

The Origins of Greek Myth

The myths of Greece have earned universal fame and popularity. Recorded as early as approximately 775 B.C. (Homer's *Iliad*), and approximately 725 B.C. (Hesiod's *Theogony*), they reveal a universe that closely resembles our own. Their gods, their heroes, and their depiction of the human condition are consistent with our knowledge of human behavior.

The Greek gods are a large family, and each member of that family has a distinct personality. Love, hate, jealousy, and pride motivate their behavior just as those feelings motivate human behavior. The gods who first rule the universe are overthrown by Zeus. Zeus, along with his brothers, sisters, and children, then rules the world of human beings.

Zeus's sister, Demeter, and their daughter, Persephone, prefer the simple beauties of the earth to the majestic palaces of the gods on Mount Olympus. When Zeus's brother, Hades, abducts Persephone, we experience with Demeter the plight of every mother who has lost her beloved daughter. We also feel their bittersweet emotions when they are reunited: joy that they are together again and sorrow that their relationship will never be the same again.

Zeus expects human beings to conform to an unwritten code of respectable behavior. When King Lycaon and his nobility lose their respect for the gods and for other human beings, Zeus destroys almost the entire race with a flood. However, he promises to create another race in its place, and he keeps his word.

According to Hesiod, Zeus also created five races of human beings, each worse than the race that preceded it. People today speak of "the good old days" and wonder whether the human race will survive. Hesiod had the same concerns. It is interesting to compare his description of his generation with the prevailing attitudes of people today.

Heracles, whom the Romans called Hercules, is the most famous Greek hero. His accomplishments were so great that his name continues to be attached to any great task that humans face today. His courage, his strength, and his skill in the face of adversity provide a model of behavior for all of us.

Many other famous heroes walk through the pages of Homer's *Iliad*. Achilles and Agamemnon, among the Greeks, and Hector, among the Trojans, must choose between their own desires and the needs of their people. Their war is ancient, but their agony is modern. Once again, the courage with which they meet the challenges in their lives makes them impressive, yet very human, models of behavior for all of us.

The myth of *Jason and the Golden Fleece* was well known in ancient Greece. In Homer's *Odyssey*, from the eighth century B.C., the goddess Circe tells Odysseus that the adventures of the Argonauts are known to all who walk the earth. However, we know the myth of Jason and the Argonauts primarily through Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*, a Hellenistic epic from the third century B.C. Here, Apollonius depicts the youthful Jason and Medea who, in their maturity, will become the Jason and Medea made famous by Euripides. Apollonius's epic is a tale of youthful heroism and love. Jason is more human than traditional heroes, such as Heracles. Jason is successful because he is pragmatic and prudent. Being a man of words rather than a man of deeds, he is able to persuade others to use their courage, strength, and skill on his behalf. Medea's love for Jason in *The Argonautica* has given posterity one of the world's great love stories. Virgil so admired Apollonius's depiction of the maiden whose passion leads her to sacrifice family, home, and country for a heroic stranger that he adapted it for his own depiction of Dido in *The Aeneid*.

The myth of *Medea* has roots both in ancient Corinth, where Medea plays a prominent role in an eighth century B.C. epic about Corinth's heroic history, and in ancient Colchis (former Soviet Georgia). Medea is one of the greatest women in all of literature. Euripides' depiction of her in his *Medea*, a tragedy from the fifth century B.C., has continued to capture the human heart. When Jason leaves Medea for a younger woman, Medea loses whatever rights and privileges she had as Jason's wife. Her universal appeal resides in the depth of her outrage against injustice and the extent to which she is willing to rebel against it. Medea's many literary children continue to confront her issues in their own time and place. Jason's self-serving ambition is as destructive as Medea's passion for revenge. Therefore, it is interesting to evaluate Jason as a tragic hero, both from an Aristotelian and from a contemporary point of view.

The Romans adopted the Greek gods and their myths. Virgil wrote his own myth, *The Aeneid*, to glorify Augustus Caesar and the founding of Rome. *The Aeneid* begins shortly after Homer's *Iliad* ends, and it describes the adventures of the Trojan hero Aeneas. Because Virgil patterned his epic upon Homer's two epics, it is interesting to compare the works of these two great authors, particularly their concept of the hero. Virgil's dramatic portrayal of the destruction of Troy is one of the most powerful descriptions in all of literature, and Aeneas' love, Queen Dido of Carthage, is one of the world's most noble heroines.

Creation, according to the Greeks, moves from a mother-dominated society, in which the most important divinities are female, to a father-dominated society, in which the most important divinities are male. Just as the human family progresses through time from generation to generation, so the divine family, which was created in the image of the human family, moves from the rule of the parents, to the rule of the children, to the rule of the grandchildren.

