

Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes

By Edith Hamilton

Intro to Classical Mythology

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. 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.

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. 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 existed 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 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, 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.

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 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 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.

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 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 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.

This bright picture has its dark spots. The change came about slowly and was never quite completed. The gods-be-come-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. 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 centaurs are half man, half horse. 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, but they are there only to give the hero his need of glory. What could a hero do in a world without them? They are always overcome by him.

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. 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. 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.

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.

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.

Chapter One: The Gods

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

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 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 order gods were not banished with the coming of Zeus but they took a lower place.

The Twelve Olympians

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 wilted 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.

Wherever it was, the entrance to it was a great gate of clouds kept by the Seasons. Within were the gods' dwellings, where they lived and slept and feasted on ambrosia and nectar and listened to Apollo's lyre. It was

an abode of perfect blessedness. No wind, Homer says, ever-shakes the untroubled peace of Olympus; no rain ever falls there or snow; but the cloudless firmament stretches around it on all sides and the white glory of Sunshine is diffused upon its walls

The twelve Olympians made up a divine family:

(1) Zeus (JUPITER), the chief; his two brothers next, (2) POSEIDON (NEPTUNE), and (3) HADES, also called PLUTO; (4) HESTA (VESTA), their sister; (5) HERA (JUNO), Zeus' wife, and (6) ARES (MARS), their son; Zeus' children: (7) ARES (MARS), (8) APOLLO, (9) APHRODITE (VENUS), (10) HERMES (MERCURY), and (11) ARTEMIS (DIANA); and Hera's son (12) HEPHAESTUS (Vulcan), sometimes said to be the son of Zeus too.

ZEUS (JUPITER)

Zeus and his brothers drew lots for their share of the universe. The sea fell to Poseidon, and the underworld to Hades. Zeus became the supreme ruler. He was Lord of the Sky, the Rain-god and the Cloud-gatherer, who wielded the awful thunderbolt. His power was greater than that of all the other divinities together. In the *Iliad* he tells his family, "I am mightiest of all. Make trial that you may know. Fasten a rope of gold to heaven and lay hold, every god and goddess. You could not drag down Zeus. But if I wished to drag you down, then I would. The rope I would bind to a pinnacle of Olympus and all would hang in the air, yes, the very earth and the sea too."

Nevertheless he was not omnipotent or omniscient, either. He could be opposed and deceived. Poseidon dupes him in the *Iliad* and so does Hera. Sometimes, too, the mysterious power, Fate, is spoken of as stronger than he. Homer makes Hera ask him scornfully if he proposes to deliver from death a man Fate has doomed.

He is represented as falling in love with one woman after another and descending to all manner of tricks to hide his infidelity from his wife. The explanation why such actions were ascribed to the most majestic of the gods is, the scholars say, that the Zeus of song and story has been made by combining many gods. When his worship spread to a town where there was already a divine ruler the two were slowly fused into one. The life of the early god was then transferred to Zeus. The

result, however, was unfortunate and the later Greeks did not like these endless love affairs.

Still, even in the earliest records Zeus had grandeur. In the *Iliad* Agamemnon prays: "Zeus, most glorious, most great, God of the storm-cloud, thou that dwellest in the heavens." He demanded, too, not only sacrifices from men, but right action. The Greek Army at Troy is told "Father Zeus never helps liars or those who break their oaths." The two ideas of him, the low and the high, persisted side by side for a long time.

His breastplate or shield was the aegis, awful to behold; his bird was the eagle, his tree the oak. His oracle was Dodona in the land of oak trees. The gods' will was revealed by the rustling of the oak leaves which the priests interpreted.

POSEIDON (NEPTUNE)

He was the ruler of the sea, Zeus' brother and second only to him in eminence. The Greeks on both sides of the Aegean were seamen and the God of the Sea was all important to them. His wife was Amphitrite, a granddaughter of the Titan, Ocean. Poseidon had a splendid palace beneath the sea, but he was oftener to be found in Olympus.

Besides being Lord of the Sea he gave the first horse to man, and he was honored as much for the one as for the other.

But when he drove in his golden car over the waters, the thunder of the waves sank into stillness and tranquil peace followed his smooth-rolling wheels. He was commonly called "Earth-shaker" and was always shown carrying his trident, a three-pronged spear, with which he would shake and shatter whatever he pleased. He had some connection with bulls as well as with horses, but the bull was connected with many other gods too.

