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Classical Myth

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Barry B. Powell

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Classical Myth

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Classical Myth

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Barry B. Powell

University of Wisconsin–Madison

with translations
by Herbert M. Howe

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Contents

Preface 17

Part I
Definitions and Background

1. What Is Myth? 23
2. The Cultural Context of Classical Myth 39
3. The Development of Classical Myth 73

Part II
Divine Myth

4. The Origins of the Gods 99
5. The Origins of Mortals 130
6. Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, and Hades 156
7. Apollo 179
8. Hermes, Pan, Hephaestus, and Ares 199
9. Aphrodite, Artemis, and Athena 222
10. Demeter and Related Myths 252

11. Dionysus 284

12. The Underworld 314

Part III
Legends

13. Introduction to Heroic Myth: Gilgamesh 346

14. Perseus 361

15. Heracles 383

16. Theseus 420

17. The Myths of Crete 451

18. Oedipus and the Myths of Thebes 476

19. Jason and the Argonauts 504

20. The Trojan War 539

21. The Fall of Troy and Its Aftermath 576

22. The Return of Odysseus 600

Part IV
Roman Myth

23. Aeneas 630

24. Legends of Early Rome 657

Part V
Interpretation

25. Theories of Myth Interpretation 681

Reference Charts 711

Chronology of the Ancient World 711

The Greek and Roman Pantheon 713

Credits 715

Index and Pronunciation Glossary 719

LIST OF PERSPECTIVES

1 The Brothers Grimm 32
2 Frank Miller's *300* 52
4.1 Rubens's *Saturn Devouring His Son* 112
4.2 The Biblical Creation Story 127
5 Ted Hughes's *Prometheus on His Crag* 139
6.1 The Three Graces 165
6.2 The Loves of Zeus in European Art (color insert)
7 Soldani's *Apollo and Daphnê* 193
8 Pan and the Pastoral Tradition 214
9.1 H. D.'s "Adonis" 230
9.2 Venus: Images of Beauty in European Art (color insert)
10 Rossetti's *Proserpina Holding the Pomegranate* 263
11.1 Reni's *Bacchus and Ariadnê* 291
11.2 Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* 311
12.1 Vampires 318
12.2 Cerrini's *Apollo and the Cumaean Sybil* 337
12.3 Dante's *Inferno* 341
13 J. R. R. Tolkien's Modern Hero in *The Lord of the Rings* 356
14.1 Piero di Cosimo's *Perseus Frees Andromeda* 374
14.2 Classical Myth and the Stars 379
15 Daumier's *Hercules in the Augean Stables* 397
16 Boccaccio's *Misfortunes of Famous Men* 442
17.1 Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* 459
17.2 Picasso's *Minotauromachia* 463
17.3 Blondel's *The Sun, or the Fall of Icarus* 468
18 Ingres's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* 487
19.1 Seneca's *Medea* 528
19.2 Delacroix's *Médée* 531
20.1 Yeats's "Leda and the Swan" 546

20.2 The Beauty of Helen 559
21.1 The Trojan War in European Art (color insert)
21.2 Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* 592
22.1 Ulysses 601
22.2 The Legends of Odysseus in European Art (color insert)
22.3 Cavafy's "Ithaca" 622
23 Aeneas, Augustus, and Mussolini 652
24.1 David's *Oath of the Horatii* 667
24.2 The *Lucretia* of Rembrandt and Shakespeare 670
25 Apuleius' Allegory of Cupid and Psychê 686

MAPS

I. The Ancient Mediterranean (inside front cover)
II. Southern and Central Greece (Chapter 2) 41
III. The Ancient Near East (Chapter 3) 80
IV. The Processional Route from Athens to Eleusis (Chapter 10) 269
V. The Argive Plain (Chapter 14) 362
VI. Heracles' Adventures in Greece (Chapter 15) 393
VII. Locations of Heracles' Deeds Abroad (Chapter 15) 400
VIII. Ancient Athens (Chapter 16) 422
IX. The Adventures of Theseus (Chapter 16) 432
X. The Voyage of the *Argo* (Chapter 19) 509
XI. The Troad (Chapter 20) 556
XII. Ancient Italy (Chapter 23) 634
XIII. Travels of Aeneas (Chapter 23) 647
XIV. Map of Imperial Rome Showing Sites Mentioned in the Text (Chapter 24) 658
XV. Greece, the Aegean Sea, and Western Asia Minor (inside back cover)

CHARTS

3 Near Eastern Gods and Goddesses 84
4.1 The First Generation of Gods 100
4.2 The Offspring of Gaea and Uranus 102
4.3 The Offspring of Gaea and Pontus 108
4.4 Hittite and Greek Theogonies Compared 127
5 The Descent of the Greek Tribes from the Race of Titans 153
6.1 The Twelve Olympians 157
6.2 Zeus's Divine Consorts and Their Children 163
14 The Descent of Perseus 364
15.1 The Descent of Heracles 384
15.2 Heracles' Wives and Offspring 389
16.1 Cecrops and His Descendants 421
16.2 The House of Erichthonius 424
17 The House of Crete 452
18 The House of Cadmus 481
19.1 The House of Aeolus 505
19.2 The House of Calydon 533
20.1 The House of Atreus 540
20.2 The House of Tyndareüs 544
20.3 The House of Troy 549

