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## CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY: THE GREEKS

### COURSE GUIDE



Professor Peter W. Meineck  
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

# **Classical Mythology: The Greeks**

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Professor Peter W. Meineck  
New York University



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Classical Mythology:  
The Greeks  
Professor Peter W. Meineck



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Producer - David Markowitz  
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#### **COURSE GUIDE**

Editor - James Gallagher  
Design - Anjela Snapko

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Cover image: *Medusa* © Nataly Kochina/shutterstock.com  
#UT058 ISBN: 978-1-4193-2984-5

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## About Your Professor

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### Peter W. Meineck

Peter W. Meineck is a clinical assistant professor of classics and artist in residence at the New York University Center for Ancient Studies and the producing artistic director and founder of the Aquila Theatre Company. Peter currently teaches in the Classics Department at New York University in ancient drama, Greek literature, and classical mythology. He has held teaching appointments at Princeton University, the University of South Carolina, and the Tisch School of the Arts. Fellowships include the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies, Princeton, the University of California at San Diego, and the University of Texas at Austin. He has lectured and held workshops on ancient drama and Shakespeare at conferences, academic institutions, museums, festivals, and schools throughout the world.

Peter's publications include Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Hackett Cambridge, 1998); *Aristophanes Vol. 1 - Clouds, Wasps, Birds* (Hackett Cambridge, 1998); Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* with Paul Woodruff (Hackett Cambridge, 2000); Aristophanes' *Clouds* (Hackett Cambridge, 2000); and *The Theban Plays* with Paul Woodruff (Hackett Cambridge, 2002).

He has translated several Greek plays for the stage (*Clouds, Wasps, Birds, Philoctetes' Ajax, Agamemnon, and Oedipus the King*). He founded Aquila in 1991 after working extensively in West End theatre, including the Aldwych, the Almeida, the English National Opera, the Phoenix, the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre, the Royal Opera House, and Sadler's Wells. Peter trained as a lighting designer and has lit and co-designed many Aquila shows.

His work as a director includes Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*; Sophocles' *Ajax*; a new play, *Villain*, which he also co-wrote; Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*; and Aristophanes' *Wasps*.



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## Introduction

In *Classical Mythology: The Greeks*, widely published professor Peter Meineck examines in thrilling detail the far-reaching influence of Greek myths on Western thought and literature. The nature of myth and its importance to ancient Greece in terms of storytelling, music, poetry, religion, cults, rituals, theatre, and literature are viewed through works ranging from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to the writings of Sophocles and Aeschylus. Through the study of these time-honored myths, the Greek heroes and gods—including Heracles, Zeus, Achilles, Athena, Aphrodite, and others—leap from the page in all their glorious splendor. The following lectures are not only an entertaining guide to Greek mythology, but also a fascinating look into the culture and time that produced these eternal tales.

## Lecture 1: The Nature of Greek Myth

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is G.S. Kirk's *Nature of Greek Myths*, section 1.

### Introduction

The mythology of the Greeks has had a profound influence on Western thought and literature, yet myths themselves are very difficult to categorize. The Greeks were closely connected to their mythic tradition via storytelling, music, poetry, religious and cult practice, rituals and festivals, theatrical performances, and literature. This lecture will set out a basic framework for understanding the meaning of the term “myth,” the different types of myth, and various approaches to the study of mythology. We will also create some context for our course with a brief description of the main periods of Greek history and an overview of the landscape and climate of Greece.

### What Is Myth?

The mythology of the Greeks has had a profound influence on Western thought and literature.

The term “myth” is derived from the Greek *mythos*, which means “a spoken story,” “speech,” or simply “the plot.” The fifth/fourth-century Athenian philosopher Plato contrasted *mythos* with the term *logos*, meaning “account.” The teller of a *logos* takes personal responsibility for what they say, whereas the speaker of a *mythos* relates a traditional story, one that is “handed down”; hence the Latin term *trado*—to “hand over.” Aristotle came to equate *mythos* with fiction and see it as acting like the plot of a Greek tragedy, capable of producing catharsis or “healing” through the shared experience of the audience. The Romans named their mythological stories *fabulae*, regarding many of them as mere fables.

Originally, Greek myths were handed down by word of mouth, via the songs of bards, at ritual gatherings, or simply via oral storytelling. By the eighth century BCE, these stories began to be written down and took on a textual form in works such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Myths became highly mutable as they developed through the course of their oral delivery. They changed to reflect local customs, social and political conditions, and contemporary tastes. As myths became recoded as written texts, different versions with varied plots emerged.

All cultures seem to have developed some sort of mythological narrative. There are numerous parallels and points of contact between the various traditions.

Examples include:

The Babylonian epics, such as the *Enuma Elish*

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Sanskrit poetry, such as the *Mahabharata*

The first books of the Old Testament

The Viking sagas

The Native American oral tradition

The *Arabian Nights*

The stories of King Arthur, the Knights of the Round Table, and the Holy Grail

The rich tradition of African mythology

The Inca creation stories

## **Types of Myth**

It is incredibly difficult to create a clear system for cataloguing mythology. The following three types of myth can establish only the broadest of outlines. Many myths contain elements of each.

### *Etiological or Divine Myths*

The term “etiological” is derived from the Greek word *aitia*, meaning “cause,” and is used to describe a type of myth that articulates natural phenomena or the actions of divine forces. This includes creation myths, stories concerning the gods, and accounts of the time before humankind. Gods are often depicted as forces of nature (for example, Zeus is the sky god and his weapon is the lightning bolt), or they personify a powerful emotive force, such as Aphrodite, who encapsulates desire and sexual passion. Etiological myths can also be viewed as a type of primitive science in which myths are used to explain matters beyond the bounds of knowledge.

### *Heroic Myths or Legends*

These kinds of stories can best be described as mythological memories of the human past. Here the main characters are mortal, not divine, although many are related to the gods in some way and have larger-than-life attributes. They tend to reflect an aristocratic “hero” class, great leaders whose deeds have become enshrined in myth, such as Heracles, Achilles, Jason, and Theseus. Often these heroes are held up to reflect an extreme example of human behavior and the positive and negative effects this causes. These kinds of legends often contain elements of historical memory, such as the mythological accounts of the Trojan War. These may reflect a real conflict that occurred in the distant past, and portray elements of a much older culture.

### *Traditional Folk Stories*

Folk tales are used to articulate human commonalities, such as societal fears, important rites of passage, and moral guidance. Examples of folk tales in Greek mythology include the fables of Aesop, the central books of Homer’s *Odyssey*, and stories of great trials or quests, such as the myths of Perseus and Jason. These tales contain recognizable motifs, such as the use of items imbued with magic power, an escape from danger using trickery, or sexual conquest after the passing of an initiation rite.



## Methods of Studying Myth

**Allegorical**—Rationalizes myths as metaphors for human behavior and customs. This type of study can be traced back to the Hellenistic thinker Euhemerus (c. 300 BCE).

**Comparative**—Examines the similarities and differences inherent in the mythologies of different cultures. The work of Joseph Campbell uses this method.

**Ritualism**—The connection between religious rituals and mythology. A theory advocated by the Cambridge School in the early twentieth century. Frazer's the *Golden Bough*, Graves' the *White Goddess*, and the works of Jane Harrison and F.M. Cornford are notable examples of this school of thought.

**Psychological**—Sigmund Freud used mythic stories to demonstrate his theories on human mental development and the effects of the personal unconscious. His famous terms "Oedipus complex" and "Electra complex" are drawn from the mythic accounts of Greek tragedy. Carl Jung advances a theory of a collective unconscious using the commonalities inherent in myth as evidence.

**Functionalism**—Mainly advocated by anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, who studies the Tobriand islanders of New Guinea. Here myths are seen as charters of social customs and beliefs, often dealing with cultural taboos.

**Structuralism**—The analysis of myths as component parts. Claude Lévi-Strauss detailed a binary structure and observed a negotiation and resolution of opposing forces. Vladimir Propp documented thirty-one distinct motifs as units of recurring patterns. Walter Burkert blended structuralism and historical perspective to uncover essential meaning behind myths.

## The Geography of Greece

The Greek landscape and climate had a profound effect on ancient Greek culture and mythology. Greece has a temperate Mediterranean climate, with warm summers and mild winters. This led to the development of a culture that lived much of its civic and social life outside. In mythology, exterior space tends to be the realm of men, the state, and government, while interior space is attributed to women, the home, and privacy. Most communities in Greece were very close to the sea or situated on an island. A reliance on seafaring for trade and warfare led to the fluent exchange of cultural influences apparent in Greek mythology. Because the Greek mainland is broken up by low mountain ranges, communities developed in isolation. This led to the emergence of localized mythic traditions. The rugged landscape of Greece produced the olive, the vine, and hard cereals such as barley. These products were widely exported, allowing for the spread of mythology via devices such as iconography on painted vases and the export of sculpture. The cycle of the Greek agricultural year is also strongly reflected in Greek myth and ritual practice.

## Historical Periods of Ancient Greece

### *Early to Middle Bronze Age*

(3000 to 1600 BCE)

- Beginning of Minoan Palace culture on Crete/Thera
- Cycladic culture in the Aegean

### *Late Bronze Age*

(1600 to 1100 BCE)

- Mycenaean culture on Greek mainland
- Height of Minoan culture - 1400 BCE
- Destruction of Troy in 1250 BCE

### *Dark Age*

(1100 to 800 BCE)

- Collapse of palace culture

### *Archaic Period*

(800 to 480 BCE)

- Foundation of the *polis* city-state
- Colonization by Greeks
- Development of Greek writing

### *Classical Period*

(480 to 323 BCE)

- Defeat of Persian forces led by Athens at Salamis in 480
- Development of democracy in Athens
- Emergence of history, philosophy, rhetoric, drama

### *Hellenistic Period*

(323 to 31 BCE)

- Death of Alexander in 323 BCE
- Spread of Hellenic culture throughout Alexander's former empire
- Conquest of Hellenic world by Rome—fall of Alexandria in 31 BCE

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. Choose one Greek myth you know well and apply several different scholarly approaches to analyze the meaning of the myth.
2. Find one example of each of the three broad categories of myth and explain how the myth functions and why it should be placed in a particular category.

### Suggested Reading

Kirk, G.S. *The Nature of Greek Myths*. New York: Viking Press, 1975.

### Other Books of Interest

Frazer, James George. *Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*.  
New York: Simon & Schuster 1996.

Graves, Robert. *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*.  
New York: The Noonday Press, 1997.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*.  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

## Lecture 2: Religion and Society

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Robert Garland's *Religion and the Greeks*.

### Religion and Society

Much of Greek mythology deals with the actions of the gods, their involvement with mortals, and the deeds of humans with divine ancestors. How did the Greeks view their gods and in what way did religious practice, ritual, and sacrificial cult interact with mythology? In this lecture we will examine these questions and take a look at the changing face of Greek society as it developed through the ages and what effect this had on the telling of myths.

### The Greeks and Their Gods

Originally, the Greeks seemed to have viewed their gods as elemental forces. Zeus is a sky god and Hera represents the earth. As Greek culture develops and human individuality becomes more important, the gods are seen as anthropomorphic and take on human form. The gods come to take on attributes of human traits and emotions, such as Athena, who stands for wisdom and moderation. Greek gods were not held to any moral standard, and ancient mythology is full of the sexual, duplicitous, mischievous, and downright malevolent antics of the gods. Mortals observed the gods more out of a fear of divine retribution. They believed they had to avoid displeasing them and to not incur their terrible wrath.

The Greek gods were worshipped via rituals and sacrificial cult. Their temples were built on hilltops and adorned externally in order that all members of the community could see them at all times and be mindful of that particular deity. Different gods were worshipped in a variety of temples and shrines—some cities placed more importance in certain “patron” gods. In Athens, for example, Athena and Poseidon were held in special reverence.

Communion via sacrifice was controlled by the clan chief, the king, or a state representative. This important ceremony distributed meat to the community, disposed of animal remains, and nourished the gods with the smoke of the burnt offering.

Mythology was a part of Greek religion and cult practice. Certain rituals “performed” mythological stories, and the performance of myth in lyric poetry, epic, and tragedy was dedicated to the gods.