HERA (JUNO)

She was Zeus' wife and sister. The Titans Ocean and Tethys, brought her up. She was the protector of marriage, and married women were her peculiar care. There is very little that is attractive in the portrait the poets draw of her. She is called, indeed, in an early poem,

*Golden-throned Hera, among immortals the queen.
Chief among them in beauty, the glorious lady
All the blessed in high Olympus revere,
Honor even as Zeus, the lord of the thunder.*

But when any account of her gets down to details, it shows her chiefly engaged in punishing the many women Zeus fell in love with, even when they yielded only because he coerced or tricked them. It made no difference to Hera how reluctant any of them were or how innocent, the goddess treated them all alike. Her implacable anger followed them and their children too. She never forgot an injury. The Trojan War would have ended in an honorable peace, leaving both sides unconquered, if it had not been for her hatred of a Trojan who had judged another goddess lovelier than she. The wrong of her slighted beauty remained with her until Troy fell in ruins.

In one important story, the Quest of the Golden Fleece, she is the gracious protector of heroes and the inspirer of heroic deeds, but not in any other. Nevertheless she was venerated in every home. She was the goddess married women turned to for help. Ilithyia (or Eileithyia), who helped women in childbirth, was her daughter.

The cow and the peacock were sacred to her. Argos was her favorite city.

HADES (PLUTO)

He was the third brother among the Olympians, who drew for his share the underworld and the rule over the dead. He was also called Pluto, the God of Wealth, of the precious metals hidden in the earth. The Romans as well as the Greeks called him by this name, but often they translated it into *Dis*, the Latin word for rich. He had a far-famed cap or helmet which made whoever wore it invisible. It was rare that he left his dark realm to visit Olympus or the earth, nor was he urged to do so. He was not a welcome visitor. He was un pitying, inexorable, but just; a terrible, not an evil god.

His wife was Persephone (Proserpine) whom he carried away from the earth and made Queen of the Lower World. He was King of the Dead-not Death himself, whom the Greeks called Thanatos and the Romans, Orcus.

PALLAS ATHENA (MINERVA)

She was the daughter of Zeus alone. No mother bore her. Full-grown and in full armor, she sprang from his head. In the earliest account of her, the *Iliad*, she is a fierce and ruthless battle-goddess, but elsewhere she is warlike only to defend the State and the home from outside enemies. She was pre-eminently the Goddess of the City, the protector of civilized life, of handicrafts and agriculture; the inventor of the bridle, who first tamed horses for men to use. She was Zeus' favorite child. He trusted her to carry the awful aegis, his buckler, and his devastating weapon, the thunderbolt.

The word most often used to describe her is "gray-eyed," or, as it is sometimes translated, "flashing-eyed." Of the three virgin goddesses she was the chief and was called the Maiden, Parthenos, and her temple the Parthenon. In later poetry she is the embodiment of wisdom, reason, purity. Athens was her special city; the olive created by her was her tree; the owl her bird.

PHOEBUS APOLLO

The son of Zeus and Leto (Latona), born in the little island of Delos. He has been called "the most Greek of all the gods". He is a beautiful figure in Greek poetry, the master musician who delights Olympus as he plays on his golden lyre; the lord too of the silver bow, the Archer-god, far shooting the Healer, as well, who taught men the healing art. Even more than of these good and lovely endowments, he is the God of Light, in whom is no darkness at all, and so he is the God of Truth. No false word ever falls from his lips.

Delphi under towering Parnassus, where Apollo's oracle was, plays an important part in mythology. Castalia was its sacred spring; Cephissus its river. It was held to be the center of the world, so many pilgrims came to it, from foreign countries as well as Greece. No other shrine rivaled it. The answers to the questions asked by the anxious seekers for Truth were delivered by a priestess who went into a trance before she spoke. The trance was supposed to be caused by a vapor rising from a deep cleft in the rock over which her seat was placed, a three legged stool, the tripod.

Apollo was called Delian from Delors, the island of his birth, and Pythian from his killing of a serpent, Python, which once lived in the caves of Parnassus. It

was a frightful monster and the contest was severe, but in the end the god's unerring arrows won the victory. Another name often given him was "the Lycian", variously explained as meaning Wolf-god, God of Light, and God of Lycia. In the *Iliad* he is called "the Sminthian,": the Mouse -god, but whether because he protected mice or destroyed them no one knows. Often he was the Sun-god too. His name Phoebus means "brilliant" or "shining". Accurately, however, the Sun-god was Helios, child of the Titan Hyperion.