FIGURES

1.1 Stars Descend before Sun 27
1.2 The Author at the Walls of Troy 30
2.1 Athens From the West 42
2.2 Greek Papyrus with Alphabetic Writing 48
2.3 Greek Hoplite 51
2.4 The Modern Village of Sparta 55

2.5 Pederastic Scene 57
2.6 The Greek Symposium 59
2.7 Footrace 60
2.8 Greek Village Women 61
2.9 Statue of a *Korê* 62
2.10 The Day after the Wedding 64
2.11 Slaves Digging Clay 66
3.1 Goddess Giving Birth 74
3.2 Cycladic Mother Figurine 75
3.3 Artemis *Potnia Thêrôn* 76
3.4 An *Aoidos* 77
3.5 Clay Tablet with Cuneiform Writing 79
3.6 Ziggurat 81
3.7 Akkadian Seal-Impression 82
3.8 Mesopotamian Terracotta Relief 83
4.1 Egyptian Sky and Earth 102
4.2 Aphrodite Rising from the Sea 107
4.3 Heracles and Cerberus 109
4.4 Chimera 109
4.5 Typhonomachy 116
4.6 Birth of Athena 117
4.7 Gigantomachy 118
4.8 Four-Faced God on a Ram 123
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 4.1 Rubens's *Saturn Devouring His Son* 112
5.1 Atlas and Prometheus Punished 133
5.2 Prometheus and Satyrs 136
5.3 Epimetheus Seduced by Pandora 138
5.4 Greek Women at a Well 142
6.1 Temple to Zeus at Athens 159
6.2 Wedding of Zeus and Hera 161
6.3 Zeus and Ganymede 167

6.4 Temple of Hera at Olympia 168
6.5 Tree of the Hesperides 170
6.6 Poseidon and Amphitritê 174
6.7 Poseidon or Zeus 176
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 6.1a Roman Graces 165
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 6.1b Rubens's *Graces* 166
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 6.2a Titian's *Danaë* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 6.2b Correggio's *Leda and the Swan* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 6.2c Natoire's *Jupiter Abducting Ganymede* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 6.2d Pierre's *Rape of Europa* (color insert)
7.1 Apollo and Dionysus at Delphi 180
7.2 Temple of Apollo at Bassae 181
7.3 Author at Delos 185
7.4 Temple of Apollo at Delphi 187
7.5 Orestes Purified by Apollo 189
7.6 Aegeus and Themis 190
7.7 Apollo and Daphnê 193
7.8 Asclepius and Hygieia 196
7.9 Apollo on Olympia Pediment 197
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 7 Soldani's *Apollo and Daphnê* 194
8.1 A *Herm* 200
8.2 Baby Hermes in a Basket 206
8.3 Ithyphallic Pan 213
8.4 Blacksmith's Shop 216
8.5 Return of Hephaestus to Olympus 217
8.6 Adultery of Ares and Aphrodite 218
9.1 Priapus 226
9.2 Aphrodite Anadyomenê 227
9.3 Artemis of Ephesus 239
9.4 Death of the Niobids 240

9.5 Death of Actaeon 242
9.6 The Parthenon 245
9.7 Athena on Panathenaic Vase 246
9.8 Four-Horse Chariot Race 247
PERSPECTIVE FIGURES 9.2a Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURES 9.2b di Cosimo's *Venus and Mars* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURES 9.2c Veronese's *Venus and Adonis* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURES 9.2d Velasquez's *Toilet of Venus* (color insert)
10.1 Well of the Maiden at Eleusis 256
10.2 Persephonê and Hades 267
10.3 Telesterion at Eleusis 270
10.4 Demeter and Persephonê Send Forth Triptolemus 271
10.5 Head of Inanna 272
10.6 Isis and Osiris 276
10.7 Resurrection of Osiris 279
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 10 Rossetti's *Proserpina* 264
11.1 Dionysus in Ecstasy 285
11.2 Hetaira with Phallus 285
11.3 Baby Dionysus on Zeus's Thigh 287
11.4 Dionysus in a Boat 290
11.5 Maenad and Satyr 295
11.6 Dismemberment of Pentheus 303
11.7 Ritual with Dionysus Mask 306
11.8 Theater of Dionysus 310
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 11.1 Reni's *Bacchus and Ariadnê* 291
12.1 Odysseus and Elpenor 324
12.2 Orpheus in Thrace 329
12.3 Charon and Hermes *Psychopompos* 336

