

Chapter 3: An Introduction to Classical Mythology

Because it's important for readers of classical literature to be familiar with the deities which populate the works of ancient authors, we'll first review the Olympian gods, that is, Zeus, Hera, Aphrodite and the like. Then we'll glance over the general "history" of classical mythology, the basic framework of chronology in which Greek myths take place.

I. The Principal Olympian Deities

The following is a list of the most important Olympian deities. To the extent possible, it's best to memorize these gods and goddesses. At least, learn to spell their names correctly and acquaint yourself with their major powers, domains and attributes.

A. The First Six

The Olympians fall into two groups: (1) the "First Six," gods of Zeus' generation who are, for the most part, his brothers and sisters, and (2) the "Second Eight," those of the following generation many of whom are Zeus' children. The spellings used below are transliterations of the Greek names, in some cases Latinized. We will use the Greek names for gods and heroes, until we study Roman myth when we will employ the names of their Roman equivalents.

1. Zeus

Zeus, the king of the Olympian gods, was born to **Cronus**, an earlier king of the gods, and his spouse Rhea. Zeus usurped the throne of heaven from his father by organizing a revolt of the gods, just as Cronus had earlier deposed of his own father Uranus (see below, Aphrodite). This story recalls the rise of tyrants in the early history of Greece, most of whom came to power through warfare and bloodshed. As is often true in classical mythology, this story pattern reflects in an abstract way the actual course of history. Thus, myth was one way in which the Greeks remembered and understood the remote past.

Zeus controls the sky, evidenced in his name which means "bright(ness)," or "day(-father)." Although the figurehead of Olympian government in heaven, he's not omnipotent. For instance, he doesn't hold sway over fate. Indeed, more than once in Greek myth he's forced to act against his wishes. Moreover, his brothers Poseidon and Hades have command of the land and sea, respectively, and his wife Hera who is the goddess of marriage frequently exerts her will over him, especially when he's seeking, as he frequently does, an illicit sexual relationship.

Appropriate for a sky-god, Zeus' great attribute is the lightning-bolt which he wields in anger at those who defy him. On occasion, he even threatens to use it when his family on Olympus becomes disorderly. In Greek art he's sometimes depicted holding a

thunderbolt. He also has an awesome shield, the **aegis**, on which is depicted the face of the Gorgon, a monster so hideous it turns enemies to stone. In modern English, aegis means "protection, sponsorship." The eagle and the oak tree are also sacred to Zeus and symbols of his power.

2. Hera

Hera is Zeus' sister and wife whom Zeus married after a rocky courtship. Having spent much time suing unsuccessfully for Hera's love and hand in marriage, Zeus finally resorted to a sort of trickery he often deployed. He transformed himself into animal, in this case, a sad little cuckoo seeking shelter from the rain. When Hera saw the miserable bird, she took it in and warmed it by her breast. Zeus immediately resumed his divine form and ravished her, leaving her no choice but to marry him. Their wedding night lasted three-hundred years.

As the idealized form of a Greek wife, Hera is eternally faithful to her husband and at the same time suspicious of his dalliance with nymphs, demi-goddesses and the like. When she discovers any such activities, typically she's vengeful in punishing not her husband—she doesn't have the power to punish him—but his consorts and their offspring. The hero Heracles (Hercules) and the hapless cow-girl Io are among the many mortals who felt the wrath of her jealousy.

Of Zeus' manifold offspring only a few are Hera's: the god of war Ares, the cupbearer of the gods Hebe, the goddess of childbirth Eileithyia and the lame blacksmith-god Hephaestus (see below, Hephaestus). Hera may originally have been an earth-goddess whose name was Dione, a feminine form of the name Zeus.

3. Poseidon

Poseidon is the god of the sea and waters in general. Like Zeus, he inherited his domain from an earlier deity, Oceanus who was the progenitor of many marine divinities, especially river-gods and the **Oceanids** (sea-nymphs). Poseidon is a passionate, quick-tempered god, the personification of the fickle and violent sea. He carries a trident with which he stirs up waters or causes earthquakes on land. He rides through the ocean in a chariot drawn by white horses escorted by creatures of the sea.

