

# CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

A critical anthology

*Edited by Geoffrey Miles*



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# Part 1

# 1

## THE MYTH-KITTY

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty... To me the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology, means very little, and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots but dodges the poet's duty to be original.

(Larkin 1983:69)

Philip Larkin's dismissal of the notion of a 'myth-kitty' raises a real question. Why, at the start of the twenty-first century, should writers, readers, or students of English literature still be taking an interest in the fantastic tales told by Greek peasants three millennia ago? Why should I, at a university on the Pacific rim twelve thousand miles from Mount Olympus, be compiling yet another volume about the classical myths and their influence?

The shortest answer is that, despite Larkin's disbelief, a classical 'tradition' does exist: a continuous line of inheritance and influence connects ancient Greece and Rome with the modern 'western' world, shaping our arts, our institutions, our values and philosophies. One small aspect of that tradition has been the use of classical mythology in English literature. For many centuries writers in English have been able to draw upon a common stock of mythological stories, characters, and images—a 'myth-kitty', to use Larkin's derisive term—in the confidence that their readers will recognise and understand their allusions. In the words of the critic George Steiner,

From Chaucer to [Eliot's] *Sweeney among the Nightingales* much of English poetry has relied on a code of instantaneous recognition. Where the code lapses... a good deal of the poetry may lapse too.

(Quoted in Radice 1973:13)

For educated readers from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century, a reference to (say) Hercules, or Venus, or Helen, or the sack of Troy, could be relied on to produce 'instantaneous recognition'—not an anxious search of school memories for a vaguely familiar name, but the involuntary and subliminal flash of images and associations that a modern reader would have on encountering the name of (say) Superman, or Sherlock Holmes, or Marilyn Monroe. Hence mythological references can work as a language, a 'code', to communicate instant and vivid meaning. When Hamlet describes his mother at his father's funeral as 'like Niobe, all tears', or says that his hated uncle is 'no more like my father/Than I to Hercules' (*Hamlet*, 1. 2. 149, 152–3), he is invoking mythical archetypes: Hercules, the strongest and bravest of men; Niobe, who wept for her children's deaths

#### 4 *Classical Mythology in English Literature*

until she turned to stone, the ultimate in grief and misery. The mythic allusions, set against the realities of Hamlet's own situation, convey his disillusionment and self-loathing with extraordinary vividness and economy—so long as the audience understands the code.

The language or code of mythology, however, is not a fixed one. The mythic images may remain stable and simple, but the interpretation of the stories shifts from period to period and from writer to writer. For instance, the image of Orpheus the musician has remained more or less stable over the centuries (though his lyre may change to a lute, a violin, or an electric guitar), but the meaning of his story shifts radically. For the Greeks, he was a religious teacher and mystic; for the Romans, a tragically bereaved lover. In the Middle Ages he may be a symbol of sinful man trying to save his soul from hell, or of Christ successfully saving human souls. In the Renaissance he is a symbol of cosmic order and harmony. In the eighteenth century he is the great civiliser, bringing order and culture to society. In the nineteenth century he is again primarily the tragic lover. In the twentieth century he may be a fearless explorer of the darkness of the soul, a symbol of the limitations of human art, a revolutionary liberator, or an arrogant male chauvinist. To study the evolution of a single myth over time reveals not only the richness and adaptability of the myths, but also the characteristic themes and preoccupations of successive literary periods.

Moreover, these changing interpretations do not simply displace each other, but rather build up on top of one another, creating increasingly complex layers of meaning. A myth is in a sense a palimpsest—a document that has been repeatedly written over, so that traces of earlier texts can be faintly read beneath the surface text. For instance, a feminist text like Elaine Feinstein's 'The Feast of Eurydice' in a sense depends on the earlier, more heroic views of Orpheus which the reader brings to the poem, and which partly emerge between the lines of the poem itself. The significance of Orpheus, in a twentieth-century text, is potentially a compound of all the various significances he has acquired in earlier texts.

It is, I believe, this combination of simple 'instantaneous recognition' and complex and multiple meanings which makes classical mythology a continually popular resource for writers. Even if it were possible for a writer to be, as Larkin demands, totally original, and to create, like God, a 'sole freshly created universe' in every work, such a work would lack the richness and complexity attainable by drawing on the centuries of tradition accumulated around the figures in the 'myth-kitty'.

The main purpose of this anthology is to bring together versions and rewritings of three major classical myths, starting with the ancient sources and then moving through English literature from the Middle Ages to the present day. The stories are those of Orpheus the musician, Pygmalion the sculptor, and the lovers Venus and Adonis. These are not necessarily 'typical' or 'representative' myths; many typical concerns of Greek mythology—war, heroic quests, hubris and nemesis, the family feud—are barely touched on in them. Nevertheless they are linked by a knot of common concerns which make them interesting to compare: art, and love, and death, and the borderlines between life and death and immortality, and the relationship between the human and the divine. Perhaps more important, each has been treated by a number of major writers across the centuries, making it possible to see how the treatment of each myth shifts with changing literary fashions, moral values, and intellectual concerns.

First, however, the book aims to provide a basic introduction to Greek mythology, a kind of primer to the 'code'. The remainder of this chapter will introduce the principal ancient

sources of the myths, and sketch the history of classical mythology in English literature. Chapter 2 will briefly introduce the classical gods, goddesses, and demigods; and chapter 3 is a rapid survey of the whole story of Greek myth, from the creation of the universe down to the foundation of Rome.

### **The ancient sources of the myths**

The ultimate 'source' of the Greek myths is, of course, the people who originally made them up, told them as stories, and passed them on to later generations. That source is inaccessible, though we can speculate about it. Scholars have propounded many views of the origins of myths: that they were pre-scientific attempts to explain the world and its phenomena; that they were aetiological stories, explaining the origins of things; that they acted as 'charters', explaining and justifying social institutions; that they were records of religious rituals, garbled over time into narratives of real events; that they were political propaganda; that they taught moral lessons; that they were historical facts distorted and fantasticated over time into legends of gods and superheroes (this theory is known as Euhemerism after its ancient inventor).

The most sensible view (argued by Kirk 1974) is that myths can be any or all of these things; no single theory can explain all the great variety of traditional stories told by the Greeks or any other people. For example, the figure of Zeus the sky god, gathering clouds and hurling thunderbolts, is clearly a primitive attempt to explain weather. The story of how Zeus was tricked by Prometheus is an aetiological or charter-myth, explaining why the Greeks ate the meat of their sacrificed animals and sent the gods only the smoke and bones. On a higher level, the figure of Zeus as archetypal king, giver of laws, protector of guests and strangers, functions as a kind of moral charter-myth, justifying the importance of law and custom. On the other hand, the stories of Zeus's adulteries with assorted women and nymphs seem to be told primarily for entertainment—though they may serve both a political purpose (in tracing a historical family back to an ancestor casually begotten by Zeus) and a social purpose (in embodying conventional assumptions about male/female roles and power relationships). No single view of myth will explain all the ways in which the myths about Zeus work.

To take another example: the three myths dealt with in this anthology seem to be of quite different types. The story of Venus and Adonis seems to be an ancient 'explanatory' myth, which traces the fertility of the world to the sexual union of the goddess and her consort, and the cycle of the seasons to the repeated ritual death and rebirth of the young god. The story of Orpheus may be explained in Euhemerist terms: it is possible that he was originally a real person, revered by the Greeks as a poet and religious teacher, who came to be an archetype of the poet-musician and a symbol of the powers and limitations of human art. The story of Pygmalion may have had a ritual origin, in the sacred marriage of a king to the goddess's statue; but it has been thoroughly remade by the poet Ovid into a humorous literary fantasy about art and love. The interesting thing is that all three legends, as retold in classical and English texts, cover almost exactly the same range from profound seriousness to sheer frivolity. The origins of a myth seem to have little to do with how it is treated by later writers.

The primary concern of this book is with the literary uses of myth, and by the time the myths were written down by classical writers they were already generations or centuries

removed from the people who had originally created them. For this reason I will spend no more time on the origins of the myths, but turn instead to the literary texts in which they were handed down.

First in age and authority are **Homer's** two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Almost everything about Homer is debatable, including whether or not he existed; scholars agree that the Homeric poems derive from a tradition of orally improvised poetry, but disagree whether a single author (or two authors) put the poems into their present form. The orthodox current view seems to be that there was a 'Homer' around the end of the eighth century BC. What is indisputable is that the Homeric poems became the basis of Greek literature and education, carrying the combined cultural prestige of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and the Bible for English readers. Both poems deal with the stories of the Trojan War; the *Iliad* focuses on the destructive anger of the Greek warrior Achilles, his quarrel with his commander Agamemnon, and his eventual duel to the death with the Trojan Hector; the *Odyssey* follows a different kind of hero, the patient and resourceful Odysseus, on his journey home after the war. Homer created the classic picture of the Greek heroic age, and also of the very human, quarrelsome and meddling Olympian gods. Other poets completed the '**epic cycle**' by filling in the gaps around the Homeric epics, but these later and lesser poems are now almost entirely lost.

Contemporary with Homer, or a little later, is **Hesiod**. His *Theogony* ('Origin of the Gods') gives the fullest account of the earliest Greek myths, dealing with the creation of the world and the early battles of gods, Titans, and Giants leading up to the establishment of Zeus as ruler of the universe. His *Works and Days*, a didactic poem about farming life, also includes the myths of Prometheus and Pandora and the Four Ages.

In the so-called 'lyric age' (mid-seventh to mid-fifth centuries), the dominant literary form was song: poems to be publicly sung, either by an individual or by a choir. From the earlier part of this period probably come the **Homeric Hymns** (which, despite their traditional name, have no connection with Homer): choral hymns to various deities, sometimes including vivid retellings of stories about them. The five longest hymns are those to Demeter (telling the story of her search for her lost daughter Persephone), to Apollo (about his birth and the founding of his temple at Delphi), to Hermes (about his mischievous childhood thefts), to Aphrodite (about her love for Anchises), and to Dionysus (about his transformation of a band of pirates into dolphins). Other lyric poets also take their subjects from myth, but the treatment becomes gradually less narrative and more allusive. An early poet like **Stesichorus** writes miniature epics (his lost song about Hercules' battle with Geryon ran to over 1,800 lines); later poets like **Simonides**, **Sappho**, and **Bacchylides** focus on brief, vivid vignettes of mythic scenes and characters. Most subtly, **Pindar** (early fifth century), in his odes in honour of victors at the athletic games, makes an art of quick, glancing allusion to a variety of myths. His audiences were clearly expected to know the stories well enough to pick up the allusions and understand their often oblique and unstated relevance to the subject of the ode.

Myth is also central to classical Athenian drama. The tragic playwrights **Aeschylus** (late sixth to early fifth century), **Sophocles** (fifth century), and **Euripides** (fifth century) took their plots from the age of heroes and the Trojan War, and many of the great tragic stories—Agamemnon and his children, Oedipus, Pentheus, Jason and Medea, Phaedra and Hippolytus—took on their classic form in their plays. The dramatists took stories which

were already familiar to their audience, and reinterpreted them in the light of contemporary issues and shifting ethical debates; Euripides' plays about the Trojan War, for instance, clearly offer a commentary on Athens's involvement in the Peloponnesian War. In at least one case—the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides about the revenge of Orestes and Electra—we can see all three dramatists successively reworking a single myth, casting a progressively more 'realistic' and disillusioned eye on the heroic story. The comic playwright **Aristophanes** (fifth to early fourth century) also on occasion plays irreverently with myth, as in *Birds* (in which an Athenian entrepreneur founds a kingdom of the birds and blockades Mount Olympus) or *Frogs* (in which the god Dionysus disguises himself rather unconvincingly as Heracles for a trip to the underworld).

While Greek poets and dramatists were reworking the myths, Greek philosophers were beginning to criticise them. **Plato** (early fourth century), for instance, though he was happy to create his own allegorical myths (such as the vision of Er in the *Republic*), attacked the traditional tales of the gods' tricks and thefts and adulteries as immoral, objected to their central role in literature and education, and proposed to ban them from his ideal state. Plato's attitude is the sign of a growing gap between the traditional myths and the beliefs of the educated Greek citizen.

That gap widened in the Hellenistic age (late fourth and third centuries), the period after the conquests of Alexander the Great, in which Greek culture becomes a world culture and the cultural centre shifts eastward from Athens to Alexandria. With the collapse of the Greek city states, the old religion lost much of its power, and the old connection between the myths and the civic life of the state, when Homer's epics or Pindar's odes or Aeschylus's tragedies would be performed before people to whom these stories were vital cultural treasures, was broken. For the Hellenistic writers the myths are essentially good stories, and their treatment is both more romantic and more realistic than that of the classical Greeks: **Apollonius of Rhodes's** short epic *Argonautica*, about the voyage of the Argo, is as full of magic and marvels as a medieval romance, but also focuses closely on the psychology of a young woman in love; **Theocritus's** *Idylls* juxtapose mythic stories with down-to-earth domestic detail. At the same time myth becomes a subject of scholarly study: **Callimachus** in his *Aetia* ('Origins') takes pride in his learning, searching out rare stories and arcane allusions to test and tease his sophisticated readers.

For related reasons, this period also sees the first handbooks of mythography: pocket guides to the myths for those who wish to appear better educated than they are. Later works like **Apollodorus's** *Library*, **Eratosthenes's** *Catasterisms* ('Star Legends'), **Antoninus Liberalis's** *Metamorphoses*, and the Roman **Hyginus's** *Fables* (all dating from the first or second centuries AD) are invaluable resources for modern scholars, often giving the only connected account of myths that would otherwise only exist in scattered poetic allusions.

The Romans, who took over so many Greek literary forms—epic, lyric, comedy, tragedy, pastoral, and so on—also took over Greek mythology as a central poetic subject. The first work of Latin literature, appropriately, was a translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. Two Roman writers made especially vital contributions to the transmission of classical mythology, and both of them belong to the Augustan period—the time of the first Roman emperor Augustus, from around 40 BC to AD 14, traditionally considered the high point of Latin literature.

**Virgil** began by writing pastoral poems, the *Eclogues*, and a didactic poem about farming life, the *Georgics*; both include mythological elements, notably the story of Orpheus and



Eurydice at the end of the *Georgics*. But his masterpiece was the *Aeneid*, an epic poem about the escape of the Trojan prince Aeneas after the fall of Troy, and his long wanderings and wars before he founded a settlement in Italy that was to be the origin of Rome. In this work Virgil is both challenging Homer's supremacy as a writer of epic, and also attempting to tie Rome in to the great design of Greek mythology—though, as a gesture of independence, he derives Rome's ancestry not from the Greeks but from their ancient rivals the Trojans. The *Aeneid* is a great feat, the construction almost from scratch of a new national myth.

**Ovid**, a generation younger than Virgil, is a very different poet. He made his name as the author of light-hearted, cynical love poems, the *Amores*, and a witty self-help manual for lovers, the *Ars Amatoria* ('Art of Love'). Later he turned to mythology, in the *Heroides*, letters from mythological heroines to their lovers; the *Metamorphoses*; and the unfinished *Fasti* ('Holidays'), an account of the Roman calendar, apparently cut short when Augustus exiled Ovid to the Black Sea (partly for his immoral poetry and partly for a mysterious 'error' that may have been connected with a sex scandal in the imperial family). Ovid's masterpiece is the *Metamorphoses*: a collection of mythological tales from the creation of the world to the deification of Julius Caesar, woven together in 'one continuous song' by the unifying theme of metamorphosis or change of shape. The poem itself is metamorphic, slipping from story to story on what seems like a continuous stream of free association, while continually changing moods—ironic humour, romance, pathos, moral earnestness, violence and horror, and then back to comedy again ... The *Metamorphoses* was for many centuries one of the most popular books in Europe, and it is by far the most important text in transmitting the myths to later writers.

Some later Latin works contributed in a smaller way to the mythological tradition, such as **Seneca's** bloody and horrific tragedies (loved by the Elizabethans), or **Statius's** *Thebaid*, an epic on the war of the Seven Against Thebes (much respected in the Middle Ages). Perhaps the last classical writer to give a distinctive turn to the myths was the Syrian Greek satirist **Lucian** (second century AD), whose 'Dialogues of the Gods' and 'Dialogues of the Dead' show up the absurdity of the traditional tales by treating them with poker-faced literal-mindedness.

Finally, Christian writers like **St Clement of Alexandria** (second century AD), **St Jerome**, and **St Augustine of Hippo** (both fourth to fifth century AD), in their polemics against pagan religion, not only contributed to a continuing debate about the meaning and value of the myths, but also (unintentionally) preserved accounts of myths that would otherwise have been forgotten. One author on the borderline between pagan and Christian is particularly important: **Boethius** (fifth to sixth century AD), whose enormously popular *Consolation of Philosophy* set an example for the use of classical myth as moral and spiritual allegory.

### The myths in English literature

The fall of the Roman Empire in western Europe—a long, slow collapse over the course of two centuries, but symbolically marked by the deposition of the last Roman emperor by a Gothic chieftain in AD 476—was the end of Rome's political power, but not its literature and culture. Throughout the 'Dark Ages' (fifth to tenth centuries), and the 'Middle Ages' that followed, it was the Christian Church which preserved classical literature. In this context 'classical' effectively means 'Latin': hardly anyone in the west knew Greek, and

Greek literature fell virtually into oblivion (with the exception of a few authors such as the philosopher Aristotle, who survived in Latin and—later—Arabic translations). Latin works, on the other hand, were repeatedly copied and recopied, ensuring not only that they survived but that they continued to be a living cultural influence.