12.4 Ares, Hermes, Ixion 340
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 12.1 *Dracula* 320
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 12.2 Cerrini's *Apollo and the Cumaean Sybil* 338
13.1 Tomb of Alyattes 347
13.2 Gilgamesh and Bull of Heaven 352
13.3 A *Kouros* 359
13.4 Statue of Antoninus Pius 359
14.1 Lion Gate at Mycenae 363
14.2 Hermes Kills Argus 365
14.3 Danaë and Shower of Gold 369
14.4 Danaë and the Chest 370
14.5 Perseus Slays Medusa 372
14.6 Gorgon Pursues Perseus 373
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 14.1 Piero di Cosimo's *Perseus Frees Andromeda* 375
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 14.2 Dürer's Star Map 380
15.1 Infant Heracles and the Snakes 388
15.2 Heracles and the Nemean Lion 394
15.3 Heracles and the Erymanthian Boar 395
15.4 Heracles and the Stymphalian Birds 399
15.5 Heracles in the Cup of Helius 402
15.6 Heracles and Busiris 405
15.7 Commodus as Heracles 407
15.8 Heracles and the Cercopes 411
15.9 Heracles and Nessus 413
15.10 The Farnese Hercules 418
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 15 Daumier's *Hercules* 397
16.1 Erechtheum 423
16.2 Birth of Erichthonius 425
16.3 Philomela and Procnê 429
16.4 Theseus Discovers the Sword and Sandals 433
16.5 The Labors of Theseus 434

16.6 Aegeus Greets Theseus 435
16.7 Theseus and Amazons 437
16.8 Heracles and Theseus in Hades 446
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 16 *Phaedra Kills Herself* 443
17.1 Europa and the Bull 453
17.2 Pasiphaë with Baby Minotaur 455
17.3 Theseus and Amphitritê 458
17.4 Theseus Kills the Minotaur 461
17.5 Bronze Age Palace at Cnossus 470
17.6 Snake-Goddess 472
17.7 Bull-Vaulting Fresco 473
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 17.2 Pablo Picasso's *Minotauromachia* 463
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 17.3 Blondel's *The Sun, or the Fall of Icarus* 468
18.1 Cadmus Kills the Serpent 477
18.2 Death of Lycus and Dircê 483
18.3 Oedipus and the Sphinx 486
18.4 Polynices Bribes Eriphylê 493
18.5 Duel between Eteocles and Polynices 497
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 18.1 Ingres's *Oedipus and the Sphinx* 488
19.1 Gathering of the Argonauts 508
19.2 Phineus 511
19.3 Greek Ship 512
19.4 Serpent Disgorges Jason 516
19.5 Death of Talus 518
19.6 Medea Boiling the Ram 520
19.7 Medea Stabs her Child 527
19.8 Calydonian Boar Hunt 533
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 19.2 Delacroix's *Médée* 531
20.1 Pelops Flees with Hippodamia 541

20.2 Leda and the Swan 544
20.3 Peleus Wrestles with Thetis 548
20.4 Judgment of Paris 50
20.5 Chiron with Achilles 552
20.6 Sacrifice of Iphigenia 555
20.7 Embassy to Achilles 567
20.8 Ransom of Hector 571
21.1 Death of Penthesilea 577
21.2 The Trojan Horse 579
21.3 Death of Laocoön 582
21.4 Sacrifice of Polyxena 586
21.5 Trojan Settlements 587
21.6 Lesser Ajax and Cassandra 589
21.7 Death of Agamemnon 594
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 21.1a *Trojan Horse* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 21.1b Cranach's *Judgment of Paris* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 21.1c El Greco's *Laocoön* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 21.d Leighton's *Captive Andromachê* (color insert)
22.1 Blinding of Polyphemus 610
22.2 Circê Enchants Odysseus' Men 614
22.3 Odysseus and the Sirens 616
22.4 Odysseus and Nausicaä 618
22.5 Penelopê and her Web 620
22.6 Odysseus Kills the Suitors 624
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 22.2a Dossi's *Circê* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 22.2b Lorrain's *Ulysses Returning Chryseïs* (color insert)
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 22.2c Lemoyne's *The Work of Penelopê* (color insert)

PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 22.2d Turner's *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus* (color insert)
23.1 River *Numen* 635
23.2 Hellenized Roman Gods 637
23.3 Temple of Portunus 640
23.4 Lares 641
23.5 Temple of Vesta 642
23.6 Aeneas Escaping from Troy 646
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 23a Aeneas Sacrificing 653
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 23b *Tellus Mater* Postage Stamp 654
24.1 Capitoline Wolf 661
24.2 Base of Roman Funerary Column 664
24.3 Etruscan Calchas 673
24.4 Arch of Titus 677
24.5 Relief from Arch of Titus 678
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 24.1 David's *Oath of the Horatii* 668
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 24.2 Rembrandt's *Lucretia* 670
25.1 Odysseus as Christ 691
25.2 Oedipus in *Atalanta Fugiens* 692
PERSPECTIVE FIGURE 25 Gentileschi's *Cupid and Psychê* 688

Preface

> What does our great historical hunger signify, our clutching about us of countless cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home, the mythic womb?
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872

The category "classical myth" exists more in the minds of contemporary teachers than it did in the ancient world itself, but it nonetheless serves a useful pedagogical purpose. For some time now, courses bearing this or a similar title have been a vehicle for introducing college students to the cultures of the ancient Greeks and Romans, hence to the roots of Western civilization. By studying the myths of the ancients primarily through the literary works in which they are preserved, students are exposed to important classical authors, as well as to stories and figures that have sustained interest and kindled imaginations throughout the history of Western culture, and continue to do so today.

