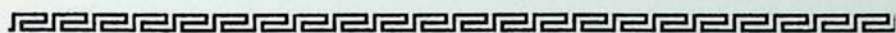


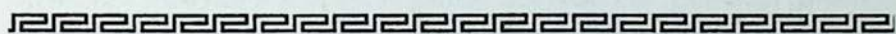
Mythology

EDITH
HAMILTON





MYTHOLOGY



EDITH
HAMILTON



BACK BAY BOOKS

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston London

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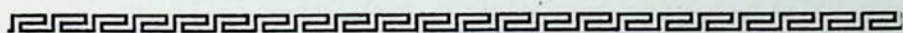
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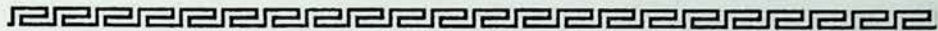
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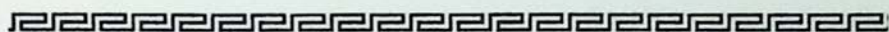


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Preface

A book on Mythology must draw from widely different sources. Twelve hundred years separate the first writers through whom the myths have come down to us from the last, and there are stories as unlike each other as "Cinderella" and "King Lear." To bring them all together in one volume is really somewhat comparable to doing the same for the stories of English literature from Chaucer to the ballads, through Shakespeare and Marlowe and Swift and Defoe and Dryden and Pope and so on, ending with, say, Tennyson and Browning, or even, to make the comparison truer, Kipling and Galsworthy. The English collection would be bigger, but it would not contain more dissimilar material. In point of fact, Chaucer is more like Galsworthy and the ballads like Kipling than Homer is like Lucian or Aeschylus like Ovid.

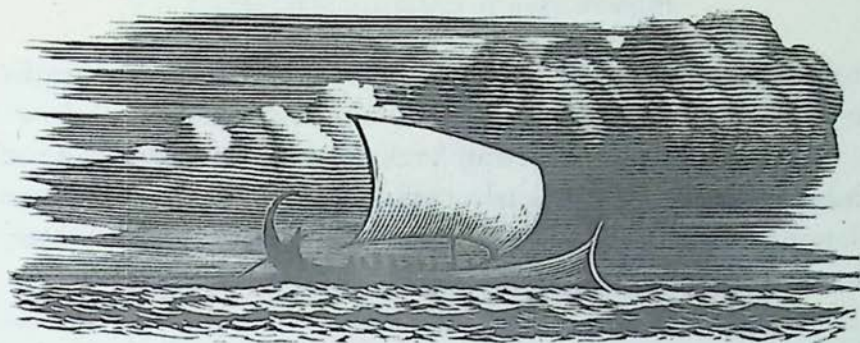
Faced with this problem, I determined at the outset to dismiss any idea of unifying the tales. That would have meant either writing "King Lear," so to speak, down to the level of "Cinderella"—the vice versa procedure being obviously not possible—or else telling in my own way stories which were in no sense mine and had been told by great writers in ways they thought suited their subjects. I do not mean, of course, that a great writer's style can be reproduced or that I should dream

Preface

of attempting such a feat. My aim has been nothing more ambitious than to keep distinct for the reader the very different writers from whom our knowledge of the myths comes. For example, Hesiod is a notably simple writer and devout; he is naïve, even childish, sometimes crude, always full of piety. Many of the stories in this book are told only by him. Side by side with them are stories told only by Ovid, subtle, polished, artificial, self-conscious, and the complete skeptic. My effort has been to make the reader see some difference between writers who were so different. After all, when one takes up a book like this, one does not ask how entertainingly the author has retold the stories, but how close he has brought the reader to the original.

My hope is that those who do not know the classics will gain in this way not only a knowledge of the myths, but some little idea of what the writers were like who told them—who have been proved, by two thousand years and more, to be immortal.

MYTHOLOGY



Introduction to Classical Mythology

*Of old the Hellenic race was marked off from the barbarian
as more keen-witted and more free from nonsense.*

HERODOTUS I: 60.

