

Fathers and Son: Theseus's Ovidian Paternity

In its construction as a series of thought-experiments, mythology frequently reflects on the question of who a hero's parents are. If there are competing answers, the reason often pertains to local identity, or it may hint at a deeper level of mythological significance that informs the hero's own identity. However, in terms of mythic thought, conflicting genealogical traditions do not necessarily insist on our choosing between them. In this paper, I focus on one instance of genealogical variation, the two fathers of Theseus (Poseidon and Aegeus), and how these alternate traditions (and, by extension, the character of Theseus) come into play in Ovid's poetry, as well as examining what the broader poetic significances of Ovid's choices are. I argue that by sometimes referring to the hero as son of Aegeus and sometimes as son of Neptune, Ovid illuminates particular aspects of Theseus's character depending on which father is brought to the fore (or actively rejected, such as in the case of *Her.* 10.131–2), and that Theseus is associated more strongly with Neptune in the *Heroides* and with Aegeus in the *Metamorphoses*, thus emphasizing his piratical nature in the former and his civilizing Athenian side in the latter. I also look at how missing pieces of Theseus's story are narrated through the seemingly unrelated tales that abut and interrupt the so-called “*Theseid*” in the central books of the *Metamorphoses* and how, against the background of these “replacement” tales and in the hyper-watery realm of Achelous's grotto, we see the Neptunian side of Theseus briefly emerge at the heart of the epic, undermining his otherwise strongly Athenian presentation.