

Mythology Study Guide

Mythology by Edith Hamilton

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Plot Summary

This book explains the main concepts of the Greek and Norse mythologies, including their gods and how the world was made. It then summarizes some of the most important myths of each. In most cases, these center around specific heroes, individuals or families.

The main Greek gods and their roles were: Zeus (the Roman Jupiter), the king of the gods and the god of the sky and thunder; Poseidon (Neptune), god of the sea; Hades (Pluto), god of the underworld; Demeter, goddess of crops and agriculture; Hera (Juno), goddess of women and marriage; Aphrodite (Venus), goddess of love; Ares (Mars), god of war; Hermes (Mercury), the messenger of the gods and god of travelers and merchants; Hephaestus (Vulcan), god of blacksmiths; Athena (Minerva), goddess of wisdom, crafts and civilization; Apollo, god of light, culture and truth; Artemis (Diana), goddess of the hunt and the woods; and Dionysus (Bacchus), god of grapes, wine and theater. The male gods, especially Zeus, liked to indulge in affairs with mortal women, leading to the birth of many semi-divine heroes and lesser gods.

The main Norse gods and their roles were: Odin, the king of the gods and the sky-father; Balder, god of light and happiness; Thor, god of thunder; Freyr, goddess of things that grow from the earth; Tyr, god of war; Freya, goddess of love and beauty; and Hela, goddess of death. There was also Loki, the trickster fire-god, who was technically not a god but the son of a giant.

One of the most important Greek heroes was Hercules, who completed twelve seemingly impossible tasks to make up for the murder of his family, and was eventually allowed to join the gods in Olympus. Theseus was the hero of Athens, who slew the fearsome Minotaur of Crete and escaped King Minos' labyrinth. He ruled wisely and fairly as king of Athens, giving power back to the people. Perseus was the hero who fought Medusa and brought back her head. He also killed the sea monster that was about to eat a beautiful maiden called Andromeda, whom he later married. Jason was the hero who went on a famous voyage to bring back the Golden Fleece from Colchis. Atalanta was a female hero who took part in the Calydonian Boar hunt. She challenged all suitors to a foot-race, which she always won, until one day a man was able to defeat her with the help of Aphrodite. The Trojan War saw many heroes fight on both sides, the most important being the Greek Achilles and the Trojan Hector. When the two fought, Achilles won, but he was killed soon after by an arrow to his heel, his one vulnerable spot. After ten years the Greeks won the war. The Greek hero Odysseus took a further ten years to get home afterward, facing many dangerous people and monsters on the way. He blinded the Cyclops, defeated the witch Circe's spell, and killed the suitors who were trying to win his wife. The Trojan Aeneas had similar adventures on his way to Italy, where he founded Roman society. These were the most important heroes of mythology. Other myths told the tales of the loves of the gods, or explained the origins of various plants, animals and stars. Some held moral lessons, and others were merely entertainment.



One of the most important Norse heroes was Sigurd, the man who won a Valkyrie maiden called Brynhild but was tricked into taking a love potion that made him love another woman. He then won Brynhild for another man, King Gunnar. When Brynhild found out the truth, she had Sigurd killed before committing suicide. Another Norse myth involved a woman called Signy, who planned for vengeance against her husband, who had killed her father and brothers. When her scheme was completed, she entered the burning house to die with her husband and their children. These two examples are typical of the Norse idea of heroes struggling against their doomed fate. The gods also faced a dark future as they were fated to lose in a final battle against the frost giants at the end of the world. Nevertheless, they never gave up the fight.



Introduction to Classical Mythology

Introduction to Classical Mythology Summary and Analysis

Mythology is a book about the myths and stories of the ancient Greeks and Romans. It focuses particularly on the gods and the heroes, and how they interacted with each other, as well as exploring some of origin myths such as how certain flowers were created. The sources for the various myths are given in italics at the beginning of each chapter, and these range from eleventh century BC Greek to second century AD Roman. At the end of the book an introduction to Norse mythology is given, with a brief discussion of their main gods and heroes.

The Greeks created their gods in their own image, unlike the mythologies and religions of other peoples such as the Egyptians and Assyrians. Not only were the Greek gods human in appearance, they also acted in a very human manner. This made them more familiar to the people who worshipped and told stories about them. They had emotions, made mistakes, could be vindictive, but also caring and even humorous. The humanity of the Greek gods reflects the Greek attitude towards the beauty and perfection of man. The Greeks saw perfection in the ideal beauty of youth, and used it to model their statues of the gods on. To them, there was no better form for a god than an idealized man or woman, rather than a fantastical creature or incarnation of mysterious power. To them, men were capable of incredible feats, great emotions and wonderful achievements.

