

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF PLUTARCH



ILLUSTRATED

PARALLEL LIVES MORALIA

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Plutarch
Parallel Lives. Moralia
Illustrated**

THE TRANSLATIONS

PARALLEL LIVES

Translated by Bernadotte Perrin

Theseus

1 Just as geographers, O Sossius Senecio, crowd on to the outer edges of their maps the parts of the earth which elude their knowledge, with explanatory notes that “What lies beyond is sandy desert without water and full of wild beasts,” or “blind marsh,” or “Scythian cold,” or “frozen sea,” so in the writing of my Parallel Lives, now that I have traversed those periods of time which are accessible to probable reasoning and which afford basis for a history dealing with facts, I might well say of the earlier periods: “What lies beyond is full of marvels and unreality, a land of poets and fabulists, of doubt and obscurity.” 2 But after publishing my account of Lycurgus the lawgiver and Numa the king, I thought I might not unreasonably go back still farther to Romulus, now that my history had brought me near his times. And as I asked myself,

“With such a warrior” (as Aeschylus says) “who will dare to fight?”

“Whom shall I set against him? Who is competent?”

it seemed to me that I must make the founder of lovely and famous Athens the counterpart and parallel to the father of invincible and glorious Rome. 3 May I therefore succeed in purifying Fable, making her submit to reason and take on the semblance of History. But where she obstinately disdains to make herself credible, and refuses to admit any element of probability, I shall pray for kindly readers, and such as receive with indulgence the tales of antiquity.

2 1 It seemed to me, then, that many resemblances made Theseus a fit parallel to Romulus. For both were of uncertain and obscure parentage, and got the reputation of descent from gods;

“Both were also warriors, as surely the whole world knoweth,”

and with their strength, combined sagacity. Of the world’s two most illustrious cities, moreover, Rome and Athens, Romulus founded the one, and Theseus made a metropolis of the other, and each resorted to the rape of women. 2 Besides, neither escaped domestic misfortunes and the resentful anger of kindred, but even in their last days both are said to have come into collision with their own fellow-citizens, if there is any aid to the truth in what seems to have been told with the least poetic exaggeration.

3 1 The lineage of Theseus, on the father's side, goes back to Erechtheus and the first children of the soil; on the mother's side, to Pelops. For Pelops was the strongest of the kings in Peloponnesus quite as much on account of the number of his children as the amount of his wealth. He gave many daughters in marriage to men of the highest rank, and scattered many sons among the cities as their rulers. One of these, named Pittheus, the grandfather of Theseus, founded the little city of Troezen, and had the highest repute as a man versed in the lore of his times and of the greatest wisdom. 2 Now the wisdom of that day had some such form and force as that for which Hesiod was famous, especially in the sententious maxims of his "Works and Days." One of these maxims is ascribed to Pittheus, namely: —

"Payment pledged to a man who is dear must be ample and certain."

At any rate, this is what Aristotle the philosopher says, and Euripides, when he has Hippolytus addressed as "nursling of the pure and holy Pittheus," shows what the world thought of Pittheus.

3 Now Aegeus, king of Athens, desiring to have children, is said to have received from the Pythian priestess the celebrated oracle in which she bade him to have intercourse with no woman until he came to Athens. But Aegeus thought the words of the command somewhat obscure, and therefore turned aside to

Troezen and communicated to Pittheus the words of the god, which ran as follows: —

“Loose not the wine-skin’s jutting neck, great chief of the people,

Until thou shalt have come once more to the city of Athens.”

4 This dark saying Pittheus apparently understood, and persuaded him, or beguiled him, to have intercourse with his daughter Aethra. Aegeus did so, and then learning that it was the daughter of Pittheus with whom he had consorted, and suspecting that she was with child by him, he left a sword and a pair of sandals hidden under a great rock, which had a hollow in it just large enough to receive these objects. 5 He told the princess alone about this, and bade her, if a son should be born to her from him, and if, when he came to man’s estate, he should be able to lift up the rock and take away what had been left under it, to send that son to him with the tokens, in all secrecy, and concealing his journey as much as possible from everybody; for he was mightily in fear of the sons of Pallas, who were plotting against him, and who despised him on account of his childlessness; and they were fifty in number, these sons of Pallas. Then he went away.

4 1 When Aethra gave birth to a son, he was at once named Theseus, as some say, because the tokens for his recognition had been *placed* in hiding; but others say that it was afterwards at Athens, when Aegeus

acknowledged him as his son. He was reared by Pittheus, as they say, and had an overseer and tutor named Connidas. To this man, even down to the present time, the Athenians sacrifice a ram on the day before the festival of Theseus, remembering and honouring him with far greater justice than they honour Silanio and Parrhasius, who merely painted and moulded likenesses of Theseus.

5 1 Since it was still a custom at that time for youth who were coming of age to go to Delphi and sacrifice some of their hair to the god, Theseus went to Delphi for this purpose, and they say there is a place there which still to this day is called the Theseia from him. But he sheared only the fore part of his head, just as Homer said the Abantes did, and this kind of tonsure was called Theseis after him.