WHAT'S NEW IN THIS EDITION

In this Eighth Edition, I have made many improvements to the book—rearranged some material, corrected expressions, streamlined it somewhat, and added maps and illustrations—all changes based on suggestions from instructors who have used

the earlier editions in their classes. I have added the addresses of links to modern online translations of complete ancient texts, so that the interested reader can easily expand knowledge of a given topic without having to purchase auxiliary texts. I added new images throughout to give the book a different look, and also updated the bibliography. But the central goals remain unchanged. The first seven editions were unique among texts on classical myth in their *contextual approach*, which emphasizes the context in which ancient stories were told. In the eighth edition I have continued my efforts to place the myths in their anthropological, historical, religious, sociological, and economic contexts.

The present text began as a modern introduction to classical myth at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, a comprehensive and flexible resource for a college-level course that would reflect the best recent scholarship in the field. The fact that the first seven editions have been used in many such courses throughout the United States and in Canada, and in Australia, New Zealand, and even Taiwan, by instructors with different academic backgrounds teaching in a wide variety of educational settings, has deeply gratified my sense that a book of this type was needed. In many ways I see it as a summary of my own intellectual career, because I remember when and usually where I first brushed up against the many figures of myth, when they first became important to me. In this respect this book is more personal than it reflects any objective standard of "what is classical myth," and in many ways my purpose is to share with the reader my own excitement at the discovery of our classical past.

The first seven editions emphasized the historical development of classical myth and I have maintained that approach here. Only when we see how myth changes over time, yet somehow remains the same, can we grasp its essence. It is important to remember that the versions of myth I present in the text represent only one version of the many disparate, often contradictory, stories that the Greeks told about their gods and heroes. For this reason, at the end of each chapter I cite ancient sources for the myths, which will lead the student to disparate accounts. A complete inventory is, of course, far beyond the scope of this text, but these suggestions can serve as a starting point for those wishing to explore the mythical background more fully.

Many original Greek and Latin sources (which can be complex) are also listed in Edward Tripp's *Meridian Handbook of Classical Mythology* and in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (3rd ed., Oxford, UK, 1996), or simply do a Google search on the Internet, whose resources for learning are astounding. There are numerous sites (Google "classical myth") that give ancient sources for even minor figures in myth. Most useful perhaps is the New Zealand website http://www.theoi.com that has articles on most Greek myths and outstanding illustrations. You can always Google a name or a place to receive an abundance of information and hundreds of images, too. The computerization of knowledge and its dissemination on the Internet is a profound advance in culture, and students of myth are as much the beneficiaries as anyone. The entries in Wikipedia are also often excellent, containing illustrations, bibliographies, and links to related material.

Many of the passages from ancient literary works quoted here are from well-known sources, but I have not hesitated to present lesser-known passages when that seemed appropriate. Whenever possible I have used Greek sources rather than Latin, but I have included numerous selections from Ovid's highly influential Latin retelling of the Greek myths (and other Latin writers) when the myth is found in no other ancient literary source. The complete text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* will form a natural, although not necessary, adjunct to this text, as will complete translations of Greek tragedies (many of these texts can be found at the links cited in the text). Pearson Education has made possible the purchase of these and other auxiliary Penguin titles at a much-reduced cost, shrink-wrapped with this text, if the instructor prefers hardcopy to online resources. (Instructors: Please contact your local Pearson Education representative if you wish to order such a packet.)

Like the first seven editions, the eighth stresses the importance of interpretation in the study of myth, although without relying on a single perspective. No one approach to interpretation can be adequate to the enormous range and complexity of classical myth. I briefly introduce the subject of interpretation in Chapter 1, and throughout the text I offer interpretive comments on individual myths—a basis, I am sure, for objection as much as agreement! I postpone an in-depth examination of myth interpretation to the last chapter, "Theories of Myth Interpretation," when the student will be familiar with various examples of myth. Many instructors may prefer to introduce this topic earlier, of course, and the chapter can be read at any time without loss of coherence.

The eighth edition remains committed to the principle that when we study classical myth, we also study the roots of Western culture. Ancient works of art play a valuable role in helping students visualize mythical figures and events as the ancients themselves did, and therefore I have included many illustrations from classical sources—more than two hundred reproductions of vase paintings, sculptural works, architectural monuments, and other works of art from the ancient and modern worlds, several new to this edition. In general the maps on the front and back covers have all the important places mentioned in the myths, but for this edition I have included new maps in the chapters that focus on places important in that chapter. When a place is found on a map within a chapter, I put that name in SMALL CAPS when it first appears.

As in the first seven editions, chapters also include "Perspective" boxes that examine the uses of classical myth in the medieval, Renaissance, or modern periods. Many of the Perspectives incorporate excerpts from or reproductions of literary and artistic works. My intent is to help students see how stories and figures from classical myth were appropriated and interpreted at later stages of history, including the modern period, often for purposes very different from those found in the ancient world itself.

The study of classical myth inevitably presents students with hundreds of new and unfamiliar names. To assist students with pronunciation, I have provided an English pronunciation guide the first time each difficult name appears in the text.