The Greeks created their myths initially as a way of understanding the world, attributing gods to the natural phenomena that they saw around them. The myths also acted as entertaining stories, and not all of them were meant to explain something. Finally, the myths conveyed developing religious ideas concerning morality and justice. The myths also held important religious messages, as the Greeks began to explore ideas of morality. For example, despite Zeus' own questionable behavior in the myths, he came to be understood as a protector of justice. When a mortal committed a crime, broke an oath or harmed a guest, they were seen to be displeasing and dishonoring the gods. The Greek myths should not be understood as a bible of religious belief, but more a collection of tales that communicate a message about humans and the world they live in.

There are many different ancient sources that can be used to gain information about Greek mythology. The Roman poet Ovid wrote a lot about the myths, but presented them as silly stories that held no inner meaning. Due to this, the author of this book has tried not to use Ovid wherever possible. Homer, an ancient Greek poet, provided a lot of important insight in his epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey. Hesiod's Theogony is another main source, which asked questions about the origins of things. Homeric hymns, written from the end of the eighth century BC to the fifth or even fourth century BC, were written to honor various gods. Later Greek writers include Pindar, a lyric poet whose poems



contained references to mythology, and the tragic playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The comic playwright Aristophanes also referred often to various myths. The historian Herodotus and philosopher Plato also mentioned mythological subjects. Later sources include the Alexandrian poets, such as Apollonius of Rhodes, who told the story of the Golden Fleece, the Romans Ovid and Apuleius, and the Greek Lucian. They did not really believe the stories they were telling, presenting them as entertainment or satire. The Greek Pausanias, writing in the second century AD, took the myths more seriously. Finally, the Roman poet Virgil is an important source, bringing the myth of Aeneas to life so vividly in his epic poem, the Aeneid.



Part One. The Gods, and The Two Great Gods of Earth

Part One. The Gods, and The Two Great Gods of Earth Summary and Analysis

These two chapters give brief summaries of the main characteristics of the Greek and Roman gods. The main gods, or Olympians, lived on Mount Olympus. This was the realm of the gods that mortals could not reach. These gods were the children of the Titans, who were the children of heaven and earth. Zeus and the other gods took over when Zeus dethroned the main Titan Cronus and seized his power. He locked the titans away under the earth, allowing only a few to remain free. The Romans also believed in the Olympian gods, giving them different names but adopting the same characteristics and mythology that the Greeks gave them.

Zeus (Jupiter to the Romans) was the king of the gods and ruler of Olympus. He was married to his sister Hera. He had many lovers and was constantly trying to hide his affairs from Hera. He was the god of thunder and lightning.

Hera (Juno) was the goddess of marriage and women. She was Zeus' wife, and was constantly jealous of his affairs. She would punish any mortal woman that Zeus slept with, whether the woman actually consented to the sex or not.

Poseidon (Neptune) was the god of the sea and brother of Zeus. He was also the god of horses and could cause earthquakes.

Hades (Pluto) was the other brother of Zeus and ruler of the underworld, where mortals went when they died. Hades was not evil, but could seem cold and unpitiful.

Athena (Minerva) was the goddess of wisdom, and protector of cities and civilization. She had power over hand-crafts and agriculture. She could also be a fierce battle-goddess when needed. The olive and the owl were her symbols. She was born fully grown out of the head of Zeus.

Apollo (also known as Apollo to the Romans) and Artemis (Diana) were the children of Zeus and Leto. Apollo was the god of light, archery, music, culture, healing and prophecy. He was sometimes said to be the Sun-god; at other times this role was given to Helios. Artemis was the goddess of hunting and the moon. She also watched over young girls, and was often associated with fertility, despite being a virgin goddess.

Aphrodite (Venus) was the goddess of love, who was said to have been born from sea-foam. Ares (Mars) was the god of war, and the son of Zeus and Hera. Hephaestus (Vulcan) was also Hera's son, sometimes said to have been born without a father,



sometimes said to be Zeus' son. He was the lame god of blacksmiths and volcanoes. Hephaestus was married to Aphrodite, who slept with Ares behind his back.

Hermes (Mercury) was the messenger of the gods, and the god of travelers and merchants. He was also the guide of the dead who led spirits safely to the underworld.

Dionysus (Bacchus) was the god of grapes and wine, and Demeter (Ceres) was the goddess of crops. Both were worshipped at harvest time. Demeter's daughter, Persephone (Proserpina) was taken by Hades to be his bride. She spent half the year on earth with her mother, when plants grew and crops flourished, and half the year in the underworld, when Demeter mourned and the plants withered. This explained the changing seasons of the year. Dionysus could be cruel as well as bring joy to mortals, representing how wine can be pleasant but also drive mortals to frenzy. Dionysus came to be worshipped through theater, with plays presented in his honor. Both Dionysus and Demeter were associated with rebirth and hope for a good life after death.