### Sacrifice

Sacrificial cult was of vital importance to the Greeks. The role of sacrifice is articulated in the myth of Prometheus, in which the wise Titan tricks Zeus into accepting offal by wrapping it back up in its skin. In this way the mortals received the meat. Sacrifice also articulates the role of the hunter/warrior. One famous example is the myth of the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon

before the Greeks sailed on Troy. Human sacrifice abounds in Greek mythology. It is not definitively known if human sacrifice ever played a real role in Greek religious practice.

### **A Brief Glossary of Greek Religion**

**Olympians**—The divine dynasty that rules from “above,” led by Zeus.

**Chthonic**—The opposite of the Olympians. These are the spirits that are said to inhabit the earth or the nether regions. Hecate and the Furies are both chthonic forces.

**Libation**—A liquid offering to the gods or the dead. This could be water, wine or honey, olive oil and milk, or a combination. A *sponde* was offered for heavenly protection, a *choe* to appease the dead or chthonic forces.

**Miasma**—Pollution. A religious virus that could infect a whole community if not treated with ritual purification. Oedipus is a prime example of a man with Miasma.

**Oracles**—A cult shrine where mortals could receive divine guidance on the future. Apollo’s shrine at Delphi was one of the most important oracles.

**Divination**—In addition to consulting oracles, Greeks read signs, usually of birds in the sky, such as the omen of the eagles in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. They also examined the entrails of birds to seek to understand divine will.

**Sanctuaries**—Cult sites for worship and reverence, often sacred spaces clearly defined by strict rules of entry.

**Hades**—The god of the underworld but also the place mortals went when they died, where they wandered as shades. There were different beliefs of the afterlife, including reincarnation, a blessed existence in Elysian, a transformation into a star, and diffusing into the ether.

**Mystery Cults**—Cults of initiation that offered degrees of enlightenment. The most famous mystery cult was at Eleusis near Athens.

**Prayers**—The invocation of a particular deity, usually a reciprocal offer in which the person praying would offer to perform a service or make an offering in return for a divine favor. Curses also operated in similar fashion.

### **Greek Society**

Greek mythology contains explanations of the divine and a collective memory of an earlier human existence. These stories were handed down through the dark ages and many of them seem to articulate moments from the Greek’s own historic past. These stories include the myth of the Trojan War and myths of the city of Thebes.

As Greek society evolves, so does its mythology. As Greece emerges from the dark ages, there is a reorganization of Greek society into the city-state, the development of new forms of warfare, and the rise of novel systems of government. Athens is a good example. A small Mycenaean settlement hardly even mentioned in the *Iliad* becomes one of the major cities in the ancient world in a period of less than 100 years. Athens develops its own mythology based on earlier myths, such as the myths of Theseus and Aeschylus’ great trilogy the *Oresteia*.

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The Athenian writer Herodotus, known as the father of history, produces a written text explaining the Persian Wars. Here mythology, contemporary opinion, and a travelogue are blended to form the Western world's first history. One generation later the writer Thucydides completes a history of the Peloponnesian War that contains no mythological explanations.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. How did Greek religion differ from the main religions of today?
2. How did the Greeks seek to learn the will of their gods?

### Suggested Reading

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Garland, Robert. *Religion and the Greeks*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1994.

### Other Books of Interest

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- Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- Easterling, P.E., and J.V. Muir. *Greek Religion and Society*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Grant, M., and R. Kitzinger, eds. *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean*. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1988.
- Graves, Robert. *Greek Gods and Heroes*. Reissue. New York: Laurel Leaf, 1965.
- Martin, Thomas. *Ancient Greece*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Mikalson, J.D. *Athenian Popular Religion*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983.

## Lecture 3: In the Beginning There Was Chaos

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.

### Introduction

In the previous lecture we looked at the nature of Greek religion. Here we will examine our first primary sources: Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*. In both texts, Hesiod details the origin of the universe, the lineage of the Olympian gods, the role of Prometheus in the ascent of humanity, Pandora and the creation of women, and the five ages of man.

### Creation Myths

The Greeks had many different creation myths that explained the origins of the universe, the gods, and the earth. These ideas of creation were influenced by the cultures of the Near East, such as the Sumerian creation myth, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* ("When Above"), the Hurrian-Hittite *Kingship in Heaven* and *Songs of Ullikummi*, and the Hebrew creation myth enshrined in the biblical *Book of Genesis*.

The earliest account of Greek creation lies in Book 14 of Homer's *Iliad*, composed around 750 BCE. The goddess Hera tells Aphrodite that the gods and humans were created by two Titans, the great river Oceanus and Tethys, the daughter of Earth and Sky. The most complete attempt to explain creation is told by Hesiod in two works that come down to us from around 700 BCE: the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*.

### The Beginning

*In the beginning there was only Chaos, the Abyss,  
But then Gaia, the Earth, came into being,  
Her broad bosom the ever-firm foundation of all,  
And Tartarus, dim in the underground Depths,  
And Eros, loveliest of all the Immortals, who  
Makes their bodies (and men's bodies) go limp,  
Mastering their minds and subduing their wills.*

~Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116–122  
trans. S. Lombardo



## The Creation According to Hesiod

### CHAOS

GAIA TARTARUS EROS EREBUS NIGHT

### EREBUS + NIGHT

AETHER  
(BRILLIANCE)

HEMERA  
(DAY)

### NIGHT

MOERAE  
(FATES)

NEMESIS  
(RETRIBUTION)

### GAIA

URANUS MOUNTAINS PONTUS FURIES GIANTS  
(SKY) (SEA)

#### Eros

Eros is the original divine element, the power of desire. Hesiod is unclear as to whether Chaos produced Eros or Eros caused Chaos to “breed.” The fifth-century comic dramatist Aristophanes, in the *Birds*, also placed Eros as a supreme originator. He argued that birds are more powerful than gods because the winged Eros caused creation. Here Aristophanes may be parodying the creation stories of the mystery cult that held the idea of the world as a great egg (“Orphism”).

*In the beginning there was only Chaos and Night,  
black Darkness and vast Tartarus,  
there was no earth, no air, and no heaven,  
and in the infinite hollow of Darkness  
black winged Night laid the first wind borne egg,  
nurtured by the seasons it hatched Eros,  
soaring love high on the wind  
with his glimmering golden wings.*

~Aristophanes, *Birds*, 693, ff.  
trans. P.W. Meineck

# GAIA + URANUS (EARTH) (SKY)

## TITANS CYCLOPES HUNDRED HANDERS (INC. CRONUS)

### Earth and Sky: The First Gods

Uranus as the personification of the male sky reflects patriarchal custom in his marriage to Gaia, the earth. This image of the sky god dominating and fertilizing the earth continues down to Cronus and Rhea and Zeus and Hera, all forms of sky and earth. Some scholars have identified evidence of earth-mother worship in early Greek religion. The domination and violent succession of the male sky god may reflect a cultural shift from a matrifocal society to a patriarchal order.

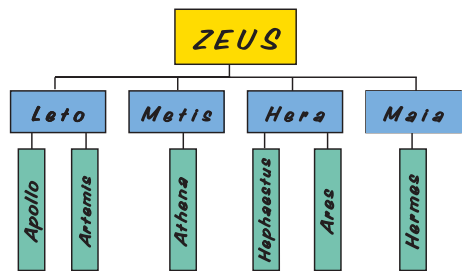
### The Overthrow of Uranus: The Birth of Aphrodite

Uranus tried to hide his offspring back inside the earth from which they sprung. This put a great strain on Gaia, who begged her children to help her. Of the twelve Titans, Cronus was the youngest, and he took up his mother's challenge. As Uranus lay with Gaia, Cronus took a flint sickle and castrated his father. The blood of the genitals that fell on the earth produced the Furies—elemental forces that punished blood crimes. Cronus then cast the genitals into the sea, where sea foam produced Aphrodite (*aphros*—"foam"), the goddess of desire.

### The Birth of Zeus

Cronus marries his sister Rhea (another form of Gaia—"earth"), and like his father devours his children: Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon. Zeus is hidden in a cave in Crete by Rhea and substituted for a stone. Cronus belches up the stone and Zeus' siblings and is subsequently overthrown by Zeus, who seizes power and marries his sister, Hera. The Olympian pantheon is formed from this generation of gods and the offspring of Zeus.

### ZEUS' OFFSPRING



### Prometheus and the Creation of Man

Greek mythology is almost silent on the exact origins of humans. Hesiod is not specific, and some later myths credit Zeus. Traditionally, the Titan Prometheus was said to have created the first man, and in mythology he is depicted as the great benefactor of humanity. Prometheus tricks Zeus into receiving the sacrificial offal so the humans could eat the meat. As punishment, Zeus removed fire from man.

Prometheus again outwits Zeus by stealing fire from Olympus and hiding it in a fennel stick (used for carrying embers in the ancient world).

Zeus punished Prometheus by having Kratos (strength) and Bia (force) chain him to a mountainside where an eagle would come each day and peck out his liver, which would grow back each night. Humans were punished with a life of endurance and hard work and, according to Hesiod, the invention of women.

## Pandora

*He (Hephaestus) made this lovely evil to balance the good,  
Then led her off to the other gods and men  
Gorgeous in the finery of the owl-eyed daughter  
Sired in power (Athena). And they were stunned,  
Immortal gods and mortal men, when they saw  
The sheer deception, irresistible to men.  
From her is the race of female women,  
The deadly race and population of women,  
A great infestation among mortal men.*

~Hesiod, *Theogony*, 588–596  
trans. S. Lombardo

According to Hesiod, Pandora, the first woman, was created to inflict further misery on man. Hephaestus is commanded to fashion Pandora from water and clay and to make her resemble a goddess. Athena is to give her intelligence, Aphrodite, the power of desire, and Hermes, the morality of a thief.

Pandora means “all-gifted.” Hesiod tells us she is dispatched to earth with a jar. When man lifts the lid all manner of worldly evils fly out, all except hope, which remains inside. The jar is a womb symbol, and in Greek culture women are often associated with such containers.

## The Five Ages of Man

Hesiod names five distinct ages of man in *Works and Days*:

- ✦ Gold—The men who lived during the reign of Cronus, a blessed god-like race who knew no troubles. Hesiod has it that they faded away like a dream.
- ✦ Silver—The gods made an inferior race who spent most of their lives in childhood. They refused to worship the gods and were very violent. Cronus buried them in the earth.
- ✦ Bronze—Zeus made this race of men, who were known for their warlike nature and their weapons of bronze. They killed one another and went down to Hades.
- ✦ Heroes—Hesiod believed this race to have inhabited the earth prior to the emergence of his people. They were also created by Zeus but were more godlike and noble than their forebearers. These were the men who fought the Trojan War.
- ✦ Iron—This is Hesiod’s own generation, debased, miserable, and struggling.

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## **Aristophanes and the Origins of Mankind**

In Plato's *Symposium* the comic dramatist Aristophanes tells his own version of the origins of mankind. Originally there were three sexes: men, women, and a combination of both. Humans were round in shape and had two sets of limbs, two faces, and two sets of sexual organs. They were very strong, and Zeus, fearing an uprising, spilt them in half. From then on people were forced to search for their other half and would never be happy until they had found it.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. Where can one find the earliest account of Greek creation?
2. How was Aphrodite born, according to Hesiod?

### Suggested Reading

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Hesiod. *Works and Days* and *Theogony*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993.

### Other Books of Interest

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Lamberton, Robert. *Hesiod*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

Mulvey, Laura. "Pandora: Topographies of the Mask and Curiosity." *Sexuality and Space*. Ed. Beatriz Colomina. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, pp. 53–71.

Nagy, Gregory. "Hesiod." *Ancient Authors*. Ed. T.J. Luce. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1982.

Penglase, Charles. *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influence in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod*. London: Routledge, 1994.

## Lecture 4: The Olympians

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Walter Burkert's *Greek Religion*, chapter III and Homer's *Iliad*, Books 1 through 3.