The pronunciation guides are repeated in the Index. I have also used **bold** letters to highlight names of greatest importance, those that one really ought to know to claim competence in the topic. These names are repeated in a list of important terms at the end of each chapter, with page numbers where the term first appears. I leave names of lesser importance in ordinary type, although in many cases I give pronunciations for these as well. In the Index I have included a capsule identification for important names, so the Index also serves as a glossary.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book grew out of a course in classical myth offered for many decades without interruption at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The course, one of the first of its kind, began in the 1930s with the labors of Walter "Ray" Agard, whom the famous educator Alexander Meiklejohn brought to Madison from Amherst in 1927 to teach in the Meiklejohn Experimental College. Ray passed it on to **Herbert M. Howe**, who did most of the translations for the book, and Herb to me. Herb died in 2010 at age 98, a superb, even magical, teacher and a world-class swimmer, and I have dedicated this book to him. My long friendship with Herb was always a treasure. The course continues to be taught today as one of the most popular in the undergraduate curriculum.

I want to express my gratitude to my editor Joe Terry, who with great cheer and energy has helped to craft this new edition. Many others have helped, and I am grateful to them, especially **William Aylward**, whose advice has proved invaluable and who has contributed important material to the chapters on Roman myth. William teaches the course today. I also want to thank Dale Grote for his continued superb labors on the Web site, which has so greatly enhanced the value of the text. Other reviewers involved in the Eighth Edition are: Matthew Dillon, Loyola Marymount University; Timothy McNiven, The Ohio State University; Martha Payne, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis; Glenn Snyder, Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis; Mel Storm, Emporia State University; and Lisa Trentin, University of Toronto Mississauga.

I am responsible for the translations from Akkadian, Egyptian, and modern Greek. In our translations we have sought a modern idiom, unrhymed, with a regular beat in the poetic lines. The translator can only try to re-create in modern language thoughts and manners distant from our own. In the preparation of my own English versions of Mesopotamian and Egyptian literary texts, I owe a general indebtedness to the following translations: James B. Pritchard, editor, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ, 1969); A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1949); Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, CT, 1976); Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (New York, 1961) and *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago, 1963); and Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, UK, 1989). I thank Frederick W. Schwink for his translation of the Hittite "Kingship in Heaven." I also thank Random House for permission to quote "Musée des Beaux Arts" from

The Collected Poems of W. H. Auden (2007); Simon & Schuster to quote "Leda and the Swan" from *W. B. Yeats's Collected Poems* (1996); and New Directions Publishing Corporation to quote "Adonis" from *Collected Poems 1912–1944* by H. D. (1986). We also wish to thank the museums, libraries, galleries, and other collections that have kindly allowed reproduction of items in their collections and have provided the necessary photographs. Photographs from these and other sources are gratefully acknowledged in the text.

I welcome comments on this edition from instructors and students who have used it, as these will help plan improvements for future editions. I can be contacted at the e-mail address below.

—B. B. P.

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Chapter 1

What is Myth?

> The longer I occupy myself with questions of ancient mythology, the more diffident I become of success in dealing with them, and I am apt to think that we who spend our years in searching for solutions to these insoluble problems are like Sisyphus perpetually rolling his stone uphill only to see it revolve again into the valley.
>
> Sir James G. Frazer (1854–1941),
> author of *The Golden Bough*

The Western Roman Empire ended more than fifteen hundred years ago, but the stories of classical gods and goddesses, of Greek and Roman warriors and leaders, live on in their ancient vigor. Zeus, Venus, Helen, Odysseus, Achilles, Aeneas—these familiar names stood in the background as later Western art and literature advanced, and they stand there still today. They were bequeathed to us in the writings of the Greeks and Romans, but their names and stories are much older than the written word. They go back before the introduction of writing, an era when classical myth first took shape.

Later chapters examine specific myths that have come down to us from the Greeks and Romans, but in this chapter we limit ourselves to examine some preliminary questions essential to a clear understanding of classical myth. We discuss the definition of myth and the three main types of myth: *divine myth, legend,* and *folktale.* We also look briefly at some aspects of the study of myth.

WHAT IS A MYTH?

Human beings have told stories from time immemorial, for stories are a natural product of spoken language, an outgrowth of the imaginative power that clearly separates us from our animal cousins. The story is a universal ingredient of human culture, bringing relief from the tedium of everyday labor and reminding listeners of their own values, beliefs, and origins.

This book is concerned with a certain type of story known as *myth*. The term *myth* is hard to define, in part because of the enormous variety of stories gathered from many cultures by ethnographers, anthropologists, and literary historians. Originally, the Greek word *mythos* simply meant “authoritative speech,” “story,” or “plot,” but later writers used the term *myth* in more restricted ways. Some recent authorities, exasperated by the complexity of the phenomena, deny that the term *myth* expresses a coherent concept at all. A definition widely agreed on is that myth is *a traditional story with collective importance*. We can accept this definition, but we must consider carefully what it means.