As a strong masculine figure second only to Zeus, he's the father of numerous demi-gods and -goddesses as well as mortal heroes, including Theseus of Athens. He's associated with the horse and the bull, symbols of male sexuality. Curiously, however, his name appears to translate as "the consort/husband of Da" —Da is an archaic name for the Earth Mother (see below, Demeter)—hinting that he may once have played a secondary role in a matriarchal religion of some kind. In that light, it's appropriate that as the god of waters he's seen to fertilize or inseminate the Earth Mother Da, causing things to grow.

4. Hestia

The least important of the Olympians, **Hestia** is the goddess of the hearth and home. She never married or engaged in disputes. That alone exempts her from involvement in most Greek myths and literature which deal for the most part with love and war. The centrality of fire in the archaic house for warmth and cooking led to her inclusion in the first six Olympians, but her passive role as the goddess who stays at home and tends the hearth left her with a meagre mythology. Her name in Greek means "hearth."

5. Hades

A shadowy figure, **Hades** is the god of the Greek underworld. As with Hestia, few myths revolved around him but for a different reason. Where Hestia is too removed from the turmoil of life to figure in myth, Hades as lord of the dead is too potent and awesome to play a role in most legends.

One important myth, however, involves him extensively, the rape of Demeter's daughter **Persephone** ("Persian Voice"). When Demeter finds that Hades has seized Persephone by force and is keeping her in his gloomy kingdom beneath the ground, she demands her return. Hades strikes a deal with her, agreeing to release the girl for six months out of the year on the grounds that Persephone had eaten six pomegranate seeds while in the underworld and to that extent had partaken of death. Thus Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, rejoices when Persephone visits her and during the other half of the year mourns and refuses to let plants grow, which explains the change of seasons.

Hades is a solemn god unlike either the Christian Devil or the Grim Reaper. He receives the dead when they are brought down to him and keeps them from returning to the upper world but he neither brings death upon them nor even collects souls on earth. Those are the jobs of Thanatos ("Death"), the god of death, and Hermes the *psychopompos* (see below).

Nor does Hades' kingdom resemble Hell in the modern sense. Often called by the same name as the god, Hades is only a dimly lit world with gloomy swamps and black rivers, where the dead sustain a flavorless, semi-conscious semblance of existence. And although some souls in Hades are punished for crimes they committed on earth, usually it's not Hades himself who carries out their torture but demons like the Furies who dwell in **Tartarus**, a pit of unending blackness at one end of the classical underworld.

Meaning in Greek "the Unseen One," Hades isn't so much a name as a description. This euphemism—that is, a nice way of saying a bad thing—betrays a certain superstitious reluctance on the part of the Greeks to refer to this god by his actual name, whatever that was, since to call him by name was to invoke him and thereby death. In that vein, the Greeks also called him **Pluto** from their word *ploutos* ("wealth") because they credited him in part with the fertility of crops, the richness of the earth and its mineral resources, especially gold.

6. Demeter

Demeter is the goddess of grain and agriculture, whose name is sometimes rendered in Greek *Da-meter* meaning "Earth-mother." The *da* base is related to *gê*, the Greek word for "earth." Because it's hard to find clear linguistic and religious cognates for Demeter in other Indo-European cultures, some historians suggest that Demeter was a goddess worshiped originally by the Pelasgians, the people who lived in Greece before the Greeks as we know them arrived. Demeter was important enough in this native culture to have been absorbed by the invading Greeks and included among the principal Olympians. In support of this hypothesis, most of her myths have a primitive aura about them and she's largely absent from later legends and myth.

The great exception to that is the **Eleusinian Mysteries**, an influential cult which survived well into Roman times and in which Demeter played a central role. Because it was a mystery cult whose devotees were sworn to secrecy, we today don't know exactly what the Eleusinian Mysteries entailed, but there can be little doubt they revolved around the most important myth in the Demeter cycle, the rape of Persephone (see above, [Hades](#)).

B. The Second Eight

1. Aphrodite

Aphrodite is the goddess of sexual love and beauty. According to one story she was born as a result of Cronus' revolt against his father Uranus. After Cronus castrated Uranus and flung his genitals into the ocean, Aphrodite arose from the foam of the sea that formed around Uranus' dismembered organs, a story stimulated, no doubt, by the interpretation of her name as "foam (*aphro-*) born (*-dite*)," a dubious etymology. The goddess floated to shore on a shell, inspiring among other things one of the Renaissance painter Botticelli's most famous paintings. A tamer version of her birth co-exists alongside this in Greek myth, that she was the child of Zeus and Dione, not Hera but a demi-goddess of that name.