To preserve Latin literature inevitably meant preserving classical mythology. This posed a serious problem for the Church and Christian readers: the myths were an integral part of the literature they loved and revered (especially the poetry of Virgil and Ovid), but also part of a false, pagan belief system. The most popular medieval solution to this dilemma was to treat the myths allegorically. This was a strategy already tried out by pagan critics, who had suggested that (for example) the voyages of Odysseus or Aeneas could be seen as allegorical of the human journey through life, or that the disturbing story of Cronus eating his children could be rationalised as a symbol of devouring Time; it was also one familiar to Christian interpreters of the Bible, who were accustomed to read the biblical narratives on both a literal and an allegorical level. By allegorical interpretation any myth could be given a Christian meaning. For instance, in the anonymous thirteenth-century *Ovide Moralisé*, a 70,000-line moral commentary on the *Metamorphoses*, the story of Apollo's attempted rape of Daphne becomes a symbol of the Incarnation: Daphne is the Virgin Mary, and Apollo crowning himself with the laurel is Christ entering the womb of his mortal mother.

At the same time, intermingled with this earnest allegorical tradition, there is an enjoyment of the mythical stories for their own sake—especially in the so-called 'Ovidian age' of the eleventh to fifteenth centuries. In fourteenth-century English poets like Chaucer and Gower, it is hard to draw a line between where the stories are being told as moral *exempla* and where they are simply being told as good stories. Medieval writers easily assimilated the ancient stories to the story-telling conventions of medieval romance; with little sense of historical distance or anachronism, they unselfconsciously imagined the ancient characters in the dress and behaviour of their own times. So the anonymous author of 'Sir Orfeo' imagines Orpheus as a troubadour-king rescuing his 'dame Heurodis' from the fairy king who has stolen her away to fairyland. In medieval hands 'the Matter of Troy' becomes a romance of chivalric combat and love, and in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Henryson's *Testament of Criseyde* the war of Greeks and Trojans becomes merely backdrop to the tragic love story of prince Troilus and his faithless Cressida.<sup>1</sup>

The Renaissance was given that name ('rebirth') by those who lived through it, because they saw it as the rediscovery of a lost classical world, the reawakening of civilisation after the long darkness of the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Obviously this is an emotive and value-laden term, and some modern scholars prefer the more neutral label 'the early modern period' (which perhaps raises just as many questions about how one defines 'modernity'); but in a discussion of the classical tradition it is hard to avoid talking about 'the Renaissance', and I shall continue to do so. Whether or not one sees it as a rebirth, it certainly was a period of rediscovery of the classics. The lead was taken by the scholars who called themselves 'humanists', because they were interested in human rather than theological studies, and because they believed in the ideal of 'humane' learning which creates a well-rounded human being. They searched out manuscripts of forgotten Latin texts, and re-edited and published them using the recently invented printing press; they also rediscovered Greek texts long unknown in the west, and began to learn and teach Greek, helped by Greek scholars who had fled to the west after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453.

Out of this rediscovery came a new set of attitudes to the classical world. There was a new sense of historical perspective—a realisation that Greece and Rome were alien worlds, separated from us by the gulf of the Middle Ages, requiring to be studied and

understood on their own terms rather than merely assimilated to our world in the medieval manner. There was a new kind of respect for classical literature as a model for imitation: writers now strove, not only to grasp the wisdom of the ancient texts, but also to imitate their generic forms, their style and conventions. And—perhaps most important in the long run—there was a new ideal of education: the secular ‘grammar school’ or (later) ‘public school’, whose curriculum was centred on Latin and (to a lesser extent) Greek, and where gentlemen’s sons were raised on knowledge of the classics. Such an education was for boys only; girls did not attend school and (with a few notable exceptions) were not taught Latin or Greek. This is one of the reasons why women generally, before the nineteenth century, did not write in the classical genres or on mythological subjects, and why their first major incursions into the English canon came with the rise of that non-classical form, the novel.

Despite these new developments, the treatment of myth in the Renaissance shows clear continuities with the Middle Ages. The tradition of allegorical interpretation continued. A succession of Renaissance mythographers—Lilius Geraldus in 1548, Natale Conti (or Natalis Comes) in 1551, Vincenzo Cartari in 1556—produced illustrated handbooks of mythology, describing the gods and interpreting the myths; and they were followed in English by writers such as Abraham Fraunce (1592), Francis Bacon (1609), George Sandys (1632), or Alexander Ross (1647). The main difference is that the Renaissance allegorisers were more ambitious. With a heightened respect for the wisdom and subtlety of the Greeks and Romans, they sought in the myths not only simple moral lessons, but profound secrets of nature, philosophy, politics, and society, cunningly veiled under the appearance of simple stories. So the philosopher-scientist Bacon, in *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, reads the myths as symbolically teaching doctrines similar to his own about the nature of the universe and the proper conduct of scientific research. Others are ready to accept whatever meanings may emerge: George Sandys’s commentary on his translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is a fascinatingly eclectic jumble of moral, psychological, scientific, political, philosophical, and historical interpretations.

In Renaissance literature, too, we can see the blurry medieval distinction between myth-as-allegory and myth-as-romance continuing in the contrast between (to use Douglas Bush’s terms) the ‘sensuously symbolic or allegorical’ and the ‘merely’ sensuous treatment of myth (Bush 1937/1969:xxii). Major writers like Edmund Spenser, George Chapman, and John Milton draw upon the tradition of allegorical interpretation, interweaving classical myths with Christian doctrine. In Spenser’s vast allegorical romance *The Faerie Queene*, for instance, the goddesses Venus and Diana appear as the complex embodiments of sexuality and of chastity; in Milton’s *Comus* the heroine’s chastity is threatened by an enchanter who is the son of Bacchus and Circe, and defended by a Spirit who is at once a Christian guardian angel and an inhabitant of a pagan paradise presided over by Venus and Cupid. This serious blend of the pagan and the Christian, of course, is an unstable compound. We see this particularly in Milton, who embodies pagan myth in unforgettable poetry, and yet is capable, in the opening book of *Paradise Lost*, of dismissing the classical gods as devils. Here, for instance, he describes the fall of Vulcan:

...and how he fell  
From heaven they fabled, thrown by angry Jove  
Sheer o'er the crystal battlements; from morn  
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve,  
A summer's day; and with the setting sun  
Dropped from the zenith like a falling star  
On Lemnos the Aegean isle...

and then abruptly undercuts the tale by reminding us of Vulcan's real nature as one of Satan's fallen angels:

thus they relate,  
Erring; for he with this rebellious rout  
Fell long before...  
(*Paradise Lost*, 1. 740–8)

This dash-of-cold-water effect recurs repeatedly in Milton, suggesting the difficulty of at once imaginatively embracing and intellectually rejecting the myths.

An alternative approach to myth is what Bush calls the 'merely sensuous': to approach the myths in an Ovidian spirit as pure stories, full of beauty and humour and horror and eroticism and opportunities for gorgeous scene-painting and rhetorical fireworks. It is best exemplified in poems such as Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, which scholars label 'erotic epyllions'—mini-epics about mythological lovers, set in pastoral landscapes, and fantastically embroidered with descriptions, digressions, and rhetorical debates until the simple story almost disappears from view. Such poems create an idealised mythic world, without allegory or Christianising (though *Venus and Adonis*, with its serious debate about love and chastity, shows how easily moral concerns can creep back into such a 'merely sensuous' world). Lesser Elizabethan poems and songs swarm with nymphs and shepherds, Venuses and Cupids, golden Phoebuses and silver Dianes; just as Elizabethan tragedy is haunted by allusions to classical crimes and punishments and the lurid scenery of Hades.

The problem with the 'merely sensuous' treatment of myth is that it can become merely conventional and decorative, and so, by degrees, merely boring. Already in the early seventeenth century the 'metaphysical' poets like Donne, Herbert, and Carew were beginning to dismiss 'the goodly exiled train/Of gods and goddesses' in favour of more original and challenging subjects and imagery (see O18). At the same time a new scientific rationalism began to undercut the claims of myth to serious treatment; as Renaissance reverence for 'the wisdom of the ancients' gave way to an Enlightenment belief in progress, the classical myths ceased to be seen as vehicle of moral and philosophical truth, and became instead mere fictions from the primitive childhood of mankind. So Joseph Addison in 1712 rejects as childish the whole notion of mythology in literature:

When we are at school it is necessary for us to be acquainted with the system of pagan theology, and may be allowed to enliven a theme or point an epigram with an heathen god; but when we would write a manly panegyric that should carry in it all the colours of truth, nothing can be more ridiculous than to have recourse to

our Jupiters and Junos... Virgil and Homer might compliment their heroes by interweaving the actions of deities with their achievements; but for a Christian author to write in the pagan creed... would be downright puerility, and unpardonable in a poet that is past sixteen.

(*The Spectator*, no. 523, 30 October 1712)

The result of these changing attitudes is paradoxical. The period from 1660 to the 1780s is the heyday of English classicism—especially the earlier eighteenth century, often called ‘Augustan’ for its conscious emulation of the Augustan age of ancient Rome; yet this period also saw the lowest decline of myth in English literature. The eighteenth century produced magnificent translations (Dryden’s *Virgil and Ovid*, Pope’s *Homer*), and brilliant satires and travesties, but hardly a single treatment of myth that was both serious, original, and memorable. Unfortunately, at the same time that myth had become impossible to take seriously, the principles of neoclassical imitation meant that it remained a compulsory part of the language of poetry. Hence eighteenth-century poetry is cluttered with conventional, fossilised allusions to ‘Jupiters and Junos’. As Lord Chesterfield wrote to his son: ‘in prose, you would say very properly, “it is twelve of the clock at noon”...but that would be too plain and flat in poetry, and you would rather say, “the Chariot of the Sun had already finished half its course”... This is what is called poetic diction’ (*Letters*, no. 641, 1739, quoted in Bush 1937/1969:20). Such conventional uses of myth, of course, only made it seem all the more tedious and irrelevant.

By a further paradox, the same spirit of scientific inquiry which had almost killed myth in the seventeenth century also contributed to its revival at the end of the eighteenth century. It was eighteenth-century scholars who inaugurated the scientific study of religion and mythology, studying the classical myths simply as cultural phenomena rather than as sources of ancient wisdom or of pagan corruption. New popular handbooks of mythology, like Lemprière’s *Dictionary* (1788), *Bell’s New Pantheon* (1790), and Godwin’s *Pantheon* (1806), simply recounted the ancient stories and beliefs without medieval allegories or Christian tub-thumping. Such new developments made it possible to take myth seriously again.

The writers of the Romantic movement, arising in the last decades of the eighteenth century, were predisposed to do so. With their exaltation of imagination over mere reason, their worship of nature, their love of fantasy and romance, they were prepared to see myth not as a childish and outmoded habit of thought but as a perennially valid vehicle of insight; for them, to see the landscape as inhabited by the presences of gods, nymphs, and satyrs was not a primitive superstition or a conventional image but a vivid metaphor for the divine power which pervades the natural world. For the first generation of Romantics, however, classical myth was still tainted with the fustiness of eighteenth-century convention; the Wordsworth and Coleridge of *Lyrical Ballads* turned more readily to medieval ballads and folk-tales. It was the second generation who found a new inspiration in Greek myth. Keats embodied his concerns with love and beauty and human suffering in *Endymion* and the unfinished *Hyperion* poems; Shelley more radically transformed myths in *Adonais* and *Prometheus Unbound*. Whereas Keats largely taught himself mythology out of texts such as Lemprière, Shelley was a scholar who loved and translated much of Plato and the Greek poets and dramatists. In the preface to his play *Hellas* (1822) he declared:

We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their roots in Greece... The human form and the human mind attained to a perfection in Greece which has impressed its image on those faultless productions, whose very fragments are the despair of modern art, and has propagated impulses which cannot cease... to ennoble and delight mankind until the extinction of the race.

Shelley's panegyric reflects a new sense that the art and literature and mythology of Greece, even in 'fragments', were the real thing, and superior to their Roman imitations. Homer and Plato, rather than Virgil and Horace and Ovid, are the great classical figures of the nineteenth century (see Jenkyns 1980; Turner 1981). The long dominance of the *Metamorphoses* now began to wane; Ovid began to seem a little frivolous and superficial beside the antique grandeur of Homer and Aeschylus and Sophocles. Even the names of the gods and heroes begin to change, the original Greek names replacing the Roman ones (Jupiter becomes Zeus), and, for some enthusiastic Hellenists, the long-familiar Latinised spellings giving way to spiky, alien-looking Greek ones (Circe becomes Kirkê, Aeschylus becomes Aischulos).

Even in the Romantic exaltation of Greek myth, however, there are undertones of doubt. Keats in the preface to *Endymion* (1818) hoped that he had not 'in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece, and dulled its brightness'. This fear that it was too late for Greek mythology was echoed jokingly by Peacock when he said that there are no dryads in Hyde Park nor naiads in the Regent's Canal (*The Four Ages of Poetry*, 1820), and more seriously by Wordsworth in a famous sonnet in which, lamenting his age's preoccupation with materialistic 'getting and spending', he declared:

Great God! I'd rather be  
A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.  
(‘The World Is Too Much With Us’, 1807)

Wordsworth wishes he could recapture that innocence, and yet he knows that he is not going to see Proteus; the world has changed, and Greek paganism is a 'creed outworn'.

In the course of the nineteenth century this sense of belatedness grew stronger. The Victorian period (1837–1901) produced a huge volume of poetry on mythological themes (see Bush 1937/1969), and among the mass some genuinely major works: Tennyson's 'Ulysses' (1842) and other dramatic monologues, Arnold's 'The Strayed Reveller' (1849), perhaps Robert Browning's rewriting of Euripides' *Alcestis* in *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871). Nevertheless, as the century goes on, mythology comes to seem increasingly marginal. On the one side the 'creed outworn' was once again being challenged by Christianity: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for instance, dismisses the 'vain false gods of Hellas' as subjects of worship or art:

Earth outgrows the mythic fancies  
 Sung beside her in her youth,  
 And those debonair romances  
 Sound but dull beside the truth.

(‘The Dead Pan’, 1844, 232–5)

On the other hand, the modern world of ‘getting and spending’, industrialism, commerce, science, political reform, and empire, made the old myths seem increasingly remote and irrelevant, while the creative energies of the period thrived in the novel and discursive prose rather than in mythological poetry. In the latter half of the century the irrelevance of myth becomes its positive attraction. Pre-Raphaelites like D.G.Rossetti and William Morris (who hark back beyond the Renaissance to the Middle Ages and the ancient world), and aesthetes like Swinburne and Wilde and De Tabley, use it to create an idealised dream-world, a vanished time which can be contemplated with wistful nostalgia. Where the Middle Ages simply assimilated classical myth to their own world, and the Renaissance and the Romantics used it to deal with contemporary concerns, the late Victorians, aware of looking back at it over a vast abyss of time and change, see it as a refuge from drab contemporary reality.

The early twentieth century brought myth back to startling life and relevance precisely by shattering that nineteenth-century image of idealised beauty and serenity. Once again the impetus came from new scholarly developments, in anthropology and psychology. Sir James Frazer in his massive study *The Golden Bough*, and his followers in the ‘Cambridge School’ such as Jane Harrison and Gilbert Murray, applied the techniques of modern anthropology to ancient myth and religion, finding startling similarities between classical myths and the beliefs of present-day ‘primitive’ peoples. Behind the statuesque dignity of Greek myths, they suggested, there often lay barbaric and bloody rites, such as the sacrifice of a sacred god-king to ensure the fertility of the soil. At the same time Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung argued the vital psychological importance of myths. For Freud, they embody primal human drives of sexuality and violence, which may emerge in dreams or fantasies when the rational mind represses them: for instance, the story of Oedipus, who (unwittingly) killed his father and married his mother, reflects the instinctive desire of every young male child to do precisely that (the ‘Oedipus complex’). For Jung, they are ‘archetypes’, powerful images from the ‘collective unconscious’ of the entire human race, embodying our deepest desires and needs; understanding them can help us to achieve psychic integration and health. Once again, as in the Renaissance, myths are seen as symbolic representations of profound truth. Their irrationality is no longer a barrier to taking them seriously—in fact, in an irrational and chaotic modern world, it guarantees their significance and value.

T.S.Eliot, in a 1923 review of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), wrote:

Psychology..., ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible only a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art.

(*The Dial*, 75 (1923), 483; quoted in Feder 1971:26)

The 'modernist' writers of the earlier twentieth century embraced myth as a way of imposing significance (if sometimes by ironic contrast) on a chaotic or shabby modern world. Joyce's *Ulysses* overlays a day in Dublin in 1904 on top of the epic plot of Homer's *Odyssey*, at once mocking the littleness of modern life and suggesting the persistence of archetypal, age-old concerns from archaic Greece to modern Ireland. Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922) draws on Frazer's discussion of ancient fertility myths, creating a waste land which images both the chaos of post-war Europe and the arid psyche of contemporary western man. W.B. Yeats, inter-weaving Celtic, classical, and his own occult mythology; Ezra Pound, using the figure of Odysseus as his persona; D.H. Lawrence, fascinated with the Etruscans and the mysteries of the underworld; H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), repeatedly returning to a mythic Greece of hot sun and terrifyingly present divinities; Robert Graves, creating his own interpretations of Greek myth (half scholarly, half crackpot) and his own poetic religion of the White Goddess—almost all the modernist writers use Eliot's 'mythical method'. Each of them, moreover, in a sense creates his or her own private mythology, as if it is no longer enough to draw upon a common stock of familiar stories and images.