GREEK and Roman mythology is quite generally supposed to show us the way the human race thought and felt untold ages ago. Through it, according to this view, we can retrace the path from civilized man who lives so far from nature, to man who lived in close companionship with nature; and the real interest of the myths is that they lead us back to a time when the world was young and people had a connection with the earth, with trees and seas and flowers and hills, unlike anything we ourselves can feel. When the stories were being shaped, we are given to understand, little distinction had as yet been made between the real and the unreal. The imagination was vividly alive and not checked by the reason, so that anyone in the woods might see through the trees a fleeing

nymph, or bending over a clear pool to drink, behold in the depths a naiad's face.

The prospect of traveling back to this delightful state of things is held out by nearly every writer who touches upon classical mythology, above all by the poets. In that infinitely remote time primitive man could

Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

And we for a moment can catch, through the myths he made, a glimpse of that strangely and beautifully animated world.

But a very brief consideration of the ways of uncivilized peoples everywhere and in all ages is enough to prick that romantic bubble. Nothing is clearer than the fact that primitive man, whether in New Guinea today or eons ago in the prehistoric wilderness, is not and never has been a creature who peoples his world with bright fancies and lovely visions. Horrors lurked in the primeval forest, not nymphs and naiads. Terror lived there, with its close attendant, Magic, and its most common defense, Human Sacrifice. Mankind's chief hope of escaping the wrath of whatever divinities were then abroad lay in some magical rite, senseless but powerful, or in some offering made at the cost of pain and grief.

THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE GREEKS

This dark picture is worlds apart from the stories of classical mythology. The study of the way early man looked at his surroundings does not get much help from the Greeks. How briefly the anthropologists treat the Greek myths is noteworthy.

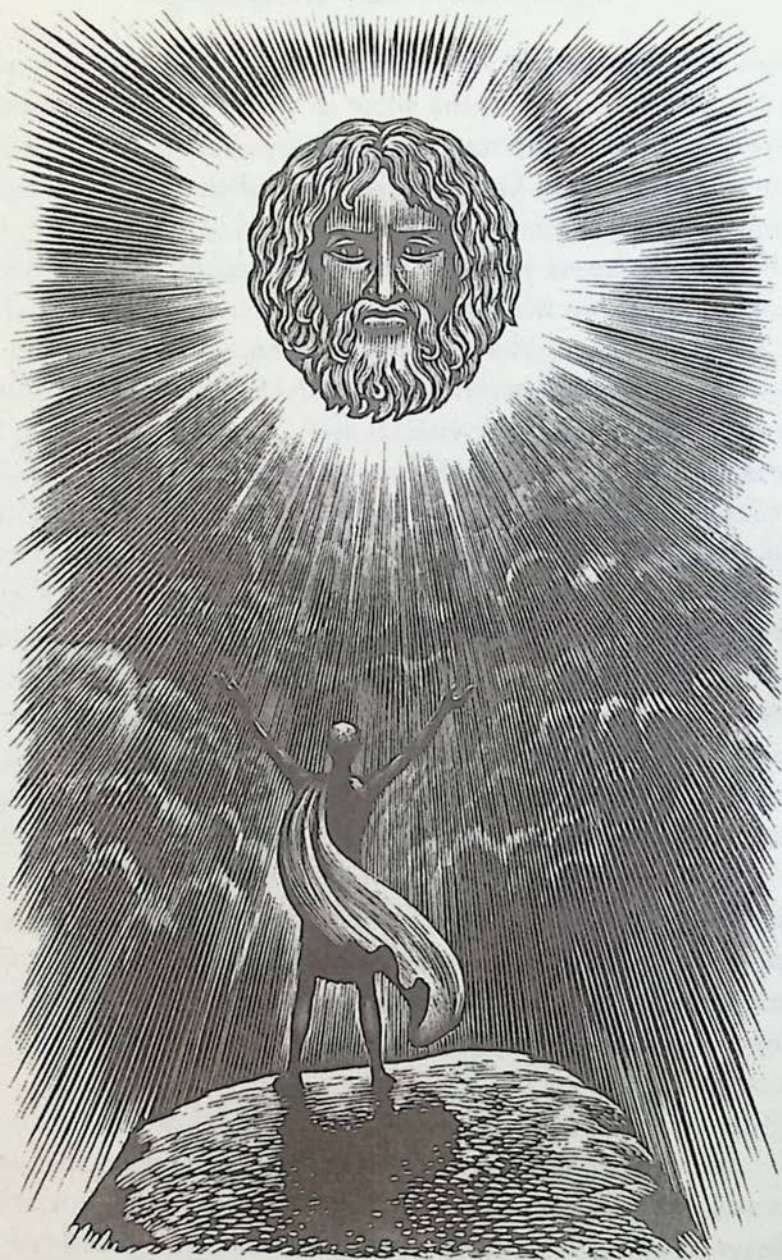
Of course the Greeks too had their roots in the primeval