Although she was technically wed to the ugly Hephaestus, Aphrodite had liaisons with quite a few gods and mortals and is the only one of the Olympian goddesses outside of Demeter to have children by mortals, e.g. her son Aeneas by the Trojan shepherd Anchises. As such, she was a popular goddess and appears in many Greek myths. In some she assists young lovers, but more often she's depicted as vengeful and angry, chastising those who defy or deny her.

Her punishments are often highly creative and unusual. For instance, the women of the island Lemnos ignored her, and so she made them all smell so bad that their husbands divorced them and imported new foreign wives. Out of madness and frustration the Lemnian women killed all the men on their island, hardly a well thought-out solution to the problem. The women were then left alone and lonely on their island until the Argonauts happened by and solved their problem, incidentally repopulating the island at the same time.

Despite her eternal youth and beauty, Aphrodite was a very ancient goddess, perhaps borrowed by the Greeks from their eastern neighbors. Originally a mother-goddess, a type worshiped widely throughout the ancient Near East, Aphrodite bears close resemblance in many ways to the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar or the Canaanite Ashtoreth (Astarte). For example, Aphrodite's priestesses in several Greek towns were prostitutes just as Ishtar's. According to Herodotus, the worship of Mylitta, Aphrodite's equivalent in Babylon, required that women offer themselves at least once during their lives in the goddess' temple to strange men for any price. This, Herodotus notes with a smirk, posed a problem for ugly women who might have to remain in the temple for many years awaiting an offer.

In general, Aphrodite is treated rather lightly by the Greeks, especially Homer who makes her subordinate to Hera and Athena. A famous exception is Euripides' portrait of the goddess in his tragic masterpiece *Hippolytus*, where she emerges as all-powerful and highly dangerous. Also, the Romans who called her Venus worshiped her with great solemnity. One famous Roman clan, the Julii to which Julius Caesar belonged, traced its ancestry back to Venus.

2. Hephaestus

The god of fire and the forge, **Hephaestus** is one of the few legitimate children of Zeus and Hera. According to a different story, Hera grew angry at Zeus' perpetual infidelity and gave birth to Hephaestus parthenogenetically, that is, without her husband's involvement. Either way Hephaestus was largely ignored by his father along with the majority of ancient poets and playwrights.

Indeed, so preternaturally ugly and lame, the new-born baby Hephaestus was flung out of Olympus by his own mother disgusted at his deformity. He fell for many days, according to myth, finally landing on the island of Lemnos where there was a cult to him in antiquity. Hephaestus is associated with volcanic eruptions, often accredited to his working in a smithy deep below the earth. He was best known for his many inventive creations, for instance, the shield of Achilles (*The Iliad*, Book 18), palaces for the gods and golden robots which speak and think and assisted him in his work at the forge.

Most myths concerning Hephaestus center around his wife Aphrodite. Having been awarded her as wife in order to prevent a violent quarrel among the other more powerful and handsome gods who wanted her, Hephaestus won last place in her heart, a sentiment she proved by having numerous affairs. Homer, for instance, describes in *The Odyssey* (Book 8) how Hephaestus thought he'd gotten revenge on her for her frequent infidelities. He trapped her and her current lover, Ares the god of war, in bed by dropping a mesh of chains on them as they were making love. The indignant cuckold then called the gods to the scene—the goddesses refused to come out of shame—to witness her adultery. Some gods laughed, others expressed their disgust, but none refused to look at the naked Aphrodite and in the back Apollo whispered to Hermes, "Would you suffer these humiliating chains, if you could lie down with golden Aphrodite?" And Hermes replied,

"Put three times these chains on me and let all the gods laugh, only let me lie down with her!" Beauty lives by its own rules.

3. Ares

Ares is the god of war and an exceptionally unpleasant character. In many stories he's little more than a bully and a butcher, loved only by Hades because he's the death-god's best wholesale supplier. Like Hephaestus, Ares is the son of Zeus and Hera and further evidence that his parents' marriage wasn't a very good match.