Apollo at Delphi was a purely beneficent power, a direct link between gods and men, guiding men to know the divine will showing them how to make peace with the gods; the purifier, too, able to cleanse even those stained with the blood of their kindred. Nevertheless, there are a few tales told of him which show him pitiless and cruel. Two ideas were fighting in him as in all the gods: a primitive, crude idea and one that was beautiful and poetic. In him only a little of the primitive is left. The laurel was his tree. Many creatures were sacred to him, chief among them the dolphin and the crow.

ARTEMIS (DIANA)

Also called Cynthia, from her birth place, Mount Cynthus in Delos Apollo's twin sister, daughter of Zeus and Leto. She was one of the three maiden goddesses of Olympus: Golden Aphrodite who stirs with love all creation, Cannot bend nor ensnare three hearts: the pure maiden Vesta, Gray-eyed Athena who cares but for was and the arts of the craftsmen, Artemis, lover of woods and the wild chase over the mountain.

She was the Lady of Wild Things, Huntsman-in-chief to the gods, an odd office for a woman. Like a good huntsman, she was careful to preserve the young; she was "the protectress of dewy youth" everywhere. Nevertheless, with one of those startling contradictions so common in mythology, she kept the Greek Fleet from sailing to Troy until they sacrificed a maiden to her. In many another story, too, she is fierce and revengeful. On the other hand, when women died a swift and painless death, they were held to have been slain by her silver arrows.

As Phoebus was the Sun, she was the Moon called Phoebe and Selene (Luna in Latin). Neither name originally belonged to her. Phoebe was a Titan, one of the older gods. So too was Selene- a moon-goddess,

indeed, but not connected with Apollo. She was the sister of Helios, the sun-god with whom Apollo was confused.

In the later poets, Artemis is identified with Hecate. She is "the goddess with three forms, " Selene in the sky, Artemis on earth, Hecate in the lower world and in the world above when it is wrapped in darkness. Hecate was the Goddess of the dark of the Moon, the black nights when the moon is hidden. She was associated with deeds of darkness, the Goddess of the Crossways, which were held to be ghostly places of evil magic.

APHRODITE (VENUS)

The Goddess of Love and Beauty, who beguiled all, gods and men alike; the laughter-loving goddess, who laughed sweetly or mockingly at those her wiles had conquered; the resistible goddess who stole away even the wits of the wise. She is the daughter of Zeus and Dione in the *Iliad*, but the later poems she is said to have sprung from the foam of the sea, and her name was explained as meaning "the foam risen." Aphros is foam in Greek. This sea birth took place near Cythera, from where she was wafted to Cyprus. Both islands were forever after sacred to her, and she was called Cytherea or the Cyprian as often as by her proper name.

The Romans wrote of her in the same way. With her, beauty comes. The winds flee before her and the storm clouds; sweet flowers embroider the earth; the waves of the sea laugh; she moves in radiant light. Without her there is not joy nor loveliness anywhere. This is the picture the poets like best to paint of her.

But she had another side too. It was natural that she should cut a poor figure in the *Iliad*, where the battle of heroes is the theme. She is a soft, weak creature there, whom a mortal need not fear to attack. In later poems she is usually shown as treacherous and malicious, exerting a deadly and destructive power over men.

In most of the stories she is the wife of Hephaestus (Vulcan), the lame and ugly god of the forge.

The myrtle was her tree; the dove her bird-sometimes, too, the sparrow and the swan.

HERMES (MERCURY)

Zeus was his father and Maia, daughter of Atlas, his mother. Because of a very popular statue his

appearance is more familiar to us than that of any other god. He was graceful and swift of motion. On his feet were winged sandals; wings were on his low-crowned hat, to, and on his magic wand, the Caduceus. He was Zeus' messenger, who "flies as fleet as thought to do his bidding".

Zeus made him give them back, and he won Apollo's forgiveness by presenting him with the lyre which he had just invented, making it out of a tortoise's shell. Perhaps there was some connection between that very early story of him and the fact that he was God of Commerce and the Market, protector of traders. In odd contrast to this idea of him, he was also the solemn guide of the dead, the Divine Herald who led the souls down to their last home. He appears oftener in the tales of mythology than any other god.

ARES (MARS)

The God of War, son of Zeus and Hera, both of whom, Homer says, detested him. Indeed, he is hateful throughout the *Iliad*, poem of war though it is. Occasionally the heroes "rejoice in the delight of Ares' battle," but far oftener in having escaped the fury of the ruthless god." Homer calls him murderous, bloodstained, the incarnate curse of mortals; and, strangely, a coward, too, who bellows with pain and runs away when he is wounded. Yet he has a train of attendants on the battlefield which should inspire anyone with confidence. His sister is there, Eris, which means discord, and Strife, her son. The Goddess of War, Enyo, -in Latin Bellona,- walks beside him, and with her are Terror and Trembling and Panic. As they move, the voice of groaning arises behind them and the earth streams with blood.