### Introduction

Reading Hesiod provided us with an excellent introduction to archaic Greek ideas about creation and the relationship of gods to humans. It is within the works of Homer that we find Greek mythology, religion, epic poetry, and narrative coming together to form some of the world's most enduring and influential works. Over the course of the next few lectures we will meet each of the Olympian gods set against a contextual background of their roles in particular myths. In Homer's *Iliad* (ca. 750 BCE), we first meet Zeus in literature. In this lecture, we will be looking at Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hera, and Aphrodite against the mythical narrative of Homer.

### A Glossary of the Main Greek Gods

There are thirteen main Greek Gods. Dionysus later replaced Hestia in the Pantheon of Twelve Olympians.

**Zeus**—His name is derived from the Indo-European *Dyaus pitar*—"sky father." The same name is found in the Roman Jupiter, the Germanic Tiu (from which we get Tuesday), and the Latin word for god—*deus*. He is the sky god, the great father, and is depicted with a mighty frame, a manly beard, and either seated on his throne or clutching his dread thunderbolt.

**Hera**—The origins of her name are unclear, but she is linked to Gaia and Rhea, who are earlier earth goddesses. She is the wife of Zeus and presides over marriage and women's fertility. Her epithet "cow-eyed" may refer to her association with fertility and agriculture. The cow sacrifice is often made in her honor. She is depicted veiled like a bride.

**Hades**—His name means "the unseen one," as he rules over the realm of the dead in the underworld. He is Zeus' brother and is married to Persephone, whom he shares with her mother, Demeter, as Persephone dwells half the year in the underworld and half the year on earth, thus explaining the changing seasons. He is rarely depicted in art.

**Poseidon**—His name means something like "husband" or "lord." He too is Zeus' brother and like Hades can be seen as another facet of Zeus himself. Poseidon is god of the sea and the earth-shaker—capable of causing earthquakes. The horse is sacred to the god, who is unpredictable, dangerous, and capable of sudden bouts of rage. He is shown Zeus-like, often holding a trident.

**Demeter**—"The Mother," a goddess of crops and abundance. In the classical period, many of her cult attributes for the promotion of fertility begin to be assumed by Dionysus.

**Hestia**—The goddess of the hearth, the essential part of the Greek home. The sacred fire here was never supposed to be extinguished. She protected the home and family life.

**Apollo**—The son of Zeus and Leto, the young, petulant male god of prophecy, healing and sickness, music, and poetry. He is depicted as a beautiful, young, athletic man, holding the hunter's bow or the lyre. His most famous shrine was his great sanctuary at Delphi, where his oracle served the whole Greek world.

**Artemis**—The elder twin sister of Apollo, a goddess of the hunt, wild animals, and virgin girls. She was associated with female rites of passage and depicted as a huntress with a bow.

**Athena**—The virgin daughter of Zeus and the spirit of intelligence, Metis. Zeus swallowed Metis and the result was the birth of Athena, fully developed and armed for war, from Zeus' head. The goddess of wisdom, moderation, craft, and strategy, she was depicted fully armed with shield and spear and helmeted head.

**Hephaestus**—The god of the forge and the blacksmith of the gods. This lame god was said to inhabit the volcanic island of Lemnos, where he fashioned amazing metalwork for the gods, such as the arms of Achilles and a fine net that trapped his wife, Aphrodite, in bed with Ares.

**Ares**—The god of war and the lust for violence. A son of Zeus and Hera and a frequent consort of Aphrodite's, he is depicted as an impatient warrior.

**Hermes**—The name means "stone-heap" and is derived from the practice of placing a stone as a boundary marker. Hermes was the god of crossing boundaries in his guise as escort to the dead going to Hades, the protector of all messengers, the trickster, and the patron of both merchants and thieves. He is depicted with winged sandals carrying his messenger's staff.

**Dionysus**—His name may mean "son of god." He is the lord of wine and revelry and god of the theatre. He was born of Zeus and a mortal mother but was snatched from her womb as she died and was sewn up in Zeus's thigh, from which he emerged as a baby. He is depicted in Eastern costume wreathed in ivy and vine leaves and holding a wine cup. He is often shown accompanied by his followers, the bestial Satyrs and the wild Maenads.

### Elements of Zeus

Zeus is an Indo-European name meaning *di*—"sky," or in Latin, *dies*. His Roman name, Jupiter, is also a version of the Indic *Dyaus Pitar*, or "sky father." Our Tuesday is named for the European god Tiu, also a version of the Indo-European "sky."

Zeus is a weather god, a cloud gatherer—he gives the symbol of the sky, his goatskin Aegis, to Athena. He also holds the power of the thunderbolt—the lightning streak.

Zeus is god of hospitality, law, and justice and the father of all gods and men. He is depicted either seated on his throne or hurling a thunderbolt. He is always shown bearded, with a powerful frame and usually wearing a wreath.

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Agamemnon and Menelaus believed they were upholding the laws of Zeus when they launched the Trojan War, to punish the Trojans for the abduction of Helen, an affront to the rules of hospitality.

Many of the myths of Zeus relate to his sexual potency as the great begetter of offspring. When seducing mortal women he must change his form:

- ✦ He appeared to Danae as a shower of gold, and she bore Perseus.
- ✦ He came to Europa as a bull, and she bore Minos.
- ✦ He tricked Alcmena by taking the form of her husband, and she bore Heracles.
- ✦ Semele tricked Zeus into appearing to her, and she was engulfed in flames as a result. The infant Dionysus was rescued before she died.
- ✦ Zeus also lay with the goddess Demeter and the Titan Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis. He swallowed Metis, producing Athena fully armed from his head, and slept with Maia, an earth goddess, who bore Hermes.
- ✦ Zeus also seduced a Trojan prince named Ganymede, transforming him into an eagle and carrying him up to Olympus to serve as his cupbearer.

His bothers, Poseidon, god of the sea, and Hades, ruler of the underworld, could be said to be two versions of Zeus presiding over different realms.

Like the sea he ruled over Poseidon was prone to unpredictable behavior and a tempestuous spirit. It was he who caused Odysseus to spend ten years reaching his home of Ithaca after Odysseus blinded Poseidon's son the Cyclops. He was called the earth-shaker and a breaker of horses. There may be an etiological explanation to the myth of the Trojan horse connected with the cult of Poseidon, his association with the horse, his role as the "earth-shaker," and the fact that Troy may have been leveled by an earthquake or other significant seismic event.

Hades is depicted as a judge of the dead and is famously portrayed abducting Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, the earth-mother goddess. This caused Demeter to plunge the world into a perpetual winter as she grieved for her lost daughter. Zeus intervened and brokered a compromise. Persephone (or "Kore") would spend half the year in Hades and half on earth, thus explaining the changing seasons.

Zeus' wife is Hera, another version of Gaia and Rhea. The meaning of her name is unknown, but it may be connected with the term *hora*—"season"—and be indicative of her role as the goddess of marriage. The marriage vows of Zeus and Hera are seen as the first *nomos*, or law, and the spiritual bond that all other *nomoi* spring from.

## Aphrodite

- ✦ The goddess of sexual desire is often thought of as a child of Zeus, but as we learned from reading Hesiod, she is one of the oldest divinities. She is always depicted as a voluptuous, powerful, and self-assured woman, often naked or semi-naked. Her companion is Eros, known by the Romans as Cupid, who shoots his love arrows into the hearts of mortals, causing great mischief.



- ✦ She is associated with the island of Cyprus, and she may be a version of the Eastern fertility goddess Astarte.
- ✦ Aphrodite is credited with causing the Trojan War. It all went back to the exploits of Zeus. His archenemy, Prometheus, had warned him that if he lay with the divine sea nymph Thetis their son would overthrow him. Zeus arranged for Thetis to marry Peleus, a mortal man from the island of Aegina just off the coast of Athens. Hera planned a wedding for Peleus and Thetis and invited all the gods. Only Eris (“strife”) was not invited. Infuriated, she threw a golden apple into the midst of the celebration carved with the words “to the most beautiful goddess.” Hera, Athena (the goddess of wisdom), and Aphrodite each claimed the apple and asked Zeus to decide among them.

Zeus was a wise god and told them to seek out the lowliest of mortals to decide instead. They chose a lonely shepherd boy grazing his flocks on the slopes of Mt. Ida near Troy. Each goddess secretly offered the boy a great prize if he would choose her. Hera offered unlimited power, Athena, great victories in battle, but Aphrodite offered what every young man dreams of—the most beautiful woman in the world.

Of course, this young man turned out to be the long lost prince of Troy, Paris, who, citing Aphrodite’s promise, would take Helen away from Menelaus in Sparta and return with her to Troy, causing one of the greatest of all mythological battles, the ten-year Trojan War.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What is the nature of the relationship between Zeus and Hera?
2. How are the gods depicted in Homer?

### Suggested Reading

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Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. Trans. John Raffan. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.

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### Other Books of Interest

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Kerényi, Carl. *The Gods of the Greeks*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1980.

Shay, Jonathan. *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. New York: Athenaeum, 1994.

Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *Mortals and Immortals*. Ed. Froma I. Zeitlin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

## Lecture 5: The Trojan War

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Homer's *Iliad*, Books 4 through 12.

### Introduction

In the last lecture we examined the role of some of the prominent Olympian gods against a backdrop of Greek mythology. Here we will look specifically at Homer's *Iliad* and the mythology of the Trojan War, paying special attention to Apollo and his role in the *Iliad*.

### Myths of the Greeks: The Heroes

The Greeks used their mythology, particularly the stories of their heroes, to define their past. A mythological hero is any man who has lived larger than life and through the power of his deeds and actions has won a place in the memory of men. Heroes were worshipped as cult figures.

The Athenians had ten eponymous heroes who represented the ten tribes of Attica. Sometimes a man assumes hero status because of his actions as a warrior, such as Achilles. Oedipus becomes a powerful hero because he has walked a path no other man has ever trodden.

It was the desire of the aspiring hero to be remembered, to have tales told about him after his death. This is all Achilles ever wanted, and here we are, however many thousands of years later, still speaking his name.

### The Trojan War

The stories of the Trojan War were told throughout the dark ages by Greek bards who traveled the Hellenic world telling their ancient stories of an epic clash between two great civilizations. These myths seem to contain memories of an ancient culture that we have come to know as the Mycenaeans.

### Homer

There has been a long debate over whether Homer was one creative mind or a collective term for a wider bardic tradition. Most scholars agree that the *Iliad* dates from around 750 BCE and the *Odyssey* 725 BCE. Little is known of Homer himself, if he did indeed exist. His use of language and other clues in his work point to origins in the Ionic Greek communities of Asia Minor, and both Chios and Smyrna are claimed to be his birthplace. Homer's works are written in dactylic hexameter, a six-beat stressed line using formulaic devices of oral delivery such as repetition, similes, and the epithet. Many fine translations of Homer are available in English today, including the work of Richmond Lattimore, Robert Fitzgerald, Robert Fagles, and Stanley Lombardo.

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There were countless versions of the Trojan War myth in circulation throughout the Greek world. Our primary source is the *Iliad* of Homer, a written record of an oral performance, probably an epic song from around 750 BCE. We cannot know if there ever was a “Homer”; scholars remain divided between those who see him as a metaphor for a wider oral tradition and others who still feel that this is the work of one great mind. In any event, the *Iliad* is a truly great work of mythology.

Homer’s *Iliad* is really a story about the wrath of Achilles, set against the background of events during the ninth year of the Trojan War.

The story begins with a terrible plague sent by Apollo. He is angry with the Greeks because Agamemnon, their commander, has been awarded the captured daughter of Apollo’s priest. When Chryses the old priest offers a handsome ransom to win her back, Agamemnon abuses him and sends him packing.

### The Trojan War Sources

The stories of the Trojan War come to us mainly through Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the later works of the Greek tragic dramatists, and two lost epics remaining only in scattered fragments. The *Cypria* was an exhaustive account of all the mythological events leading up to the Trojan War, and the *Little Iliad* told the stories of the Trojan War and its aftermath after the death of Hector, the point where the *Iliad* stops.

### Apollo

Apollo is one of the more fascinating Olympians. He is the young male god of prophecy, healing, disease, and music. In the Hellenistic period, he becomes known as a sun god, probably because he is seen as a bringer of light. His famous shrine at Delphi was the greatest oracle in the Greek world, and every city-state would send ambassadors to ask the gods for advice. But Apollo’s prophecies were often vague and designed to provoke action, rather than give definitive answers. In many myths, it is the oracle at Delphi that forms the catalyst that starts the mythological wheels in motion.