The later twentieth century might seem a period inimical to myth, with the enormous explosion of science and technology, the proliferation of non-classical literary forms and media (journalism, cinema, television), the decline of the 'classical education' and of knowledge of the classical languages, the rising protests against literary elitism and the dominance of Dead White European Males... Nevertheless, as the contents of this anthology demonstrate, myth has remained throughout the century a powerful force in twentieth-century literature. The field of its influence has also widened out, in at least two significant ways.

Firstly, 'classical myth in English literature' in the twentieth century embraces not only the literature of England, but also that of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and English-speaking parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific. Classical myth has arguably been part of American literature since George Sandys translated the *Metamorphoses* as a colonial official in seventeenth-century Virginia, but up to the end of the nineteenth century the field was mostly left to minor and conventional versifiers; the major American writers (with some notable exceptions—Emerson, Poe, Hawthorne) seemed to agree with Walt Whitman's impatient demand:

Come Muse, migrate from Greece and Ionia,  
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,  
That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas', Odysseus'  
wanderings,  
Placard REMOVED and TO LET on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus...  
For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide untried domain awaits,  
demands you.

(*'Song of the Exposition'*, 1876)

In the twentieth century, however, the old accounts have been reopened. As this anthology demonstrates, American poets and dramatists such as Ashbery, Duncan, Jarrell, Jeffers, Levertov, Lowell, MacLeish, O'Neill, Rexroth, Rich, Rukeyser, Tennessee Williams (a brief alphabetical sample) have found the mythology of the Old World a powerful vehicle for New World themes. The same is true of other countries and literatures even



more remote from the Old World. To take my own country as an example, New Zealand literature is haunted by the figure of Odysseus—from A.R.D. Fairburn's romantic vision of the wanderer making landfall in New Zealand (1930), to James K. Baxter's war veteran coming home to 'the gully farm' (1950), to Alistair Paterson's globetrotting 'Odysseus Rex' (1986). Baxter, who declared that 'What happens is either meaningless to me, or else it is mythology' (Baxter 1967:122), draws with equal conviction on classical, Christian, and Maori images; and Alastair Te Ariki Campbell, in the very act of rejecting the classical Greek myths in favour of those of Polynesia, evokes an unforgettable image of the death of the old gods:

Face downward  
 And in a small creek mouth all unperceived,  
 The drowned Dionysus, sand in his eyes and mouth,  
 In the dim tide lolling—beautiful, and with the last harsh  
  
 Glare of divinity from lip and broad brow ebbing...  
 ('The Return')

So too writers from parts of the 'Third World' who might be expected to draw on their own indigenous mythical traditions have found use for the myths of Greece and Rome. The Nigerian Wole Soyinka's version of Euripides' *Bacchae* (1973), or the St Lucian Derek Walcott's revision of the Homeric characters in *Omeros* (1990), have shown that the ancient stories can gain a new vividness when naturalised in a completely alien setting.

The second widening-out of the myths is in terms of gender. Occasional women had written on mythological themes in the eighteenth century, and more in the nineteenth century (a few of them appear in this anthology). But it was not until the twentieth century that women writers really began to focus on the ancient myths, taking the stories traditionally told by and about men, reimagining and reinterpreting them from a female point of view, and allowing the women characters of the myths to speak for the first time. Some of the most original and challenging mythological writing of this century has come from such feminist revisions: H.D. or Margaret Atwood giving Eurydice a voice, Sandra Gilbert allowing the Bacchantes to justify their murder of Orpheus, Atwood presenting the Odysseus-Circe relationship from Circe's point of view, Angela Carter merging the Pygmalion myth with those of Frankenstein and Dracula to give the statue a bloody revenge...

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, classical mythology shows no signs of going away. If knowledge of Greek and Latin has declined, translations of classical works and popular accounts of the myths proliferate. Ovid, in particular, seems to be undergoing a boom in the 1990s, with the appearance of several new translations of the *Metamorphoses*, at least three novels based on his life and exile, and two volumes of poetic revisions of his tales—the anthology *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (1994), and Ted Hughes's prizewinning *Tales from Ovid* (1997). In the age of postmodernism and magical realism, Ovid, with his mixture of wit and fantasy and violence, his artful fragmentariness and his hints of serious meaning under a kaleidoscopically frivolous surface, once again seems a very modern writer. (With the development of cinematic 'morphing' effects, surely *Metamorphoses: The Movie* cannot be far off?) At any rate, it seems a safe bet that, so long as our civilisation lasts through the new millennium, the classical myths will survive as well.

## Notes

- 1 Troilus appears in Homer, and Cressida is distantly derived from Homer's Briseis and Chryseis (in *Iliad*, book 1), but the love story is a medieval invention (by the twelfth-century French poet Benoît de Saint-Maure). The medieval writers, of course, had no access to Homer; their main authorities were two late classical prose works, claiming to be eyewitness accounts of the war, by 'Dares the Phrygian' and 'Dictys the Cretan'.
- 2 In Italy the 'Renaissance' is the period from the late fourteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century. In England it comes a century later, stretching from the end of the fifteenth century (1485, the accession of the first Tudor king Henry VII, is a conventional marker) to the mid-seventeenth century (conventional dates are 1642, the beginning of the Civil War, or 1660, the Restoration of Charles II). Of course, any such dates are arbitrary markers for processes of gradual cultural change.

## A ROUGH GUIDE TO THE GODS

The most essential item in the classical myth-kitty is a knowledge of the classical gods and goddesses—their names, attributes, personalities, areas of power, and the complex web of relationships which sometimes makes classical mythology seem like a vast divine soap opera. This chapter aims to provide a brief guide to the gods as they appear in classical and European literature and art (rather than as the objects of ancient Greek and Roman worship and ritual, a quite different matter).

Simply knowing the names of the gods is more complex than it might appear, since almost all of them go by two names, one Greek, one Roman. It was the Greeks (sometimes borrowing from older Middle Eastern traditions) who created the personalities, stories, and relationships of the gods. The Romans, on the other hand, originally worshipped mostly impersonal, faceless spirits of place and personifications. When the Romans came in contact with Greek culture they borrowed the whole colourful apparatus of Greek mythology and applied it to their own pantheon, identifying each Greek god with his or her nearest Roman equivalent. So, for instance, Hephaestus, the Greek master-craftsman and smith who has his forge under a volcano, became identified with Vulcan, a Roman god of volcanic fire. Over time—although classical scholars, naturally, maintain the distinctions between them—the Greek and Roman gods effectively fused into a single personality. It was the Roman names of the gods which were passed down through the Middle Ages, and became standard in English: eighteenth-century writers, even translating Homer or Sophocles, would speak of ‘Jupiter’ and ‘Mars’ and ‘Venus’. In the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries the original Greek names have gradually come back. Anyone following the history of the myths needs to be familiar with both. I considered consistently using the Roman names (which are the most familiar in English literature), but this sounds absurd in relating the more archaic Greek myths; instead I have introduced each god by giving both names (first Greek, then Roman: **Hera/Juno**), and thereafter used either or both as seems appropriate. For quick reference the following table may be useful.

<i>Greek name</i>	<i>Roman name</i>	<i>Principal function</i>
Zeus	Jupiter, Jove	king, god of the sky
Hera	Juno	queen, goddess of marriage
Poseidon	Neptune	god of the sea
Hades	Pluto, Dis	god of the underworld
Demeter	Ceres	goddess of agriculture
Hestia	Vesta	goddess of home and hearth
Athena	Minerva, Pallas	goddess of war and wisdom
Apollo	Apollo	god of light, music, healing, the sun
Artemis	Diana	goddess of the wild, virgin huntress, the moon
Aphrodite	Venus	goddess of love and beauty
Ares	Mars	god of war

Hephaestus	Vulcan	god of fire, blacksmith and craftsman
Hermes	Mercury	messenger, god of travel and communication
Dionysus	Bacchus	god of wine and madness
Persephone	Proserpina	goddess of underworld and of spring
Eros	Cupid	god of love
Cronus/Kronos	Saturn	father of the gods
Rhea	Ops	mother of the gods

### **The Olympian gods**

The most important Greek gods lived on the summit of Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece (nearly 10,000 feet high), or in the clouds above it. The Greeks conceived Olympus like an ancient Greek city, with the citadel of the king (Zeus) on the highest peak and the homes of the other nobles/gods clustered round. Ovid re-envisages it in terms of Rome's palatial Palatine Hill (*Metamorphoses*, l. 168–76), and a seventeenth-century translator in turn 'Englishes' it as 'Heaven's Whitehall' (Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphoses Englished*).

The principal gods were categorised by the Greeks as 'the Twelve Olympians', though there was some disagreement about the composition of the list; the following discussion includes thirteen major gods as well as some of their more important hangers-on. They fall into two generations: the older generation of Zeus/Jupiter and his siblings, and the younger generation who are his children by various mothers. The underworld god Hades/Pluto, who seldom sets foot on Olympus, is not counted among the Olympians; he, his consort, and his kingdom are separately dealt with later.

### ***Zeus/Jupiter/Jove***

King of the gods and ruler of the universe from his throne on Mount Olympus. Originally a god of the sky and storm, thunder and lightning, he also becomes patron of kingship and government, law and custom, the patriarchal lord of the status quo. He is depicted as a powerfully built bearded man of middle age, often grasping a thunderbolt or lightning flash, attended by his messenger the eagle and his sacred tree the oak. Homer depicts Zeus impressively as the cloud-gatherer, 'father of gods and men', whose nod shakes heaven:

He bent his ponderous black brows down, and locks  
ambrosial of his immortal head  
swung over them, as all Olympos trembled.

(*Iliad*, l. 528–30; trans. Robert Fitzgerald)

And Virgil gives a similarly powerful picture of Jupiter:

the Almighty Father then,  
 Chief power of the world, began to speak,  
 And as he spoke the great hall of the gods  
 Fell silent, and earth quaked...  
 (*Aeneid*, 10. 100–2; trans. Robert Fitzgerald)

This ‘Almighty Father’ has a striking resemblance to the Christian God, and English writers have often taken advantage of the accidental similarity between Latin ‘Jove’ and Hebrew ‘Jehovah’ to create a composite pagan/Christian image of the supreme being.

Zeus/Jupiter has a less exalted aspect, however. He is also an insatiable lecher, pursuing nymphs and mortal women and boys, and seducing or raping them in various forms, thus fathering many heroes and heroines and founding many of the great royal and noble families of mythology (for more details, see ‘Tales of love’ in chapter 3, pp. 38–40). His sexual exploits have provided endless material for artists and poets, who (being mostly male) have tended to treat them in a light-hearted spirit. Ovid, observing the spectacle of the lord of the universe transformed into a bull and mooing his love for Europa, comments wryly that ‘majesty and love go ill together’ (*Metamorphoses*, 2. 846–7).

### *Hera/Juno*

Queen of the gods, sister and wife of Zeus/Jupiter, goddess of marriage and childbirth, and the pre-eminent women’s deity. Some scholars conjecture that she was once the mother goddess of a matriarchal society, later forcibly married and subjected to Zeus—which might explain something of their rather rocky marital relationship. She is depicted as a beautiful and stately queen, with a full Junoesque’ figure and large liquid ‘ox-eyes’ (in Homer’s phrase); her attendant is the proud peacock, and **Iris**, the shining rainbow goddess, is her messenger. Less majestically, Hera is the archetypal jealous wife, forever quarrelling with her husband, suspicious (with reason) of his infidelities, and vengefully pursuing his mistresses and his bastard children. Her malice in this regard means that she is often cast in a villainous role: as Hercules’ wicked stepmother, for instance, or as ‘baleful Juno’ whose ‘sleepless rage’ against Aeneas and his Trojans prompts Virgil’s question, ‘Can anger/Black as this prey on the minds of heaven?’ (*Aeneid*, 1.4–11).

### *Poseidon/Neptune*

God of the sea, who won that realm by lot from his brothers Zeus and Hades; called ‘Earthshaker’, he is also the god of earthquakes and of horses. He appears as a bearded middle-aged man, very similar to Zeus, but holding the three-pointed spear or trident with which he rules the waves; he rides in a shell-shaped chariot drawn by sea-horses, attended by his wife **Amphitrite**, by his herald **Triton** (a merman, half man and half fish, who blows on a conch shell—some-times turned into a multitude of tritons), and by sea-nymphs. Like the element he rules, he can be fierce of temper and a dangerous enemy (as he is to Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*), and as ruthless as his brother in his sexual affairs. As ‘King Neptune’ he is still a familiar icon, and used to turn up (perhaps still does) to initiate passengers on ships crossing the Equator.

Among his followers are **Proteus**, the Old Man of the Sea, prophet and shape-changer, and **Thetis**, the beautiful sea-nymph who becomes the father of Achilles. Like other sea gods they can change shape, flowing like water into various forms, to evade capture or questioning by mortals.

### *Demeter/Ceres*

Goddess of grain and crops, agriculture and fertility. An earth-mother goddess, she is depicted as a matronly figure, sometimes rising out of the earth, with ears of grain in her hands. The only important myth connected with Demeter is that of her search for her stolen daughter **Persephone/Proserpina** (see below). Otherwise she is a rather colourless figure, and when her name appears in literature it is often a mere metaphor for grain or food (Ceres is the origin of the word ‘cereal’): so Pope writes of the time when an aristocratic garden will revert to farmland ‘And laughing Ceres reassume the land’ (‘Epistle to Burlington’, 186).

### *Hestia/Vesta*

Goddess of the hearth-fire, home, family, and community. Eldest of the Olympian family, the one who stayed home to look after the fire, Hestia is the most respectable and dullest of the gods, important in religion but almost entirely devoid of myth. Some say she later stepped down to make room among the Twelve for the more exciting Dionysus. She appears in literature only as patroness of the Vestal Virgins, the Roman priestesses who guarded the sacred flame and were sworn to lifelong virginity on pain of being buried alive.

### *Athena/Minerva*

Goddess of war, of arts, crafts, and skills (especially spinning and weaving), of intelligence and wisdom. Her birth is the subject of a strange archaic myth: Zeus swallowed her mother, the titaness Metis (‘wisdom’), in the traditional family fear that her child would be stronger than himself, and so Athena was born from his head—his brainchild, one might say, born directly from the father without feminine intervention. Hence she is the most ‘masculine’ of goddesses, an asexual virgin and an incarnation of militant intelligence. She is depicted as a tall, sternly beautiful young woman, ‘grey-eyed’ or ‘flashing-eyed’, dressed in full armour with helmet and spear, and often wearing the head of the Gorgon Medusa (see the story of Perseus in chapter 3) on her breastplate; her attributes include the owl (symbol of wisdom), the snake, and the olive tree—the gift with which she won the honour of being patron goddess of Athens. In Homer’s *Odyssey* she is the loyal friend of Odysseus, for whose tricky intelligence she has an almost sisterly regard.

### *Apollo*

Apollo, whose name is the same in Latin and Greek, is also sometimes called **Phoebus** (bright), and this is perhaps his key attribute. He is the god of light and enlightenment in all its senses, of reason and perception, music and poetry, prophecy, medicine, and of the sun. (This last is a later development—the original sun god was Helios—but in English literature ‘Phoebus’ often refers to the sun.) He describes himself in Shelley’s ‘Hymn of Apollo’:

I am the eye with which the Universe  
Beholds itself, and knows itself divine;  
All harmony of instrument or verse,  
All prophecy, all medicine are mine,  
All light of art or nature...

He is depicted as a beardless young man of perfect classical beauty, often surrounded by a halo of light, carrying a bow and arrows and a lyre. As a hunter he is often linked with his twin sister Artemis/Diana (they are the children of Zeus and the titaness Leto); together they kill monsters and send disease and death on evildoers. Apollo also heals disease, and his son **Asclepius/Aesculapius** is the god of medicine. As prophet he speaks from his shrines such as the great Oracle at Delphi, the centre of the earth, where the Pythia-priestess utters her riddling oracles in his name. As god of music and poetry he is associated with the mountains of Parnassus and Helicon, where he is attended by the nine **Muses** (see below). Apollo was often seen by the Greeks as the epitome of Greek civilisation; so he takes a central place in the frieze on the Parthenon in Athens, calmly wrestling a centaur into submission, the symbol of reason overcoming barbarism. It may be added, to qualify his almost insufferable perfection, that he inherits his father's sexual appetite, and that his love affairs with women or boys nearly always have unhappy endings (see 'Tales of love' in chapter 3, pp. 38–40).

**The Muses** are the nine daughters of Zeus and the titaness Mnemosyne ('memory'), who live on Mount Helicon beside the spring of Hippocrene; they are the patronesses of the creative arts and the givers of inspiration. Later writers give each of them responsibility for a particular art, though the assignments vary; this is one traditional version.