2 Now the Abantes were the first to cut their hair in this manner, not under instruction from the Arabians, as some suppose, nor yet in emulation of the Mysians, but because they were war-like men and close fighters, who had learned beyond all other men to force their way into close quarters with their enemies. Archilochus is witness to this in the following words: —

3 “Not many bows indeed will be stretched tight,
nor frequent slings

Be whirled, when Ares joins men in the moil of
war

Upon the plain, but swords will do their mournful work;

For this is the warfare wherein those men are expert

Who lord it over Euboea and are famous with the spear.”

4 Therefore, in order that they might not give their enemies a hold by their hair, they cut it off. And Alexander of Macedon doubtless understood this when, as they say, he ordered his generals to have the beards of their Macedonians shaved, since these afforded the readiest hold in battle.

6 1 During the rest of the time, then, Aethra kept his true birth concealed from Theseus, and a report was spread abroad by Pittheus that he was begotten by Poseidon. For Poseidon is highly honoured by the people of Troezen, and he is the patron god of their city; to him they offer first fruits in sacrifice, and they have his trident as an emblem on their coinage. 2 But when, in his young manhood, Theseus displayed, along with his vigour of body, prowess also, and a firm spirit united with intelligence and sagacity, then Aethra brought him to the rock, told him the truth about his birth, and bade him take away his father's tokens and go by sea to Athens. 3 Theseus put his shoulder to the rock and easily raised it up, but he refused to make his journey by sea, although safety lay in that course, and his grandfather and his mother begged him to take it. For it was difficult

to make the journey to Athens by land, since no part of it was clear nor yet without peril from robbers and miscreants.

4 For verily that age produced men who, in work of hand and speed of foot and vigour of body, were extraordinary and indefatigable, but they applied their powers to nothing that was fitting or useful. Nay rather, they exulted in monstrous insolence, and reaped from their strength a harvest of cruelty and bitterness, mastering and forcing and destroying everything that came in their path. And as for reverence and righteousness, justice and humanity, they thought that most men praised these qualities for lack of courage to do wrong and for fear of being wronged, and considered them no concern of men who were strong enough to get the upper hand. 5 Some of these creatures Heracles cut off and destroyed as he went about, but some escaped his notice as he passed by, crouching down and shrinking back, and were overlooked in their abjectness. And when Heracles met with calamity and, after the slaying of Iphitus, removed into Lydia and for a long time did slave's service there in the house of Omphale, then Lydia indeed obtained great peace and security; but in the regions of Hellas the old villainies burst forth and broke out anew, there being none to rebuke and none to restrain them.

6 The journey was therefore a perilous one for travellers by land from Peloponnesus to Athens, and

Pittheus, by describing each of the miscreants at length, what sort of a monster he was, and what deeds he wrought upon strangers, tried to persuade Theseus to make his journey by sea. But he, as it would seem, had long since been secretly fired by the glorious valour of Heracles, and made the greatest account of that hero, and was a most eager listener to those who told what manner of man he was, and above all to those who had seen him and been present at some deed or speech of his. 7 And it is altogether plain that he then experienced what Themistocles many generations afterwards experienced, when he said that he could not sleep for the trophy of Miltiades. In like manner Theseus admired the valour of Heracles, until by night his dreams were of the hero's achievements, and by day his ardour led him along and spurred him on in his purpose to achieve the like.

7 1 And besides, they were kinsmen, being sons of cousins-german. For Aethra was daughter of Pittheus, as Alcmene was of Lysidice, and Lysidice and Pittheus were brother and sister, children of Hippodameia and Pelops. 2 Accordingly, he thought it a dreadful and unendurable thing that his famous cousin should go out against the wicked everywhere and purge land and sea of them, while he himself ran away from the struggles which lay in his path, disgracing his reputed father by journeying like a fugitive over the sea, and bringing to his real father as proofs of his birth only sandals and a sword unstained with blood, instead of at once offering

noble deeds and achievements as the manifest mark of his noble birth. In such a spirit and with such thoughts he set out, determined to do no man any wrong, but to punish those who offered him violence.

8 1 And so in the first place, in Epidauria, when Periphetes, who used a club as his weapon and on this account was called Club-bearer, laid hold of him and tried to stop his progress, he grappled with him and slew him. And being pleased with the club, he took it and made it his weapon and continued to use it, just as Heracles did with the lion's skin. That hero wore the skin to prove how great a wild beast he had mastered, and so Theseus carried the club to show that although it had been vanquished by him, in his own hands it was invincible.