Moreover, for all his vainglorious boasting Ares isn't very successful in war. In mythological combat, he's defeated by his sister Athena, the hero Heracles four times(!) and, according to Homer, even wounded by the Trojan mortal Diomedes (*The Iliad*, Book 5). When he complains of his mistreatment to his father, Zeus calls him a two-faced brute, tells him to quit whining and says that his quarrelsome nature comes from his mother Hera, *and* that if he were not his son he would have kicked him out of Olympus long ago. The Greeks' scorn of war comes through clearly in this depiction of Ares, and in the fact that archaeologists have found relatively few shrines to him in Greece. Most of his centers of worship were in northern Greece from which this deity may have been exported to the cities of the south.

4. Athena

As a deity of war, **Athena** was far preferable to most Greeks, especially in Athens the city named after her. Also a goddess of wisdom and crafts, her prominence is at least in part due to Athens' dominance of our historical and literary sources. Had we more records from ancient cities outside of Athens, we would, no doubt, see a more balanced picture of Athena. As it is, she comes across as a strong, virgin goddess, the protectress and patron of civilized man against errant barbarians. The personification of ingenuity and genius, she is attributed with inspiring such remarkable inventions as the Trojan horse, the double flute, the ship Argo, the magic bridle used to harness the flying horse Pegasus and the mirrored shield with which Perseus killed the Gorgon Medusa. Her wisdom was, thus, rarely the abstract sort we tend to associate with philosophers and poets, more often the practical kind linked with cunning and technical expertise.

Athena was born in a highly unusual manner. Her father Zeus ate her mother Metis ("Wisdom") in fear that the pregnant Metis would give birth to a child who would be greater than he was. Metis survived, however—she was clever, after all—living on in Zeus' head where eventually she went into labor causing Zeus to have a great headache. Hephaestus—or in some stories the Titan Prometheus—split Zeus' skull open and out came the goddess Athena fully grown and armed.

In art she can be identified by her crested helmet, spear and shield emblazoned with a Gorgon's head, a present from Perseus for her help in killing the Medusa. She's also often depicted with an owl, the bird that symbolized wisdom and her city Athens. Sometimes

she's called Pallas Athena in memory of her childhood friend **Pallas** whom she killed accidentally while playing war-games.

5. Apollo

Apollo represents a wide amalgam of powers and attributes. He's the god of the sun, wisdom, prophesy, music, flocks, wolves, mice, entrances, plagues and medicine. How he came to be included in the Greek pantheon and was introduced to Greece is not at all clear, but some historical data suggest he may have been an eastern god originally—possibly Apulunas, a god of the Hittites who occupied central Asia Minor (Turkey) in the second millennium BCE—though the ancient Greeks linked him with the peoples of the far North. Whatever the truth, it's evident from both the many spheres he controls and his other names, Loxias (see below) and **Phoebus**—sometimes combined with Apollo to make "Phoebus Apollo"—that he represents the conflation of several deities, native and foreign perhaps.

The story of his birth is one of the most famous myths in the Greek canon. His mother the Titaness **Leto** was impregnated by Zeus, extra-maritally as usual. When Hera discovered this, she became enraged and wished to prevent the birth of Leto's child—or children, as it turned out, since Leto had twins, Apollo and Artemis. When she felt their birth coming on, Leto searched for a place to have her children, but out of fear of Hera's anger no place would receive her until she came to the island **Delos** in the Aegean Sea east of Greece. She persuaded the island to allow her to stay there with the promise that it would become an important center of worship. There under a palm tree she gave birth to Apollo and Artemis, and henceforth the island was sacred to Apollo.

Despite his birth on Delos, Apollo was more closely associated with Delphi in central Greece on the northern shore of the Gulf of Corinth. There, as a precocious babe of only four days, Apollo killed a huge snake named Pytho and established a center of worship in Delphi from which he prophesied. This so-called **Oracle of Delphi** was maintained by a succession of prophetesses, each called the Pythia after the snake, lasting well into historical times.