The Romans liked Mars better than the Greeks liked ARES. He never was to them the mean whining deity of the *Iliad*, but magnificent in shining armor, redoubtable, invincible. The warriors of the great Latin heroic poem, the *Aeneid*, far from rejoicing to escape from him, rejoice when they see that they are to fall "on Mars' field of renown." They "rush on glorious death" and find it "sweet to die in battle."

Ares figures little in mythology. In one story he is the lover of Aphrodite and held up to the contempt of the Olympians by Aphrodite's husband, Hephaestus; but for the most part he is little more than a symbol of war.

He is not a distinct personality, like Hermes or Hera or Apollo.

He had no cities where he was worshipped. The Greeks said vaguely that he came from Thrace, home of a rude, fierce people in the northeast of Greece. Appropriately, his bird was the vulture. The dog was wronged by being chosen as his animal.

HEPHAESTUS (VULCAN AND MULCIBER)

The god of Fire, sometimes said to be the son of Zeus and Hera, sometimes of Hera alone, who bore him in retaliation of Zeus' having brought forth Athena. Among the perfectly beautiful immortals he only was ugly. He was lame as well. In one place in the *Iliad* he says that his shameless mother, when she saw that he was born deformed, cast him out of heaven; in another place he declares that Zeus did this, angry with him for trying to defend Hera.

These events, however, were supposed to have taken place in the far distant past. In Homer he is no danger of being driven from Olympus; he is highly honored there, the workman of the immortals, their armorer and smith, who makes their dwellings and their furnishings as well as their weapons. In his workshop he has handmaidens he has forged out of gold who can move and who can help him in his work.

In the later poets his forge is often said to be under this or that volcano, and to cause eruptions. His wife is one of the three Graces in the *Iliad*, called Aglaia in Hesiod; in the *Odyssey* she is Aphrodite. He was a kindly, peace loving god, popular on earth as in heaven. With Athena, he was important in the life of the city. The two were the patrons of handicrafts, the arts which along with agriculture are the support of civilization; he the protector of the smiths as she of the weavers. When children were formally admitted to the city organization, the god of the ceremony was Hephaestus.

HESTIA (VESTA)

She was Zeus' sister, and like Athena and Artemis a virgin goddess. She has no distinct personality and she plays no part in the myths. She was the Goddess of the Hearth, The symbol of the home, around which the newborn child must be carried before it could be received into the family. Every meal began and ended with an offering to her.

Each city too had a public hearth sacred to Hestia, where the fire was never allowed to go out. If a colony was to be founded, the colonist carried with them coals from the hearth of the mother city with which to kindle the fire on the new city's hearth. In Rome her fire was cared for by six virgin priestesses, called Vestals.

The Lesser Gods of Olympus

There were other divinities in heaven besides the twelve great Olympians. The most important of them was the God of **Love**, (**Cupid** in Latin). Homer knows nothing of him, but to Hesiod he is *Fairest of the deathless gods*.

In the early stories, he is most often a beautiful serious youth who gives good gifts to men. This idea the Greeks had of him is best summed up not by a Poet, but by a philosopher, Plato: "Love-Eros-makes his home in men's hearts, but not in every heart, for where there is hardness he departs. His greatest glory is that he cannot do wrong nor allow it; force never comes near him. For all men served him of their own free will. And he whom Love touches not walks in darkness."

In the early accounts **Eros** was not Aphrodite's son, but merely her occasional companion. In the later poets he was her son and almost invariably a mischievous, naughty boy, or worse. He was often represented as blindfolded, because love is often blind. In attendance upon him was Anteros, said sometimes to be the avenger of slighted love, sometimes the one who opposes love; also Himeros or Longing, and Hymen, the God of the Wedding Feast.

Hebe was the Goddess of Youth, the daughter of Zeus and Hera. Sometimes she appears as cupbearer to the gods; sometimes that office is held by Ganymede, a beautiful young Trojan prince who was seized and carried up to Olympus by Zeus' eagle. There are no stories about Hebe except that of her marriage to Hercules.

Iris was the Goddess of the Rainbow and a messenger of the gods, in the *Iliad* the only messenger. Hermes appears first in that capacity in the *Odyssey*, but he does not take Iris' place. Now the one, now the other

is called upon by the gods. There were also in Olympus two bands of lovely sisters, the **Muses** and the **Graces**.