- ✦ Oedipus receives the news that he will kill his own father.
- ✦ Orestes is guided to Athens after he has murdered his mother, Clytemnestra.
- ✦ Herodotus (Book 1) tells us that the Lydian king Croesus consulted Delphi for military advice. He was told that if he attacked the Persians a great empire would surely fall. Of course, it was his empire that was destined to fall.
- ✦ Herodotus goes on to tell us (Book 7) that in 481 BCE the Athenians received an oracle from Delphi instructing them to put their faith in their wooden walls in the face of a Persian invasion. Some Athenians believed they should build wooden fortifications to defend their city, but the statesman Themistocles thought it meant that Athens should build ships and increase her navy. In 480 the Persians attacked Athens. Those who chose to remain behind the literal wooden walls were slaughtered. But

Themistocles had evacuated the majority of Athenians by ship and counterattacked the Persians, winning the great sea battle of Salamis and ensuring Athens' future domination of the waves.

Apollo was depicted as the eternal *ephebe*, a young man emerging from childhood. He is usually shown beardless and with a petulant, detached expression. He is a divine archer like his sister Artemis, and in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, we experience his wrath as he rains down arrows of sickness upon the Greeks.

### The Quarrel in the Greek Camp

Agamemnon is pressured to give the girl back, but this is Homeric warrior society, in which the power and status of a warrior is defined by the gifts he is awarded. Agamemnon feels he will lose face if he relents. Only one man steps forward to speak against him—Achilles, the greatest warrior of the Greeks, the very child of Thetis who might have overthrown Zeus had he not had a mortal father, Peleus. Achilles verbally spars with Agamemnon, and it is only the good judgment inspired by Athena that prevents him from killing his commander.

Agamemnon knows he must return his girl or watch his army be destroyed by Apollo's plague. So he agrees to hand her back, but only if he is given Achilles' prize, a young girl called Briseis, in return. The army agrees despite Achilles' objections. As the wise old warrior Nestor so aptly puts it, Achilles may be the best fighter, but Agamemnon commands more men.

Infuriated, Achilles has no choice but to withdraw from battle. He cannot desert and break the oath he swore at the wedding of Menelaus and Helen, and he cannot kill Agamemnon. Instead, in a moment of supreme mythological passive aggressiveness, he retires to his tent and refuses to fight. But that's not all: he begs his mother, Thetis, to plead with Zeus to turn the war against the Greeks, and so the events of the *Iliad* with all its bloody consequences begin.

Apollo's links to the *Iliad* are important. He was the god that represented the Greek male at the most important crossroads of his life, from boy to man. Many mythological stories are parables of initiation, and, like Apollo, Achilles also represents an *ephebic* type. Though he has been fighting at Troy for nearly ten years, he still seems an eternal eighteen-year-old, and, like Apollo, he is petulant, quick to anger, vain, and very, very dangerous.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What kind of heroic value system is operating in the world of the *Iliad*?
2. Is Achilles justified in withdrawing from battle?

### Suggested Reading

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Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000.

### Other Books of Interest

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Griffin, Jasper. *Homer on Life and Death*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1980.

Nagy, Gregory. *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.

Powell, B.B., and Ian Morris, eds. *A New Companion to Homer*. Leiden: Brill Academic, 1996.

Schein, Seth L. *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. Berkeley: University of California, 1984.

Slatkin, Laura M. *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in The Iliad*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

## Lecture 6: Myth as History

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Michael Wood's *In Search of the Trojan War* and Homer's *Iliad*, Books 13 through 18.

### Introduction

Now that we have read some of Homer's *Iliad*, this lecture will turn our attention to asking the question, Is the *Iliad* historical fiction or mythological fact? How much truth is there in the *Iliad*? Does the myth relate a historical perspective, or is it purely a work of poetic fiction? With this in mind, we will discuss the role of Heinrich Schliemann in the "discovery" of the Mycenaean world.

### Heinrich Schliemann and Troy

Until the late nineteenth century it was believed that the *Iliad* was a work of mythological fiction. Then German architect Heinrich Schliemann, who had read Homer as a young boy, decided to prove that the Trojan War must have taken place.

Schliemann made his fortune selling dyes to the Russians, trading gold during the California gold rush, where he became an American citizen, selling armaments to the Russians during the Crimean War, and going on to sell illegal cotton during the American Civil War. He was also the father of archaeology, though most archaeologists hate to admit it, and the man who uncovered Troy and the Mycenaeans.

An Englishman called Frank Calvert started digging on a hill on the northwest coast of Turkey called Hissarlick ("Hillfort"). He was so convinced this was Troy that he begged the British Museum to investigate, but officials refused his requests. Finally, he met Schliemann, who had been searching in vain for the city, and Schliemann agreed to finance an excavation in his own name.

Schliemann began to dig on the part of Hissarlick not owned by Calvert. He knew the Turkish landowners would eventually arrive, but he hoped he would make an amazing discovery and that he would be allowed to continue. After four days of frenetic and not-too-scientific digging, he had discovered the foundations of several buildings, and then the landowners arrived. They were not impressed with Schliemann's tales of the walls of Troy. Instead, they wanted to take the stones he had found and use them to build a bridge.

After many delays, Schliemann obtained official permission from the Turks to excavate at Hissarlick. Schliemann could never prove he had found Troy, until one day he suddenly ordered the workmen to take a break and told his wife to bring her shawl. Deep in a trench, he filled the shawl with gold artifacts and jewelry and arranged to have them immediately smuggled out of the country. A famous photograph of wife Sophia wearing "the jewels of Helen of Troy" caught the public's imagination and led to some believing that they were forgeries planted to justify Schliemann's quest. The bulk of Schliemann's treasure,

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believed lost after World War II, is now divided between the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and the Pushkin in Moscow.

Schliemann is considered both a brilliant man and a liar and a thief. His excavation at Hissarlick cut a huge thirty-foot trench, destroying several layers of settlement. He assigned Homer's Troy to "Troy II," which scholars now believe dates to a much earlier period, around 2600 BCE. Of the many levels of settlement found at Hissarlick, Troy VI is the leading candidate for Homer's Troy. It was built by an Indo-European people around 1900 BCE, and by 1400 we have evidence of substantial trade with Mycenaean Greece.

### **The Face of Agamemnon**

Because of his sensational discoveries, the Greek government allowed Schliemann to excavate at Mycenae, where he excavated a royal grave circle from the Middle Bronze Age and found the remains of twenty-one bodies adorned with gold. A myth has developed around this discovery that Schliemann lifted a fine mask and saw the perfectly preserved face of a Mycenaean king. He was said to have sent a telegram to the king of Greece, saying, "I have gazed upon the face of Agamemnon." None of this appears to have been true, and yet the famous gold mask in question so prominently displayed at the national museum in Athens is still known as the gold mask of Agamemnon.



## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What are your feelings about how archaeologists and historians have viewed the antiquities of other countries? Should these artifacts now be returned?
2. What impact did the uncovering of the Mycenaean civilization have on attitudes toward Greek mythology?

### Suggested Reading

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- Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000.
- Wood, Michael. *In Search of the Trojan War*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

### Other Books of Interest

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- Blegan, Carl W. *Troy and the Trojans*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1995.
- Chadwick, John. *The Mycenaean World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- Snodgrass, A.M. *Archaic Greece: The Age of Experiment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Vermeule, Emily. *Greece in the Bronze Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

## Lecture 7: Divine Myth

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Homer's *Iliad*, Books 19 through 24.

### Introduction

In Homer's *Iliad* we encountered a vast mythological story that portrayed the Greek gods as anthropomorphic figures. They are vain, jealous, quarrelsome, aggressive, petulant, and often divided in their loyalties. The Greeks used their myths to try to understand or at least rationalize the unpredictable world around them. The ancient Greek world was one of great social upheaval, wars, plague, political unrest, and rapid change. In this lecture, we will stay with the *Iliad* and examine the relationship between gods and mortals, focusing on Hephaestus and Ares and looking at the myth of the fall of Troy.

Homer brings the gods closer via their various interactions with mortals and through the narrative device of allowing us to visit Olympus and meet the gods in person.

In Book 1 of the *Iliad* we meet Hephaestus as he tries to cheer up his mother after she has been thoroughly chastised by an angry Zeus. Here we are shown the lame, slightly ludicrous god who acts out a famous story like a court jester. Yet Hephaestus makes an important mark on the world of Homeric warriors in his guise as god of the forge—the ancient god of technology.

As Achilles sits brooding in his tent, Zeus has allowed the war to go against the Greeks. The tables have turned, and now the Trojan forces, led by the mighty Hector, are bearing down on the Greek ships, threatening to burn them. The huge warrior Ajax is holding the line, but the Greeks are in serious trouble. Achilles' best friend Patroclus can stand it no longer and begs Achilles to rejoin the battle. He won't, and so Patroclus begs his friend to at least let him borrow his armor and lead his men into battle to save the ships. Ties of friendship among Homeric warriors were very powerful. Friends and family were *philoí* and all others *xenoi*, or "outsiders." Achilles relents, and Patroclus does indeed turn the tide of battle. He even kills a mortal son of Zeus, Sarpedon.

### The Death of Sarpedon

Zeus is heartbroken at the death of his mortal son at the hand of Patroclus, but even he cannot change fate. Hera reminds him of his obligations in Book 16.

*"A mortal man, whose fate has long been fixed,  
And you want to save him from a rattling death?"*

Reluctantly, knowing he cannot use his power to upset the delicate balance between gods and mortals, Zeus sends Sleep, Death, and Hermes to gently lift his son's corpse from the field of battle. Even the king of the gods is not immune from the grief of war.

Achilles' rage was magnified at the news of the death of Patroclus and his wrath is redirected toward the man who killed him, Hector. Achilles' divine mother, Thetis, appeals to Hephaestus to make Achilles new armor, and Thetis delivers this wondrous work of craftsmanship to her son, who eagerly rejoins the battle after propitiating Patroclus' spirit with the sacrifice of several young Trojan boys upon his funeral pyre. Achilles ultimately slays Hector, but his wrath is not assuaged. He defies the laws of heaven by refusing to bury Hector and goes so far as to defile the corpse by dragging the body behind his chariot three times around the walls of Troy. It is only a heartbreaking personal appeal by Hector's father, King Priam, that causes Achilles to soften, as he is reminded of his own father and family.

### **Bronze Age Technology**

Metallurgy was of vital importance to Homeric warriors. They are described as "Bronze-clad" and many of them were known for specific weaponry—Ajax's great shield and Hector's helmet with its nodding plume, frightening his young son when Hector returns from battle. Even the popular myth of Achilles' invulnerability may have its roots in the importance of armor. This story, not found in the *Iliad*, tells of Thetis dipping her newborn baby in the river Styx to make him invulnerable. The myth relates that only his ankle was exposed and an arrow to the ankle was the cause of his death—hence "Achilles tendon." Archaeologists have found complete suits of armor from the Mycenaean period that must have been enormously expensive. When the ancient warrior wore this armor, with metal grieves protecting his legs, the only exposed area would have been the lower back of his legs and ankles.

Hephaestus' role in myth is fascinating. He is both reviled and venerated. Working underground in his forge on the volcanic island of Lemnos, he toils away in a hot, sweaty, grimy existence. We know he is lame because of the story told to Hera in Book 1 of the *Iliad*. Zeus flicked him off Olympus in disgust. But Hera too was said to have also thrown him from heaven. This time he was rescued by Thetis. While being nurtured back to health, he learned his craft and put it to good use, constructing a beautiful, golden throne for Hera. Hera gladly accepted what she took to be a peace offering, but as she sat down she was trapped in a fine gold mesh and could not escape. Hephaestus would release her only if he could return to heaven. Hera sent Ares to force him, but Hephaestus drove him back with flaming bolts. It took the god of wine, Dionysus, to lull him with alcohol and bring him back to Olympus on the back of a donkey.