The Pythia often spoke in riddles, words which were true but hid their truth from plain view in some way. One of the most famous prophesies of the Oracle of Delphi was that delivered to King Croesus of Lydia who asked the Pythia what would happen if he attacked the Persians. The oracle replied that "a great kingdom will fall." Thus, Croesus, thinking he had the god's sanction, energetically attacked the Persians and was horribly defeated. Only too late he realized that the "kingdom" the oracle meant was his own! Thus, as the god of prophesy, Apollo is often called **Loxias** ("slanting").

Apollo was very popular in the Classical Age and appears often in later myth and literature. He provided much fodder for myth-making in that he had many love affairs with women, nymphs and young men and was heavily involved in the Trojan War and its aftermath. He's often held up as the ideal—or the anomaly—of the perfect male

according to the classical Greeks. Despite his personal excesses and often outrageous behavior, he preached a philosophy of self-awareness and moderation seen on his temple in Delphi which bore the inscriptions "Know yourself" and "Nothing in excess." As the god of enlightenment through knowledge, he's commonly counterposed to Dionysus, the god of mystery and revelation.

6. Artemis

Apollo's twin sister **Artemis** is both his antithesis and counterpart. She represents the moon, where he represents the sun; she darkness, he light; she primitive chastity, he civilized intercourse; she the child, he the adult; she black magic, he science; she death, he healing. Yet in spite of their fundamental differences the brother and sister share some important similarities. Both are often depicted carrying a bow and arrows and both are associated with plagues. In later mythology she was given the name Phoebe, the feminine form of her brother's alternate name Phoebus. In origin, she may be related to eastern goddesses, such as the Minoan "mistress of the wild beasts" or the Phrygian Cybele, another "mistress of the wild."

The story of Artemis' birth is the same as her brother Apollo's. Compared to Apollo, however, there are few myths involving her. Her virgin nature restricts her from love stories so popular in mythology. She's often seen as the personification of wilderness and unbounded nature, as in the myth of Actaeon, the mortal hunter who accidentally came across her bathing naked in a stream. When he stopped and stared, she flung water on him and changed him into a stag. He died when his own hunting dogs tracked him down and tore him to pieces.

Such tales of her swift and uncompromising vengeance are rife, such as the story of Niobe, the queen of Thebes. Niobe boasted that she had many beautiful children but Leto had only two, Apollo and Artemis. The divine siblings took badly this comparison to mere mortals and killed all of Niobe's children with their arrows. Niobe wept so much in grief for her children that the gods in pity turned her into a rock from which a spring continually flowed.

7. Hermes

Hermes is the messenger of the gods and the patron of all who traveled and live by their wits, including athletes, gamblers and thieves. As a symbol of the seedy underbelly of society, he's often characterized as a lower-class deity. Aeschylus in his drama *Prometheus Bound* calls him the "lackey of the gods."

It makes sense, then, that the story of his birth is comical. The son of Zeus and a nymph named Maia, almost the moment he was born the baby Hermes sneaked away from his mother and went out looking for trouble. He found a tortoise, killed it, scraped out its shell and by stretching strings across the shell invented the lyre. He then sat down with his new musical instrument and, of course, sang the song of his own glorious birth.

But that was hardly enough for this villainous *Wunderkind*, this Mozart of mischief. Baby Hermes was hungry and wanted beef. His brother Apollo happened to keep a large herd of cattle nearby, so the new-born decided to invent cattle rustling, too, but with an ingenious twist. He made Apollo's cattle walk away in reverse(!) so that their hoof-prints seemed to lead backwards to their home, and he wore sandals of brushwood to hide his own prints. When he had led them to his cave, although only a baby, he slaughtered and ate two entire cows.

When Apollo discovered his cattle missing and saw the hoof-prints heading toward home but nothing there, the god of wisdom was momentarily confused until an old man told him that he had seen a baby leading the cattle away. Apollo knew just who that child was. He went to Hermes, who had tucked himself back in bed and was looking every bit the innocent babe, and accused him of theft. Little Hermes defended himself with deft lies: "How can you accuse a little baby of such things? What kind of fool do you take me for? It's not like I wasn't born yesterday!" Sure that he had the culprit now, Apollo took the infant into court, an assembly of the gods. Zeus was not taken in by Hermes' innocent act and ordered him to return the cattle, which he did out of respect to his father. In recompense for the two cattle he had eaten, he gave Apollo the lyre he'd just invented and they were fast friends ever after.

