers (Ouranos, Cronus, Zeus)? Can the succession curse ever truly be escaped? 2. Peleus interrupts Thetis's attempt to make Achilles immortal, dooming his son to a mortal fate. Was this an act of love or a mistake born of mortal incomprehension? How do you read his choice? 3. Eris's golden apple is a small object with

catastrophic consequences. What does this tell us about how Greek myth understands the origin of great conflicts? Do they begin with grand decisions or with small provocations?

Chapter 28: Theseus of Athens - Hero-King, Murderer, Exile

Every city needs a hero. Athens, that city of olive trees and argument, of democracy and law, found theirs in a boy who grew up not knowing his father. But the story of **Theseus** (*THEE-see-uhs*) is not a simple tale of monster-slaying and happy ever after. It is the story of how courage curdles into recklessness, how a man who unites a nation destroys his own family, and how the greatest hero of Athens ends his life as an exile, pushed off a cliff by a man he trusted.

In other words, it is a very Greek story indeed.

The Sword Under the Stone

Aegeus (*EE-jee-uhs*), king of Athens, had a problem. He had no heir. In desperation, he consulted the Delphic oracle, whose riddles were famous for being technically true and practically useless. The oracle told him: "Do not loosen the foot of your wineskin until you reach the highest point of Athens."

Aegeus, understandably, had no idea what this meant.

On his way home, he stopped at Troezen, a city in the Peloponnese, to visit its king, **Pittheus**. Pittheus was known for his cleverness, and after a few cups of wine - which Aegeus, still obeying the oracle, did not fully empty - the king understood exactly what the prophecy meant. He arranged for his daughter **Aethra** (*EE-thruh*) to spend the night with his guest. Whether Aethra was willing is a question the old sources do not answer, and we shall leave it respectfully shrouded in the privacy of myth.

Before departing, Aegeus placed a sword and a pair of sandals under a heavy rock. He told Aethra: "If we have a son, and if he grows strong enough to lift this rock, send him to Athens with these tokens. He will know what they mean."

Theseus was born. He grew up strong, brave, and quick-tempered, the kind of boy who solved every problem with his fists and never backed down from a challenge. Stories of his youthful strength spread through Troezen before he had seen fifteen summers. At sixteen, he could wait no longer. He strode to the rock, wrapped his arms around it, and lifted it as if it were a pebble. The sword and sandals were his.

He could have taken the sea route to Athens. It was safer, quicker, and the conventional choice. But Theseus was not a conventional young man. He chose the land route along the Isthmus, a road notorious for its bandits and monsters. He intended to clear it, not because anyone asked him to, but because the road was dangerous and he was Theseus.

The Six Labours of the Road

The road to Athens was a proving ground, and Theseus treated it as his personal mission. Where **Heracles** had faced monsters across the known world, Theseus faced criminals on a single road. The difference between them is telling. Heracles relied on superhuman strength. Theseus relied on intelligence, timing, and a certain grim sense of justice.

Monster / Bandit	Location	Method of Defeat
Periphetes (*per-i-FET-eez*), the Club-Man	Epidaurus	Theseus wrestled the club away and beat him with his own weapon.
Sinis (*SY-nis*), the Pine-Bender	Isthmus of Corinth	Theseus tied him between two bent pines and let the trees do what they always did.
The **Crommyonian Sow**	Crommyon	Theseus simply killed the monstrous pig with his sword.
Sciron (*SKY-ron*)	Megarian cliffs	Theseus threw him off the same cliff where he kicked his victims to a giant turtle below.
Cercyon, the wrestler	Eleusis	Theseus lifted him overhead and smashed him to the ground. A lesson in humility.
Procrustes (*proh-KRUS-teez*), the Stretcher	Attican road	Theseus made him fit his own bed. The short one. Justice, of a kind.

Each of these encounters was a small masterpiece of poetic justice. Procrustes, who had stretched or amputated travelers to fit his two beds, found himself forced into the shorter one. Sciron, who washed his feet before kicking victims off a cliff, learned what it felt like to fall. Sinis, who tore people apart with pine trees, experienced his own method firsthand.