In Book 8 of Homer's *Odyssey*, the bard Demodocus tells a story of how Hephaestus constructed a similar net to ensnare Ares, who was cavorting with Hephaestus' wife, Aphrodite. That the god of craftsmen could tangle up the very forces of war and desire is an apt mythological metaphor for the power of technology and planning over lust.

Ares, known to Romans as Mars, was the god of war and the lust for battle. In Book 5 of the *Iliad*, Ares actually joins the battle to fight on behalf of Aphrodite. She had intervened on the side of her Trojan son Aeneas and was chased off the battlefield and even wounded by Diomedes, a Greek. Diomedes yells out:

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*“Get out of the war, daughter of Zeus!  
Don’t you have enough to do distracting  
Weak women? Keep meddling in war and  
You’ll learn to shiver when it’s even mentioned.”*

But Aphrodite’s mother, Dione, nursing her daughter’s wounds and broken pride, comforts her with these words:

*“This fool Diomedes doesn’t understand  
That a man who fights with gods doesn’t last long,  
His children don’t sit on his lap calling him ‘Pappa’  
To welcome him home from the horrors of war.  
So strong as he better watch out.”*

But Diomedes keeps on coming, determined to kill Aeneas, who is now being protected by none other than Apollo. Apollo flicks him back three times, but full of the lust of war, Diomedes keeps coming. On his fourth charge, he hears Apollo’s voice:

*“Think it over, son of Tydeus, and get back.  
Don’t set your sights on the gods. Gods are  
To humans what humans are to crawling bugs.”*

Apollo asks Ares to stop him before he ends up taking on Zeus. Ares stirs up the battlefield, turning the tide against Diomedes and the Greeks. Now Hera gets involved and implores Athena to help her beloved Greeks. Hera appeals to her husband, calling Ares “a mindless bully who knows no law.” Athena is dispatched by Zeus and helps Diomedes drive off Ares, who thrusts his spear deep into the stomach of Ares, who is said to have yelled as if ten thousand warriors had shouted at once. He flies off back to Olympus and complains bitterly to Zeus. The king of the gods replies:

*“Shifty lout. Don’t sit here by me and whine.  
You’re the most loathsome god on Olympus.  
You actually like fighting and war.”*

## **Ajax**

Sophocles’ tragic play *Ajax* tells the story of the quarrel over the arms that are awarded to Odysseus. Ajax, mad with fury, goes to kill the Greek commanders in the night but is deluded by Athena and instead kills and tortures cattle and sheep. When he realizes what he has done, he commits suicide with the sword given to him by his archenemy, Hector (Ajax in turn gave Hector his belt—the very belt Achilles used to drag his corpse around the walls of Troy).

## **The Fall of Troy**

The *Death of Achilles*—Paris, helped by Apollo, kills Achilles. A huge battle erupts over the body and arms of Achilles. Ajax wins the body and Achilles’ armor is offered as a prize to the best warrior.

It is from the *Odyssey* that many of the myths of the fall of Troy are documented, although images of the famous wooden horse abound in early Greek art. Many Greek myths deal with the aftermath of the Trojan War, and this becomes a prevailing theme in Greek drama performed in the fifth century BCE. The *Odyssey* is perhaps the most supreme use of Greek mythology, in which divine myths, legends, folklore, and social commentary are all combined in an epic narrative. Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* comes down to us from around 800 BCE, but many of its folkloric themes seem much older.

The story of the wooden horse is told by Helen and Menelaus in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*. The first five books of the *Odyssey* are often called the *Telemachia* because they primarily deal with the search of a son (Telemachus) for his father (Odysseus), who has been absent for twenty years. It seems Menelaus and Helen are only able to live together back in Sparta with the assistance of drugged wine. Within the telling of this story, we feel the stress that must underlie this most dysfunctional of marriages.

Helen tells Telemachus that Odysseus entered Troy disguised as a beggar, and there told her how he planned to take Troy. But Menelaus interrupts and reminds Helen that when the Greeks were hidden in the wooden horse she walked around it and called to each of the Greeks in the name of his wife. It was Odysseus who restrained the Greeks from reacting and foiling the plot.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. How would you describe the relationship between gods and mortals as articulated by Homer?
2. Why has the myth of the wooden horse become one of the most famous of all Greek myths?

### Suggested Reading

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Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000.

### Other Books of Interest

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Otto, Walter Friedrich. *The Homeric Gods: The Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion*. Reprint. Trans. Moses Hadas. W.W. Norton & Co, 1979.

Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *Mortals and Immortals*. Ed. Froma I. Zeitlin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

## Lecture 8: Myths of Identity: *The Odyssey*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Homer's *Odyssey*, Books 1 through 8 in Richmond Lattimore's *The Odyssey of Homer*.

### Introduction

In the last lecture, we discussed interaction between gods and humans and some of the myths and legends dealing with the fall of Troy. Here we will look at myths that deal with issues of identity, including the myth of Ajax as well as Homer's great work, the *Odyssey*.

### The Places Odysseus Visits in *The Odyssey*

*The Odyssey* is perhaps the greatest use of Greek mythology where divine myths, legends, folktale, and social commentary are all combined in an epic narrative. Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* comes down to us from around 800 BCE, but many of its folkloric themes seem much older.

*Troy*—Where Trojans and Greeks fought for ten years.

*Cicones*—Where they greet a new city with brutality and are beaten off, suffering heavy losses.

*Lotusland*—Where men are offered the chance to live in pure oblivion.

*Cyclopes*—A one-eyed, man-eating giant that rejects human hospitality.

*King Aiolos*—Offers safe passage home, thwarted by a lack of trust.

*Laestrygonians*—A race of giants who destroy Odysseus' fleet.

*Circe*—A sorceress who turns men into pigs and detains Odysseus for a year.

*The Underworld*—Where Odysseus receives a prophecy and meets the dead.

*The Sirens*—Their song promises fame and glory.

*Scylla and Charybdis*—A terrible choice, death or more death.

*The Island of the Cattle of Helios*—Where the cattle of the Sun are eaten.

*The Island of Calypso*—Where Odysseus hides away, unseen and lonely.

*The Phaeacians*—The people who hear Odysseus' remarkable story.

*Ithaca*—Odysseus' home, but in disguise and under threat.

### Folklore in *The Odyssey*

The narrative structure of the *Odyssey* contains much older folkloric elements that were skillfully blended into an epic story. The myth of the Cyclops is found on Greek vase paintings predating 725 BCE and seems to be a common folkloric motif. Here the inquisitive Odysseus finds himself trapped in a seemingly impossible situation. He is far from home, disorientated, and his rules of conduct have no effect. He must therefore rely on his wits and trickery (*dolos*) in order to escape. The myopic Cyclops is blinded, but not

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before the hero has befuddled him with the fruits of human viniculture—a bag of unmixed wine. Odysseus also tells him that his name is “nobody,” suppressing his identity and allowing him to escape. But he is still the quintessential Homeric warrior and can’t resist shouting his real name to the blinded Cyclops as he sails safely away, an act that results in the curse of Poseidon that keeps Odysseus from his home for ten long years.

### **The Theme of Initiation**

Many folkloric motifs deal with the articulation of certain important rites of passage. To the Greek male, the initiation of a boy into manhood was of prime importance. These young men undergoing their manly education were known as *epebes* and were often trained in subterfuge, night fighting, hunting, and living in the wild. The *Odyssey* teems with initiation motifs as Odysseus learns more about himself, his society, the world around him, his relationship to the gods, and his family.

It is in the underworld that Odysseus learns the most startling information. On meeting the shade of Achilles, he asks:

*“While you were alive the army honored you  
Like a god, and now you are here  
You rule the dead with might. You should not  
Lament your death at all, Achilles.”*

I spoke, and he answered me at once:

*“Don’t try to sell me on death, Odysseus.  
I’d rather be a hired hand back up on earth,  
Slaving away for some poor dirt farmer,  
Than lord it over these withered dead.”*

~Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.505-513  
trans. S. Lombardo

A startling discovery, and in one short exchange the whole honor code of the warriors of the *Iliad* seems negated. Achilles, who lived only to die famous, rejects all he stood for while he was alive.



## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. How does Homer manipulate the narrative structure of the *Odyssey* to create a cohesive meaning from the many myths this work contains?
2. To what extent is myth being used to create a paradigm for contemporary archaic Greek society?

### Suggested Reading

Lattimore, Richmond. *The Odyssey of Homer*. New York: Perennial, 1999.

### Other Books of Interest

Clay, Jenny Strauss. *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in The Odyssey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

Rubens, Beaty, and Oliver Taplin. *An Odyssey Round Odysseus: The Man and His Story Traced Through Time and Place*. London: BBC Consumer Publishing, 1989.

Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 2003.

## Lecture 9: Myths of the Afterlife

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Homer's *Odyssey*, Books 9 through 13 in Richmond Lattimore's *The Odyssey of Homer*.

### Introduction

In this lecture we will examine myths of the afterlife, paying special attention to the myth of Odysseus in the underworld, Orpheus and Eurydice, and the myth of Perseus and the Gorgon. We will also look at Hermes, in his guise as the escort of the dead as well as his other attributes.

### The Greeks and the Afterlife

Most Greeks believed that when dead their spirit, or psyche, was escorted by Hermes down to the realm of Hades, where they crossed the river Styx and wandered as shades in dark eternity. The afterlife was seen as neither positive nor negative. Only divine sinners were punished, such as the miscreant Titans, who suffered eternal torments. The Greeks believed that all peoples must be buried or else wander as lost souls on the banks of the Styx. They practiced both cremation and inhumation. Burials were held in three parts: the laying out of the body (*prothesis*), the funeral cortege (*ekphora*), and the burial itself.

### Odysseus in the Underworld

- ✦ Circe tells Odysseus that he must descend into the underworld to consult the seer Tiresias.
- ✦ He crosses the river ocean to the end of the world. He digs a pit and makes a ritual sacrifice, offering milk and honey, sweet wine, and water with barley. He kills the sheep and lets the blood run into the pit.
- ✦ The dead come up from Hades and Odysseus has to keep them from drinking the blood until Tiresias arrives. He sees his comrade Elpenor, who has not yet been buried, as he died falling off the roof while drunk at Circe's. Elpenor begs to be buried.
- ✦ He sees his mother, Anticlea, and resists giving her wine until he sees Tiresias.
- ✦ Tiresias makes his strange prophecy and warns Odysseus of the dangers ahead.
- ✦ He finally gives his mother wine. They speak, but he cannot embrace her as she slips through his arms.
- ✦ He then meets Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax.
- ✦ He sees the judges of the dead: Minos, Rhadamanthys, and Aeacus.
- ✦ He sees the suffering of the Titans:

**Tityus**, who tried to rape Leto, has a vulture eating his innards.

**Tantalus** tried to test the gods by serving up his own son at a banquet. He stands in a swamp up to his chin but cannot drink the water. Nor can he ever reach the lush fruit on the trees.

**Sisyphus** tried to cheat death by imprisoning him. He has to forever roll a boulder to the top of a hill.

## Orphism

A popular mystery cult developed in the classical world based on the myth of Orpheus. Linked closely to the rites of Dionysus, Orphism seemingly promised an initiation into the very knowledge of Orpheus himself through his songs and poetry. He had transcended death and visited the underworld. Through an affinity with Orpheus, his followers felt they could come to understand the nature of their deaths.

Orphics also believed in a dual nature of man from a myth stating that Dionysus had been twice born, once from the wicked Titans and once from Zeus. They thought that man's wickedness came from the Titans and that mortal life was a kind of penance for the sins of the Titans. Orphics were strict vegetarians and did not consume wine. They may have believed that the afterlife contained a dualistic existence and that by maintaining ritual purity in life they could achieve a kind of grace in death.

## The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

- ✦ Some say Orpheus invented the lyre and was famous for his beguiling song. His music could charm animals, stop birds in flight, and alter the very landscape.
- ✦ His wedding to Eurydice is interrupted by a man called Aristaeus, who tries to rape Eurydice. She flees but is bitten by a snake (a symbol of death) and is sent down to Hades.
- ✦ Orpheus refuses to accept her death and enters Hades by charming the spirits there. Hades and Persephone agree to release Eurydice if Orpheus promises not to look back.
- ✦ Orpheus cannot help but look back and sees Eurydice following him—he loses her forever and cannot re-enter the underworld.
- ✦ He wanders the earth distraught and refuses the company of women. He is finally torn apart by the Bacchae. His head, thrown into the sea, continues singing.