The Graces were three: **Aglaia** (Splendor), **Euphrosyne** (Mirth) and **Thalia** (Good Cheer). They were the daughters of Zeus and Eurynome, a child of the Titan, Ocean. Except in a story Homer and Hesiod tell, that Aglaia married Hephaestus, they are not treated separate personalities, but always together, a triple incarnation of grace and beauty. The gods delighted in them when danced enchantingly to Apollo's lyre, and the man they visited was happy. They "give life its bloom". Together with their companions, the Muses, they were "queens of song," and no banquet without then could please.

The Muses were nine in number, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, Memory. At first, like the Graces they were not distinguished from each other. "They are all," Hesiod says, "of one mind, their hearts are set upon song and their spirit is free from care. He is happy whom the Muses love. For though a man has sorrow and grief in his soul, yet when the servant of the Muses sings, at once he forgets his dark thoughts and remembers not his troubles. Such is the holy gift of the Muses to men".

In later times each had her own special field. Clio was Muse of history, Urania of astronomy, Melpomene of tragedy. Thalia of comedy, Terpsichore of the dance, Calliope of epic poetry, Erato of love poetry, Polythymnia of songs to the gods, Euterpe of lyric poetry.

Hesiod lived near Helicon, one of the Muses' mountains, the other were Pierus in Pieria, where they were born, Parnassus and, of course, Olympus. One day the Nine appeared to him and they told him, "We know how to speak false things that seem true, but we know, when we will, to utter true things." They were companions of Apollo, the God of Truth, as well as of the Graces. Pindar calls the lyre theirs as well as Apollo's, "the golden lyre to which the step, the dancer's step, listens, owned alike by Apollo and the violet-wreathed Muses." The man they inspired was sacred far beyond any priest.

As the idea of Zeus became loftier, two august forms sat beside him in Olympus. Themis, which means the Right, or Divine Justice, and Dike, which is Human Justice. But they never became real personalities. The

same was true of two personified emotions esteemed highest of all feelings in Homer and Hesiod: Nemesis, usually translated as Righteous Anger, and Aidos, a difficult word to translate, but in common use among the Greeks. It means reverence and the shame that holds men back from wrongdoing, but also means the feeling a prosperous man should have in the presence of the unfortunate, not compassion, but a sense that the difference between him and those poor wretches is not deserved.

It does not seem, however, that either Nemesis or Aidos had their home with the gods. Hesiod says that only when men have finally become completely wicked will Nemesis and Aidos, their beautiful faces veiled in white raiment, leave the wide-wayed earth and depart to the company of the immortals. From time to time a few mortals were translated Olympus, but once they had been brought to heaven they vanished from literature. Their stories will be told later.

The Gods of the Waters

Poseidon (Neptune), was the Lord and Ruler of the Sea (the Mediterranean) and the Friendly Sea (the Euxine, now the Black Sea). Underground rivers, too, were his.

Ocean, a Titan, was Lord of the river Ocean, a great river encircling the earth. His wife, also a Titan, was Tethys. The Oceanids, the nymphs of this great river, were their daughters. The gods of all the rivers on earth were their sons.

Pontus, which means the Deep Sea, was a son of Mother Earth and the father of Nereus, a sea-god far more important than he himself was.

Nereus was called the Old Man of the Sea (the Mediterranean), "A trusty god and gentle," Hesiod says, "who thinks just and kindly thoughts and never lies." His wife was Doris a daughter of Ocean. They had fifty lovely daughters, the nymphs of the Sea, called Nereids from their father's name, one of whom, Thetis, was the mother of Achilles. Poseidon's wife. AMPHITRITE, was another.

Triton was the trumpeter of the Sea. His trumpet was a great shell. He was the son of Poseidon and Amphitrite.

Proteus was sometimes said to be Poseidon's son sometimes his attendant. He had the power both of foretelling the future and of changing his shape at will.

The NAIDS were also water nymphs. They dwelt in brooks and spring and fountains.

LEUCOTHEA and her son Palaemon, once mortals, became divinities of the sea, as did also Glaucus, but all three were unimportant.

The Underworld

The kingdom of the dead was ruled by one of the twelve great Olympians, **Hades** or Pluto, and His Queen, **Persephone**. It is often called by his name, Hades. It lies, the Iliad says, beneath the secret places of the earth. In the Odyssey, the way to it leads over the edge of the world across Ocean. In later poets there are various entrances to it from the earth through caverns and beside deep lakes.