slime. Of course they too once lived a savage life, ugly and brutal. But what the myths show is how high they had risen above the ancient filth and fierceness by the time we have any knowledge of them. Only a few traces of that time are to be found in the stories.

We do not know when these stories were first told in their present shape; but whenever it was, primitive life had been left far behind. The myths as we have them are the creation of great poets. The first written record of Greece is the *Iliad*. Greek mythology begins with Homer, generally believed to be not earlier than a thousand years before Christ. The *Iliad* is, or contains, the oldest Greek literature; and it is written in a rich and subtle and beautiful language which must have had behind it centuries when men were striving to express themselves with clarity and beauty, an indisputable proof of civilization. The tales of Greek mythology do not throw any clear light upon what early mankind was like. They do throw an abundance of light upon what early Greeks were like—a matter, it would seem, of more importance to us, who are their descendants intellectually, artistically, and politically, too. Nothing we learn about them is alien to ourselves.

People often speak of “the Greek miracle.” What the phrase tries to express is the new birth of the world with the awakening of Greece. “Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.” Something like that happened in Greece.

Why it happened, or when, we have no idea at all. We know only that in the earliest Greek poets a new point of view dawned, never dreamed of in the world before them, but never to leave the world after them. With the coming forward of Greece, mankind became the center of the universe, the most important thing in it. This was a revolution in thought. Human



The Greeks, unlike the Egyptians, made their gods in their own image.

beings had counted for little heretofore. In Greece man first realized what mankind was.

The Greeks made their gods in their own image. That had not entered the mind of man before. Until then, gods had had no semblance of reality. They were unlike all living things. In Egypt, a towering colossus, immobile, beyond the power of the imagination to endow with movement, as fixed in the stone as the tremendous temple columns, a representation of the human shape deliberately made unhuman. Or a rigid figure, a woman with a cat's head suggesting inflexible, inhuman cruelty. Or a monstrous mysterious sphinx, aloof from all that lives. In Mesopotamia, bas-reliefs of bestial shapes unlike any beast ever known, men with birds' heads and lions with bulls' heads and both with eagles' wings, creations of artists who were intent upon producing something never seen except in their own minds, the very consummation of unreality.

These and their like were what the pre-Greek world worshiped. One need only place beside them in imagination any Greek statue of a god, so normal and natural with all its beauty, to perceive what a new idea had come into the world. With its coming, the universe became rational.

Saint Paul said the invisible must be understood by the visible. That was not a Hebrew idea, it was Greek. In Greece alone in the ancient world people were preoccupied with the visible; they were finding the satisfaction of their desires in what was actually in the world around them. The sculptor watched the athletes contending in the games and he felt that nothing he could imagine would be as beautiful as those strong young bodies. So he made his statue of Apollo. The storyteller found Hermes among the people he passed in the street. He saw the god "like a young man at the age when youth is loveliest," as Homer says. Greek artists and poets realized how

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splendid a man could be, straight and swift and strong. He was the fulfillment of their search for beauty. They had no wish to create some fantasy shaped in their own minds. All the art and all the thought of Greece centered in human beings.