2 On the Isthmus, too, he slew Sinis the Pine-bender in the very manner in which many men had been destroyed by himself, and he did this without practice or even acquaintance with the monster's device, but showing that valour is superior to all device and practice. Now Sinis had a very beautiful and stately daughter, named Perigune. This daughter took to flight when her father was killed, and Theseus went about in search of her. But she had gone off into a place which abounded greatly in shrubs and rushes and wild asparagus, and with exceeding innocence and childish simplicity was supplicating these plants, as if they understood her, and vowing that if they would hide and save her, she would

never trample them down nor burn them. 3 When, however, Theseus called upon her and gave her a pledge that he would treat her honourably and do her no wrong, she came forth, and after consorting with Theseus, bore him Melanippus, and afterwards lived with Deïoneus, son of Eurytus the Oechalian, to whom Theseus gave her. From Melanippus the son of Theseus, Ioxus was born, who took part with Ornytus in leading a colony into Caria; whence it is ancestral usage with the Ioxids, men and women, not to burn either the asparagus-thorn or the rush, but to revere and honour them.

9 1 Now the Crommyonian sow, which they called Phaea, was no insignificant creature, but fierce and hard to master. This sow he went out of his way to encounter and slay, that he might not be thought to perform all his exploits under compulsion, and at the same time because he thought that while the brave man ought to attack villainous men only in self defence, he should seek occasion to risk his life in battle with the nobler beasts. However, some say that Phaea was a female robber, a woman of murderous and unbridled spirit, who dwelt in Crommyon, was called Sow because of her life and manners, and was afterwards slain by Theseus.

10 1 He also slew Sciron on the borders of Megara, by hurling him down the cliffs. Sciron robbed the passers by, according to the prevalent tradition; but as some say, he would insolently and wantonly thrust out

his feet to strangers and bid them wash them, and then, while they were washing them, kick them off into the sea. 2 Megarian writers, however, taking issue with current report, and, as Simonides expresses it, “waging war with antiquity,” say that Sciron was neither a violent man nor a robber, but a chastiser of robbers, and a kinsman and friend of good and just men. For Aeacus, they say, is regarded as the most righteous of Hellenes, and Cychreus the Salaminian has divine honours at Athens, and the virtues of Peleus and Telamon are known to all men. 3 Well, then, Sciron was a son-in law of Cychreus, father-in law of Aeacus, and grandfather of Peleus and Telamon, who were the sons of Endeïs, daughter of Sciron and Chariclo. It is not likely, then, they say, that the best of men made family alliances with the basest, receiving and giving the greatest and most valuable pledges. It was not, they say, when Theseus first journeyed to Athens, but afterwards, that he captured Eleusis from the Megarians, having circumvented Diocles its ruler, and slew Sciron. Such, then, are the contradictions in which these matters are involved.

11 In Eleusis, moreover, he out-wrestled Cercyon the Arcadian and killed him; and going on a little farther, at Erineüs, he killed Damastes, surnamed Procrustes, by compelling him to make his own body fit his bed, as he had been wont to do with those of strangers. And he did this in imitation of Heracles. For that hero punished those who offered him violence in the

manner in which they had plotted to serve him, and therefore sacrificed Busiris, wrestled Antaeus to death, slew Cycnus in single combat, and killed Termerus by dashing in his skull. 2 It is from him, indeed, as they say, that the name “Termerian mischief” comes, for Termerus, as it would seem, used to kill those who encountered him by dashing his head against theirs. Thus Theseus also went on his way chastising the wicked, who were visited with the same violence from him which they were visiting upon others, and suffered justice after the manner of their own injustice.

12 1 As he went forward on his journey and came to the river Cephisus, he was met by men of the race of the Phytalidae, who greeted him first, and when he asked to be purified from bloodshed, cleansed him the customary rites, made propitiatory sacrifices, and feasted him at their house. This was the first kindness which he met with on his journey.

It was, then, on the eighth day of the month Cronius, now called Hecatombaeon, that he is said to have arrived at Athens. And when he entered the city, he found public affairs full of confusion and dissension, and the private affairs of Aegeus and his household in a distressing condition. 2 For Medea, who had fled thither from Corinth, and promised by her sorceries to relieve Aegeus of his childlessness, was living with him. She learned about Theseus in advance, and since Aegeus was ignorant of him, and was well on in years and afraid of

everything because of the faction in the city, she persuaded him to entertain Theseus as a stranger guest, and take him off by poison. Theseus, accordingly, on coming to the banquet, thought best not to tell in advance who he was, but wishing to give his father a clue to the discovery, when the meats were served, he drew his sword, as if minded to carve with this, and brought it to the notice of his father. 3 Aegeus speedily perceived it, dashed down the proffered cup of poison, and after questioning his son, embraced him, and formally recognized him before an assembly of the citizens, who received him gladly because of his manly valour. And it is said that as the cup fell, the poison was spilled where now is the enclosure in the Delphinium, for that is where the house of Aegeus stood, and the Hermes to the east of the sanctuary is called the Hermes at Aegeus's gate.

13 1 Now the sons of Pallas had before this themselves hoped to gain possession of the kingdom when Aegeus died childless. But when Theseus was declared successor to the throne, exasperated that Aegeus should be king although he was only an adopted son of Pandion and in no way related to the family of Erechtheus, and again that Theseus should be prospective king although he was an immigrant and a stranger, they went to war. 2 And dividing themselves into two bands, one of these marched openly against the city from Sphettus with their father; the other hid themselves at Gargettus and lay in ambush there,