The Greek and Roman gods explained various natural phenomena, emotions and necessities of life. The author describes this as a kind of 'early science', a way to explain mysterious things in the world. The aspects and powers of the gods reflected their importance. Zeus hurled lightning, which must have seemed incredibly strange and all-powerful to the Greeks. He also controlled rain, which was so important to the parched and rocky land of Greece. Hermes, god of travelers and merchants, was less powerful but very swift. Aphrodite was beautiful because love is beautiful, but she was also deceptively powerful, like love. She even had power over Zeus, as no one, even an immortal, could fight love. Ares was regarded better by the warlike Romans because he was a god of war. Demeter and Dionysus had two of the most important cults because their powers were so important to mankind. This brought them closer to humans, which is why in their mythology they suffered more than other gods. The other gods could never truly understand humans as they never experienced suffering or the tragedy of death.



Part One. How the World and Mankind Were Created, and The Earliest Heroes

Part One. How the World and Mankind Were Created, and The Earliest Heroes Summary and Analysis

According to the Greeks, in the beginning there was only chaos. Out of this came Night and Death, then Light, followed by Earth (Gaia) and Heaven (Ouranos, or Uranus). Their children were the Titans. The Titan called Cronus fought his father and took his power. Fearing that his children would do the same when they grew up, he swallowed each newborn baby. When Zeus was born, Cronus' wife Rhea fed her husband a stone wrapped in blankets instead. When Zeus was grown, he forced Cronus to disgorge the children he had swallowed. There was then a war between the first gods and the Titans, which Zeus won with the help of the Titan Prometheus. Zeus imprisoned the Titans and forced Atlas to hold up the sky.

There are three different versions of the story of the creation of man. In one, the gods created different races of men based on metals. The gold race was the best, the silver not so good, and the brass even worse. The bronze race were heroes, but the iron race was corrupt, desiring only power. It was this race that was held to be currently on earth. Another story tells that Zeus was angry with early men and sent a great flood to destroy them. Only Prometheus' family survived. When they cast stones behind them, they sprang into the next race of men. Another version says that the Titan Epimetheus created man. According to most traditions, the Titan Prometheus brought fire to humanity. Zeus was angry with Prometheus' love of man and tied him to a rock to have his insides pecked by an eagle. To punish men, he sent them women. The first woman, Pandora, gave in to her curiosity and opened a box that released all the evils into the world. However, hope was also released to aid mankind in their suffering.

These early creation myths resemble creation myths of other cultures. In particular, the idea of a great flood is common to many, as is the corruptive nature of women. The fact that women were created in the first place as a punishment for men reflects the Greeks' low opinion of women, who were considered inferior and weak creatures. The creation myth of the Greeks is peculiar in that the gods did not create the universe or the world, and in some versions did not even create life. The universe and earth existed before them, and in fact gave birth to them. The gods are also not shown as being the kind protectors of man. Prometheus was punished for trying to help humanity too much. The Greek gods were therefore not worshipped for creating the world, for giving humans life, or for their goodness. They had done none of these things. Instead, they were worshipped because of their power, partly because it would be too dangerous not to, and partly in the hopes that they might be persuaded to bestow gifts. The gods were not benevolent and very rarely helped any mortal if there was nothing in it for them, such as a sacrifice or offering.



Some of the earliest myths were the stories of Zeus' loves. Io was a woman who he transformed into a cow to hide their meeting from an angry Hera. Hera was still suspicious however, and forced the cow Io to wander the earth, constantly stung by a gadfly. Europa was another woman loved by Zeus. He transformed into a beautiful bull and carried her off to Crete on his back. Early stories such as these allowed important royal families to claim lineage from the gods themselves. An example is the royal line of Crete, which was said to be descended from Europa.

Other early stories explained the creation of certain flowers. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection and pined away, a flower growing where his body should have been. Hyacinth was Apollo's favorite companion, and was transformed into a flower when struck dead by a discus. The anemone flower sprung from the blood of Adonis, a handsome man loved by Aphrodite. Flowers must have seemed particularly beautiful and miraculous in dry, rocky Greece. It is possible that these flower myths reflect ancient practices of human sacrifice, when a youth's blood may have been sprinkled on the ground to ensure good crop growth. When plants sprang up, it may have seemed like they were growing from the blood of the sacrificed youth. Later, when such customs came to be considered barbaric, stories such as these flower myths may have disguised the unsavory aspects by replacing them with gods and magic.