## Hermes

- ✦ Hermes is the god who guides the dead to Hades.
- ✦ His name is derived from *herma* (pile of stones) and reflects his cult status as a god of boundaries.
- ✦ Greek homes had a *Herm* with a phallus to protect the hearth.
- ✦ Hermes is protector of heralds and is the messenger god.
- ✦ He protects merchants. His Roman name is Mercury.

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- ✦ He is the trickster god and the protector of thieves.
  - ✦ As an infant, he invents the lyre, steals Apollo's cattle, and tries to lie to Zeus. He gives Apollo the lyre after winning him over with song.

### **The Legend of Perseus: The Hero Confronts Death**

- ✦ Perseus is the son of Zeus and Danae. Acrisius is the king of Argos and the father of Danae. He wants a male heir, but the oracle tells him that his grandson from Danae will become his heir, and also kill him. Acrisius imprisons Danae in an underground bronze room. Zeus comes to her as a shower of gold and Perseus ("destroyer") is conceived.
- ✦ When Perseus is seven Acrisius hears a child crying and learns of him. He orders a wooden box to be built and casts it into the sea with Perseus and his mother inside. They are rescued by a fisherman and brought to the island of Seriphos. The king of the island wants Danae, but she refuses him, and the young Perseus defends her. The king then pretends to be marrying another and so sends Perseus to fetch an impossible wedding present, the head of a Gorgon, knowing that this means certain death.
- ✦ There were three Gorgons. If they looked at you, you turned to stone.
  1. Stheno—strength.
  2. Euyale—far leaping.
  3. Medusa—wide ranging.
- ✦ They lived at the edge of the world, and only Medusa was mortal.
- ✦ Athena helps Perseus and gives him guidance. He must first go to the Graeae, horrible chthonic creatures that had only one tooth and one eye between the three of them.
- ✦ He confronts the Graeae and forces information from them by grabbing the eye.
- ✦ He then goes to the Nymphs and receives magic items to help in his quest.
  1. The cap of Hades—invisibility.
  2. Winged sandals—flight.
  3. A leather bag—concealment.
  4. The curved sword of Hermes.
- ✦ Perseus flies to the river ocean. He finds the Gorgons asleep, surrounded by petrified men. He uses his burnished shield as a mirror and decapitates Medusa. She was pregnant by Poseidon and out flies the winged horse Pegasus and a giant called Chrysoar. Pegasus flies away from the other Gorgons.
- ✦ In one version of the myth, Perseus returns to save his mother and turns Polydectes to stone. He makes the fisherman king of the island and gives Medusa's head to Athena as an offering. Athena wears it in the center of her Aegis.
- ✦ Perseus fulfills the prophecy unwittingly. He throws the discus at the games and the wind takes it. The discus strikes Acrisius and he dies.
- ✦ Ashamed to take over Argos after killing the king, he founds Mycenae and rules there with wife Andromeda, whom he rescues from a sea monster.

- ✦ The myth of Perseus articulates the quest of the *ephebe* over the fear of death. The Graeae and Gorgons are chthonic underworld figures that must be dominated with cunning and bravery.
- ✦ Freud saw the Gorgon's head as representing female genitalia and the Perseus myth as a metaphor for the separation of the boy from the female world of childhood into the male world of the adult.

### **Folkloric Elements in the Perseus Myth**

*Threat*—The forced marriage of Danae.

*Quest*—To retrieve the head of Medusa.

*Magic Items*—His hat, sandals, and sword.

*Uncharted Land*—Beyond the river ocean.

*Mortal Combat*—Killing Medusa.

*Deadly Pursuit*—The Gorgons' chase.

*Homecoming*—Return to Seriphos.

*Recognition*—Raising the head of Medusa.

*Villain Revenged*—Turning Polydectes to stone.

*Sexual Reward*—Andromeda.

*Reward of power*—The Throne of Tiryns.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. Compare the episode of Odysseus in the underworld to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
2. Apply the list of folkloric elements to the myths of Odysseus, Theseus, Heracles, and Jason. What are the similarities?

### Suggested Reading

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Lattimore, Richmond. *The Odyssey of Homer*. New York: Perennial, 1999.

### Other Books of Interest

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Morris, Ivan M. *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Vermeule, Emily. *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

Lecture 10:  
Myths Into Politics:  
*Agamemnon*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* in *Oresteia* and Euripides's *Bacchae*.

### The Theatre and Dionysus

In the fifth century BCE in Athens, one of the dominant forms for the expression of mythology was theatre. Greek theatre had its origins in the cult worship of Dionysus and was influenced by the performance of Dithyrambic poetry in honor of the gods, the epic tradition of storytelling, such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and choral dancing.

Theatrical performances were held as festivals in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine, revelry, and the theatre. In fact, one of his cult symbols is the mask, and in many ways the mask represents the idea of Dionysus: he is a god who encourages one to lose his or her inhibitions, take on other personas, and explore what lies beyond the boundaries.

Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Semele. His name may mean "son of god." He was also known as Bacchus, and the myths of his birth and early life strongly suggest that his worship originated as far away as India and spread across the ancient Near East. Although wine features prominently in the *Iliad*, the actual cult of Dionysus seems to take root in Greece some time in the seventh century BCE, as Greece emerged from the dark ages and came into contact with the Near East. He seems to have knocked off Demeter, the earth mother, and to have taken over many of her cult functions as a god of renewal and rebirth. Perhaps he was just more exciting.

Dionysus is a god of arrival. In the Dionysus festival, his image was paraded through the streets on a wheeled boat, perhaps the origin of our parade floats. He is depicted with a long, luxurious beard and hair, an Asiatic and slightly effeminate dress, wreathed in ivy and usually holding a wine cup with a grapevine flowing close behind.

Wherever he went, he spread ecstasy and was accompanied by his followers the Maenads, wild dancing women who carried the *thyrsus*, a wooden rod topped off with a pine cone (perhaps representing the pine resin used in Greek wine production), and wreathed in ivy. His male followers were the Satyrs, men in a constant state of erotic excitement with horses' ears and tails and goatlike features.

Euripides dramatizes one powerful myth of Dionysus in his tragedy the *Bacchae*, staged in the last years of the fifth century. Dionysus seeks revenge on his mother's family by driving the women of Thebes mad and into the mountains. Even old King Cadmus and the prophet Tiresias abandon their stations and join the cult. Only the young King Pentheus resists, with tragic results. He is torn apart by his crazed female relatives.

## A Day at the Theatre

The Athenians watched drama twice a year at the great City Dionysia and at the lesser Lenaea Festival. The City Dionysia was held at the sacred precinct of Dionysus on the southeast slope of the Acropolis, where up to 30,000 adult Athenian male citizens would gather for three days to celebrate Dionysus and watch several plays. Each day began with a trilogy of three tragedies, followed by a physical comedy called a Satyr play. In between the performances were state announcements, parades, and award ceremonies. The day ended with the performance of a comedy. The plays were judged as part of a competition in honor of Dionysus. Scholars are divided on whether women were in attendance, but as the theatre was a civic affair, in the fifth century it seems unlikely. The Theatre of Dionysus was the largest public structure built in Athens, and the annual festival was one of the few times when the majority of Athenian voters were gathered together in one place at one time. The political nature of the plays has been well documented. The statesman Pericles probably produced Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in 458 BCE, a trilogy that seemingly supports political compromise.

## The Basic Plot of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*

- ✦ A watchman appears on the roof of the house of Atreus and tells us he is working for Clytemnestra, the woman of the house. He sees a beacon in the night sky, the signal that Troy has fallen to the Greeks, and shouts to wake the household.
- ✦ The chorus of elders of Argos arrives. They tell the story of the start of the Trojan War and how after receiving a prophecy, the Argive king, Agamemnon, was forced to choose to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia in order to sail on Troy.
- ✦ Clytemnestra tells a skeptical chorus of the fantastic journey of the beacon from Troy to Argos. Each stage of its journey was a place of mythological harm to men by women. She imagines the fall of Troy in vivid detail.

## Greek Theatrical Terms

**Theatre**—Derives from the Greek term meaning “seeing-place.”

**Drama**—From the Greek, meaning “to do.”

**Character**—From the Greek: “making a mark” or “inscribing.”

**Tragedy**—“Goat song,” perhaps named for the Satyrs or the voices of the young male members of the chorus.

**Scene**—From the Greek *skene*, meaning “tent,” perhaps the earliest stage set.

**Deus ex machina**—A Latin term that has come to signify divine intervention. It means “god on a machine” and refers to the arrival of gods in tragedy flown onstage by a mechanical crane.

**Orchestra**—The circular playing area between the *skene* and the seats where the chorus sang and danced. Now the orchestra has become the term for a group of musicians, and they are buried beneath that stage in a “pit.”

**Thespian**—A term that has come to mean “actor.” Derived from the name of Thespis, an early Athenian dramatist who was said to have developed the dramatic form.



- ✦ A messenger arrives with the news that Agamemnon has returned home. He also tells the chorus that the rest of the Greek fleet has been scattered and wrecked by angry gods and that Menelaus is missing.
- ✦ Agamemnon arrives in a war chariot with his spear prize, the Trojan princess and prophet, Cassandra. Clytemnestra bids him to enter his house on a fine red carpet that re-creates the bull sacrifice, called the *buphonia*, and recalls his decision to murder their daughter.
- ✦ Cassandra tries to warn the chorus that Agamemnon is being killed by his wife, but they do not believe her. Apollo has cursed her, and no one will ever accept her true prophecies. Tragically, she foretells of her own death and goes inside the house to meet her end.
- ✦ The chorus hears the screams of Agamemnon as he is struck down while in his bath. They are powerless to act. Clytemnestra reveals the dead bodies of her husband and Cassandra and justifies her revenge.
- ✦ Aegisthus, the exiled cousin of Agamemnon, arrives to assume joint rule with Clytemnestra. She appeals for peace, and with the king dead, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus found a tyranny to rule Argos. The chorus appeals for Agamemnon's son Orestes to return home to avenge his father's death.

*"An unbearable fate will fall on me if I disobey,  
 but how can I bear to slaughter my own daughter,  
 the glory of my house?  
 How can I stain these hands, the hands of a father,  
 with this young girl's blood, as it drenches the altar?  
 How can I choose? Both ways are full of evil!  
 Should I desert the fleet and fail my allies?  
 The sacrifice stops the storm,  
 the blood of a virgin must be spilled."*

—Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 206–214  
 trans. P.W. Meineck

### The Role of Artemis in the Sacrifice of Iphigenia

According to the myth, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to gain fair winds to sail on Troy. This appears to be an articulation of the *protelia*, a pre-sacrifice that the highest-ranking official would perform before a war to gain the favor of the gods.

This ritual may have had its origins in the offerings of hunters before they killed a wild animal. Because Artemis protects wild creatures, a domestic animal is killed to propitiate the death of the wild animal and give the hunters food for strength on the chase.

Agamemnon is about to embark on the greatest war and therefore feels compelled to make the greatest sacrifice, one that represents a direct conflict between the female sphere of the household (*oikos*) and the male sphere of

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the state (*polis*). Aeschylus gives us a dramatic rendition of Agamemnon facing this terrible choice.

Artemis is invoked as protector of all wild creatures and also as the goddess who watches over young girls. Agamemnon believes she demands this sacrifice, and in making it he is enabled to sail. Aeschylus presents the myth to show that this is Agamemnon's interpretation of a sign in the sky and the oracle of his prophet Calchas, not the direct word of god. Agamemnon's choice has tragic consequences.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. Was Clytemnestra justified in killing Agamemnon? Is she simply a woman protecting her family or a personification of the curse of the house of Atreus bent on revenge? Perhaps both?
2. Examine the links between mythology and the Greek theatre. Why did the Athenian dramatists use mythological stories in their work?

### Suggested Reading

- Aeschylus. *Oresteia*. Trans. P.W. Meineck. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998.
- Euripides. *Bacchae*. Trans. Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2000.