Tartarus and **Erebus** are sometimes two divisions of the Underworld, Tartarus the deeper of the two, the prison of the Sons of Earth; Erebus where the dead pass as soon as they die. Often, however, there is no distinction between the two, and either is used, especially Tartarus, as a name for the entire lower region.

In Homer the underworld is vague, a shadowy place inhabited by shadows. Nothing is real there. The ghost's existence, if it can be called that, is like a miserable dream. The later poets define the world of the dead more and more clearly as the place where the wicked are punished and the good rewarded. In the Roman poet Virgil this idea is presented in great detail as in no Greek poet. All the torments of the one class and the joys of the other are described at length. Virgil too is the only poet who gives clearly the geography of the underworld. The path down to it leads to where Acheron, the river of woe, pours into Cocytus, the river of lamentation. An aged boatman named Charon ferries the souls of the dead across the water to the farther bank, where stands the adamantine gate to Tartarus (the name Virgil prefers). Charon will receive into his boat only the souls of those upon whose lips the

passage money was placed when they died and who were duly buried.

On guard before the gate sits **CERBERUS**, the three headed, dragon-tailed dog, who permits all spirits to enter, but none to return. On his arrival each one is brought before three judges, Rhadamanthus, Minos, and Aeacus, who pass sentence and send the wicked to everlasting torment and the good to a place of blessedness called the **Elysian Fields**.

Three other rivers, besides Acheron and Cocytus, separate the underworld from the world above: Phlegethon, the river of fire: Styx, the river of the unbreakable oath by which the gods swear; and Lethe, the river of forgetfulness.

Somewhere in this vast region is Pluto's palace, but beyond saying that it is many gated and crowded with innumerable guests, no writer describes it. Around it are wide wastes, wan and cold, and meadows of asphodel, presumably strange, palid ghostly flowers.. We do not know anything more about it. The poets did not care to linger in that gloom-hidden abode.

The Erinyes (the Furies), are placed by Virgil in the underworld, where they punish evildoers. The Greek poets thought of them chiefly as pursuing sinners on the earth. They were inexorable, but just. Heraclitus says, " Not even the sun will transgress his orbit but the Erinyes, the ministers of justice, overtake him." They were usually represented as three: Tisiphone, Megaera, and Alecto.

Sleep, and Death, his brother, dwelt in the lower world. Dreams too ascended from there to men. They passed through two gates, one of horn through which true dreams went, one of ivory for false dreams.

The Lesser Gods of Earth

Earth herself was called the All-Mother, but she was not really a divinity. She was never separated from the actual earth and personified. The Goddess of the Corn, **DEMETER** (Ceres), a daughter of Cronus and Rhea, and the God of the Vine, **DIONYSUS**, also called **BACCHUS**, were the supreme deities of the earth and of great importance in Greek and Roman mythology. Their stories will be found in the next chapter. The other

divinities who lived in the world were comparatively unimportant.

PAN was the chief. He was Hermes' son a noisy, merry god, the Homeric Hymn in his honor calls him: but he was part animal too, with a goat's horns, and goats hoofs instead of feet. He was the gatherer's god, and the shepherds' god, and also the gay companion of the woodland nymphs when they danced. All wild places were his home, thickets and forests and mountains, but best of all he loved Arcady, where he was born. He was a wonderful musician. Upon his pipes of reed he played melodies as sweet as the nightingale's song. He was always in love with one nymph or another, but always rejected because of his ugliness.

Sounds heard in a wilderness at night by the trembling traveler were supposed to be made by him, so that is easy to see how the expression "panic" fear arose.

SILENUS was sometimes said to be Pan's son; sometimes his brother, a son of Hermes. He was a jovial fat old man who usually rode an ass because he was too drunk to walk. He is associated with Bacchus as well as with Pan; he taught him when the a Wine-god was young, and as is shown by his perpetual drunkenness, after being his tutor he became his devoted follower.

Besides these gods of the earth there was a very famous and very popular pair of brothers, CASTOR AND POLLUX (Polydeuces), who in most of the accounts were said to live half of their time on earth and half in heaven. They were the sons of LEDA, and are usually represented as being gods, the special protectors of sailors, Saviors of swift-going ships when the storm winds rage Over the ruthless sea.

They were also powerful to save in battle. They were especially honored in Rome, where they were worshipped as "The great Twin Brethren to whom all Dorians pray". But the accounts of them are contradictory. Sometimes Pollux alone is held to be divine, and Castor a mortal who won a kind of half-and-half immortality merely because of his brother's love.