Human gods naturally made heaven a pleasantly familiar place. The Greeks felt at home in it. They knew just what the divine inhabitants did there, what they ate and drank and where they banqueted and how they amused themselves. Of course they were to be feared; they were very powerful and very dangerous when angry. Still, with proper care a man could be quite fairly at ease with them. He was even perfectly free to laugh at them. Zeus, trying to hide his love affairs from his wife and invariably shown up, was a capital figure of fun. The Greeks enjoyed him and liked him all the better for it. Hera was that stock character of comedy, the typical jealous wife, and her ingenious tricks to discomfit her husband and punish her rival, far from displeasing the Greeks, entertained them as much as Hera's modern counterpart does us today. Such stories made for a friendly feeling. Laughter in the presence of an Egyptian sphinx or an Assyrian bird-beast was inconceivable; but it was perfectly natural in Olympus, and it made the gods companionable.

On earth, too, the deities were exceedingly and humanly attractive. In the form of lovely youths and maidens they peopled the woodland, the forest, the rivers, the sea, in harmony with the fair earth and the bright waters.

That is the miracle of Greek mythology — a humanized world, men freed from the paralyzing fear of an omnipotent Unknown. The terrifying incomprehensibilities which were worshiped elsewhere, and the fearsome spirits with which earth, air, and sea swarmed, were banned from Greece. It may seem odd to say that the men who made the myths disliked

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the irrational and had a love for facts; but it is true, no matter how wildly fantastic some of the stories are. Anyone who reads them with attention discovers that even the most nonsensical take place in a world which is essentially rational and matter-of-fact. Hercules, whose life was one long combat against preposterous monsters, is always said to have had his home in the city of Thebes. The exact spot where Aphrodite was born of the foam could be visited by any ancient tourist; it was just offshore from the island of Cythera. The winged steed Pegasus, after skimming the air all day, went every night to a comfortable stable in Corinth. A familiar local habitation gave reality to all the mythical beings. If the mixture seems childish, consider how reassuring and how sensible the solid background is as compared with the Genie who comes from nowhere when Aladdin rubs the lamp and, his task accomplished, returns to nowhere.

The terrifying irrational has no place in classical mythology. Magic, so powerful in the world before and after Greece, is almost nonexistent. There are no men and only two women with dreadful, supernatural powers. The demoniac wizards and the hideous old witches who haunted Europe and America, too, up to quite recent years, play no part at all in the stories. Circe and Medea are the only witches and they are young and of surpassing beauty—delightful, not horrible. Astrology, which has flourished from the days of ancient Babylon down to today, is completely absent from classical Greece. There are many stories about the stars, but not a trace of the idea that they influence men's lives. Astronomy is what the Greek mind finally made out of the stars. Not a single story has a magical priest who is terribly to be feared because he knows ways of winning over the gods or alienating them. The priest is rarely seen and is never of importance. In the *Odyssey* when a priest

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and a poet fall on their knees before Odysseus, praying him to spare their lives, the hero kills the priest without a thought, but saves the poet. Homer says that he felt awe to slay a man who had been taught his divine art by the gods. Not the priest, but the poet, had influence with heaven — and no one was ever afraid of a poet. Ghosts, too, which have played so large and so fearsome a part in other lands, never appear on earth in any Greek story. The Greeks were not afraid of the dead — “the piteous dead,” the *Odyssey* calls them.

The world of Greek mythology was not a place of terror for the human spirit. It is true that the gods were disconcertingly incalculable. One could never tell where Zeus’s thunderbolt would strike. Nevertheless, the whole divine company, with a very few and for the most part not important exceptions, were entrancingly beautiful with a human beauty, and nothing humanly beautiful is really terrifying. The early Greek mythologists transformed a world full of fear into a world full of beauty.

This bright picture has its dark spots. The change came about slowly and was never quite completed. The gods-become-human were for a long time a very slight improvement upon their worshipers. They were incomparably lovelier and more powerful, and they were of course immortal; but they often acted in a way no decent man or woman would. In the *Iliad* Hector is nobler by far than any of the heavenly beings, and Andromache infinitely to be preferred to Athena or Aphrodite. Hera from first to last is a goddess on a very low level of humanity. Almost every one of the radiant divinities could act cruelly or contemptibly. A very limited sense of right and wrong prevailed in Homer’s heaven, and for a long time after.