Hermes is often shown wearing winged sandals and a traveler's hat—the flat, wide-brimmed *petasus*—and carrying a wand called a *caduceus* around which two snakes have wrapped themselves. Some florists today use this image of Hermes as a symbol of their delivery service. To the ancients, Hermes also served as *psychopompos* ("soul-guide"), the god who escorts the dead to the Underworld.

8. Dionysus

We can be certain that **Dionysus**, the youngest and latest entry into the Olympian pantheon, is a god imported from the Near East, since his own myth includes the tale of his migration from Asia Minor to Greece. Although born in Thebes (Greece), he was raised in the East and represents eastern notions of ecstasy and release. Unlike his aged and debauched Roman counterpart Bacchus, the Greek god is young and beautiful in a feminine way.

Those characters in myth, however, who foolishly confuse this effeminacy with weakness are shown to be tragically misguided. The god is merciless in destroying his mockers, disbelievers and heretics. On more than one occasion he literally rips his enemies to bits in a ritual called *sparagmos* ("rending") after humiliating them by releasing their secret passions. Euripides dramatized the quintessential example of this in his masterful study of human psychology and religious hysteria, *The Bacchae*. All in all, Dionysus is more than a god of drunkenness; he's the warden of our dark side, the parole officer of that terrifying bliss which comes with the release of inhibitions, in Dionysus' own words, "the god most dreadful and most soothing to humankind" (*Bacchae* 860-1).

As with few other gods, we can feel fairly certain of Dionysus' origin. He was originally a Phrygian agriculture god from Asia Minor. The tendency associated with his worship to encourage ecstatic oneness with the god is foreign to the religion of the Greeks which emphasized the unbreachable gulf between god and man. The ancients often envisioned him leaping and dancing to the accompaniment of flutes and cymbals, holding a special wand called the *thyrsos* in his hand and wearing long eastern robes, his blond curls bound up with a band of ribbons.

C. Lesser Deities

Greek myth and literature abounds with lesser deities who run, work and conspire with or against the Olympian gods. The following is a brief overview of some of the more important of these minor divinities.

1. The Muses

First and foremost in Greek literature are the **Muses** ("reminders"), personifications of artistic and scientific inspiration. Often invoked at the outset of an epic poem, the Muses provided a bard with a continual stream of creativity allowing him to carry his ideas out in poetry before an audience. They were imagined to live on Mount Helicon in Boeotia, where they dance around the Hippocrene ("horse-spring") fountain or on Mount Pieria in northern Greece near Mount Olympus. As patronesses of the arts and music, they were often associated with Apollo.

2. The Fates

Another of the lesser deities populating classical myth and literature are the **Fates**. Imagined as three old women spinning wool into thread, the Fates were the daughters of Zeus but at times controlled him. At some point they were given distinct names and functions: Clotho ("I spin") spins out the wool, Lachesis ("allotment") twists the wool into thread and Atropos ("inflexible") cuts it. This division of duties represents the three stages of a person's life: birth is the spinning out of the wool; destiny is the twisting of the thread; and death is its severing. The Fates are implacable and except on a few rare occasions cannot be swayed once they have chosen a certain course.

3. The Furies

A third important contingent of lesser goddesses is the **Furies** (or **Erinyes**), torch-bearing female earth-demons with blood dripping from their eyes and snakes for hair. These terrifying spirits of vengeance brought madness and death on those who had committed murder, especially the murder of parents. According to some sources, they were born from the ground where the blood of Uranus had spilled after Cronus castrated him. When not pursuing and tormenting parent-killers, they live in Hades where they are charged with tormenting sinners.

Before being absorbed into the mainstream Olympian religion, the Furies may have been part of an earlier form of worship revolving around the ghosts of the dead, especially those seeking the recompense of blood for blood like Hamlet's father in Shakespeare's play. Amidst the scientific revolution that engulfed the Classical Age of Athens, however, the Furies seemed outdated and came to represent the older order in which social justice was reciprocal ("an eye for an eye") as opposed to the newer, more enlightened method of "procedural" justice which was practiced in the Athenian trial courts, themselves a recent invention. During this time, they assumed a new name, the **Eumenides** ("good-minded ones")—a euphemism if ever there was!—on the logic that calling something horrible by a nice name encourages it to act nicer.