To say that a myth is a story is to say, first, that it has a plot, a narrative structure consisting of a beginning, middle, and end. In the beginning of a typical story, we are introduced to characters in a certain situation, usually one involving conflict with other characters, with misfortune, or with themselves. The word *character* comes from a Greek word meaning “a certain mental imprint”: Hamlet cannot make up his mind, Macbeth is ambitious, King Lear is blind to the character of others. Character is the sum of the choices one makes. In myths, the characters may be gods, goddesses, or other supernatural beings, but they may also be human beings or even animals that speak and act in the manner of human beings.

In the middle of a typical story, the situation grows more complex, and tension and conflict develop. In the end, the tension is somehow resolved. Today we might find an example of this basic structure in the plot common to ten thousand novels and feature films: Girl meets boy (the beginning), girl loses boy (the middle), girl finds boy (the end). Plot is an essential feature of myth. Without a beginning, middle, and end, there can be no story and hence no myth. In casual speech we sometimes say that the Greek god Zeus, for example, is a myth. However, strictly speaking, Zeus is not a myth, but a character in myth, in the plotted stories that tell of his exploits. Belief in the existence of a particular god, the observance of a ritual in a god’s honor, and religious symbols are not myths.

Another element of myth is setting. The setting is the time and place in which the action of the story unfolds. Myths are never set in the present or the recent past; the action always takes place in the distant past or in a shadowy time altogether outside human chronology. The setting of myths may be in an actual city, such as Athens or Thebes, or some other location familiar to the audience. In other myths, the setting is an obscure place: the underworld, which no one in the real world ever visited; Mount Olympus, which really exists but in myth is the home of the gods; or Crete of a very long time ago.

Thus, like all other stories, myths have plot, characters, and setting. However, a myth is not just any story, but a certain kind of story that we describe as traditional.

Our word *traditional* comes from the Latin *trado,* "hand over," and a traditional story is one that has been "handed over" orally from one storyteller to another without the intervention of writing. In societies that do not use writing, stories must be handed over verbally, so traditional tales are the vehicle for transmitting one generation's thought to another. In this way traditional tales maintain contact with the past (about which little really is known) and pass inherited wisdom on to the future. They explain a society to itself, promulgating its concerns and values.

From this function derives myth's "collective importance"—myths hold meaning for the group, not just the individual. They describe patterns of behavior that serve as models for members of a society, especially in times of crisis. For example, in Homer's *Iliad* (written down in the eighth century BC), Achilles tries to persuade King Priam of Troy to eat at a time when Priam is heartbroken for his dead son Hector, killed by Achilles. Achilles tells the story of Niobê, a Theban princess: Although Artemis and Apollo had killed her seven sons and seven daughters, still she ate, and so should Priam. Four hundred years later, when the philosopher Socrates was on trial for his life, he defended his insistence on telling the truth in spite of threats against him by recalling the example of Achilles, who was ashamed to live as a coward and chose to die bravely before the walls of Troy.

Because they are traditional, myths are also anonymous. In contrast to such modern forms of storytelling as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace,* J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings,* J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* or George Lucas's film series *Star Wars,* myths never have identifiable authors. Literary works based on myth may have authors, but not the myths themselves. The Greek dramatist Sophocles wrote a play about Oedipus the king, but the *myth* of Oedipus existed long before, and no one can say who created it.

This anonymity helps us to understand why the Greeks, following the lead of the philosopher Plato, eventually came to contrast *mythos,* "story" or "myth," with *logos,* "account." The teller of a *logos* takes responsibility for the truth of what is said. A *logos* is a reasoned explanation of something that emphasizes a continuing causal sequence, as in the proofs of plane geometry. We still use the suffix -*logy* to indicate a reasoned inquiry into a topic, as in anthropo*logy,* "study of human beings"; bio*logy,* "study of life forms"; or even mytho*logy,* "study of myth" (although *mythology* often is used as a synonym for *myth*). By contrast, the teller of a *mythos* does not claim personal responsibility for what is said. After all, the teller did not invent the story, but only passed it on.

During oral transmission, a traditional tale is subject to constant change. Different narrators of a story have different motives and emphasize or embroider on different aspects. The story of Niobê could easily illustrate the dangers of self-assertion (Niobê bragged that she had more children than the mother of Apollo and Artemis), but Achilles uses the story to prove that eating food can lessen grief. Homer describes Achilles' anguished choice between a short, glorious life and a long, inglorious one, but never presents the choice as between courage and cowardice. In the written works in which Greek myths have been preserved, we often find strikingly different versions of the same myth. The poets Homer and Sophocles both report that Oedipus, king of Thebes, killed his father and married his mother, but in Homer's account Oedipus continues to rule after the truth comes out, whereas in

Sophocles' play he pokes pins in his eyes and leaves the city, a wretched wanderer. Neither is the "true" version of the myth, of which the other is a variant. The myth of Oedipus contains *all* the variants.

A retelling of every variant of every Greek myth would require a book of enormous length, or a very ambitious Web site, and would present its own false picture of the tradition. After all, it is not the multiplicity of versions that attracts our attention, but the best-known variants, often those of some great literary work. For example, Sophocles' version of the myth of Oedipus is far better known than is Homer's passing reference. Virtually every group of humankind has its store of traditional narrative, but in this book we limit ourselves to the myths of Greece and Rome, only occasionally referring to earlier and parallel traditions.