### Calliope

epic poetry

### Clio

history

### Erato

lyric poetry

### Euterpe

music

### Melpomene

tragedy

### Polyhymnia

sacred music and poetry

### Terpsichore

dance

### Thalia

comedy, pastoral poetry

### Urania

astronomy

### *Artemis/Diana*

The virgin huntress, goddess of wild places and wild creatures, of chastity, and of the moon. (Like her brother Apollo's association with the sun, this is a later development, by which she displaced the original moon goddess Selene; in this role she is often called **Phoebe**, the feminine counterpart of Phoebus, or **Cynthia**.) She is depicted as a beautiful, athletic young woman, dressed as a huntress with bow and arrows, often wearing a small crescent

moon in her hair or on her breast, and often accompanied by a deer or other wild creatures. She is a virgin, like Athena, but unlike her sister avoids courts and cities, preferring to run free in the forests and groves with her band of huntress-nymphs, and fiercely punishing male intruders (like the hunter Actaeon), as well as females (like the nymph Callisto) who fall below her standards of chastity. The ‘Queen and huntress, chaste and fair... Goddess excellently bright’ (Ben Jonson) is a particularly potent figure in Elizabethan literature, when Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen, liked to be associated with her. On a more sinister level, she is sometimes identified with **Hecate**, goddess of witchcraft and black magic—the trinity of huntress, moon goddess, and witch-goddess making her ‘Diana of the three faces’.

### *Aphrodite/Venus*

Goddess of love and sexuality. She is depicted as a beautiful woman (in whatever style of beauty is currently in fashion), usually naked, often accompanied by her son **Eros/Cupid** (see below), or by a whole flock of small winged Loves or Cupids; her attributes include doves, sparrows, roses, and mirrors. It is the mirror which is represented in her astrological symbol (♀), which has become the conventional symbol for women or femaleness. Homer calls her the daughter of Zeus and Dione, but Hesiod tells a more striking story of her origins: when Cronus/ Saturn castrated his father Uranus, the sky god’s genitals fell into the sea and gathered sea-foam (Gk. *aphros*) around them, and Aphrodite arose from the sea.

Plato, in the *Symposium* (180), declared that there are two Aphrodites: ‘Common Aphrodite’, goddess of ordinary love and sex, and ‘Heavenly Aphrodite’, *Aphrodite Urania*, a potent spiritual force. This is a philosopher’s concept rather than a genuine myth, but it does suggest the goddess’s range of personalities. At one extreme is the goddess of the universal cycle of life, magnificently invoked by the Roman philosopher-poet Lucretius (in Dryden’s translation):

All nature is thy gift; earth, air, and sea;  
Of all that breathes, the various progeny,  
Stung with delight, is goaded on by thee.  
O’er barren mountains, o’er the flowery plain,  
The leafy forest, and the liquid main,  
Extends thy uncontrolled and boundless reign...

(*De rerum natura*, 1. 17–20)

Common Aphrodite, on the other hand, is the embodiment of human love, and can be regarded in as many ways as love can be: as something rapturous, or kind and caring, or wantonly lustful, or elegantly frivolous, or cruel—‘Venus with her claws fixed deep in her prey’ (Racine, *Phèdre*, 1.3). She is married to Hephaestus/ Vulcan, but continually unfaithful to him; her principal lover is Ares/Mars, but she also has human lovers, of whom Adonis is the most famous. The opposite in most ways of chaste Artemis/Diana, she is like her in her harsh punishment of those who offend against her and her values; the most famous example is the tragedy of Hippolytus and Phaedra.



**Eros/Cupid**, the personification of love or desire (Gk. *eros*, Lat. *cupido*), is a god who has come down in the world. According to Hesiod, Eros was there at the very beginning of things, emerging out of Chaos along with Earth and Tartarus, and so is older than Aphrodite. Later, and more commonly, he is called the son of Aphrodite and Ares. At first depicted by the Greeks as a beautiful winged youth, he has shrunk by Roman times into the familiar figure of a pudgy little winged boy, often blind or blindfolded, with a little bow from which he shoots at random his arrows of desire. Shakespeare spells out the allegory:

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,  
 And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind.  
 Nor hath love's mind of any judgement taste;  
 Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste.  
 And therefore is love said to be a child  
 Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.  
 (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1. 234–9)

### *Ares/Mars*

The god of war. He is depicted as a warrior, with armour, sword, spear, and shield (or the contemporary equivalents, in later art); his astrological symbol (♂) represents the phallically raised spear, and has become the symbol of the male, as Venus's mirror is of the female (a rather depressing comment on traditional gender roles). Ares and Mars are rather different figures, reflecting different cultural attitudes to war: Ares was a minor Greek god, and Homer portrays him as a nasty and ineffectual bully; Mars, on the other hand, is one of the principal Roman gods, embodiment of the military virtues, and patron and defender of Rome. Mars and Venus, as archetypes of man and woman, are appropriately lovers, and the disarming of Mars by Venus is a common theme in art.

### *Hephaestus/Vulcan*

The smith, god of metalworking and of fire. Son of Zeus and Hera (or, in some versions, of Hera alone), he is ugly and lame—either because he was born so, or because his mother or father threw him out of heaven and he was crippled by the fall to earth. (The lame blacksmith is a traditional figure in many cultures, perhaps because it was a craft open to those who could not fight or farm.) He makes houses and furniture, weapons and armour, and other treasured possessions for the gods, as well as arms for heroes like Achilles and Aeneas. His forge is located underneath a volcano, usually Mount Etna in Sicily, where he is assisted by the **Cyclopes** (one-eyed giants). The other gods laugh at him for his clumsy appearance, and also for being a cuckold—husband of the most spectacularly unfaithful wife in all mythology. On one occasion, however, described by Homer, he had the last laugh on his wife Aphrodite/Venus and her lover Ares/Mars: he booby-trapped the marital bed with an invisible and unbreakable net, caught the lovers there, and invited the other deities in to enjoy their discomfiture.

### *Hermes/Mercury*

The messenger of the gods. The son of Zeus and Maia, he carries messages and aid to mortals on behalf of his father. He is depicted as a handsome, beardless youth, wearing a winged cap and sandals, and carrying the *caduceus*—a herald's staff with two snakes entwined around it. (For some reason the caduceus has become the symbol of medicine, which was never one of Hermes' functions.) He is the god of language and communication, of orators, diplomats, writers, and scholars; his medium is prose, 'the words of Mercury' rather than 'the songs of Apollo' (Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, 5. 2. 912–13). He is also the patron of travellers, traders, and thieves (categories the Greeks obviously regarded as closely related). According to the 'Homeric Hymn to Hermes', he demonstrated his precocious abilities when he was only one day old by stealing a herd of cattle from his brother Apollo, then pacifying Apollo with some fast talk and the gift of the lyre (which he had just invented) in exchange. Quick-witted, agile of foot, tongue, and brain, his 'mercurial' qualities are reflected in the metal named after him—mercury, or quicksilver. He also has a more sombre function as *psychopomp* or spirit guide, guiding the spirits of the dead down to the underworld.

### *Dionysus/Bacchus*

The god of wine, intoxication and ecstasy. A latecomer to Olympus, he is the son of Zeus and a mortal, Semele, daughter of King Cadmus of Thebes. Semele was already pregnant with the god when (on Hera's malicious advice) she unwisely asked Zeus to appear to her in his full heavenly glory, and was burnt to cinders; but Zeus rescued the unborn child and sewed him into his thigh, from which he was subsequently born. (Dionysus and Athena are thus both the children of Zeus as solo parent, so to speak; the parts of his body from which they were born suggest the contrast between Athena's pure intellect and Dionysus' 'lower', more sensual nature.) Tutored by the wise old drunkard **Silenus**, he set off on a tour of the East as far as India, spreading the knowledge of wine and his worship, before returning in triumph to claim his place on Olympus. Only his home city, Thebes, refused to acknowledge him; the tragic story of King Pentheus's defiance of Dionysus is told in Euripides' *Bacchae*.

Dionysus is depicted as a handsome young man (bearded in early Greek art, more androgynous-looking in later versions), crowned with ivy and vine-leaves, holding a wine-cup, and carrying the *thyrsus*, an ivy-wreathed staff tipped with a pine-cone; he is followed by leopards and panthers, satyrs, and fauns, old Silenus riding on a donkey, and a rout of wild (mainly female) worshippers, the *bacchantes* or *maenads*. This image reflects the actual Bacchic rites (or 'orgies'), in which women would go up into the mountains and work themselves up with wine and music and dancing into a frenzied ecstasy, culminating in the ceremonial tearing to pieces of a sacrificial animal. In later times Bacchus may become merely a personification of wine or a comic drunkard; but for the ancient Greeks he represented something more serious—the emotional and irrational, inspiration and ecstasy, whatever lifts human beings out of their normal selves and beyond rational control. He has his own kinds of poetry and music, and acting and the theatre are his special province. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), proposed an

influential distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian forms of art—the former rational, orderly, harmonious, ‘classic’; the latter emotional, instinctive, mysterious, ‘romantic’. Dionysus is the least ‘classical’ of classical deities.

### The gods of the underworld

#### *Hades/Pluto/Dis*

King of the underworld and god of the dead, who gained that realm when he cast lots with his brothers Zeus/Jupiter and Poseidon/Neptune. He is a shadowy figure. On the principle of ‘speak of the devil...’, he was seldom depicted and his name seldom spoken. In fact, his various names are all euphemisms: Hades and Aidoneus mean ‘the unseen one’ (Hades is also the name of his realm); Pluto and Dis mean ‘the rich one’ (since wealth comes from underground). It is worth stressing that he is *not* the devil, not evil or malevolent, merely a cold, grim, inflexible enforcer of the necessity of death for all mortal creatures. He has little mythology, apart from the story of his abduction of Persephone (see below), and his dealings with the heroes who from time to time invade his realm.

#### *Persephone/Proserpina*

Queen of the underworld, and goddess of spring. Also known as **Cora** or **Kore**, ‘the maiden’, she is the daughter of Zeus/Jupiter and Demeter/Ceres. Her uncle Hades/Pluto fell in love with her, and, with the connivance of Zeus, seized her and carried her off in his black chariot as she was picking flowers; in Milton’s words,

Proserpine, gathering flowers,  
Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis  
Was gathered, which cost Ceres all that pain  
To seek her through the world.

*(Paradise Lost, 4. 269–72)*

Demeter searched the earth for her lost daughter. In her grief, or her rage at finding how her brothers had conspired against her, she withdrew the blessings of fertility from the world; crops died, the world turned barren, human life was threatened. Zeus had to ask Hades to return Persephone. But Hades, knowing that those who had eaten the food of the underworld could not return to earth, had persuaded Persephone to take a bite of a pomegranate, and she had swallowed some seeds. As a compromise, Zeus decreed that she should spend half the year in the underworld, half with the other gods. This is, of course, a seasonal myth: while Persephone is underground in winter the earth is cold and barren, but she returns with new life in the spring. The Eleusinian Mysteries—the famous, secret rites held yearly at Eleusis, near Athens—apparently acted out the story of Demeter and Persephone, and seem to have promised not only the cyclic renewal of life, but also life after death to their initiates. In literature, apart from versions of the story of her abduction, Persephone/Proserpina almost always appears as the queen of the underworld—sometimes cold and stern, sometimes a kindlier influence on her husband.

### *The underworld*

The underworld, the land of the dead, was originally ‘the realm of Hades’; by extension it comes to be called simply ‘Hades’ (other names are Orcus and Erebus). Thanks to the visits of various heroes—Odysseus, Aeneas, Hercules, Theseus, Orpheus—its geography and inhabitants are fairly familiar, though the terrain can shift disconcertingly. For Homer it is a land somewhere in the far west, beyond the encircling Ocean (Odysseus is able to get there by ship), and it consists simply of an endless, featureless plain, on which only asphodel (a kind of white lily) grows, and on which the ghosts of the dead wander mindlessly and aimlessly. This simple and depressing picture becomes more complex, and more interesting, in later accounts.

Later writers usually place the underworld underneath the earth, where it can be reached by various passages: Orpheus descends through a cave at Taenarus in southernmost Greece, Aeneas through the Sibyl’s cavern near Lake Avernus in Italy. Its boundary is marked by the river Styx, the ‘hateful river’, by whose black and poisonous water the gods swear their most unbreakable oaths. (Virgil makes the river Acheron the border, but later tradition has agreed on the Styx.) The spirits of the newly dead wait on its bank to be ferried across by **Charon**, the filthy and churlish old boatman. The fare is an *obolus*, a small coin (hence the ancient custom of putting a coin in a dead person’s mouth, and perhaps the later custom of putting pennies on a dead person’s eyes); those who lack the coin, or have not been properly buried, are doomed to wait in limbo on the banks of the Styx. On the other side, the boundaries of the underworld are marked out by five rivers: Styx, Acheron (‘sorrowful’), Cocytus (‘wailing’), Phlegethon (‘fiery’), and Lethe (‘forgetful’); those who drink from Lethe forget their former lives and identities. The entrance to the underworld, or the gate of Hades’ palace, is guarded by the fearsome three-headed (or, more extravagantly, fifty-headed) hell-hound **Cerberus**.

Whereas the essential feature of Homer’s underworld is the levelling of all souls without distinction, later versions show more interest in posthumous rewards and punishments. There are three judges, **Minos**, **Rhadamanthys**, and **Aeacus**, who decide the fates of the dead. There are also equivalents of heaven and hell, though they are reserved for the exceptionally good or the exceptionally wicked. On one side there is **Elysium**, or the **Elysian Fields**: a paradisaical place where blessed souls take their ease with conversation, music, and games amid flowering meadows. Originally reserved for heroes of divine ancestry, Elysium is later open to anyone of exceptional virtue or distinction.

On the other side is **Tartarus**, a deep gulf in which the wickedest sinners are tormented. The Titans and Giants are imprisoned here, along with other famous sinners who appear in almost every description of the underworld. Some receive straightforward torments: **Ixion**, who tried to rape Hera, is tied to a turning wheel of fire; the giant **Tityus**, who tried to rape Leto, is tied to the ground while vultures feed on his liver. Other punishments are more subtle, relying on frustration rather than pain. **Tantalus**, who tried to trick the gods into eating human flesh, is ‘tantalised’ by hunger and thirst in the midst of plenty: he stands in water which drains away when he tries to drink, under hanging fruit which swings out of his reach when he tries to eat. The **Danaids**, the husband-killing daughters of King Danaus, spend their time pouring water into a leaky jar. And the trickster **Sisyphus**—in an image that the Existentialist philosopher Albert Camus took as symbolic of the absurdity

of human life—pushes a huge stone up a steep hill, and, every time he nears the top, sees it roll back down again. Presiding over the torments are the **Furies**, repulsive snake-haired female demons armed with whips and torches; originally responsible for hunting down and punishing murderers (as in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*), they later become generalised tormentors of the wicked; their names are **Alecto**, **Megaera**, and **Tisiphone**.

Other Greek monsters sometimes encountered in the underworld include the **Harpies** (bird-like creatures with the faces of women, of filthy habits, whose talons snatch food and other possessions); the **Gorgons** (snake-haired women, so hideous that the mere sight of them turns you to stone); and the **Chimaera** (a grotesque fire-breathing creature, part lion, part goat, and part snake, whose name has become a synonym for the completely unbelievable).

Just as Hades (the god) is not the devil, so Hades (the underworld) is not hell. This distinction, however, tends to be blurred by English writers, who from the Middle Ages onwards equate the two, speaking (for instance) of Orpheus's journey to hell. Elizabethan dramatists in particular loved to describe the afterlife in pagan terms, with lurid blood-and-thunder evocations of the horrors of Hades; and an eighteenth-century writer noted wryly that 'The poet generally sits down wholly undetermined whether Furies or Devils are to be the executioners he will make use of, and brings in either the one or the other, just as the humour takes or as the verse demands. If two syllables are wanting, it is Satan; but if four, you are sure of meeting with Tisiphone' (Joseph Spence, *Polymetis*, p. 300, quoted in Zwerdling 1964:452).

### Other gods

Some lesser gods, godlings, and creatures, mainly associated more closely with the earth than with Olympus or Hades.

#### *Sun, Moon, Dawn, and Winds*

The gods of Sun, Moon, and Dawn are rather insubstantial personifications. They are siblings, children of the Titans Hyperion and Thea. **Helius**, the sun god—sometimes confused with his father Hyperion, and sometimes simply called 'Titan'—drives the four-horse chariot of the sun across the sky each day, and returns each night in a golden cup across the Ocean. **Selene**, the moon goddess, rides across the night sky. In later mythology, they tend to get identified with Apollo and Artemis, who also take over the few legends associated with them (such as Helius's ill-fated loan of the sun-chariot to his son Phaethon, or Selene's love for the beautiful shepherd Endymion). **Eos/Aurora**, the dawn goddess (Homer's 'rosy-fingered Dawn'), accompanies the sun god; she is mainly a personification, but also known for her affairs with mortals such as Orion and Tithonus. (For all these legends, see chapter 3.)

The Winds in Homer are under the command of **Aeolus**, who keeps them locked up in a cave on his island in the Mediterranean. In later mythology some of them become substantial gods in their own right, particularly **Boreas**, the boisterous north wind, and **Zephyrus**, the gentle west wind—Chaucer's 'Zephirus...with his sweete breeth' (*Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue, 5).