4. Woodland Deities

Finally, the forests and wetlands of the classical world supported their own brand of minor deities, in particular **Pan**, a capering nature god most often depicted with goat's ears, horns and legs. Originally a shepherd divinity from Arcadia, he features in few classical myths but shows up more than once in Greek history. For instance, when the Persians invaded Greece the first time, the Athenians routed them partly because, according to the Greeks, Pan suddenly appeared on the battlefield, inspiring great fear in the Persians. From this sort of sudden fear this god could cause comes the word "panic."

Also denizens of woodlands and landscape are the **nymphs**, a catch-all category of minor female divinities who, like fairies in English literature, usually occupy and are restricted to specific ecological niches: trees, fields, rivers, springs, lakes, and seas. Often they attend a god or goddess in large bands. *Nymphe* in Greek means "bride," which is appropriate insofar as they are largely sexual prey and spend much of mythology avoiding lustful male gods, most unsuccessfully. Not many nymphs are singled out in mythology. Exceptions include Achilles' mother Thetis and Apollo's beloved Daphne. Thetis, at least, may have been a more important deity in earlier myth who was later recycled as a nymph.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Zeus

Cronus

aegis

Hera

Poseidon

Oceanids

Hestia

Hades

Persephone

Tartarus

Pluto

Demeter

Eleusinian Mysteries

Aphrodite

Hephaestus
Ares
Athena
Pallas

II. An Overview of Classical Myths: The Chronology of Myth

Classical mythology constitutes a history of sorts, inasmuch as both share a sense of chronology, evolution and the centrality of certain events and people. Contrary to popular opinion, Greek myths and literature do not take place in a vacuum or a magical never-never-land peopled by imaginary creatures and completely removed from human reality. Instead, they occur for the most part in specific locales in and around Greece, regions which carried great and concrete meaning to the audiences of their day. Thus, many of the characters in Greek literary works were as real for their audiences as Columbus and George Washington are to most Americans today.

At the same time, myths encompass as much of the distant past as the ancient Greeks understood. Despite this, scholars and artists in antiquity studied them with the same precision we examine biblical scripture and archaeological remains. They debated what could or might have happened in remote times, and in the gaps where data were lacking they supplied plausible embellishments. If by the standards of modern research and historiography their efforts end up looking rather dismal, we must admit how well they did with what they had. Indeed, the questions they posed still lie at the heart of most modern sciences and arts: how did the world begin? why is it the way it is? what purpose do humans serve? The Greeks' answers, therefore, matter less than that they founded methods of historical inquiry we still use today.

In the cosmos of the classical world there were older gods who preceded and engendered newer gods, and later mortal or semi-mortal heroes who succeeded and supplanted earlier ones. To say these fit within a strict chronology would be an overstatement, but the ancients had a clear sense certain mythological events followed or preceded or precipitated others.

Below we will glance over the general progression of events in Greek mythology. Bear in mind that some—and often the best—authors in antiquity took considerable liberties with the standard arrangement of events and by the sheer force of their genius compelled a reordering of mythological history, sometimes simplifying things and sometimes not. Therefore, one cannot expect from classical myth and literature the sort of exactness found in history. Conversely, however, behind any myth may lurk a real historical event of some sort—too many times this has been shown to be true—however peculiar or unlikely the connection may seem to us.

A. Chthonic Deities

The narration of creation according to the ancient Greeks is best preserved in the epic, *The Theogony* ("The Birth of the Gods"), composed by Hesiod in the seventh century BCE. There is narrated the creation of the world out of chaos ("the gap, the yawning"), the usurpation of the throne of heaven by Cronus who castrated his father Uranus, Zeus' subsequent rebellion against his father Cronus and the establishment of the Olympian deities. Amidst this come many a hideous monster: earth-born demons, many-headed giants and hideous, huge hybrids like half-snake half-human mongrels. Also populating Hesiod's early world are abstractions of physical or natural features, such as Earth and Sky, and the embodiment of abstract principles like Memory and Law.