Gaea, who is Mother Earth, is the first Great Goddess or Mother Goddess. The peoples who were living in Greece when the Bronze Age tribes invaded the land worshipped the Great Goddess because they were farmers, and the fertility of the earth was of prime importance to them. Their survival depended upon their ability to raise enough food to sustain them through the nonproductive months of the year, and upon their ability to have enough children to assure the continuity of their clan. These people drew a connection between a woman's ability to give birth to children and the earth's ability to "give birth" to all plants. Therefore, the earth spirit was feminine, and the principal divinities that the early Greeks worshipped were also feminine.

When Uranus becomes ruler of the world, his son, Cronus, dismembers him—just as priestesses of the Great Goddess or Mother Goddess in the female-oriented religion dismembered the sacred king. They used his blood, which they considered to be a prime source of fertility, to fertilize the soil so that it would produce an abundance of crops. Uranus' blood, too, produces "crops," in the form of monstrous offspring. In the matriarchal, or mother-dominated, society, a son owes a greater loyalty to his mother than to his father.

When Cronus becomes ruler of the world, the divine family is in transition from the mother-dominated society to the father-dominated society that will follow under the rule of Zeus. Rhea is a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess, just as Gaea, her mother, is. In the contest for power between husband and wife, Cronus is winning until Rhea solicits the help of her mother. Then the females win. Yet, Rhea uses her son, Zeus, to carry out her plan, and with her approval, he becomes the next principal ruler, even though he is male. He will rule with greater authority than either Uranus or Cronus did.

Cronus disposes of his infant children by eating them. Cannibalism is not unusual in history. Primitive people believed that they could acquire desirable characteristics—such as courage, strength, wisdom, and skill—by eating the important organs of another creature, often a fearsome enemy, who had possessed those characteristics. Consequently, early peoples might eat the meat of an animal they had killed, or they might drink the blood or eat the heart of the person who, until they killed him, had been a great enemy. In the matriarchal society, the priestesses would eat the flesh of the sacred king in order to acquire his fertility.

PRINCIPAL GODS

(ROMAN NAMES ARE IN PARENTHESES)

THE FIRST GENERATION

GAEA: first Great Goddess or Mother Goddess in Greek mythology; Mother Earth, who nourishes all life

URANUS: son and husband of Gaea; ruler of the sky

THE SECOND GENERATION: CHILDREN OF GAEA AND URANUS

HUNDRED-HANDED GIANTS: triplets; best known: Briareus

CYCLOPES: triplets; one-eyed metalsmiths; servants of Zeus

TITANS: thirteen; race of immortals who, with their children, ruled the universe before the gods conquered them:

CRONUS (Saturn): youngest child; god of the sky after Uranus and ruler of the Titans; father of the first six Greek gods: Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hera, Demeter, and Hestia

RHEA (Cybele): sister and wife of Cronus; a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess like Gaea; mother of Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hera, Demeter, and Hestia

HELIOS: god of the sun before being replaced by Apollo in late Greek and Roman mythology

SELENE: goddess of the Moon before being replaced by Artemis in late Greek and Roman mythology

THEMIS: goddess of prophecy at Delphi before Apollo conquered her oracle

ATLAS: strongest Titan; condemned by Zeus eternally to hold up the sky

PROMETHEUS: most creative and intelligent Titan; created mortal man out of clay

EPIMETHEUS: brother of Prometheus; husband of Pandora (the first mortal woman)

THIRD GENERATION: GREEK GODS—Children of Cronus and Rhea

ZEUS (Jupiter, Jove): youngest, most intelligent, and most powerful child; lord of the sky after Cronus; ruler of the gods; maintains order in the world of mortals; protects strangers and guests

POSEIDON (Neptune): brother of Zeus; lord of the sea; causes earthquakes

HADES (Pluto): brother of Zeus; ruler of the Underworld; lord of the dead

HERA (Juno): sister and wife of Zeus; queen of Olympus; goddess of marriage and childbirth

DEMETER (Ceres): sister of Zeus; a Great Goddess or Mother Goddess like Rhea and Gaea; goddess of grain

HESTIA (Vesta): sister of Zeus; kindest and most loved of the gods; guardian of the home

Immortal Children of Zeus

APOLLO: twin of Artemis; god of prophecy, medicine, archery, and music; god of the sun in late Greek and Roman mythology

ARTEMIS (Diana): twin of Apollo; goddess of the hunt; goddess of the moon in late Greek and Roman mythology

ATHENA (Minerva): goddess of arts and crafts and defensive war; helper of heroes; goddess of wisdom in late Greek and Roman mythology

APHRODITE (Venus): goddess of beauty and sexual desire

PERSEPHONE (Proserpine): wife of Hades; queen of the Underworld

THE FATES: CLOTHO, LACHESIS, and ATROPOS: determine the length of each mortal's life

ARES (Mars): god of war

HEPHAESTUS (Vulcan): husband of Aphrodite; metalsmith of the gods, famous for his creativity and skill

HERMES (Mercury): Zeus' messenger; guides travelers and leads shades of the dead into the Underworld; helps merchants and thieves