Other dark spots too stand out. There are traces of a time when there were beast-gods. The satyrs are goat-men and the

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centaurs are half man, half horse. Hera is often called "cow-faced," as if the adjective had somehow stuck to her through all her changes from a divine cow to the very human queen of heaven. There are also stories which point back clearly to a time when there was human sacrifice. But what is astonishing is not that bits of savage belief were left here and there. The strange thing is that they are so few.

Of course the mythical monster is present in any number of shapes,

Gorgons and hydras and chimaeras dire,

but they are there only to give the hero his meed of glory. What could a hero do in a world without them? They are always overcome by him. The great hero of mythology, Hercules, might be an allegory of Greece herself. He fought the monsters and freed the earth from them just as Greece freed the earth from the monstrous idea of the unhuman supreme over the human.

Greek mythology is largely made up of stories about gods and goddesses, but it must not be read as a kind of Greek Bible, an account of the Greek religion. According to the most modern idea, a real myth has nothing to do with religion. It is an explanation of something in nature; how, for instance, any and everything in the universe came into existence: men, animals, this or that tree or flower, the sun, the moon, the stars, storms, eruptions, earthquakes, all that is and all that happens. Thunder and lightning are caused when Zeus hurls his thunderbolt. A volcano erupts because a terrible creature is imprisoned in the mountain and every now and then struggles to get free. The Dipper, the constellation called also the Great Bear, does not set below the horizon because a goddess once was angry

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at it and decreed that it should never sink into the sea. Myths are early science, the result of men's first trying to explain what they saw around them. But there are many so-called myths which explain nothing at all. These tales are pure entertainment, the sort of thing people would tell each other on a long winter's evening. The story of Pygmalion and Galatea is an example; it has no conceivable connection with any event in nature. Neither has the Quest of the Golden Fleece, nor Orpheus and Eurydice, nor many another. This fact is now generally accepted; and we do not have to try to find in every mythological heroine the moon or the dawn and in every hero's life a sun myth. The stories are early literature as well as early science.

But religion is there, too. In the background, to be sure, but nevertheless plain to see. From Homer through the tragedians and even later, there is a deepening realization of what human beings need and what they must have in their gods.

Zeus the Thunderer was, it seems certain, once a rain-god. He was supreme even over the sun, because rocky Greece needed rain more than sunshine and the God of Gods would be the one who could give the precious water of life to his worshipers. But Homer's Zeus is not a fact of nature. He is a person living in a world where civilization has made an entry, and of course he has a standard of right and wrong. It is not very high, certainly, and seems chiefly applicable to others, not to himself; but he does punish men who lie and break their oaths; he is angered by any ill treatment of the dead; and he pities and helps old Priam when he goes as a suppliant to Achilles. In the *Odyssey*, he has reached a higher level. The swineherd there says that the needy and the stranger are from Zeus and he who fails to help them sins against Zeus himself. Hesiod, not much later than the *Odyssey* if at all, says of a man

who does evil to the suppliant and the stranger, or who wrongs orphan children, "with that man Zeus is angry."

Then Justice became Zeus's companion. That was a new idea. The buccaneering chieftains in the *Iliad* did not want justice. They wanted to be able to take whatever they chose because they were strong and they wanted a god who was on the side of the strong. But Hesiod, who was a peasant living in a poor man's world, knew that the poor must have a just god. He wrote, "Fishes and beasts and fowls of the air devour one another. But to man, Zeus has given justice. Beside Zeus on his throne Justice has her seat." These passages show that the great and bitter needs of the helpless were reaching up to heaven and changing the god of the strong into the protector of the weak.

So, back of the stories of an amorous Zeus and a cowardly Zeus and a ridiculous Zeus, we can catch sight of another Zeus coming into being, as men grow continually more conscious of what life demanded of them and what human beings needed in the god they worshiped. Gradually this Zeus displaced the others, until he occupied the whole scene. At last he became, in the words of Dio Chrysostom, who wrote during the second century A.D.: "Our Zeus, the giver of every good gift, the common father and saviour and guardian of mankind."