### Other Books of Interest

- Easterling, P.E., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Mikalson, J.D. *Honor Thy Gods, Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.
- Sommerstein, Alan H. *Greek Drama and Dramatists*. London: Routledge, 2002.

## Lecture 11: Gender in Myth: The Women of Tragedy

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Aeschylus's *Libation Bearers* and *Furies* in the *Oresteia*.

### Introduction

Gender issues are a prominent theme in Greek myth, from the succession myths of the gods as related by Hesiod to the tragedies of the Athenian stage in the fifth century BCE. The tensions between male and female may have been a mythological memory of an earlier matriarchal religion, based around an earth-mother goddess, or a reflection of the attitudes toward women in the Greek world. In this lecture, we will continue our examination of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, looking specifically at the killing of Clytemnestra at the hands of her own son, the pursuit of Orestes by the avenging Furies, and the trial of Orestes presided over by Athena. We will also mention other prominent women of Greek mythology.

### Gender in Greek Mythology

Examine the myths we have already covered and note some of the following issues of gender.

- ✦ The role of female forces in the succession myth of Hesiod. Notice how Gaia and Rhea are forced to act in protection of their young against their male counterpart and orchestrate his violent overthrow.
- ✦ The description of Pandora as told by Hesiod. Here the first woman is portrayed as a negative in the lives of men.
- ✦ The role of the two "spear-brides," the captive Trojan allies Chryseis and Briseis, as catalysts in the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon.
- ✦ The relationship between Hera and Zeus as related by Homer in the *Iliad*. Hera is threatened with physical violence when she questions her husband's fidelity. She uses trickery (*dolos*) in order to achieve her ends.
- ✦ The portrayal of Helen in the *Iliad* and the attitude of the chorus of Argive elders toward her in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.
- ✦ The relationships between Odysseus and Calypso and Odysseus and Circe in the *Odyssey*.
- ✦ The role of Nausicaa in bringing Odysseus back into the fold of human society.
- ✦ Contrast Penelope in the *Odyssey* with Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*. Pay close attention to the unfolding of the homecoming of Agamemnon to contrast with that of Odysseus. Note how Odysseus was warned by Agamemnon in the underworld.

## “The Face That Launch’d a Thousand Ships”

The phrase was first coined by Elizabethan poet Christopher Marlowe, but the notion of the woman who caused the Trojan War has been a powerful one since antiquity. According to various popular myths, Helen was the daughter of Leda and Zeus, who came to her as a swan, and she was born from an egg. This may be a link to the Orphic idea of the first egg producing the elements, having been opened by Eros, the spirit of desire. Helen and her mortal sister Clytemnestra are raised in Sparta by King Tynadarius and are married off to Menelaus and Agamemnon. As Helen was semi-divine and very beautiful she was courted by all the young chiefs of Greece, all of whom swore a solemn oath to protect the marriage of Helen and Menelaus.

In “stealing” Helen, Paris abused the rites of guest-friendship sacred to Zeus in his guise of god of hospitality. The eldest brother, Agamemnon, takes it upon

himself to call on the oath of the chiefs and launch an attack to punish Troy. In these terms women are seen as property, items of exchange, whether in a political alliance such as the coming together of Sparta and Argos with an aristocratic double marriage or in the plundering of a rival state.

### Cytemnestra

In Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*, Orestes, the exiled son of Agamemnon, is forced back to Argos under threat of a dreadful curse from Apollo. He reunites with his sister Electra as she is sent by Clytemnestra to pour a libation to mollify the spirit of the dead Agamemnon.

Orestes kills his own mother, Clytemnestra, in order to avenge his father’s death and win his throne. But he is tormented by the Furies, powerful female chthonic forces that punish crimes against blood.

Orestes flees to Apollo’s shrine at Delphi. At the beginning of Aeschylus’ *Furies*, Pythia, the priestess of Apollo, tells of how Apollo took over the shrine after it had been ruled for generations by female deities. Apollo drives the

*Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships,  
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?  
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.  
Her lips suck forth my soul: see where it flies!  
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.  
Here will I dwell, for heaven is in these lips,  
And all is dross that is not Helena.  
I will be Paris, and for love of thee,  
Instead of Troy, shall Wittenberg be sack'd;  
And I will combat with weak Menelaus,  
And wear thy colours on my plumed crest;  
Yea, I will wound Achilles in the heel,  
And then return to Helen for a kiss.  
O, thou art fairer than the evening air  
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars;  
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter  
When he appear'd to hapless Semele;  
More lovely than the monarch of the sky  
In wanton Arethusa's azur'd arms;  
And none but thou shalt be my paramour!*

—Christopher Marlowe  
*Doctor Faustus*  
ca. 1590s

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Furies from his shrine and tells Orestes to take refuge in Athens, where Athena will decide his fate.

In Athens, Athena convenes a law court and appoints a jury to hear both sides of this elemental argument. Was Orestes justified in killing his mother as revenge for her killing of Agamemnon? Apollo argues the patriarchal case, but the Furies do not accept the vow of marriage. A husband is not blood, but a mother is blood and blood cannot kill blood.

The jury votes and is split. Athena casts her vote in favor of Orestes. She is the daughter of Zeus and knew no mother. The patriarchy is upheld. But Athena offers a compromise; the Furies will be renamed the Eumenides—the kindly ones—and live in honor in the rock of the Athenian Acropolis.

### Women Killing with Cloth

The manufacture of textiles was of vital importance to the ancient economy and was the preserve of women and the household slaves under her guidance. Notice how in many myths women use textiles to further their aims.

- ✦ Hera uses the sash of Aphrodite to seduce Zeus.
- ✦ Clytemnestra lays a lavish red carpet for Agamemnon and kills him by tangling him in a robe that becomes a net.
- ✦ Penelope delays the suitors by telling them she will not marry until her father-in-law's death shroud is ready. She unpicks it every night.
- ✦ Medea kills Jason's new bride and the king of Corinth with a poisoned robe and crown.

### Athena

Athena was born from the head of Zeus after he had swallowed Metis, the spirit of intelligence. She appeared fully armed, with helmet, shield, and spear. She is depicted in this fashion wearing Zeus' Aegis—a kind of sheepskin mantle that represents the sky, and the head of Medusa, given to her by Perseus.

Athena is called Glaukopis—gray eyes or owl eyed—Athens claimed her as their patron and constructed a myth that she won the city from Poseidon. Poseidon threw down his trident to reveal a pool of water, denoting that Athens would dominate the sea, but Athena thrust down her spear to produce the sacred olive tree, the cash crop of ancient Athens.

Athena was the goddess of moderation, intelligence, and craft, both in battle and in terms of handiworks such as weaving and sewing.

She is also known as Parthenos—the Virgin; her heart belongs to her father. The Athenians claim a tenuous link to her bloodline. According to one myth, Hephaestus, another god sacred to Athens, tried to make love to her, but the goddess fled his advances. He chased her in a state of excitement and as he passed Athens he ejaculated on her thigh. She wiped off the divine semen with cotton and threw it down on Athenian soil. From there sprung Erichthonius (born of the earth), one of the first Athenian kings.

Athena is often depicted in myth as a friend to the hero, holding Achilles back from rash acts of violence, mentoring Telemachus, protecting Odysseus, and guiding Perseus with good sense.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. Prepare arguments to defend Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon.
2. Look at the homecoming of Odysseus in Book 23 of Homer's *Odyssey*. Comment on the way in which Penelope uses *dolos* (trickery) to reunite with her husband.

### Suggested Reading

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Aeschylus. *Libation Bearers* and *Furies* in *Oresteia*. Trans. P.W. Meineck. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998.

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Cantarella, Eva. *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.

## Lecture 12: Myths of Initiation: The Heroes

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Carl Kerényi's *Heroes of the Greeks*.

### Introduction

One of the most enduring mythical motifs is that of the hero. The Greeks worshipped their heroes rather like Christian saints, housing their remains in shrines and creating rites that accentuated their heroic status. Many Greek heroes, such as Achilles, Perseus, Jason, and Theseus, represent young men at the cusp of manhood going through rites of initiation. They are mythological *ephebes*—the Greek young man leaving the world of his mother to enter the realm of adult male society. Heroes were remembered and revered for having lived larger than life, positively and negatively. Oedipus is a hero despite his terrible past. Philoctetes is a hero because he is so impossibly immovable. The greatest of all mythological heroes is Heracles. Below is set out an outline of the basic myths associated with Heracles and his famous twelve labors.

### Heracles

Heracles is the son of Zeus and the mortal Alcmene. Zeus comes to her disguised as her husband, Amphitryon. She gives birth to the semi-divine Heracles and a mortal son, Iphicles.

Hera, stung with jealousy, tries to kill the infant Heracles by sending snakes to his bed, but the young boy strangles them.

Heracles has various exploits that showcase his strength and prowess. He is said to have laid with all fifty of the daughters of Thespius, either one a night for fifty nights, or, as befitting a son of Zeus, all fifty in one night.

Hera inflicts madness upon Heracles and he kills his wife Megara and his children. He is told by the oracle at Delphi to go to the city of Tiryns, where he must serve his cousin, King Eurystheus. Eurystheus fears Heracles and sets about devising twelve impossible tasks for him.

- ✦ *The Nemean Lion*—Invulnerable lionskin; Heracles wrestled the lion to death and thereafter wears its pelt.
- ✦ *The Lernaean Hydra*—Huge water serpent with many heads that grew back if cut off. He cut off the heads, burned the stumps, and buried the heads under a huge rock. He was attacked by a huge crab that he sent spinning off into the sky to become the constellation Cancer. He dipped his arrows in the poison.
- ✦ *The Ceryneian Deer*—He tracked this sacred deer with golden antlers for a year. Apollo and Artemis reproached him, and, after showing it in Tiryns, he let the deer go.
- ✦ *The Erymanthian Boar*—Heracles drove it out with his huge voice and gave it to Eurystheus, who was seeking refuge in a bronze jar.



- ✦ *The Augean Stables*—Augeas was the son of Helios the sun god and had an enormous herd. He never cleaned his stables. He told Heracles that if he cleaned them he would give him a *tokos*, 10 percent of his cattle (the modern idea of interest). But he gave him only one day. Heracles diverted two nearby rivers and completed the job. Augeas welched on the deal. Heracles killed Augeas and founded the Olympic games in honor of Zeus at his palace in Elis.
- ✦ *The Stymphalian Birds*—Facing armor-piercing feathers and metal beaks, he drove the birds from cover with bronze castanets and shot them with either a sling or his bow.
- ✦ *The Cretan Bull*—Heracles captured the bull of Minos by seizing it by the horns, throwing it into the sea, and riding it to the Greek mainland.
- ✦ *The Horses of Diomedes*—Man-eating horses belonging to Diomedes, a son of Ares who ruled over a wild northern tribe. He fed Diomedes to the horses and drove them back to Tiryns.
- ✦ *The Girdle of Hippolyta*—The Amazon queen would lie with no man and her girdle could be taken only with force or seduction. Luckily for Heracles, Hippolyta was just waiting to meet a real man. She fell instantly in love with him. But Hera disguised herself as an Amazon and made the warrior women rise up—Heracles killed Hippolyta, took her girdle, and fled.
- ✦ *The Cattle of Geryon*—Geryon was a three-bodied man who lived in the far west of the earth. Heracles traveled to the western tip of North Africa, where it meets Spain, and erected the pillars of Heracles—the Rock of Gibraltar and the Rock of Ceuta in Tangiers. While crossing the African desert, he fired an arrow at Helios the sun, who, admiring his gall, leant him his cup. It was in this cup that the sun made his rounds. Heracles killed Geryon and his guard dogs and herded the cattle into the cup, landing them in Spain and driving them through southern France and down through Italy, all places of Greek settlement.
- ✦ *The Apples of the Hesperides*—Golden apples growing on a magical tree that Zeus gave to Hera as a wedding present. They were guarded by a hundred-headed serpent. He wrestled the ever-changing sea god, Nereus, who told him where to head, and then arrived at the western end of the world, where he met Atlas. Advised by Prometheus, whom Heracles had freed from bondage, he tricked Atlas into getting the apples.
- ✦ *Cerberus*—This is the guard dog of Hades. Heracles asked Hades if he could take the dog, and Hades decreed he could, but only if he did not use weapons. He chained the dog and dragged it to Tiryns. Once there he let it go to return to Hades.