### *Cronus/Saturn*

Father of the Olympian gods, and one of the most ambiguous figures in the pantheon. In Greek myth, Cronus is the father of Zeus and his siblings, a savage figure who castrated his own father Uranus with a sickle, devoured his children, and was finally overthrown by Zeus. Another tradition, however, painted his rule as a Golden Age. The Romans identified him with the agricultural god Saturn (his sickle becoming a farmer's implement), and explained that the deposed god went into exile in Italy and there ruled over a golden age of peace, plenty, and justice; his December festival, the Saturnalia, was a time of anarchic merrymaking whose traditions contributed to those of Christmas. The combination of ogre and Father Christmas is hard to reconcile. To compound the confusion, some scholars identified Cronus with the Greek *chronos*, 'time', rationalising his cannibalism as a symbol of the devouring effects of time; hence he develops into the traditional figure of Old Father Time, the old man with his scythe (rather than sickle) and hourglass. In astrology the planet Saturn is associated with old age, disease, death, and misfortune, and those born under it are of 'saturnine' or gloomy temperament.

### *Rhea/Ops/Cybele*

Rhea (Ops to the Romans), wife of Cronus and mother of the gods, tended to merge with her own mother Gaea (Earth) into a composite figure of the great earth mother. In later classical times she became identified with **Cybele**, a powerful Asian mother goddess, whose worship was formally introduced into Rome in 204 BC. Cybele rode in a chariot drawn by lions, wearing a turreted crown and followed by eunuch priests playing tambourines, flutes, and castanets. Her most famous myth concerned her young lover **Attis**, who betrayed her, was driven mad by the goddess, castrated himself and died. In Cybele's orgiastic rites her followers sometimes followed Attis's example and castrated themselves, an excess of religious enthusiasm regarded with astonishment and horror by the Greeks and Romans.

### *Pan*

God of shepherds and wild nature, Pan is sometimes identified with the Roman **Faunus**. The son of Hermes/Mercury and a nymph, he is represented as a goat-man, with horns, hairy legs, hooves and a tail, and often playing on the pan-pipes (see the story of Syrinx in chapter 3). He haunts the mountains and forests of Arcadia in northern Greece, and is the friend of shepherds and goatherds; he is wild, mischievous, and lecherous, and his shout can induce irrational 'panic' fear. Pan would be only a minor rustic deity except for the coincidence that his name in Greek means 'all', and hence some ancient philosophers interpreted him as the god of everything, the personification of Nature. Moreover, the Greek essayist Plutarch (*Moralia*, 419) tells a strange story of a voice which was heard, during the reign of the emperor Tiberius, crying out 'Great Pan is dead'—a story which Christian writers associated with the death of Christ. Some, however, identified Pan with Christ, the Good Shepherd and all-ruler; others saw the horned and hooved god as a devilish figure, embodying the pagan gods giving way before the new age of Christ.

Some related Roman gods, often encountered in pastoral poetry, are **Silvanus** the god of forests, **Pomona** the goddess of fruits, **Flora** the goddess of flowers, and **Priapus** the garden god, whose statues, as a kind of gnome with a huge phallus, were used as garden scarecrows.

### *Nymphs, satyrs, and others*

For the Greeks, all nature was alive with divine or semi-divine presences. Each river has its own **river god**, who may appear as a man with blue-green skin and hair streaming with water. Lesser features of the landscape are inhabited by female spirits called **nymphs**. They are of various kinds: **oceanids** and **nerseids** are spirits of the sea, **oreads** of the mountains, **naiads** of lakes, streams, and fountains, **dryads** of trees. They are long-lived but not immortal, tied to the place that they inhabit, and dying if that place is destroyed. In mythology nymphs are often the object of love or lust by gods, and are treated almost as if they were human women.

If nymphs are halfway between humans and gods, **satyrs**, **fauns**, and **centaurs** are halfway between humans and beasts. Satyrs and fauns are both half man, half goat, like the god Pan, but fauns tend to be shy woodland creatures; satyrs are more boisterous, drunken, and lecherous, followers of Dionysus and chasers of nymphs. They were the heroes of the farcical 'satyr plays' that followed and mocked Greek tragedies.

The **centaurs** are creatures with a horse's body and a human torso. They are said to be the descendants of Ixion, who tried to rape Hera but was deceived with a cloud shaped to resemble her; the product of that unnatural union was the first centaur. In Greek mythology they are, for the most part, savage and violent, embodiments of the animal side of human nature. They are most famous for their savage battle with the Lapiths, a hill-country Greek tribe, which broke out when the centaurs became drunk at a Lapith wedding feast and tried to carry off the bride. An exception is Chiron, the wise and gentle old centaur who was tutor to a number of Greek heroes including Jason and Achilles.

### *The Fates*

Last comes a group of deities who may be the most powerful of all: the three Fates. Sometimes called the daughters of Night, sometimes of Zeus and Themis, they oversee or control human destinies. They are usually portrayed as old women spinning: **Clotho** spins the thread, **Lachesis** measures it, and **Atropos**—'the blind fury with the abhorred shears', in Milton's phrase (*Lycidas*, 75)—cuts it off. They embody the implacability of fate, whereas the related Roman and medieval goddess **Fortuna**, with her blindfold, turning wheel, and 'rolling restless stone' (Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 3. 6. 27), embodies the blind arbitrariness of chance.

## A MYTHICAL HISTORY OF THE WORLD IN ONE CHAPTER

The myths of some cultures seem to occur in a timeless limbo, like the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime—a period which is at once then, now, and always, in which normal laws of succession and causation are suspended. Classical mythology is very different. The Greeks saw their myths in a historical context, stretching from the ancient myths of the creation down to the Trojan War and the borders of recorded history, and held together by an elaborate (if at times contradictory) web of chronology and genealogy.<sup>1</sup> Ancient summaries of mythology, like Apollodorus's *Library*, are organised around the genealogies of heroic families and the histories of the great city-states that they ruled. For modern readers interested in the myths as they appear in English literature, such a framework is less relevant; and I have tried in this summary to focus on the stories that are interesting for their own sake, and to keep catalogues of kings and lists of 'X begat Y' to a minimum. Nevertheless, my account naturally falls into the framework of a mythological history of the world, in four broad periods:

- *Myths of origin*: stories of the origins of the world, the gods, and the human race.
- *Gods and mortals*: stories of the early interactions between gods, demigods, and mortals, in both love and enmity.
- *The age of heroes*: the sagas of great heroes and their families in the generations preceding the Trojan War—especially the stories of Perseus, Hercules, Jason, Theseus, and Oedipus.
- *The Trojan War and after*: the last and greatest of the heroic sagas.

Inevitably such a one-chapter summary is skeletal and oversimplified, skipping over significant details and omitting most of the variant versions which proliferate around every story. For fuller and more complex accounts, readers should turn to the works listed in the Bibliography, or, even better, to the classical sources noted in the course of the chapter.

### Myths of origin

#### *The origins of the gods*

The most widely accepted account of beginning of things (as reported by Hesiod's *Theogony*) starts with Chaos, a yawning nothingness. Out of the void emerged **Ge** or **Gaea**, the Earth, and other primeval figures—including **Eros** or Love. Without male assistance Gaea gave birth to **Uranus**, the Sky, and **Pontus**, the Sea. Father Sky lay with Mother Earth and fertilised her. From that union were born, first, the next generation of gods, the **Titans**, six male and six female (**Cronus** and **Rhea**, **Oceanus** and **Tethys**, **Hyperion** and **Thea**, **Coeus** and **Phoebe**, **Iapetus**, **Crius**, **Themis**, and **Mnemosyne**); then more monstrous offspring, the one-eyed **Cyclopes** and the many-limbed **Hundred-Handers**.<sup>2</sup>



Uranus, understandably alarmed at his terrible children and fearing that they would try to overthrow him, refused to let them see the light of day and buried them back within the body of their mother, Earth. Gaea, in pain and grief, encouraged them to break out and rebel. The youngest and boldest of the Titans, ‘crooked-minded’ Cronus, took up the challenge. He lay in wait and, when Uranus came to make love to Gaea, castrated him with a jagged sickle. Uranus in his agony retreated up into the sky where he remains; his blood falling on the earth gave birth to the Giants and the Furies, and where his genitals were flung into the sea, sea-foam gathered and **Aphrodite**, goddess of love and desire, rose from the waters.

Cronus now took his father’s place as ruler of the gods, with his sister-wife Rhea as his consort and the other Titans as his court. But the story of father/son conflict was repeated in the next generation: Cronus feared that his children would treat him as he had treated Uranus, and so disposed of each of them by swallowing them as soon as they were born. At last Rhea, like Gaea, took her children’s side against her husband. When the sixth and youngest child, Zeus, was born, she tricked Cronus into swallowing a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, while she spirited the child away to the pastoral island of Crete. There Zeus was brought up in a cave by nymphs, fed on honey and suckled by a she-goat. When he was grown he returned to confront Cronus, force him to vomit up his other children (**Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon**), and challenge him to war for the kingship of the gods.

There followed ten years of literally titanic battles in which thunderbolts and lightning and whole mountaintops were tossed back and forth. At last, with the help of the Cyclopes, Zeus and his siblings were victorious, and Cronus and the other Titans were hurled down to imprisonment in Tartarus, the bottommost part of the underworld. (Some say, however, that Cronus went into exile on earth, and some of the other Titans, like Rhea, Oceanus, and Hyperion, continue to have a shadowy presence in later myths.) This was not the end of the wars in heaven: Zeus had to defend his throne against further rebellions—by the earth-born Giants, the Hundred-Handers, the great serpent-tailed man-dragon **Typhon**, and other monstrous opponents who supplied material for thundering epic verse by later poets.<sup>3</sup>

At last, however, Zeus was established as ruler on Mount Olympus, with Hera as his sister-wife. He cast lots with his brothers for their areas of power, Zeus taking the sky, Poseidon the sea, and Hades the underworld; and he proceeded to father, on Hera and other goddesses, a fourth generation of gods (the legends of whose birth and early life have mostly been related in chapter 2). In Greek myth, Zeus remains the undisputed ruler of gods and men. Nevertheless, the bickering of the Olympian family and the fraught marital relationship of Zeus and Hera suggest that tensions still exist, and Zeus shares his father and grandfather’s anxiety about being overthrown by one of his children. When warned that **Metis**, one of his wives, would bear a child wiser than its father, he swallowed Metis and her unborn child, thus ensuring that **Athena** was born (from his forehead) as his sole child, with no mother to encourage her to rebel; and a similar warning about the sea-nymph **Thetis** caused him to abandon his pursuit of her and marry her off instead to the mortal king **Peleus**, who became the father of Achilles.

### *The origins of humankind*

The origins of humankind in Greek myth are obscure. Some versions say that men simply sprang up from the earth; others that they were created by Zeus or by some other deity; others that **Prometheus** (‘forethought’), a second-generation Titan, son of Iapetus, made

the first men out of clay. (I say ‘men’ advisedly, for, as we shall see, women had a separate origin.) In any case, whether or not Prometheus was the creator of men, he quickly became their protector and bene-factor. Among other gifts of knowledge and practical skills, he stole fire from heaven so they could keep warm and cook their food, and he cunningly tricked Zeus into agreeing that they could keep the meat of the animals they sacrificed to the gods, while the gods got only the smoke and bones. Enraged by these thefts and tricks, Zeus had Prometheus nailed to a cliff in the Caucasus mountains, where an eagle or vulture daily pecked at his liver. Some say that he is still there, others that **Hercules** eventually freed him; in one story, he bought his release by telling Zeus the vital secret that Thetis’s son was destined to be greater than his father.

Zeus also punished mankind, by creating the first woman. Constructed by Hephaestus and endowed with gifts of beauty, skill, and charm by the gods, she was named **Pandora** (‘all gifts’). Zeus sent her down as a gift to mankind, bearing a sealed jar (in later versions it becomes ‘Pandora’s box’) as her dowry. Prometheus’s foolish brother **Epimetheus** (‘afterthought’, that is, he who acts first and thinks later) accepted the gift. When the curious Pandora opened the jar, out flew all the evils—old age, poverty, disease, hard work—which ever since have afflicted humanity; only hope remained hidden inside. Thus, according to the misogynistic Hesiod, it is woman who is responsible for all the miseries of human life. (The stories of Prometheus and Pandora are told by Hesiod in *Theogony*, 507–616, and *Works and Days*, 47–105; Prometheus is also the hero of Aeschylus’s tragedy *Prometheus Bound*.)

As time passed, Zeus became increasingly disgusted with the wickedness of the human race, and eventually, like the biblical God, he resolved to wipe it out in a great **Flood** and start again. The Greek equivalent of Noah and his family, the virtuous humans who were spared from the calamity, were **Deucalion**, son of Prometheus, and his wife **Pyrrha**, daughter of Epimetheus. After the waters receded and their little boat touched dry land, they consulted an oracle for advice, and were shocked to be told to ‘throw your mother’s bones behind your back’. Then they realised that their mother was Mother Earth, and her bones were stones. They walked along throwing stones behind their backs; those thrown by Deucalion turned into men, those thrown by Pyrrha into women. So the world was repopulated and the survival of humankind assured. (The best account of the Flood is that of Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, 1. 244–437.)

Any account of the mythical history of the world should mention the concept of the **Four Ages**. According to Hesiod (*Works and Days*, 106–200) and Ovid (*Met.*, 1. 89–162), human history has passed through four periods, each worse than the last. First came the Golden Age, an age of primitive innocence and perpetual summer, in which people lived on wild fruits and milk and honey, without government, laws, or warfare (this is sometimes identified with the rule of Cronus/Saturn). Then came the Silver Age, in which the seasons began and agriculture and work were invented; then the Bronze (or Brazen) Age, in which warfare began; and finally the Iron Age, in which we now live, a time of violence, cruelty, corruption, and misery. It is hard to reconcile this pattern with the rest of Greek mythology, and in fact Hesiod inserts an ‘Age of Heroes’ between the Bronze and Iron Ages to order to make room for most of the great mythological sagas. Nevertheless, the Golden Age is a potent myth, and the whole pattern is a useful reminder that the Greeks and Romans, on the whole, saw history as a matter not of progress but of decline from original perfection.

### Gods and mortals

This section contains a collection of legends about relationships between gods, demigods (such as nymphs and river-spirits), and mortals, in the early days of the world when the groups mingled more freely than they did later. Most of these tales are most famously told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (and therefore I have used the Roman names of the gods in this section). These are mainly isolated stories, not linked to any major family or national saga. It seems most useful to divide them into two thematic groups: tales of love, and tales of punishment.

#### *Tales of love*

'Tales of love' is perhaps an over-romantic term, for many of the stories show gods 'committing heady riots, incest, rapes' (in Marlowe's phrase, *Hero and Leander*, 1. 144) upon unwilling women or nymphs; and even consenting relationships rarely have happy endings. The stories generally suggest that relationships between gods and mortals are something to avoid.

Jupiter was the most insatiable divine lover, seducing, raping, or abducting nymphs and women (and occasional boys) in a variety of disguises. He approached **Antiopa** in the shape of a satyr; **Danae** as a shower of gold; **Leda** as a swan; **Europa** as a bull; **Alcmena** in the form of her husband; the Trojan prince **Ganymede** as an eagle, which carried him up to Olympus to be his cupbearer. Several unfortunate women found themselves caught between Jupiter's advances and Juno's jealous rage. **Io**, for instance, was turned by Jupiter into a cow to conceal her from Juno's inquiring eye, but Juno demanded the cow as a gift, and proceeded to torment her, driving her from place to place by the stinging of a monstrous gadfly; she finally found shelter in Egypt, where, in some accounts, she became the Egyptian cow-goddess Isis (*Met.*, 1). **Callisto**, a huntress-nymph in Diana's train, was raped by Jupiter (disguised as Diana), cast out by Diana when her pregnancy became obvious, and, after the birth of her child, transformed by the jealous Juno into a bear. Years later her son, out hunting, encountered her in bear form and was about to kill her—but Jupiter averted this final tragedy by turning them both into the constellations of the Great and Little Bear (*Met.*, 2). **Semele** was tricked by Juno into making Jupiter promise to appear to her in his full divine glory, and was consequently blasted to ashes, though her child Dionysus/Bacchus was saved (*Met.*, 3).

Apollo was also a keen, and usually unlucky, lover. **Coronis** betrayed him with a mortal lover and died of an arrow from Apollo's deadly bow, though he saved her unborn child Aesculapius (Pindar, Pythian Ode 3; *Met.*, 2). **Daphne**, fleeing his advances, prayed for escape and was transformed into a laurel tree, which Apollo adopted as his sacred emblem (*Met.*, 1). His male lovers were equally unfortunate: **Hyacinthus** died when Apollo accidentally hit him with a misthrown discus, and was turned into the flower that bears his name; **Cyparissus** pined away after accidentally killing his own pet stag, and was turned into a cypress tree (*Met.*, 10). Apollo could be vindictive to those who refused his advances. He granted the Trojan princess **Cassandra** powers of prophesy but, when she refused to submit to him, added the rider that no one would ever believe her. To another great prophetess who resisted him, the **Sibyl of Cumae**, he granted as many years of life as

there were grains in a handful of sand, but refused to add the gift of youth; the Sibyl lived a thousand years, and was described by the Roman novelist Petronius as hanging in a wicker bottle and telling visitors, 'I want to die' (*Met.*, 14; Petronius, *Satyricon*, 48).