The *Odyssey* speaks of "the divine for which all men long," and hundreds of years later Aristotle wrote, "Excellence, much labored for by the race of mortals." The Greeks from the earliest mythologists on had a perception of the divine and the excellent. Their longing for them was great enough to make them never give up laboring to see them clearly, until at last the thunder and lightning were changed into the Universal Father.

THE GREEK AND ROMAN WRITERS OF
MYTHOLOGY

Most of the books about the stories of classical mythology depend chiefly upon the Latin poet Ovid, who wrote during the reign of Augustus. Ovid is a compendium of mythology. No ancient writer can compare with him in this respect. He told almost all the stories and he told them at great length. Occasionally stories familiar to us through literature and art have come down to us only in his pages. In this book I have avoided using him as far as possible. Undoubtedly he was a good poet and a good storyteller and able to appreciate the myths enough to realize what excellent material they offered him; but he was really farther away from them in his point of view than we are today. They were sheer nonsense to him. He wrote,

I prate of ancient poets' monstrous lies,
Ne'er seen or now or then by human eyes.

He says in effect to his reader, "Never mind how silly they are. I will dress them up so prettily for you that you will like them." And he does, often very prettily indeed, but in his hands the stories which were factual truth and solemn truth to the early Greek poets Hesiod and Pindar, and vehicles of deep religious truth to the Greek tragedians, become idle tales, sometimes witty and diverting, often sentimental and distressingly rhetorical. The Greek mythologists are not rhetoricians and are notably free from sentimentality.

The list of the chief writers through whom the myths have come down to us is not long. Homer heads it, of course. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are, or rather contain, the oldest Greek writings we have. There is no way to date accurately any part

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of them. Scholars differ widely, and will no doubt continue to do so. As unobjectionable a date as any is 1000 B.C. — at any rate for the *Iliad*, the older of the two poems.

In all that follows, here and in the rest of the book, the date given is to be understood as before Christ, unless it is otherwise stated.

The second writer on the list is sometimes placed in the ninth century, sometimes in the eighth. Hesiod was a poor farmer whose life was hard and bitter. There cannot be a greater contrast than that between his poem, the *Works and Days*, which tries to show men how to live a good life in a harsh world, and the courtly splendor of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But Hesiod has much to say about the gods, and a second poem, usually ascribed to him, the *Theogony*, is entirely concerned with mythology. If Hesiod did write it, then a humble peasant, living on a lonely farm far from cities, was the first man in Greece to wonder how everything had happened, the world, the sky, the gods, mankind, and to think out an explanation. Homer never wondered about anything. The *Theogony* is an account of the creation of the universe and the generations of the gods, and it is very important for mythology.

Next in order come the Homeric Hymns, poems written to honor various gods. They cannot be definitely dated, but the earliest are considered by most scholars to belong to the end of the eighth century or the beginning of the seventh. The last one of importance — there are thirty-three in all — belongs to fifth-century or possibly fourth-century Athens.

Pindar, the greatest lyric poet of Greece, began to write toward the end of the sixth century. He wrote Odes in honor of the victors in the games at the great national festivals of Greece, and in every one of his poems myths are told or alluded to. Pindar is quite as important for mythology as Hesiod.

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Aeschylus, the oldest of the three tragic poets, was a contemporary of Pindar's. The other two, Sophocles and Euripides, were a little younger. Euripides, the youngest, died at the end of the fifth century. Except for Aeschylus' *Persians*, written to celebrate the victory of the Greeks over the Persians at Salamis, all the plays have mythological subjects. With Homer, they are the most important source of our knowledge of the myths.

The great writer of comedy, Aristophanes, who lived in the last part of the fifth century and the beginning of the fourth, refers often to the myths, as do also two great prose writers, Herodotus, the first historian of Europe, who was a contemporary of Euripides, and Plato, the philosopher, who lived less than a generation later.

The Alexandrian poets lived around 250 B.C. They were so called because, when they wrote, the center of Greek literature had moved from Greece to Alexandria in Egypt. Apollonius of Rhodes told at length the Quest of the Golden Fleece, and in connection with the story a number of other myths. He and three other Alexandrians, who also wrote about mythology, the pastoral poets Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus, have lost the simplicity of Hesiod's and Pindar's belief in the gods, and are far removed from the depth and gravity of the tragic poets' view of religion; but they are not frivolous like Ovid.