TYPES OF MYTH

Modern scholars like to distinguish between several types of myth based on the nature of the principal characters and the function that the story fulfilled for the listener and the teller. **Divine myths** (sometimes called "true myths" or "myths proper") are stories in which supernatural beings are the main actors. Such stories generally explain why the world, or some aspect of it, is the way it is. **Legends** (or sagas) are stories of the great deeds of human heroes or heroines. Legends narrate the events of the human past. The word comes from the Latin *legenda,* "things that should be read," that is, originally, morally uplifting stories about Christian saints. **Folktales** are stories whose actors are ordinary people or animals. Folktales entertain the audience and teach or justify customary patterns of behavior.

The more we learn about myth, the more we discover how difficult it can be to separate one type from another. For example, stories that appear to be legends often incorporate elements of folktales or explain the nature of things, as do divine myths. Such distinctions are nonetheless valuable because they allow us to isolate and study various aspects of myth. Let us look more closely at each type.

Divine Myth

The supernatural beings who are the principal characters in divine myth are depicted as superior to humans in power and splendor. Sometimes they take on human or animal shapes at will. They control awesome forces of nature: thunder, storm, rain, fire, earthquake, or fecundity. When these beings appear in their own form, they can be enormous and of stunning beauty or ugliness. Conflicts among them can take place on an immense scale and involve whole continents, high mountains, and vast seas.

Sometimes the supernatural characters in divine myth are little more than personified abstractions without clearly defined personalities. In Greek myth, for example, Nikê (**nī**-kē) "victory" is just the abstract concept (Figure 1.1).

In other cases, the supernatural beings are gods, goddesses, or demons with well-developed and distinctive personalities of their own. Zeus, the sky-god in Greek myth,

FIGURE 1.1 Stars descend before Sun. The stars, represented as boys, leap into the sea before the approach of Helius in his horse-drawn chariot (the nimbus around his head is one origin of the medieval halo around the heads of saints), on an Attic wine bowl, c. 435 BC. As the goddess Nikê personifies an event, the stars and Helius personify natural forces. (© Trustees of the British Museum / Art Resource, New York)

is much more than a personification of the sky; he is depicted as a powerful father, an often unfaithful husband, and the upholder of justice in human communities.

The events of divine myth usually take place in a world before or outside the present order where time and space often have different meanings from those familiar to human beings. For example, one Greek myth explained how Zeus came to rule the world: He fought against the Titans, an earlier race of gods,* defeated them in a terrible battle, and established his empire on the ruin of theirs. It would be pointless to ask when these events occurred, even within the context of the story, because they are set in a time before human chronology has meaning. Moreover, many divine myths of the Greeks are set in a place far removed from the familiar world of human beings—on Mount Olympus, far away and unapproachable.

Understandably, many of the gods about whom traditional tales were told were both actors in the stories and objects of veneration in religious cult. Zeus is a character in Greek myth, but he was also a god for whom the Greeks built temples, carried out sacrifices, and celebrated festivals. Because of this double function of the gods, divine myth is easily confused with religion, but the two must be clearly distinguished. Myths are *traditional stories;* religion is *belief* and the course of action that follows from belief. Belief is best defined as "what you accept (with or without proof) as a basis for action." For example, the Greeks believed that Zeus caused the rain to fall. Therefore, they sacrificed animals in times of drought to persuade him to bring rain. Myths often justify a religious practice or a form of religious behavior,

*The word *God* (capital *G*) should be limited to a single all-powerful being in any religion—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or other. A small *g* shows that you are talking about one of many divine powers. A *demigod* is the offspring of a god and a human; sometimes a demigod becomes a god at death. The word *deity* is a general term that can refer to God or gods.

but we can retell a myth, even a myth about divine beings, without engaging in religious behavior. The relationship between myth and religion is complicated, and we will have more to say about it later, but we must remember that myth is a traditional story with collective importance, whereas religion is a set of beliefs that motivates a course of action.

Divine myths served a function in ancient cultures analogous to that of theoretical science in our own: They explained why the world is the way it is. Many of these myths tell of the origin and destruction of grand things: the universe, the gods, and ourselves; the relations of gods with one another and with human beings; and the divine origin of such human economic and social institutions as the growing of crops, the cycle of the seasons, the making of wine, and prophecy and oracles. Many divine myths deal with limited matters, such as the origin of local customs and practices.

In more technical language, we can describe such explanatory myths as etiological, from the Greek word *aition,* "cause." A creation myth is an example of an **etiological tale** because it explains the causes that brought the world into existence. An etiological myth explained the origin of Mount Etna, a dangerous volcano in Sicily: Beneath it Zeus imprisoned the fire-breathing monster Typhoeus, who continued to spew forth smoke and lava. Another example is the myth of Persephonê, daughter of the wheat-goddess Demeter. Persephonê must spend four months of the year in the underworld, and Demeter refuses to let anything grow during those months—the hot, barren summer. The change of seasons is "explained," according to many, by the myth. The etiological tale expresses a conjecture about the cause of something that existed long before the explanation.