A similar tale was told of **Tithonus**, lover of the dawn goddess Aurora: she asked Jupiter to grant him immortality but forgot to ask for agelessness as well, and he gradually shrivelled away until she transformed him into a cicada, a small bony creature with a creaking voice. The shepherd-prince **Endymion**, lover of the moon goddess Selene, had a perhaps happier fate: she cast him into a perpetual sleep, so that she could always come and look at his beauty. Venus, the love goddess, has surprisingly few recorded lovers; the most famous was **Adonis**, who was killed by a wild boar, and whose story is dealt with in detail in chapter 5. Another was the Trojan prince **Anchises**, to whom she bore the hero **Aeneas**; Anchises made the error of boasting about the relationship and was crippled by a lightning bolt from the irritated goddess (see the 'Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite'). The story of Pan and **Syrinx** resembles that of Apollo and Daphne: Syrinx, pursued by the goat-god, turned herself into a bunch of reeds, out of which Pan fashioned his famous pan-pipes (*Met.*, 1).

A rare story with a happy ending is that of **Cupid and Psyche**, told (and perhaps invented) by Lucius Apuleius in his romance *The Golden Ass* (books 4–6). Venus had ordered Cupid to punish Psyche because her beauty was attracting worshippers away from the goddess, but Cupid fell in love with her instead. He visited her every night in the dark, only forbidding her to look on him. Tempted by curiosity and fear, she lit a lamp one night to see him sleeping; a falling drop of oil woke him, and he vanished. Psyche searched the world for her lost lover, and fell into the hands of the vengeful Venus, who imposed on her a series of cruel tasks. At last, however, Cupid returned to claim his bride, Venus was pacified, and Psyche became a goddess. The name 'Psyche' means 'soul', and the story can easily be read as an allegory of a spiritual quest.

Other Ovidian tales involve unnatural or hopeless love. The handsome **Narcissus** fell in love with his own reflection in a pool, and pined away and died of frustrated love, to become a flower and a psychological term ('narcissism'); while his rejected lover **Echo**, condemned only to repeat the words spoken to her, pined away into a mere wandering voice (*Met.*, 3). The water-nymph **Salmacis** fell in love with **Hermaphroditus** when he came to bathe in her pool and, seizing him in her embrace, prayed that they might never be parted; the gods over-litely turned the two into the first hermaphrodite (*Met.*, 4). In other cases Venus intervened more benevolently, bringing the sculptor **Pygmalion's** statue to life so he could marry it (see chapter 6 below), or transforming the girl **Iphis** into a boy so she could marry her beloved **Ianthe** (*Met.*, 9).

The most tragic Greek myths of love, however, do not necessarily involve gods or magic, just human beings in the grip of sexual obsession, like **Medea** (see 'Jason') or **Phaedra** (see 'Theseus'). Perhaps the most terrible is that of the Thracian king **Tereus**, who married **Procne** but became obsessed with her sister **Philomela**. He raped Philomela, cut out her tongue to prevent her revealing the story, and locked her in a cabin in the woods; but Philomela sewed a picture of the scene into a tapestry and sent it to Procne, who released her. The women avenged themselves by killing **Itys**, Tereus' and Procne's little boy, and serving his flesh up to his father at dinner. When he discovered the truth Tereus tried to kill the women, but the gods turned them all into birds—Tereus a hoopoe, Procne a swallow, Philomela a nightingale (*Met.*, 6).<sup>4</sup> For the Greeks, as these stories suggest, sexual desire was a powerful, dangerous, and often destructive force.

*Tales of punishment*

The other great theme of stories is the gods' punishment of mortals who offended or defied them. A central Greek concept was *hubris*: the sin of over-reaching pride, which attempts to achieve more than is permitted to humans, and invites *nemesis*, divine punishment. This theme runs through many of the great Greek myths, perhaps because the striving to achieve heroic fame almost inevitably leads to hubris and hence to nemesis.

The worst punishments were reserved for those who directly challenged the gods' power. Into this category fell some of the great sinners in Tartarus (see 'The underworld' in chapter 2), like **Tantalus**, who tested the gods' omniscience by serving up the cooked flesh of his own son to them at a banquet; or **Salmeoneus**, who (whether in impiety or insanity) claimed to be Zeus, and rode around in a chariot flinging torches for thunderbolts. The most tragic case is that of **Pentheus**, king of Thebes, who tried to ban the orgiastic rites of Dionysus from his city; Dionysus lured him into disguising himself as a woman to go and spy on the rites, where he was caught and torn to pieces by the maddened women led by his own mother **Agave**. (The story is told in Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*.)

Some mortals invite divine punishment by boasting. The Lydian queen **Niobe** boasted that her twelve sons and daughters were superior to Leto's children, Apollo and Diana; all her children were killed by the arrows of the angry god and goddess, and the bereaved Niobe wept and wept until she turned to stone (*Met.*, 6). Andromeda (see 'Perseus' below) and Myrrha (see chapter 5) were similarly punished for the boasting of their over-fond parents. Others challenged the gods by claiming superior skills. **Arachne** claimed to be a better weaver than Athena; the goddess turned her into a spider, to continue spinning and weaving webs in that form (*Met.*, 6). The satyr **Marsyas** claimed to be a better musician with his flute than Apollo with his lyre; Apollo defeated him in a contest, and celebrated the victory by skinning him alive (*Met.*, 6). In another musical contest it was the judge who suffered: King **Midas** of Phrygia gave Pan's pipes the victory over Apollo's lyre, and was rewarded by the ungracious loser with a pair of donkey's ears. Midas was proverbially foolish; he was also the king who, offered a wish by Bacchus, asked that everything he touched should turn to gold—a gift he was happy to relinquish after a few days of luxurious starvation (*Met.*, 11).

Others offended the gods more or less accidentally. **Actaeon**, for instance, while hunting accidentally stumbled into a glade where Diana and her nymphs were bathing; the offended goddess turned him into a stag, and he was hunted down and torn to pieces by his own hounds (*Met.*, 3). Another whose only sin was tactlessness was the great Theban seer **Tiresias**, who appears in many stories and haunts Greek tragedy with his usually unheeded warnings. Tiresias had been both a man and a woman in the course of his life, and so was called on by Jupiter and Juno to settle an argument about which sex got the greater pleasure from the sexual act; he replied 'women', and was promptly struck blind by Juno, though Jupiter gave him the gift of prophesy as compensation (*Met.*, 3).

A few attempted more literally to rise above their place. One such was **Bellerophon** of Corinth, who rode the winged horse **Pegasus** and achieved many heroic deeds, including the killing of the monstrous Chimaera. At last, in his overweening pride, he attempted to fly to Olympus on Pegasus's back; but Jupiter sent a gadfly to sting the horse, which bucked and threw him to earth, leaving him a crippled outcast. **Icarus** also suffered for flying too high

(see 'Theseus' below). So did **Phaethon**, the young son of the sun god (Heliuss or Apollo), who, when his father offered him anything he wanted, demanded to be allowed to drive the sun-chariot for a day. Bound by his rash promise, the god had to agree. But Phaethon could not control the wild horses of the sun; he careered off course, scorching the earth, and Jupiter had to strike him down with a thunder-bolt to save the world from destruction (*Met.*, 1-2). Such myths of heroic flights and falls epitomise the Greek conviction that human beings should keep their feet on the ground and avoid challenging the gods.

### The age of heroes

The 'age of heroes' in Greek mythology is fairly well defined. It is the generation or two leading up to the Trojan War, during which most of the greatest Greek heroes were active, and from which the Greek tragedians took most of the material for their plays. This section will deal with four major figures from this period (Hercules, Jason, Theseus, Oedipus), and one (Perseus) from a slightly earlier period.<sup>5</sup>

It will be obvious that these tales share many repeated themes and motifs: the hero's mysterious birth and his quest to regain his inheritance; the father or grandfather who tries to kill the hero out of fear; the impossible quest or set of tasks, imposed by a rival who seeks to dispose of the hero; the love-struck enemy princess who helps him; the descent into the underworld; the fatal disaster and the attempt (inevitably unsuccessful) to evade it; most of all, perhaps, the contrast between the heroes' public achievements and their tragic private lives. In the ultimately bleak world of the Greek sagas, it sometimes seems that the most dangerous thing a hero can do—far worse than confronting Hydras or Minotaurs or Gorgons—is to marry or have children.

### *Perseus*

Perseus belongs to an earlier generation than the other heroes; he is, in fact, Hércules' great-grandfather. (The only complete account of his career is given by the mythographer Apollodorus, 2. 4, but Ovid tells much of it in *Metamorphoses*, 4-5.)

Perseus was the son of Zeus and **Danae**, daughter of King **Acrisius** of Argos. Acrisius had been warned by an oracle that Danae's child would kill him, and so he locked her up in a tower of brass which no man was permitted to approach. But Zeus entered the tower in the form of a shower of gold (a scene beloved of artists and moralists), and soon Danae gave birth to Perseus. Acrisius did not dare to incur the blood-guilt of directly killing his daughter and grandson, but he sealed the two of them up in a wooden chest and floated it out to sea. With Zeus's help, it washed up on the island of Seriphos, where Danae and Perseus were taken in by a kindly fisherman.

The king of Seriphos, **Polydectes**, became interested in the beautiful castaway, and as Perseus grew up he had to protect his mother from the king's unwelcome attentions. Deciding to rid himself of the interfering youth, Polydectes lured him into a rash boast that he would give the king the head of the Gorgon **Medusa**—and sent him off on the impossible quest. The **Gorgons** were three female monsters with living snakes for hair and faces so hideous that the mere sight of them would turn you to stone. Two of them were immortal, but Medusa was once a mortal woman whom

Athena had changed into this horrible shape as a punishment, either for boasting that she was more beautiful than the goddess, or for making love to Poseidon in one of her shrines.

Whether from friendship for Perseus or hostility to Medusa, it was Athena who now decided to help the hero in his task (in some versions, Hermes also helped). By her guidance, Perseus gathered the magical tools he needed to kill the Gorgon: a pair of winged sandals, a cap of invisibility, a leather bag, and an adamantine sword. Using the winged sandals he flew to the far edge of the world, where he found the Gorgons sleeping. Looking (by Athena's advice) not at Medusa's deadly face but only at her reflection in his shield, he cut off her head. From her body sprang the winged horse **Pegasus**, Poseidon's child.

By flight and invisibility Perseus escaped the rage of the other Gorgons. Flying home, with Medusa's head in his leather bag, he passed over the coast of Libya, where he saw a beautiful princess, **Andromeda**, chained to a rock and menaced by a sea-monster. Her mother **Gassiopeia** had foolishly boasted that Andromeda was more beautiful than the sea-nymphs, and the offended Poseidon had sent a flood and a sea-monster to ravage the shores; the king and queen were forced to offer her up as a sacrifice to appease the sea god. Perseus flew down and—after a rapid negotiation with the king about marriage terms—slew the monster and rescued the princess. Perseus and Andromeda were married—though the ceremony was interrupted by a rival suitor, Andromeda's uncle **Phineus**, and Perseus had to use Medusa's head to turn him and his followers to stone.

Perseus returned to Seriphos, where he found King Polydectes on the point of forcibly marrying Danae. Perseus triumphantly announced that, as promised, he had brought back the Gorgon's head, and as he drew it from his bag the dismayed king and his lords turned to stone. Leaving the good fisherman as the new king of Seriphos, Perseus returned to Argos with his mother and wife, hoping for a reconciliation with his grandfather Acrisius. Stopping by the way to take part in an athletics contest, he accidentally struck another contestant with a discus and killed him. It was, of course, Acrisius, and so the oracle was at last fulfilled. Having accidentally incurred this blood-guilt, Perseus refused the throne of Argos, and instead, by an exchange of kingdoms, took the throne of neighbouring Tiryns. He ruled well, founded the great city of Mycenae, and—almost uniquely among Greek heroes—lived happily with his wife for the rest of his long life. After their deaths both Perseus and Andromeda were placed in the sky as constellations, along with Andromeda's parents Cepheus and Cassiopeia and the sea-monster (Cetus); all of them can still be seen in the northern sky. As for the Gorgon's head, Athena took it and wore it thereafter on her shield.

### *Hercules*

Heracles, or Hercules, to use his more familiar Latin name, <sup>6</sup> is unquestionably the greatest and most famous of the Greek heroes. Even today the brawny man with his great club, his lion-skin cloak, and his 'herculean' strength is still a recognisable figure, and his fame has recently been perpetuated in a popular TV series and a Disney cartoon. Such modern versions, however, tend to simplify and sanitise the original hero, who is a benefactor

of humankind but also violent, unpredictable, and destructive. (Despite Hercules' fame, there is no surviving literary work that tells his story at length; the fullest account is in Apollodorus, 2. 4–7, and Ovid, *Met.*, 9, tells the stories of his birth and death.)

Hercules was the son of Zeus by a mortal woman, **Alcmena**. Alcmena and her husband **Amphitryon** were both grandchildren of Perseus, and Amphitryon would have succeeded Alcmena's father as king of Mycenae, if only he had not accidentally killed the king in the confusion of a battle, and been exiled to Thebes. While Amphitryon was away on a long military campaign, Zeus disguised himself as Amphitryon, visited Thebes, and spent a long night with Alcmena. When the real Amphitryon returned later that night he was somewhat confused to find he had already been home; but he accepted the god's intervention and spent the rest of the night with his wife. So were begotten Hercules and his mortal twin **Iphicles**. (The possibilities for bedroom farce in this situation were exploited by the Roman playwright Plautus in his *Amphitryon*, and by later dramatists including Molière, Dryden, and Giraudoux.)

Zeus's intention was that Hercules should become king of Mycenae and the greatest of Greek rulers: 'a child of my blood born today,' he prophesied, 'will rule over all who dwell round him.' But Hera, always bitterly jealous of her husband's bastard children, determined to frustrate his plans. Using her powers as goddess of childbirth, she delayed Hercules' birth, and speeded up the birth of his cousin **Eurystheus** in Mycenae. So the feeble, cowardly Eurystheus (also a descendant of Perseus and hence of Zeus) got the benefit of the prophesy: he would be king, and Hercules his vassal. Not content with this, Hera sent a pair of snakes to kill Hercules in his cradle; but the newborn hero happily strangled them (see Pindar, Nemean Ode 1, and Theocritus, Idyll 24).

Hercules grew up immensely strong, utterly fearless, with an ungovernable temper (he killed his music teacher **Linus** by hitting him with his lyre) and a huge appetite for food, drink, and sex (he slept with the fifty daughters of a local king, either on successive nights or, in the more heroic version, in a single night). As a reward for his services in battle he married the Theban princess **Megara**, and they had three children. But Hera was still plotting revenge. She sent a fit of madness on Hercules, in which he killed Megara and the children, taking them for monsters. (This madness is the subject of Euripides' *Heracles* and Seneca's *Hercules Furens*—though both tragedies place it after, not before, the Twelve Labours.) Having recovered his sanity, he asked Apollo's oracle at Delphi how he could purify himself of blood-guilt, and the oracle ordered him to serve his cousin King Eurystheus for twelve years and carry out twelve tasks that he would impose.

This was the start of the famous **Twelve Labours of Hercules**, which began with local quests around Mycenae but gradually extended—as Eurystheus became more desperate to get rid of Hercules—to all parts of the known world and beyond. The Labours were as follows:

- 1 To kill the **Nemean Lion**. Hercules killed it either with his club or with his bare hands, skinned it, and thereafter wore the lion-skin.
- 2 To kill the **Lernaean Hydra**, a poisonous, many-headed monster, which grew two new heads whenever one was destroyed. Hercules killed it with the help of his nephew **Iolaus**, who cauterised the stumps with a burning torch to prevent them regenerating. He used the Hydra's blood as poison for his arrows.
- 3 To capture the **Golden Hind of Cerynea**, a swift-footed deer with golden horns, sacred to Artemis.