The young Athenians who would later celebrate Theseus as their founder understood the message. This was a hero who used his brains as much as his muscles. This was, in short, an *Athenian* hero. Where Heracles would have battered down the Labyrinth's walls, Theseus used a ball of thread. Where Heracles would have bent the pines himself, Theseus turned Sinis's own method against him. The contrast was deliberate, and it shaped how Athens saw itself for centuries to come.[1]

[1] The tradition of cataloguing mythological figures extends back to Hesiod's *Theogony* (c. 700 BCE), which lists hundreds of divine names in genealogical order. Apollodorus's

A Poisoned Welcome

When Theseus finally reached Athens, he did not announce himself. He arrived dusty and travel-worn, and the court of Aegeus had changed. A new woman held sway there: **Medea**, the sorceress from Colchis, freshly arrived after her catastrophic marriage to **Jason**. She had fled Corinth, leaving behind a trail of fire and grief, and had found refuge as Aegeus's consort.

Medea was many things, but foolish was not among them. She recognised the stranger immediately. She saw the sword Theseus carried, and she understood what it meant. This young man was Aegeus's son, and he threatened everything she had built.

Medea persuaded Aegeus that the stranger was a danger. She arranged a banquet, and at it she slipped poison into Theseus's cup. Theseus, unsuspecting, drew his sword to cut his meat. Aegeus looked at the blade, and recognition broke over him like a wave. It was his own sword. The sword he had placed under the rock at Troezen, all those years ago.

He knocked the cup from Theseus's hand. The poison spilled across the floor. Medea, seeing her scheme collapse, did what she always did when cornered: she fled, rising into the air in a chariot drawn by dragons, disappearing towards the eastern lands where her grandfather Helios would protect her.

Father and son embraced. The heir to Athens had come home.

The Minotaur

But Athens had a debt to pay. **Minos** of Crete, whose son **Androgeus** had been killed in Attica, demanded a terrible tribute: seven youths and seven maidens, sent every nine years into the Labyrinth to be devoured by the **Minotaur**.

Theseus volunteered to go as one of the seven youths. He told his father: "If I survive, I will change the ship's black sails to white on my return. You will know I am alive."

In Crete, **Ariadne** (*ar-ee-AD-nee*), Minos's daughter, looked at the handsome Athenian youth and fell in love. She offered him what he needed most: a way out. She gave him a simple ball of thread, and told him to tie one end at the entrance, unwind it as he went, and follow it back.

Theseus entered the Labyrinth, unwinding the thread in the dark. The corridors twisted and turned, each one identical to the last, designed by **Daedalus** to confuse and trap. The

---

Bibliotheca itself is, in part, a reference work — a library of stories organized for consultation rather than sequential reading. These tables continue that ancient tradition in modern form.

air grew thick and heavy. Somewhere in the centre, the Minotaur waited, half-man and half-bull, its nostrils flaring at the scent of fresh prey.

Theseus found the beast in its chamber. The Minotaur charged, a bellowing mass of muscle and horn. Theseus sidestepped, struck, and struck again. The fight was brutal and brief. When it was over, the Minotaur lay still, and Theseus followed the thread back into the light.

He, Ariadne, and the other Athenians escaped. But on the island of Naxos, Theseus abandoned her. Different stories give different reasons. Some say **Dionysus** appeared and claimed her for his bride. Others say Theseus was simply faithless, the way heroes often are when convenience outweighs loyalty. Either way, Ariadne woke to find the ship gone and her hero sailing away without her. Dionysus would later make her his wife and set her crown among the stars as the Corona Borealis. But that night on Naxos, she wept.

Theseus, sailing home, forgot to change the sails from black to white. Whether it was grief, exhaustion, or simple carelessness, no one knows. Aegeus, watching from the cliffs of Athens, saw black sails on the horizon. He believed his son was dead. He threw himself into the sea, which has been called the **Aegean** ever since.

Theseus returned to a kingdom without its king. He inherited the throne through his father's death, a death that his own carelessness had caused. It would not be the last time that someone died because of Theseus's inattention.

King, Amazon, and Stepmother

As king, Theseus proved genuinely remarkable. He unified Attica, established democratic assemblies, and replaced the old system of family vendetta with courts of law. He was, by the standards of the heroic age, a civilized man. But civilized men make terrible mistakes too.

He joined Heracles on his expedition against the Amazons, those warrior women of the east who lived without men and fought with a skill that matched any male army. He either married or abducted their queen, **Antiope** (also called Hippolyta). The Amazons, enraged by the loss of their leader, marched across Greece and laid siege to Athens itself. They camped on the Areopagus, the Hill of Ares, and assaulted the walls with a fury that nearly succeeded. Antiope died fighting at Theseus's side, defending the city she had come to love against her own people. It was a death worthy of an epic, and it broke Theseus's heart.

After her death, Theseus married **Phaedra** (*FEE-druh*), Ariadne's younger sister. It was a political match, the kind of marriage kings made all the time. But Phaedra fell in love with **Hippolytus** (*hi-POL-i-tuss*), Theseus's son by Antiope. Hippolytus was a devotee of **Artemis** and had sworn a vow of chastity. He rejected Phaedra's advances with horror.