Today these gods are called **chthonic** ("from the earth, subterranean"), meaning that they were born directly from Mother Earth and are thus primitive and uncivilized. Chthonic gods include Uranus, Cronus, Rhea, the Fates, the Furies and certain nymphs. Compared to later, more sophisticated narrative, their myths seem on the surface barbarous, filled as they are with castration, incest, bestiality and other monstrous activities. Closer examination of later, more civilized myths, however, shows a similar fascination with extreme behaviors but among people, not chthonic gods. On reflection, the poised decadence of later myth may be in some ways less palatable than the honest vulgarity of its predecessor.

B. The Age of Heroes and the Founding of Cities

After the gods established themselves on Mount Olympus, the focus of Greek mythology shifts from gods to humans. **Heracles**, the son of Zeus and a mortal woman Alcmena, helped clear the earth of chthonic beasts, such as the giant snake called the Hydra and the Nemean lion whose pelt was impervious to metal. **Theseus**, the Athenian hero, killed the Minotaur, a half-bull, half-man monster. **Perseus** of Argos slew the hideous Medusa. A golden era of peace and prosperity, this is often called "The Age of Heroes."

With the extinction of these abominable creatures, cities began to rise and heroism to yield to the pedestrian nature of urban life. Sparta in the Peloponnese (southern Greece) was settled by Heracles' sons. Cadmus, a prince of Phoenicia seeking a lost sister whom he ended up never finding, established the city of Thebes in northern Greece. Athens was founded by an autochthonous (i.e. indigenous, native) line of kings sprung from the god Hephaestus. Although not gods but greater than mortals, quite a few great champions lived in this age, heroes like **Jason** who brought back from Asia Minor to Greece the Golden Fleece, the skin of a sheep that grew golden wool.

C. The Trojan War

As the Age of Heroes waned, mortal affairs returned to the abysmal level of back-biting chthonic gods, a dismal situation qualified only by the relative weakness of humans. **Oedipus** who inherited Cadmus' throne in Thebes married his own mother accidentally—or so some authors claimed—and sired ill-starred, incestuous, quarrelsome offspring. In the Peloponnese the descendants of King Pelops for whom the Peloponnese is named

fought bitterly among themselves. In Athens Theseus' son died horribly cursed mistakenly by his father.

This miserable infighting came to a temporary standstill when the Greeks banded together to fight a common war against the Trojans who lived across the Aegean Sea in Asia Minor. The war was ignited when **Helen**, the beautiful wife of King **Menelaus** of Sparta, was abducted by a renegade prince from Troy. All Greek men rose as one to defend the honor of Greek women. For ten years the best Greek warriors besieged Troy and finally took the high-walled citadel by means of a trick, the famous Trojan Horse. At the price of much suffering and death on both sides and the complete destruction of Troy, its city and its people, Menelaus finally reclaimed the lovely Helen.

D. *The Nostoi* (The Return Sagas)

The Greeks had no less trouble returning home than fighting in Troy, as recounted in series of epic adventures called *The Nostoi* ("The Return-Voyages"). **Odysseus**, for instance, took ten years getting back to his home on the island of Ithaca, only to find his house besieged by freeloaders seeking to compromise his ever-faithful wife Penelope. Conversely, **Clytemnestra**, the wife of **Agamemnon** who was Menelaus' brother and another Greek chieftain, capitulated in both mind and body to a usurper and, when her husband much to her displeasure showed up safe and sound in Argos after a decade of war at Troy, she stabbed him to death in his bath. Ironically, Menelaus whose wife Helen had caused the whole problem returned home safely—according to some ancient authors, they experienced some minor travails on their way back to Greece—and they lived more or less happily together for many years.

The consequences of the Trojan War didn't end there, however. In the aftermath of war, the next generation suffered as well. Agamemnon's son **Orestes** requited his father's death by killing his murderous mother and was visited by the Furies because of his atrocious act of matricide. He nearly died mad but was rescued by Apollo, the very god who had ordered him to slay Clytemnestra in the first place. Chronologically Orestes' tale is one of the latest stories in Greek myth, marking the end of the mythological tradition and the onset of the Iron Age, the ancient Greeks' way of describing the modern world. Henceforth, the task of recording Greek history is handed from the poets to the historians.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

chthonic
Heracles
Theseus
Perseus
Jason
Oedipus
Helen

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