- 4 To capture the **Erymanthian Boar**. When Hercules returned with this monstrous beast casually slung over his shoulders, Eurystheus was so terrified that he hid inside a large bronze jar, which he kept ready for Hercules' subsequent visits.
- 5 To clean up the **Augean Stables**. The stables of King Augeas of Elis held vast herds of cattle, and the accumulated dung of decades had never been cleared. Hercules cleaned them out in a day by diverting two rivers through them. ('Cleansing the Augean stables' is still a cliché for dealing with a mess of monstrous proportions.)
- 6 To kill the **Stymphalian Birds**, a vast flock infesting Lake Stymphalus; Hercules either scared them off with brass castanets, or shot them.
- 7 To capture the **Cretan Bull**—the bull which had fathered the Minotaur (see under **Theseus** below), and which had escaped to ravage Crete. Hercules brought it back to Greece and rather thoughtlessly released it, where it created more havoc until Theseus killed it.
- 8 To capture the **Thracian Horses**, a flock of savage mares kept by the wicked Thracian king Diomedes and fed by him on human flesh; Hercules fed Diomedes himself to his horses before bringing them home.
- 9 To bring back the **Belt of the Amazon Queen**. The **Amazons** were a tribe of warrior women who lived in the north of Asia and fought fiercely with bows and arrows, cutting off one breast (*amazon* means 'breastless') to give them more free play with the bow. Hercules (accompanied in some versions by Theseus) fought the Amazons, killed their queen, **Hippolyta**, and took her gold-studded belt.
- 10 To steal the **Cattle of Geryon**. Geryon, a monstrous being described sometimes as three-headed, sometimes as three-bodied, tended a flock of cattle on an island in the far west. Hercules borrowed the golden cup of the sun god Helios to sail across the Ocean to the island, where he killed Geryon, along with his giant herdsman and his two-headed dog, and brought back the cattle. On his return he set up the **Pillars of Hercules** on either side of the strait of Gibraltar, marking the furthest limit of the known world; he also had many adventures as he drove the cattle back across Europe, including killing the fire-breathing giant **Cacus** on the site of the future city of Rome.
- 11 To steal the **Apples of the Hesperides**. The Hesperides, daughters of Night, lived in a paradisaal garden somewhere in the far west, singing and dancing round a grove of trees which grew golden apples, and was guarded by an immortal hundred-headed dragon. According to some, Hercules himself killed the dragon and stole some apples. A more common version says that Hercules persuaded **Atlas**, the gigantic Titan (brother of Prometheus) who holds up the sky on his shoulders, to go and fetch the apples while Hercules took his place holding up the sky. (Hence the famous image of Hercules holding the sky, or in some versions the globe of the world, on his shoulders.) Then, after tricking the reluctant Atlas into shouldering his load again, he returned home with the apples.

- 12 To kidnap **Cerberus**, the monstrous three-headed guard dog of the underworld. Hades agreed that Hercules could take the hound if he could overcome it with his bare hands; Hercules did so, and carried the snarling beast back to Mycenae to show it to the terrified Eurystheus, before returning it to the underworld. So the Labours were completed.

The other deeds which Hercules carried out, in the course of his Labours or afterwards, are far too many to list. He briefly sailed with the Argonauts (see 'Jason' below). He is said to have released Prometheus from his chains on Mount Caucasus, and Theseus from his imprisonment in the underworld (see 'Theseus' below). He successfully wrestled with Death for the soul of **Alcestis**, who had willingly agreed to die in the place of her husband **Admetus** (see Euripides' tragicomedy *Alcestis*). He killed innumerable giants, monsters, and brigands, most notably the giant **Antaeus**, a child of Gaea who drew his strength from the earth; Hercules hoisted him up in the air and strangled him. He waged a number of wars, some just, some less so, against cities and kings who offended him: for instance, when king **Laomedon** of Troy refused him the promised reward for rescuing his daughter **Hesione** from a sea-monster, Hercules came back with an army, sacked Troy, killed Laomedon, and put his son **Priam** on the throne.

After the Labours were over Hercules took a second wife: **Deianira**, a princess of Calydon, whom he won by defeating his rival, the river god **Achelous**, in a wrestling contest. Returning home, they came to a river where the centaur **Nessus** offered to carry Deianira across; but on the way he tried to rape her, and Hercules, from the river bank, shot him with a poisoned arrow. The dying Nessus pretended remorse, and told Deianira to take some of the blood from his wound: if she ever lost Hercules' affection, it would act as an infallible love potion.

Later Hercules fell in love with another woman, **Iole**, princess of Oechalia. He pursued her with some vigour, in the process murdering her brother (for which crime he did penance by being made a slave to queen **Omphale** of Libya, who dressed him in women's clothes and set him to spin wool), and making war on her city. In an attempt to reclaim his love, Deianira soaked a tunic in the centaur's blood and sent it by a servant to Hercules. When he put it on the Hydra's poison began to burn him, and when he tried to tear it off it tore away his flesh. Raging in intolerable pain, he flung the messenger into the sea (while Deianira, hearing the news, hanged herself in remorse); then he built a funeral pyre on Mount Oeta and burned himself to death. But, although his mortal body died, his divine part ascended to heaven, where his father Zeus welcomed him as a god and married him to Hebe, the goddess of youth. (The death of Hercules is the subject of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* and the Roman tragedy *Hercules on Oeta*, attributed to Seneca; see also Ovid, *Met.*, 9.)

### *Jason*

Jason is perhaps one of the less heroic of the Greek heroes—fully human, and dependent in most of his adventures on the help of his companions and his wife. His story falls into two distinct parts: the romantic adventure of the Argonauts and the quest for the Golden Fleece, and the tragedy of the marriage of Jason and Medea. (The story of Jason and the Argonauts is told in Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, and more briefly in Pindar's Fourth Pythian Ode; Ovid, *Met.*, 7, tells much of the story, focusing on Medea's magic.)

Jason was the son of **Aeson**, the rightful king of Iolcos (a small kingdom in Thessaly), whose throne had been usurped by his half-brother **Pelias**. Jason was brought up in secret in the hills, and tutored by the wise old centaur **Chiron**. When he reached manhood he set off for Iolcos to claim his father's kingdom. On the way, he helped an old woman across a river, losing one of his sandals in the process. The old woman was in fact the goddess **Hera**, who had her own reasons for hating **Pelias** (who had refused to sacrifice to her), and who decided to help Jason. When the youth arrived in Iolcos, **Pelias** was alarmed: an oracle had warned him to beware of a man with only one sandal. Like **Polydectes** in the **Perseus** legend, he decided that the best way to get rid of this inconvenient young hero was to send him off on a dangerous quest, and so he promised Jason that he would surrender the throne if Jason could bring him back the **Golden Fleece**.

The Golden Fleece was a treasure famous in Jason's family. A generation or two earlier, a young Thessalian prince and princess had been about to be sacrificed, by the machinations of their wicked stepmother, when a magnificent golden ram with wings flew down and carried them off to the east. The girl, **Helle**, fell off and drowned in what was thereafter known as the Hellespont, but the boy, **Phrixus**, arrived safely in **Colchis**, a rich and eerily magical barbarian land on the far shore of the Black Sea, where king **Aeetes**, son of the sun god, welcomed him and gave him his daughter in marriage. The ram was sacrificed, and its golden fleece hung up in a sacred grove guarded by a dragon.

Jason had a great ship built, the **Argo** ('swift')—according to some, the first ship, or the first ocean-going ship, ever built. He assembled a crew of fifty **Argonauts** that included most of the heroes of the age: **Hercules**, **Orpheus** the musician, the brothers **Castor** and **Polydeuces/Pollux**, **Meleager**, **Atalanta**, **Peleus**, **Telamon**, the seer **Mopsus**, the keen-eyed **Lynceus**, **Zetes** and **Calais** the winged sons of the north wind, and others. They had many adventures on the journey: the loss of young **Hylas**, stolen by amorous water-nymphs (and of his lover **Hercules**, who left the ship to search for him); **Pollux's** boxing match to the death with the brutal king **Amycus**; a pleasant if slightly nervous interlude with the women of **Lemnos**, who had killed their husbands, and whose queen **Hypsipyle** fell in love with Jason; a battle with the **Harpies** which tormented the blind king **Phineas**; an encounter with the bronze giant **Talus** (whom they killed by shooting out the bronze nail in his ankle and letting the ichor that animated him drain out); the deadly passage between the **Clashing Rocks**, which would crush any ship that passed between them. At last they arrived at **Colchis**.<sup>7</sup>

King **Aeetes** did not welcome them. He told Jason that to win the Golden Fleece he must carry out a series of impossible tasks: to yoke a pair of firebreathing bulls and plough a field with them, to sow it with dragon's teeth, and then to kill the warriors who would grow from the teeth. However, the king's daughter **Medea**, herself a powerful sorceress, fell in love with Jason. She helped Jason to carry out the tasks, giving him a magic ointment that made him invulnerable to fire or sword, showing him how to trick the earth-born warriors into killing one another, and charming the dragon guardian to sleep so that Jason could kill it and steal the fleece. And as the **Argo** escaped from **Colchis**, with **Medea** on board, she aided their escape by a ruthless stratagem—killing her little brother and throwing the pieces of his body overboard to distract the pursuing **Colchian** ships.

After many more adventures—including Jason's marriage to **Medea** along the way—the **Argonauts** returned to **Iolcos** and delivered the Golden Fleece to **Pelias**. **Pelias**, however,

refused to surrender the throne. Once again, Medea took bold steps to solve the problem. Having already magically restored the youth of Aeson, Jason's father, she persuaded Pelias's daughters that they could do the same for their father, by chopping him up into pieces and boiling him in a cauldron of magical herbs. They did so—but (Medea having left out the vital ingredient) Pelias failed to survive the treatment. However, Jason and Medea did not profit by this murder, for they were banished from Iolcos.

They went into exile in Corinth, where Medea bore Jason two children. However, Jason was clearly beginning to regret his marriage to a barbarian witch, and at last decided to divorce her in order to marry **Glauce**, the king of Corinth's daughter. Euripides' tragedy *Medea* deals with the enraged Medea's revenge for this betrayal: she sent the bride a poisoned robe and crown, which burned both her and her father to death; then murdered her own children by Jason, and flew away in a chariot drawn by dragons towards Athens (where she reappears in the story of Theseus).<sup>8</sup> Jason was left to mourn, until at last he met a sad and ironic end: as he sat brooding under the rotting hulk of the *Argo*, a piece of its stern fell and killed him.

### *Theseus*

Theseus is the national hero of Athens, later the greatest of Greek cities, and his saga seems to have been built up by the Athenians in conscious imitation of the exploits of Hercules. Like that of Jason, his story moves from romantic and heroic youth to a painful and tragic old age. (The best connected account of Theseus's story is the biographer Plutarch's 'Life of Theseus', though he tends to rationalise the mythical elements. Mary Renault's novels *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea* are excellent modern retellings.)

Theseus was the son of **Aegeus**, king of Athens, and **Aethra**, a princess of Troezen, with whom Aegeus spent one night when he passed through her father's kingdom. (It is also said, however, that Aethra was visited on the same night by Poseidon, and that the sea god was Theseus's true father.) Before Aegeus left, he placed a sword underneath a great rock, and ordered Aethra not to tell their child of his parentage until he was able to lift the rock. When Theseus grew to manhood he took the sword from under the stone, learned his true identity, and set out for Athens to claim his inheritance. On the coastal road from Troezen to Athens he killed a number of monsters and brigands, including **Procrustes**, who forced his victims to lie in his notorious bed and cut or stretched them to length if they did not fit (hence the adjective 'Procrustean' for those who doggedly attempt to force square pegs into round holes).

In Athens, King Aegeus had fallen under the malign spell of the witch Medea, who had taken refuge there after her escape from Corinth (see 'Jason' above). When Theseus arrived, Medea persuaded Aegeus that this young monster-slayer was a dangerous threat, and Aegeus agreed to let her poison him. At the last moment he recognised the sword Theseus was wearing and dashed the poisoned cup from his lips. He embraced his son and publicly proclaimed him his heir, while Medea was banished, to return to her native Colchis.

At this time Athens was bound to send every year a tribute of seven youths and seven girls to Crete, to be fed to the **Minotaur**. The story behind this is a dark and tragic one. **Minos**, king of Crete, though a son of Zeus and renowned for his stern justice,

had offended Poseidon by failing to sacrifice a magnificent bull which the sea god had sent him for that purpose, but keeping it for his own herd. As punishment, Poseidon caused Minos's queen, **Pasiphae**, to conceive an unnatural lust for the bull. With the help of the great Athenian craftsman and inventor **Daedalus**, who constructed a wooden model of a cow for her to hide inside, Pasiphae consummated her lust, and subsequently gave birth to the Minotaur—a savage monster with a human body and a bull's head. Minos had Daedalus build a **Labyrinth**, a massive maze of incomprehensibly twisting passages, and hid his shameful secret at the heart of it, feeding the monster on human prisoners. He also imprisoned Daedalus and his son **Icarus** inside the Labyrinth, so they could not reveal the secret of the maze. But the inventor constructed wings for himself and his son out of feathers fastened with wax, and so flew away from Crete. Daedalus made it to Sicily, but young Icarus in his exhilaration flew too high, the sun melted the wax of his wings, and he plunged into the sea—becoming a classic example of hubris (*Met.*, 8).

To return to Theseus: when he learned of the tribute to Crete, he volunteered to be one of the fourteen sacrifices, and Aegeus reluctantly let him go—asking only that, if he returned safely, he should hoist a white sail on his ship instead of the usual black one. When he arrived in Crete, Minos's daughter **Ariadne** (repeating the story of Jason and Medea) fell in love with the handsome prisoner. She gave him a ball of thread, with which he was able to find his way into the heart of the Labyrinth, kill the Minotaur, find his way out, and escape from Crete with the other prisoners and Ariadne. However, Theseus's triumphant homecoming was marred by two episodes. First, he left Ariadne behind on the island of Naxos—an act which some writers condemn as a cynical betrayal, others excuse as obedience to a divine command, for the god Dionysus later descended on Naxos to make Ariadne his wife. (Her story is told by Catullus, poem 64, and no less than three times by Ovid: in *Heroides*, 10, *Ars Amatoria*, 1, and *Met.*, 8.) Secondly, Theseus forgot to change his sail as he approached Athens, and Aegeus, seeing the black sail and assuming his son was dead, threw himself from a cliff in to what was thereafter called the Aegean Sea.

Theseus was now king of Athens. He was remembered as a good king, establishing new codes of laws and fairer social institutions, and always sympathetic to the underdog: for instance, he sheltered the exiled **Oedipus**, and later intervened to put down the tyranny of **Creon** at Thebes (see 'Oedipus' below). He also embarked on many adventures overseas, often accompanied by his close friend **Pirithous**, king of the Lapiths (a wild tribe of Thessaly); together they fought in the famous battle of the Lapiths and the centaurs. One of his most famous adventures, though also the most tangled in contradictory versions, is the story of the Amazon queen. Theseus went on an expedition against the Amazons (some say along with Hercules, others say on an expedition of his own), and carried off and married an Amazon queen, named by some as **Antiopa**, by others as **Hippolyta**, who bore him a son, **Hippolytus**. Her fate is also obscure: it is said that the Amazons made war on Athens to recover her, and that she was killed, either fighting for her freedom, or else fighting alongside Theseus against her own people; others say that Theseus abandoned her for **Phaedra**, and she died in an angry attempt to prevent the wedding. (From this period in the 2000 legend come the figures of the good Duke Theseus and his wife Hippolyta in Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale' and Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*.)

In any case, Theseus subsequently married the Cretan princess Phaedra, Ariadne's younger sister. Predictably, given Theseus's earlier dealings with the Cretan royal family, the marriage ended in tragedy. Phaedra fell hopelessly in love with her stepson Hippolytus; but he, a devotee of the chaste huntress Artemis, rejected her advances in horror. Phaedra killed herself, leaving a message accusing Hippolytus of attempting to rape her. The enraged Theseus called on Poseidon for revenge, and was answered: as Hippolytus drove his chariot along the shore, a bull emerged from the sea, the horses bolted in fear, and Hippolytus was dragged to death. Theseus learned the truth too late. (This tragedy is the subject of Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Seneca's *Phaedra*)

Again a widower, Theseus made a rash bargain with Pirithous that each would help the other obtain a daughter of Zeus for his wife. Theseus chose **Helen** of Sparta, as yet a child but already famously beautiful, and they carried her off to Athens. Pirithous, more ambitious, chose to try and win the goddess Persephone. They descended into the underworld, where Hades smoothly welcomed them and invited them to sit in magical chairs—from which they were unable to rise. There they remained for a long time, until Hercules (visiting the underworld on his twelfth labour) was able to tear Theseus free, but had to leave Pirithous behind. Limping back to Athens, Theseus found that Helen's brothers Castor and Pollux had made war on Athens to rescue her, and installed a new king. Cursing the city, the old king departed into exile. He subsequently died on the island of Scyros, where he fell—or was pushed by his treacherous host—from a cliff.

### *Oedipus*

The legend of Oedipus and his family differs from the others in this section in that it contains virtually no elements of heroic adventure, but focuses entirely on tragically entangled human relationships and insoluble moral dilemmas. Hence its appeal to the ancient tragedians (most notably Sophocles in his *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*)—and to Sigmund Freud, who saw the myth as embodying one of our most fundamental psychological drives, the 'Oedipus complex'.

Oedipus was born the son of King **Laius** and Queen **Jocasta** of Thebes. His story begins with that now familiar motif: a father's prophetic fear of his son. Laius was warned by an oracle that his son would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. To avert this destiny, Laius thrust a spike through the baby's feet to cripple him (hence his name Oedipus, 'swollen-foot') and had him left out on a mountainside to die. However, a Corinthian shepherd rescued the child and took him to the king and queen of Corinth, who adopted him and brought him up as their own.

When he grew up, Oedipus was taunted one day about his uncertain parentage. He consulted the oracle at Delphi, and was appalled to receive the same message as his father had received: that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Believing that the king and queen of Corinth were his parents, he resolved to avoid the fated disaster by leaving Corinth—and heading for Thebes. On the road, he met a man in a chariot going the opposite way; they quarrelled about the right of way, blows were exchanged, and the other man died. So Oedipus unwittingly killed his father Laius, who, warned by omens that his son was on his way had been hurrying to leave the city to avoid meeting him.