Phaedra, rejected and ashamed, told Theseus that Hippolytus had tried to assault her. She wrote the accusation on a tablet and then hanged herself, leaving behind a document that could not be questioned, only believed. Theseus read it and his rage consumed him. He called upon **Poseidon**, who owed him three curses, and spent one of them on his own son.

As Hippolytus drove his chariot along the shore, Poseidon sent a sea-monster from the waves. The horses panicked. The chariot overturned. Hippolytus was dragged through the rocks and the surf until nothing remained but broken bones and a father's unbearable regret.

Artemis appeared to Theseus and told him the truth. Phaedra killed herself. Theseus was left with yet another death on his conscience, another life destroyed by his credulity and his temper.

The Descent

Theseus had a best friend named **Pirithous** (*py-RITH-oh-uhs*), king of the Lapiths. Together they had fought the centaurs at Pirithous's wedding, one of the great battles of Greek myth. Their friendship was genuine, the kind that inspires songs. But their ambition would lead them both to ruin.

They made a pact: each would marry a daughter of Zeus. They abducted young **Helen** from Sparta while she was still a girl, leaving her with Theseus's mother Aethra for safekeeping. Then they decided to descend to the underworld and abduct **Persephone** herself.

The audacity was staggering. They entered Hades's realm and sat upon the chairs of forgetfulness. Pirithous was pinned there by the **Furies**, unable to move, his mind dissolving into shadow. Theseus managed to rise, but the Furies seized him and held him fast.

Heracles, passing through on his twelfth labour to fetch Cerberus, found Theseus and freed him. But when Heracles tried to free Pirithous, the earth shook. The underworld itself rejected the attempt. Pirithous remained there forever, sitting on his chair, forgotten by the living and remembered only as a cautionary tale about friendship taken too far.

Death on Scyros

Theseus returned to Athens, but the city no longer wanted him. The people were tired of his wars, his adventures, his endless crises. He went into voluntary exile on the island of Scyros, where King **Lycomedes** received him. Whether Lycomedes acted from treachery or from simple clumsiness, the result was the same: he pushed Theseus off a cliff, and the greatest hero of Athens fell to his death.

Years later, the Athenian general **Cimon** brought what were said to be Theseus's bones back to Athens and enshrined them in the heart of the city. They built him a temple. They worshipped him as a hero.

The age of Theseus was over. But the age he had helped create, the world of cities and laws, of heroes who fought with their minds as much as their muscles, would endure. Every democratic debate in the Athenian agora, every law written on stone rather than carved in blood, every refuge offered to the persecuted, carried something of his legacy. He had been a murderer, an exile, and a fool. He had also been the founder of something that would outlast every monster, every war, and every god. That is the strange immortality of the hero. Not perfection, but endurance. Not a clean life, but a consequential one.

> **Mythology Note** Theseus was celebrated in Athens as the civic hero par excellence. Unlike Heracles, who solved every problem with overwhelming force, Theseus represented intelligence, diplomacy, and the specifically Athenian virtues of law and order. He was credited with unifying the scattered towns of Attica into a single political unit, establishing the Panathenaic festival, and replacing blood-feud justice with written law. In the fifth century BCE, the Athenian statesman Cimon brought what were claimed to be Theseus's bones back from Scyros and enshrined them in the centre of Athens, effectively making the legendary hero the patron saint of Athenian democracy.
>
> **Discussion Questions** 1. Theseus uses "poetic justice" against the six bandits, giving each a death that mirrors their crimes. What does this tell us about how Greek myth understands justice? Is it about punishment, or about balance? 2. Theseus believes Phaedra's false accusation and destroys his own son. How does this tragedy compare to other stories of false accusation in the book (Peleus accused by Astydameia, Bellerophon accused by Stheneboea)? Why do fathers in myth so readily believe lies about their sons? 3. Theseus is remembered as a great lawgiver and unifier, yet his personal life is a catalogue of loss and betrayal. Can a person be a great public figure and a disastrous private one? How do we weigh these two sides of a life?

Source note

© 2026 Mythopouch. All rights reserved. Mythopouch™ is a trademark of Mythopouch. This retelling is original educational wording by Mythopouch. Ancient myths are not owned by Mythopouch. This file is not the 1921 Frazer translation and is not a Loeb Classical Library edition. Mythopouch is not affiliated with Harvard University Press. Written for readers aged 15 and up. www.mythopouch.com