Both divine myth and modern science offer explanations of why the world is the way it is, but they do so in very different ways. Scientific explanations are based on impersonal general laws and statistical probabilities discovered, or at least verified, by repeatable quantitative experiments, whereas mythic explanations, expressed in traditional tales, assume that supernatural beings control the world through the exercise of personal will. Assigning human qualities, especially unpredictability, to the forces that stand behind the world is characteristic of the worldview we find in myth. Thunder is an expression of Zeus's anger, not the necessary result of impersonal physical forces. Greek myth could thus blame sudden and puzzling deaths on the will of the gods, as in the story of how, out of spite, the gods Artemis and Apollo struck down the fourteen children of Niobê. Modern scientists may be puzzled by death from cancer, but they do not blame such death on a divine and irrational agent. The modern world was born from the struggle of scientific thought against traditional explanations for why and how things happen in the world, a struggle by no means concluded today.

In Part II of this text we examine more closely the divine myths of the ancient Greeks.

Legend

If divine myth in oral cultures is analogous to science in modern, literate Western society, legend is analogous to history. Both legend and modern historical writing

attempt to answer the question, "What happened in the human past?" Because the past explains and justifies the present, the telling of legends was an important activity in the cultural life of many ancient peoples, and never more so than among the ancient Greeks. In legends, the central characters are human beings, not gods and goddesses. Although supernatural beings often play a part, their roles are subordinate to those of the human characters. In the legend of Orestes, the god Apollo orders Orestes to kill his mother, but the emphasis of the story is on Orestes' carrying out the order and facing its terrible consequences.

The principal actors of legend are heroes and heroines. Drawn from the ranks of the nobility, they are kings and queens, princes and princesses, and other members of an aristocratic elite. They have extraordinary physical and personal qualities and are stronger, more beautiful, or more courageous than ordinary people. Most Greeks had no doubt that such legendary figures really lived, and members of important families regarded themselves as descended from them. Whereas divine myth is set in a different or previous world-order, legendary events belong to our own order, although they took place in the distant past, at the very beginning of human time when mighty heroes and heroines lived on earth, great cities were founded, difficult quests undertaken, fearful monsters slain, and momentous wars waged.

Most ancient Greeks, then, did not doubt that such events as the Trojan War really did occur, and they pointed out the tombs of legendary figures and the actual sites of their exploits. But the Greeks had no way to compare their traditions with historical reality. Today, armed with the insights of archaeology and techniques of historical investigation, modern scholars recognize that the oral transmitters of traditional tales had little respect for historical truth, or even any concept of it. Greek myth tells us more about the circumstances and concerns of its transmitters than it does about life in the distant past.

Still, legends can contain an element of historical truth. Modern scholars have long thought that Greek legend does reflect, however dimly, major events and power relations of a historical period now known to us through archaeological remains. Many or most of the figures in Greek legend probably did live at some time, most likely in the Mycenaean civilization of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1600–1150 BC). Their very names provide one bit of evidence. For example, the name of Menelaüs, the legendary husband of Helen of Troy, means something like "upholder of the people." This distinctive name is appropriate to the aristocracy that certainly existed during this period, and similar names appear in written documents of the time (the Linear B tablets, the writings of the Mycenaeans, discussed in Chapter 2).

Archaeology provides further evidence. Excavation has shown that many of the places associated with important legendary events were great centers of civilization during the Late Bronze Age. Troy, for example, was a settlement of considerable importance until it was destroyed about 1230 BC. Although we have no proof that it was destroyed by Greek warriors, as Greek legends assert, there remains a tantalizing correspondence between the legend and the archaeological evidence (Figure 1.2).

Like divine myths, some legends also served a specific etiological function. Thus, one Greek story explained why, at the spring wine festival, Athenians brought their own wine jugs, although at other festivals they drank from a communal bowl. According to the legend, the Mycenaean prince Orestes, who had killed his own mother to avenge her murder of his father, came to Athens at the time of the festival.

FIGURE 1.2 The author at the walls of Troy. The earliest settlement at Troy can be dated to about 3000 BC, but the citadel walls shown here belong to the sixth level of occupation (Troy VI), built around 1400 BC and destroyed around 1230 BC. Constructed of neatly cut blocks of limestone that slope inward, the citadel wall had at least four gateways, two of them protected by towers. Either Troy VI or its much poorer successor Troy VIIa, destroyed about 1180 BC, could have inspired Greek legends of the Trojan War. (Author's photo)

The king of Athens did not want to send Orestes away impolitely, but neither did he want the Athenian people to be polluted by sharing a bowl with a man who had murdered his mother, so the king had every man fill his cup from his own jug. In reality the use of separate jugs seems to have arisen from a fear of contagion from ghosts, thought to be abroad at this season. The practice had nothing at all to do with a visit from Orestes, and the story was invented well after the custom was established. Such is often true of etiologies in myth.

We examine the legends of the ancient Greeks and Romans in detail in Part III of this text, with further remarks on general patterns in heroic myth (Chapter 12).

Folktale

Folktale is more difficult to define than is divine myth or legend because of the variety of traditional stories grouped together under this heading. Some scholars describe folktales as any traditional story that is not a divine myth or legend. This category would encompass such familiar fairytales as "Cinderella" and