### **The Meaning of the Myths of Heracles**

The name Heracles means “glorious through Hera,” and yet the mythic tradition has him at odds with Hera. This could be an explanation of the Argive seizure of the shrine of Hera, the Heraion, in the ninth century BCE, or, an even older myth of patriarchal control over a previous matriarchal religion.

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Heracles' early labors seem to suggest a general taming of the neighboring lands in the Peloponnesus and a patriarchal civilizing influence through a combination of strength and intelligence.

As the labors progress, Heracles ventures further afield to many colonies of Greek cities, perhaps linking the hero with the new Greek settlements in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.

Heracles came to absorb many local cult figures, becoming a Pan-Hellenic superhero. He presides over the initiation rites of *ephebes*, especially concerning military training and the gymnasium.

Sophocles creates a tragedy based around the myth of Philoctetes, a Greek warrior who was abandoned by his fellow Greeks after he sustained a putrid wound.

Ten years later the Greeks learn that Troy can fall only if they possess the bow of Heracles. Philoctetes received the bow from Heracles as a young man when he was the only person brave enough to light his funeral pyre and send the hero to heaven.

Now Odysseus arrives in Lemnos with Neoptolemus ("new warrior"), the son of Achilles. Odysseus conspires to have Neoptolemus persuade Philoctetes to either come with him to Troy or to give him his bow.

Neoptolemus, the epitome of the young *ephebe*, is torn between the political rationalizations of the wily Odysseus and the pure, intractable spirit of Philoctetes, who absolutely refuses to do anything for the Greeks.

The play ends with Heracles ordering Philoctetes to go to Troy with Neoptolemus.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. Consider the relationship Sophocles creates between Neoptolemus, Odysseus, and Philoctetes. What does this tell us about changing attitudes toward heroic conduct?
2. Examine the labors of Heracles. What etiological explanations can you suggest for certain labors? For example, the myth of the Hydra could be seen as an explanation of subjugation of the earth's resources through irrigation (*hydra* is Greek for "water").
3. Examine the malice of Hera toward Heracles. What does this signify in terms of her relationship with Zeus, the role of the hero in Greek mythology, and issues of gender conflict?

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## Lecture 13: Myths of the City: *Oedipus*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus*.

### Introduction

In the previous lecture we discussed heroes, focusing on Heracles and Philoctetes. Here we will examine the role of Oedipus in mythology, the foundation myths of the city of Thebes, and how the Athenians used the myths of Oedipus and Thebes to hold up a mythological mirror to their own culture.

### The Foundation of Thebes

- ✦ Europa, a Phoenician princess, is abducted by Zeus disguised as a bull. Agenor, her father, has his sons search for her. They all give up the search except for Cadmus:
  - Cilix founds Cilicia.
  - Phoenix founds Phoenicia.
  - Thasos settles the island of Thasos on the Aegean.
- ✦ Cadmus consults Delphi, who tells him to give up the search and found a city where a strange cow lay down. This is a hill in Boeotia (place of cows), and he founds Thebes.
- ✦ Cadmus has to kill a serpent that was denying him water. He throws the serpent's teeth into the ground and up springs armed men. They fight one another until only five remain. These are the "sown men," the heads of the original families of Thebes.
- ✦ Cadmus marries Harmonia, the daughter of Aphrodite and Ares. Aphrodite gives Harmonia a divine neck chain and a regal robe. But these godly gifts can never be owned by a mortal, and as they are passed down the generations they spread a curse. Of their children:
  - Ino kills her children and commits suicide.
  - Semele is burned by Zeus.
  - Agave tears her son Pentheus to pieces.
  - Autonoe's son Actaeon is killed by his hunting dogs for daring to watch Artemis bathe.

### The Story of Oedipus

The king of Thebes, Laius, receives a prophecy that his son will kill him. He plans to have his son exposed at birth and orders the baby's feet pinned to the side of a mountain. A herdsman takes pity on the child and gives him to a Corinthian. The child is adopted by the king of Corinth and grows up a Corinthian prince, unaware of his true origins.

A drunken guest reveals that Oedipus is adopted. Confused, the young man goes to Delphi to consult Apollo's oracle. There he learns he will kill his own

father. Determined never to return to Corinth and to avoid his fate, Oedipus heads toward Thebes. On his way, he kills a man and his retinue, who refuse to give way.

Arriving in Thebes, he finds a city under a terrible curse and suffering a plague inflicted by the Sphinx. Oedipus successfully answers the riddle of the Sphinx and the curse is lifted. The ruler of Thebes has gone missing, and so Oedipus is embraced as a savior of the city and marries the widowed queen, Jocasta.

Years later the plague returns and Oedipus vows to root out its cause. Slowly he realizes against terrible pressure that he is the root of the curse and that he has in fact married his own mother and fathered several children with her. Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus gouges out his own eyes.

Oedipus wanders as an exile until he learns from a prophecy that he will come to his end in a sacred grove. He sets himself down at the shrine of the hero Colonus, just outside Athens, and is given sanctuary by Theseus.

Despite the aggressiveness of Creon, who now rules in Thebes, and the appeals of his son Polynices, Oedipus refuses to grant the heroic power that his death will bring to Thebes. Instead, he meets his end in Colonus, bequeathing the secret of his death to Theseus and the protection of his shrine to Athens.

Oedipus' son Polynices launches an attack on Thebes, helped by seven Argive heroes. They are defeated, and Polynices and his brother Eteocles kill each other in single combat. The new ruler, their uncle Creon, will not allow Polynices to be buried, as an example to all those who would attack their own country.

Oedipus' daughter Antigone, who had accompanied her blind father in exile, returns to Thebes and demands that her brother be buried. Creon refuses. Despite his orders, Antigone buries her brother and is captured by Creon's guards. Citing religious law and her vows to her brother, Antigone refuses to relent and is condemned to death by being entombed alive in a cave.

After hearing the warnings of Tiresias and the appeals of his son Haemon, Creon orders the cave opened, but Antigone has hanged herself. Haemon curses his father and commits suicide, and Creon's wife, unable to bear the news, also commits suicide.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What does the Oedipus myth say about the role of fate in the minds of the ancient Greeks?
2. How does the Oedipus myth apply to society today?

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Lecture 14:  
Myths of the City:  
Athens

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is John Boardman and David Finn's *Parthenon and Its Sculptures*.

### Myths of Theseus

#### *Athens and Crete—The Minotaur*

Agenor, a descendent of Zeus, settled in the area that would later be called Phoenicia. One of his sons was Cadmus, who went on to found Thebes. Zeus fell in love with his daughter Europa and came to her as a bull, carrying her off into the sea and across the water to Crete.

Zeus and Europa had several children: Minos, Sarpedon, and Rhadamanthys.

Minos forced out his brothers and claimed the throne of Crete. He said that he would prove he had the right to rule because Poseidon would make a bull rise from the sea and he would offer it in sacrifice. The great bull came, but Minos could not bring himself to sacrifice it.

He married Pasiphae, daughter of Helios, and they had several children, including Araidne and Phaedra.

Poseidon had Pasiphae fall in love with the bull to punish Minos for breaking his promise. The great master craftsman Daedalus built a wooden bull-like contraption that Pasiphae could climb inside of to couple with the bull. She eventually became pregnant and gave birth to the dreaded Minotaur—half man and half bull.

Minos ordered Daedalus to build the labyrinth to contain the Minotaur.

#### *The Legend of Theseus*

Aegeus, the king of Athens, was childless until after visiting the oracle at Delphi for advice when he visited the city of Troezen. After getting drunk, he laid with Aethra, daughter of King Pittheus. Aethra bore a son, and to keep his identity secret Pittheus instructed her to raise him until such time as the boy could lift a huge stone and there find a sword and a pair of sandals left by Aegeus. This boy was Theseus, and when he came of age he lifted the rock and headed for Athens.

On his journey to Athens, Theseus emulated the labors of Heracles by undertaking six labors involving clearing the way of brigands and thieves.

On his arrival in Athens, his safety was threatened by Medea, who had married Aegeus and was positioning her son Medus as heir. Medea tried to poison Theseus and told Aegeus that this stranger meant trouble. But Aegeus recognized the sword and saved his real son.

Theseus caught the bull of Marathon, the same bull that Heracles had driven from Crete. He took the bull to Athens and sacrificed it to Apollo.

Theseus learned that Athens was paying tribute to the house of Minos in

Crete by sending seven young men and seven virgins as human sacrifices to be “fed” to the Minotaur. Aegeus reluctantly let him go with the youths, asking that on his return he would change the sail of the ship from black to white if he was successful.

Theseus, assisted by the Cretan princess Ariadne, kills the Minotaur and returns by tracing his way through the Minoan labyrinth with the assistance of Ariadne’s ball of thread.

He abandons Ariadne on the island of Naxos, where she becomes the consort of Dionysus and a constellation. On his return to Athens, he forgets to change the sail and his father drowns himself, naming the sea the Aegean.

Theseus inherits Athens and is known for uniting Attica and being a benevolent ruler and protecting suppliants such as Oedipus and the mothers of the dead warriors who attacked Thebes with Polynices.

Theseus undergoes other adventures that tie him to Heracles, such as an expedition against the Amazons in which he carried off Antiope, who bears his child Hippolytus. He also tried to carry off Helen and joins with the Lapith Pirithous in journeying to the underworld to try to carry off Persephone. He is held there until Heracles rescues him.

Theseus was said to have died on the island of Skiros. The Athenian leader Cimon made a great show in 475 BCE of returning the hero’s bones to the city of Athens.

## **The Mythological Monuments of Athens**

### *The Parthenon*

Initiated by Pericles in 447 BCE and finally completed in 438, this Doric temple to Athena replaced an earlier temple destroyed in the Persian invasion in 480. Dominating the Athenian skyline, the Parthenon articulated several important moments in Athenian mythology. The sculptures were by the great classical artist Phidias.

*The East Pediment*—The birth of Athena from the head of Zeus.

*The West Pediment*—The battle between Athena and Poseidon for Athens.

## **The Minotaur Myth**

- ✦ The bull of Minos is reflected in the bull symbolism found in Minoan art.
- ✦ One important symbol of Minoan power was the double-headed ax, called a labrys. This was used for the sacrifice of bulls. The term “labyrinth” for the Cretan maze is probably a link to this symbol.
- ✦ The mazelike corridors of the palace of Knossos, excavated in the later nineteenth century by Sir Arthur Evans, would suggest a vast labyrinth to someone from a less developed culture.
- ✦ Theseus can be seen as a son of Poseidon and of his father, Aegeus—a mythological metaphor for the god of the sea—hence Aegeus—Aegean Sea.
- ✦ Ariadne may be a memory of a Cretan goddess associated with Aphrodite.
- ✦ Troezen and Knossos on Crete were both important cult sites for the worship of prominent earth-mother goddesses.



*The Metopes*—The battle of Lapiths and Centaurs and Greeks and Amazons.

*The Frieze*—The grand Panathenaic procession witnessed by the gods and/or the dead of Marathon, according to John Boardman, and the human sacrifice of the daughters of Erectheus, according to Connelly.

*The Statue*—The temple contained a huge cult statue of Athena holding a winged victory, or Nike.

### *The Erechtheum*

Begun in 421 BCE, this multilayered shrine next to the Parthenon on the Acropolis houses several mythological cult shrines of Athens.

The wooden cult statue of Athena Polis (Athena of the City).

The tomb of Erectheus, the mythical first king of Athens, born “of the earth.”

The salt spring of Poseidon, marking where his trident fell.

The marks of Poseidon’s trident.

The sacred olive tree of Athena.

An altar to Poseidon.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions and Essays

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1. Locate images of the Parthenon and consider the mythological aspects of its sculptures.
2. Examine how Athens “invented” mythologies to define their city-state. Consider the myth of Theseus and the way in which Aeschylus uses Athenian political institutions to solve an age-old Peloponnesian problem.

### Suggested Reading

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