

Auctores saxa fretumque tui:
Questioning Theseus' Paternity

Theseus, although generally thought of as the son of Aegeus, was also believed to be the son of Poseidon. This tradition is preserved in Bacchylides 17, where Theseus proves his divine parentage to Minos by entering the realm of the Nereids and returning with Minos' signet ring, as well as in the successful curse levied against Hippolytus in Euripides' play. Unlike tales of, for example, Iphigenia's parentage (where some traditions say that she is the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and others say that she is the daughter of Helen and Theseus, but it never really matters), the issue of Theseus' paternity is clearly relevant to his character and abilities as a hero — his retrieval of Aegeus' sword and sandals proves that he is the Athenian king's son and allows him to inherit the city's rule, but the myths cited above and his life-long association with bulls suggest otherwise. In this paper, I intend to show that when Ariadne calls Theseus' paternity into question at *Heroides* X.131–2, she is not just reflecting a tradition of scorned lovers reaching all the way back to Patroclus in the *Iliad*; rather, she is cutting to the quick of Theseus' identity. Many sons of Poseidon are “biological monstrosities” (Pease, *HSCP* 54, p. 70), and “the sea is itself associated with injustice” (Pease, p. 71). Is Theseus an unfortunately callow youth and an accidental parricide or is he, as DeBrohun has suggested (*CP* 94), the real monster in place of Ariadne's *frater* Minotaur? I propose to look at *Heroides* X and two related passages — Catullus 64.155–8 and *Met.* VIII.119–25 — to determine what exactly Ariadne's assertions may reveal about Theseus' character and, possibly, about Ovid's own motivations in his treatment of the story.