LEDA was the wife of King Tyndareus of Sparta, and the usual story is that she bore two mortal children to him, Castor and Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife; and to Zeus, who visited her in the form of a swan, two others who were immortal, Pollux and Helen, the heroine of Troy. Nevertheless, both brothers, Castor

and Pollux were often called "sons of Zeus"; indeed, the Greek name they are best known by, the Dioscouri, means "the striplings of Zeus." On the other hand, they were also called "sons of Tyndareus, " the Tyndaridae.

They are always represented as living just before the Trojan War, at the same time as Theseus and Jason and Atalanta. They took part in the Calydonian boar-hunt; they went on the Quest of the Golden Fleece; and they rescued Helen when Theseus carried her off. But in all the stories they play an unimportant part except in the account of Castor's death, when Pollux proved his brotherly devotion.

The two went, we are not told why, to the land of some cattle owners, Idas and Lynceus. There, Pindar says, Idas, made angry in some way about his oxen, stabbed and killed Castor. Other writers say the cause of the dispute was the two daughters of the king of the country, Leucippus. Pollux stabbed Lynceus, and Zeus struck Idas with his thunderbolt. But Castor was dead and Pollux was inconsolable. He prayed to die also, and Zeus in pity allowed him to share his life with his brother, to live, *Half of thy time beneath the earth and half / Within the golden homes of heaven.*

According to this version the two were never separated again. One day they dwelt in Hades, the next Olympus, always together. The late Greek writer Lucian gives another version, in which their dwelling places are heaven and earth; and when Pollux goes to one, Castor goes to the other, so that they are never with each other. In Lucian's little satire, Apollo asks Hermes: "I say, why do we never see Castor and Pollux at the same time?"

"Well," Hermes replies, "they are so fond of each other that when fate decreed one of them must die and only one be immortal, they decided to share immortality between them."

"Not very wise, Hermes. What proper employment can they engage in, that way? I foretell the future; Aesculapius cures diseases; you are a good messenger - but these two - are they to idle away their whole time?"

"No, surely. They're in Poseidon's service. Their business is to save any ship in distress."

"Ah, now you say something. I'm delighted they're such a good business."

Two stars were supposed to be theirs: the Gemini, the Twins.

They were always represented as riding splendid snow white horses, but Homer distinguishes Castor above Pollux for horsemanship. He calls the two Castor, tamer of horses, Polydeuces, good as a boxer.

The SILENI were creatures part man and part horse. They walked on two legs, not four, but they often had horses' hoofs instead of feet, sometimes horses' ears, and always horses' tails. There are stories about them, but they are often seen on Greek vases.

The SATYRES, like Pan, were goat men, and like him they had their home in the wild places of the earth.

In contrast to these unhuman, ugly gods the goddesses of the woodland were all lovely maiden forms, the

OREADS, nymphs of the mountains and the DRYADS, sometimes called HAMADRYADS, nymphs of trees, whose life was in each case bound up with that of her tree.

AEOLUS, King of the winds, also lived on the earth. An island, Aeolia, was his home. Accurately he was only regent of the Winds, viceroy of the Gods. The four chief Winds were BOREAS, the North Wind, in Latin

AQUILO; ZEPHYR, the West Wind, which had a second Latin name, FAVONIUS; NOTUS, the South Wind, also called in Latin AUSTER; and the East Wind, EURUS, the same in both Greek and Latin.

There were some beings, neither human nor divine, who had their home on the earth. Prominent among them were:

THE CENTAURS. They were half man, half horse, and for the most part they were savage creatures, more like beasts than men. One of them, however, CHIRON, was known every where for his goodness and his wisdom.

THE GORGONS were also earth dwellers. There were three, and two of them were immortal. They were dragonlike creatures with wings, whose look turned men to stone. Phorcys, son of the Sea and the Earth, was their father.

THE GRAIAE were sisters, three gray women who had but one eye between them. They lived on the farther bank of the Ocean.

THE SIRENS lived on an island in the Sea. They had enchanting voices and their singing lured sailors to their death. It was not known what they looked like, for no one who saw them ever returned.

Very important but assigned to no abode whether in heaven or on the earth were the Fates, *Moriae* in Greek, *Parcae* in Latin, who, Hesiod says, give to men at birth evil and good to have. They were three, Clotho, the Spinner, who spun the thread of life; Lachesis, the Disposer of Lots, who assigned to each man his destiny; Atropos, she who could not be turned, who carried "the abhorred shears" and cut the thread of death.