Two late writers, Apuleius, a Latin, and Lucian, a Greek, both of the second century A.D., make an important contribution. The famous story of Cupid and Psyche is told only by Apuleius, who writes very much like Ovid. Lucian writes like no one except himself. He satirized the gods. In his time they had become a joking matter. Nevertheless, he gives by the way a good deal of information about them.

Apollodorus, also a Greek, is, next to Ovid, the most volu-

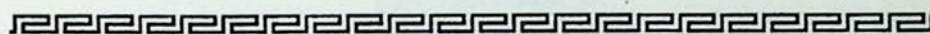
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minous ancient writer on mythology, but, unlike Ovid, he is very matter-of-fact and very dull. His date has been differently set all the way from the first century B.C. to the ninth century A.D. The English scholar, Sir J. G. Frazer, thinks he probably wrote in either the first or the second century of our era.

The Greek Pausanias, an ardent traveler, the author of the first guidebook ever written, has a good deal to say about the mythological events reported to have happened in the places he visited. He lived as late as the second century A.D., but he does not question any of the stories. He writes about them with complete seriousness.

Of the Roman writers, Virgil stands far ahead. He did not believe in the myths any more than Ovid did, whose contemporary he was, but he found human nature in them and he brought mythological personages to life as no one had done since the Greek tragedians.

Other Roman poets wrote of the myths. Catullus tells several of the stories, and Horace alludes to them often, but neither is important for mythology. To all Romans the stories were infinitely remote, mere shadows. The best guides to a knowledge of Greek mythology are the Greek writers, who believed in what they wrote.



PART ONE

The Gods,
the Creation,
and the
Earliest Heroes



CHAPTER I

The Gods

*Strange clouded fragments of an ancient glory,
Late lingerers of the company divine,
They breathe of that far world wherefrom they come,
Lost halls of heaven and Olympian air.*

THE Greeks did not believe that the gods created the universe. It was the other way about: the universe created the gods. Before there were gods heaven and earth had been formed. They were the first parents. The Titans were their children, and the gods were their grandchildren.

THE TITANS AND THE TWELVE GREAT OLYMPIANS

The Titans, often called the Elder Gods, were for untold ages supreme in the universe. They were of enormous size and of incredible strength. There were many of them, but only a few

Mythology

appear in the stories of mythology. The most important was CRONUS, in Latin SATURN. He ruled over the other Titans until his son Zeus dethroned him and seized the power for himself. The Romans said that when Jupiter, their name for Zeus, ascended the throne, Saturn fled to Italy and brought in the Golden Age, a time of perfect peace and happiness, which lasted as long as he reigned.

The other notable Titans were OCEAN, the river that was supposed to encircle the earth; his wife TETHYS; HYPERION, the father of the sun, the moon, and the dawn; MNEMOSYNE, which means Memory; THEMIS, usually translated by Justice; and IAPETUS, important because of his sons, ATLAS, who bore the world on his shoulders, and PROMETHEUS, who was the savior of mankind. These alone among the older gods were not banished with the coming of Zeus, but they took a lower place.

The twelve great Olympians were supreme among the gods who succeeded to the Titans. They were called the Olympians because Olympus was their home. What Olympus was, however, is not easy to say. There is no doubt that at first it was held to be a mountain top, and generally identified with Greece's highest mountain, Mt. Olympus in Thessaly, in the northeast of Greece. But even in the earliest Greek poem, the *Iliad*, this idea is beginning to give way to the idea of an Olympus in some mysterious region far above all the mountains of the earth. In one passage of the *Iliad* Zeus talks to the gods from "the topmost peak of many-ridged Olympus," clearly a mountain. But only a little further on he says that if he willed he could hang earth and sea from a pinnacle of Olympus, clearly no longer a mountain. Even so, it is not heaven. Homer makes Poseidon say that he rules the sea, Hades the dead, Zeus the heavens, but Olympus is common to all three.

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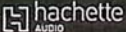
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