When Oedipus arrived at Thebes, he found the rulerless city plagued by a monster: the **Sphinx**, a creature with a lion's body, a woman's head, and wings, which killed and devoured all comers who could not answer its riddle: what goes on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening? Oedipus correctly answered: a man—who crawls as a baby, walks upright as an adult, and hobbles with a stick in old age. The Sphinx in chagrin threw itself off a cliff, and the grateful Thebans rewarded Oedipus with the kingship—and marriage to the widowed Queen Jocasta. So the second part of the oracle was fulfilled.

Oedipus and Jocasta lived together for many years and had four children. Then Thebes was struck by a terrible plague, which the priests said was caused by the pollution of some great and undisclosed crime. Oedipus set himself to solve the mystery, and by a gradual and painful process (brilliantly dramatised in *Oedipus the King*) uncovered the truth about his own crime. Jocasta hanged herself; Oedipus blinded himself and went into exile. He wandered Greece for many years, an object of pity and fear, accompanied only by his daughter **Antigone**; at last he was given shelter by King Theseus at Colonus, near Athens, and died there (see *Oedipus at Colonus*).

This did not end the troubles of the Theban royal family. When Oedipus's two sons **Eteocles** and **Polynices** came of age, they quarrelled over the kingship, and agreed to rule in alternate years; but Eteocles refused to hand over the throne when his year was up. Polynices gathered up six allies among the neighbouring princes, and the '**Seven Against Thebes**' led their armies in an assault on the city, in which nearly all the main combatants died, and Eteocles and Polynices killed each other in single combat. (The war is the subject of Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*, Euripides' *The Theban Women*, and Statius's epic *Thebaid*.) After the battle the regent **Creon**, Jocasta's brother, ordered that the bodies of the rebellious Seven should be left unburied, on pain of death. Antigone, knowing that a spirit could not rest in the underworld until its body was properly buried, dis-obeyed the order by burying her brother Polynices, and was condemned to death (see Sophocles' *Antigone*). The wives of the other princes appealed to Theseus, who put down Creon's tyrannical regime and saw to the burial of the dead (see Euripides' *Suppliants*). Ten years later the sons of the original Seven came back for revenge on Thebes, and, it seems, finally destroyed the unfortunate city.

### **The Trojan War and after**

The story of the Trojan War—the seige and sack of the great city of Troy, on the coast of Asia Minor, by a Greek alliance, and the adventures of the Greek leaders on their return home from the war—is the last and most famous of the Greek heroic sagas, partly because it was the subject of Homer's two epic poems, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Historians believe that it has some basis in historical fact, though the war was more likely to have been about trade routes than about the love of a Greek princess.

#### *The origins of the war*

According to the Greeks, it all began with an apple. The gods were at a banquet to celebrate the wedding of King **Peleus** and the sea-nymph **Thetis**, when **Eris**, goddess of strife and discord, who had not been invited, turned up and threw on to the table a golden

apple labelled 'For the Most Beautiful'. Three goddesses, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite, immediately laid claim to it. Zeus prudently declined to settle the dispute, and referred it instead to a mortal judge: the young Trojan prince **Paris**, known for his handsomeness and charm with women. The three goddesses paraded before Paris as he herded sheep on Mount Ida, and in addition to their beauty they each offered him a bribe: Hera offered kingly power, Athena success in war, and Aphrodite the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris awarded the apple to Aphrodite.

The most beautiful woman in the world was **Helen**—officially the daughter of King **Tyndareus** of Sparta and his queen **Leda**, but in fact the daughter of Leda by Zeus, who had seduced her in the form of a swan.<sup>9</sup> Helen's beauty had already led to her abduction by Theseus, and when Tyndareus invited suitors to offer for her hand, most of the kings and princes in Greece took part in the bidding. The successful suitor was **Menelaus**, who married Helen and took over the throne of Sparta; and all the unsuccessful suitors, at Tyndareus's request, swore to defend Menelaus' right to her against any challengers. However, Helen's marriage did not deter Paris. He visited Menelaus and Helen at Sparta, seduced Helen (helped by the irresistible power of Aphrodite), and carried her off with him to Troy.

Menelaus appealed to his fellow Greek kings to honour their oath and help him recover his wife. His brother **Agamemnon**, the powerful king of Mycenae, took the leadership of the expedition, and other kings rallied to him: the aged elder statesman, **Nestor** of Pylos; the sturdy **Diomedes** of Argos; **Aias/Ajax**, son of Telamon, called 'Great Ajax', strong and brave and stubborn as an ox, and his friend **Aias/Ajax**, son of Oileus, called 'Little Ajax'; the cunning **Palamedes**; the great archer **Philoctetes**, who bore Hercules' bow; and many others. Two of the greatest Greek heroes were harder to recruit. **Odysseus** (or **Ulysses**), the clever and resourceful king of Ithaca, newly married with a newborn son, tried to dodge the draft by pretending to be mad. When the Greek generals called at Ithaca they found him ploughing a field and sowing it with salt; but Palamedes placed his infant son in the path of the plough, and Odysseus was forced to reveal his sanity by rescuing the boy. And young **Achilles**, the son of Peleus and Thetis—destined to be the bravest, handsomest, swiftest, and most formidable of the Greek warriors—was kept back by his goddess mother. She had already dipped him as a baby in the River Styx to make him invulnerable (except for the heel by which she was holding him), but she still wished to prevent him going to war, because it was prophesied that he would live either a long peaceful life or a short but glorious one. She therefore dressed him up as a girl and concealed him among the princesses at the court of Scyros. It was Odysseus who exposed him, visiting the court disguised as a trader; while the other girls exclaimed over the clothes and jewellery, Achilles betrayed his manhood by instantly seizing on the sword which was concealed among them. So Achilles went off to glory and death, leaving the princess **Deidamia** pregnant with his child.

The Greek army and fleet assembled at Aulis, but were delayed for a long time by contrary winds. The Greek seer **Calchas** told Agamemnon that he could only change the weather by sacrificing his own daughter, **Iphigenia**. Reluctantly Agamemnon did so—sealing his own fate in the process—and the fleet was able to sail. Some say, however, that Artemis saved Iphigenia from death by substituting a deer on the altar, and carried the girl off to a barbarian kingdom in the east, where her brother **Orestes** later found and rescued her. (Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* is about the sacrifice; his *Iphigenia in Tauris*



about the rescue.) The expedition suffered one more loss on its way: Philoctetes was bitten by a snake, his wound would not heal, and the Greeks, unable to stand the stench and the cries of pain, left him behind on the island of Lemnos, while they sailed on to Troy.

### *The war at Troy*

The city of Troy (also called **Ilium**, after its royal palace) was ruled by the aged King **Priam**, supported by his queen **Hecuba** and his fifty sons (by various mothers), of whom the the eldest, the brave and noble **Hector**, was the city's greatest warrior. When the Greeks landed they sent a delegation to demand the return of Helen, but the Trojans refused—despite the warnings of Priam's prophetess daughter **Cassandra**, ignored as usual, that Troy was doomed to destruction. So the siege began.

The first years of the war were comparatively uneventful: the Trojans remained barricaded in their well-supplied and fortified city, while the Greeks raided the neighbouring towns and countryside, trying to cut off Troy's support, and the two sides met only in occasional skirmishes. Meanwhile the gods took sides in the conflict: Hera and Athena (resentful of Paris's judgement) and Poseidon supported the Greeks; Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, and Artemis took the Trojan side; Zeus remained a neutral umpire.

The dramatic events of the war begin in the ninth year, at the start of Homer's *Iliad*, when Achilles was mortally angered by the commander Agamemnon's demand that he hand back a Trojan woman captive granted to him as a slave. Seeing this as an insult to his honour, Achilles refused to fight and withdrew to his tent. Encouraged by the Greeks' loss of their greatest champion, Hector led a Trojan assault which cut a swathe through the Greek army and threatened to burn their ships. At this crisis Achilles' closest friend **Patroclus** begged him to return; Achilles refused, but agreed to let Patroclus borrow his armour and go into battle in his name. Patroclus did so, performed great deeds, but was finally killed by Hector. In rage and grief at his friend's death, Achilles returned to the battle, wearing magnificent new armour and arms made for him by Hephaestus. He killed Hector, and vindictively dragged his body three times round the walls of Troy. The old King Priam came to Achilles' tent to beg for the return of his son's body, and Achilles, touched by a sense of their common mortality, agreed. So the *Iliad* ends with the funeral of Hector.

Achilles defeated and killed two more of Troy's allies, the Amazon queen **Penthesilea** and the Ethiopian king **Memnon**, before he met his own fated death, shot by Paris in his vulnerable heel (hence the proverbial 'Achilles' heel'). After his funeral, Odysseus and Great Ajax contested to inherit his divinely made armour. The Greek generals awarded the armour to Odysseus; Ajax went mad with anger and humiliation, and (in his mind) slaughtered his ungrateful comrades; when he recovered his sanity and discovered he had only slaughtered a herd of sheep, he killed himself. On Odysseus's generous advice, he too received a hero's funeral. (See Sophocles' *Ajax*, and Ovid's account of the Ajax/Odysseus debate in *Met.*, 13, which wittily summarises almost every major event of the war.)

As the war dragged on into its tenth year, the Greeks became increasingly desperate to get an edge over the Trojans. A prophet declared that Troy would fall if the **Palladium**, the sacred image of Pallas Athena, was stolen from her temple; Odysseus sneaked into the city and stole the image, but Troy still stood. Another prophet said that the Greeks needed the

bow of Philoctetes. Odysseus went back to Lemnos, accompanied by a new young warrior, **Neoptolemus** (also called **Pyrrhus**), son of Achilles and Deidamia; they persuaded the understandably resentful Philoctetes to return to Troy with them. He was cured of his wound, and used the bow to shoot and kill Paris (see Sophocles' *Philoctetes*). However, even this did not end the war: the Trojans simply handed Helen on to Paris's brother **Deiphobus**, and the siege continued.

At last Odysseus proposed a new plan. The Greeks constructed a gigantic **Wooden Horse**, and stationed a party of their best warriors in its hollow belly; they left it outside the gates of Troy and sailed away. Convinced by the lies of the Greek agent **Sinon** that the Greeks had left this offering to the gods when they sailed for home, and ignoring the warnings of Cassandra and the priest **Laocoon**, the Trojans dragged it inside the city. That night the warriors inside the horse emerged and opened the gate to the returned Greek army. Troy was taken, sacked, and burned; King Priam was murdered at the altar by Neoptolemus; Cassandra was raped by Little Ajax; the men of Troy were slaughtered, the women taken into slavery, and Hector's little son was thrown from the walls to ensure the end of the Trojan royal family. Menelaus found Helen, but could not bring himself to kill her; he forgave her and took her back as the victorious Greeks sailed for home. (The most vivid account of the fall of Troy is in Virgil's *Aeneid*, 2; Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba* deal memorably with the plight of the defeated.)

### *After the war: Agamemnon*

A number of the Greek leaders encountered further adventures and disasters on their return from the Trojan War. The bloodiest homecoming was that of Agamemnon. His wife **Clytemnestra** (Helen's sister) had never forgiven him for the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia, and during his absence she had become the lover of his cousin **Aegisthus**, who had his own bitter hereditary grudge. (Agamemnon's father **Atreus** and Aegisthus's father **Thyestes** had fought a long and vicious battle for the throne of Mycenae, in the course of which each had successively driven the other into exile, Thyestes had seduced Atreus's wife, and Atreus had tricked Thyestes into eating a cannibal feast of the bodies of his murdered children—a story bloodily dramatised in Seneca's *Thyestes*.) Clytemnestra and Aegisthus joined their grievances to plot Agamemnon's murder, and when he returned home they entangled him in a net as he bathed and Clytemnestra hacked him to death with an axe.

Agamemnon's son **Orestes**, when he was grown to manhood, returned to Mycenae with a command from Apollo to avenge his father's death. Helped by his sister **Electra**, he killed Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. But to kill one's mother incurred a terrible blood-guilt, and Orestes was pursued and driven to madness by the Furies. At last (according to Aeschylus's *Oresteid*) he came to Athens, where an Athenian court heard his case argued by Apollo (for the defence) and Athena (for the prosecution), and pronounced the murder justified; Orestes was purified of guilt, and the Furies soothingly renamed the **Eumenides** ('Kindly Ones'). (Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy is the classic version of the story, the three plays dealing in turn with Agamemnon's murder, Orestes' revenge, and the trial; Sophocles' *Electra* and Euripides' *Electra* dramatise the same story from different points of view.)

*After the war: Odysseus*

The longest homecoming was that of Odysseus, as related in Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus spent ten years getting home, pursued by the anger of Poseidon, but helped by Athena, who admired his cleverness and resilience and his skill at talking or lying his way out of sticky situations. On the way he encountered and avoided many perils. He escaped the cave of the Cyclops **Polyphemus**, a oneeyed ogre who tried to eat his men, by getting him drunk and blinding him—and so incurred the anger of Poseidon, the Cyclops's father. He resisted the spells of the witch **Circe**, who had turned his men (temporarily) into pigs, and became her lover for a year. He passed the **Sirens**, seductively musical bird-women whose song enticed sailors on to their murderous rocks, by plugging his crew's ears with wax and having them tie him to the mast, so he safely could hear the wonderful song. He passed almost unscathed through the narrow passage between the monster **Scylla** and the whirlpool **Charybdis**. But in the end all his ships were wrecked, and Odysseus alone was cast up on the island of the nymph **Calypso**, who kept him as her lover and prisoner for seven years. Released at last through Athena's help, he came to the land of the Phaeacians, who welcomed him, listened to his story, and gave him passage home to Ithaca at last.

In Ithaca all was not well. After twenty years Odysseus was presumed dead, and his faithful wife **Penelope** was besieged with suitors, arrogant young lords who had occupied his palace while they competed to marry Penelope and take over the kingdom. His young son **Telemachus** could not withstand them; Penelope had held them off for several years by promising to marry when she had finished weaving her father-in-law's funeral shroud, which she wove by day and unravelled by night; but the suitors had finally discovered the trick and were pressing her for an answer. Helped by Telemachus and some faithful old servants, Odysseus came to the palace disguised as a beggar, and persuaded Penelope to set up an archery contest for her hand; Odysseus was the only one who could string his great bow, and, having won the contest, he turned his arrows on the suitors and killed them all. He revealed himself to Penelope, and they lived happily (and without adventures) for the rest of their lives.

*After the war: Aeneas and Rome*

The final 'homecoming' of this post-war era is that of a Trojan: the Trojan prince **Aeneas**, as related by the Roman poet Virgil in his *Aeneid*. According to Virgil, Aeneas, son of Anchises and Venus, was commanded by the gods to escape the fall of Troy and establish a new kingdom. Carrying his crippled father, his little son, and his household gods out of the burning city, he set sail with a few followers in search of the promised land. They had a hard journey, pursued by the malevolent hatred of Juno; Aeneas's love affair with Queen **Dido** of Carthage ended tragically in Aeneas's departure and Dido's embittered suicide; and on arrival in Italy they were embroiled in an accidental war with the local people under the leadership of the fiery **Turnus**. But in the end Aeneas won the war, killed Turnus, married the local princess **Lavinia**, and established a Trojan city in Italy.

Three hundred years later (the Romans say) a descendant of Aeneas founded Rome. The virgin priestess **Rea Silvia** was seduced by the god Mars, and gave birth to twin sons, **Romulus** and **Remus**, who were cast out by their wicked uncle and suckled by a friendly she-wolf. Grown to manhood, they set out to found a new city; they quarrelled over its rulership, and Romulus killed Remus, becoming the first king of the city he called 'Rome' after himself. At this point, however, the mythical history of the world starts to merge into the real history of Rome.

### Notes

- 1 A wallchart compiled by Robert A. Brooks (1991) sets out a gigantic family tree which includes every significant figure from Gaea and Uranus down to Telemachus and Neoptolemus.
- 2 This is a rather simplified version of the account given by Hesiod in the *Theogony*. The pairing of the Titans reflects the marriages between brother and sister.
- 3 The chronology of these wars is confused: some say Zeus was helped against the Giants by Dionysus and Hercules, who were not born until many generations after the Flood.
- 4 Originally Philomela was the mute swallow, but the other version has become standard, and 'Philomel' is still a poetic name for the nightingale.
- 5 Technically, in Greek religion, a 'hero' is defined as a demigod, the son of one divine and one mortal parent. However, I use the word in a looser sense; Jason and Oedipus, both fully human, do not fit the strict definition.
- 6 An alternative name for him, often used by Shakespeare, is **Alcides**, after his grandfather Alcaeus.
- 7 Accounts of the Argonauts' journey vary, and some of these adventures may have taken place on the return trip.
- 8 Some other versions clear Medea of the murder of her children, saying that they died accidentally when she tried to make them immortal, or that they were killed by the angry people of Corinth.
- 9 Leda produced four children at a birth (some say in an egg, or a pair of eggs): Helen, her sister **Clytemnestra**, and her brothers **Castor** and **Polydeuces/Pollux**. It is usually said that Helen and Pollux were the half-divine children of Zeus, and Clytemnestra and Castor the mortal children of Tyndareus. However, the brothers were so devoted to each other that when they both died, Pollux gave up half his immortality to Castor, and they each spent alternate days on Olympus and in the underworld. They are sometimes called the **Dioscuri** (sons of Zeus) or the Heavenly Twins.