The Roman Gods

The Twelve great Olympians mentioned earlier were turned into Roman gods also. The influence of Greek art and literature became so powerful in Rome that ancient Roman deities were changed to resemble the corresponding Greek gods, and were considered to be the same. Most of them, however, in Rome had Roman names. These were Jupiter (Zeus), Juno (Hera), Neptune (Poseidon), Vesta (Hestia), Mars (Ares), Minerva (Athena), Venus (Aphrodite), Mercury (Hermes), Diana (Artemis), Vulcan or Mulciber (Hephaestus), Ceres (Demeter).

Two kept their Greek names: Apollo and Pluto; but the latter was never called Hades, as was usual in Greece. Bacchus, never Dionysus, was the name of the wine god, who had also a Latin name, Liber.

It was a simple matter to adopt the Greek gods because the Romans did not have definitely personified gods of their own. They were a people of deep religious feelings, but they had little imagination. They could never have created the Olympians, each a distinct, vivid personality. Their gods, before they took over from the Greeks, were vague, hardly more than a "those that are above." They were THE NUMINA, which means the Powers or the Wills - the Will-Powers, perhaps.

Until Greek literature and art entered Italy the Romans felt no need for beautiful, poetic gods. They were a practical people and they did not care about "Violet-tressed Muses who inspire song" or "Lyric Apollo making sweet melodies upon his golden lyre," or anything of that sort. They wanted useful gods. An important Power, for example, was One who Guards the Cradle. Another was One Who Presides over Children's Food. No stories were ever told about the

Numina. For the most part they were not even distinguished as male or female. The simple acts of everyday life, however, were closely connected with them and gained dignity from them as was not the case with any of the Greek gods except Demeter and Dionysus.

The most prominent and revered of them all were the LARES and PENATES. Every Roman family had a Lar, who was the spirit of an ancestor, and several Penates, gods of the hearth and guardians of the storehouse. They were the family's own gods, belonging only to it, really the most important part of it, the protectors and defenders of the entire household. They were never worshipped in temples, but only in the home, where some of the food at each meal was offered to them. There were also public Lares and Penates, who did for the city what the others did for the family.

There were also many Numina connected with the life of the household, such as TERMINUS, Guardian of Boundaries; PRIAPUS, Caus of Fertility; PALES, Strengtheners of Cattle; SYLVANUS, Helper of Plowmen and Woodcutters. A long list could be made. Everything important to the farm was under the care of a beneficent power, never conceived of as having a definite shape.

SATURN was originally one of the Numina, the Protector of the Sowers and the Seed, and his wife OPS

was a Harvest Helper. In later days, he was said to be the same as the Greek Cronus and the father of Jupiter, The Roman Zeus. In this way he became a personality and a number of stories were told about him. In memory of the Golden Age, when he reigned in Italy, the great feast of the Saturnalia was held every year during the winter. The idea of it was that the Golden age returned to the earth during the days it lasted. No war could be then declared; slaves and masters ate at the same table; executions were postponed; it was a season for giving presents; it kept alive in men's minds the idea of equality, of a time when all were on the same level.

JANUS, too, was originally one of the Numina, "the god of good beginnings," which are sure to result in good endings. He became personified to a certain degree. His chief temple in Rome ran east and west, where the day begins and ends, and had two doors, between which stood his statue with two faces, one young and one old. These doors were closed only when Rome was at peace. In the first seven hundred years of the city's life they were closed three times, in the reign of the good king, Numa; after the first Punic War when Carthage was defeated in 241 B.C.; and in the reign of Augustus when, Milton says, *No war or battle's sound / Was heard the world around.*

Naturally his month, January, began the new year.

QUIZ QUESTIONS

1. What happened to the portrayal of Zeus over the years?
2. What did the Greeks believe about the origins of the gods and the universe?
3. According to classical Greek mythology, who were the first parents?
4. Who was Zeus's favorite child? Hint: She was born of no mother, but sprang from Zeus's head.
5. Describe the relationship between Zeus and Hera?
6. Who were Zeus's two brothers, and where did they rule?
7. Who are the twelve great Olympians and what is the function of each (for example, Ares is the God of War)?
8. Be able to identify the correct Greek and Roman equivalents for the names of the gods and goddesses.
9. According to the ancients Greeks, what is the name of the place where the gods were said to reside?
10. Who are the gods of the waters?
11. Who is Hera? Why was she jealous? And what did she do to get revenge?
12. Who is Hermes? What is his function in Greek mythology (What does he do?) And how is he typically described or depicted?
13. What is the difference between "primitive mythology" and "classical mythology"? How are the Greek gods different from Egyptian or Mesopotamian gods?