One of the earliest hero tales to be told was that of Odysseus besting the Cyclops called Polyphemus. The monster captured him and his men, intending to eat them all. Odysseus blinded the Cyclops, then hid his men under the bellies of his largest sheep. When the monster let his flock outside for the day, the men escaped with them. As they were sailing away, however, Odysseus could not resist boasting who had beaten the Cyclops. This story champions the cunning of its hero but also teaches of the danger of excessive pride. It can therefore be seen as an early moral tale.



Part Two. Cupid and Psyche, and Eight Brief Tales of Lovers

Part Two. Cupid and Psyche, and Eight Brief Tales of Lovers Summary and Analysis

Psyche was a young woman whose beauty Venus became jealous of. She sent her son Cupid (Eros) to make Psyche fall in love with the ugliest and lowliest peasant he could find. However, Cupid fell in love with Psyche instead, and took her away to a wonderful palace. Here Cupid became her husband, but instructed that she must never look upon him. One day, however, her sisters came to visit. They persuaded her that she must try to see her new husband in case he was some fearsome monster who intended to eat her. That night she took a lamp to the bedroom and gazed at Cupid while he slept, but a drop of oil from her lamp fell on him and he awoke. He was angry that she had not trusted him and he flew away. Psyche was heartbroken and searched all over for her lost husband. Eventually she went to the temple of Venus and offered to serve her. Venus set her a series of impossible tasks, but Psyche was always helped by sympathetic creatures. Proving her love through her efforts, Psyche was able to win back Cupid. Jupiter allowed the two to be properly married, and Psyche became the goddess of the soul.

Pyramus and Thisbe were neighbors who fell in love, but their parents would not allow them to marry. One day they agreed to meet by a mulberry tree. Thisbe arrived first, but was forced to flee from a lion, dropping her cloak in the process. When Pyramus arrived he saw the torn cloak and the lion's footprints, jumped to the wrong conclusion, and killed himself. When Thisbe found his dead body she also killed herself. The white mulberry berries turned crimson in honor of their great love.

Orpheus was a renowned musician whose music was admired by everyone who heard it. When his wife Eurydice died, he journeyed to the underworld to beg for her release. Persephone was enchanted by his music, and Hades agreed to release Eurydice, on the condition that Orpheus must not look back at her until she was in the land of the living again. However, Orpheus could not resist looking back once at the mouth of the underworld, and Eurydice was lost forever.

When Alcyone's husband Ceyx was killed in a storm at sea, the pitying gods sent her a dream to tell her the truth about what had happened to him. The next day she saw his body and leaped into the sea. As she did so, they were both transformed into seabirds.

Pygmalion fell in love with the statue of a woman that he had created. Venus took pity on his aching heart and turned the statue into a real, living woman. Pygmalion married her and named her Galatea.



Baucis and Philemon were an old couple who showed good hospitality towards Jupiter and Mercury when they visited them disguised as mortals. The gods rewarded them by making them priest and priestess of a glorious temple. When they died, they were transformed into two trees, an oak and a linden, that grew from one trunk.

Endymion was a shepherd who was loved by the Moon goddess Selene. She put him into an eternal sleep and came down to kiss him each night.

Daphne was a young girl who did not want to marry. Apollo fell in love with her and pursued her through the woods. She cried out for help from her father, a river god, who transformed her into a laurel tree.

A similar story involved Arethusa running from a river god, Alpheus. Artemis saved her by turning her into a spring of water in Sicily.

These tales show how dangerous the gods and goddesses could be. The story of Psyche shows Venus' jealous, vindictive nature. She does not come across as a very appealing character, but at the same time it is made very clear that she was not a goddess to get on the wrong side of. Earning a god's love did not seem much better. Poor Endymion was cast into an eternal sleep, Daphne became a tree, and Arethusa a stream. The gods did not seem to care who they hurt as long as they got their way. However, a more sympathetic side was also shown. The gods could be pitying and even kind, such as in their treatment of Pygmalion, or Baucis and Philemon. These represent the two main reasons why the gods had to be shown respect at all costs; they were capable of great cruelty, but also great kindness. Keeping on their good side would have seemed a very sensible plan. Stories such as the tales of Daphne and Arethusa also helped explain the existence of various natural features. This was one way in which the Greeks connected their mortal world with the gods and could be seen as a form of what Edith Hamilton calls 'early science.'



Part Two. The Quest of the Golden Fleece, and Four Great Adventures

Part Two. The Quest of the Golden Fleece, and Four Great Adventures Summary and Analysis

Jason was the hero who set out to retrieve the Golden Fleece from King Aetes of Colchis. He gathered a crew of great heroes to help him. On the journey they faced many dangers. They fought winged monsters called Harpies, took advice from a wise old seer, sailed safely through the Clashing Rocks by sending a dove through first, and eventually arrived at Colchis. There, Aetes set Jason some impossible tasks, which he completed with the help of Aetes' daughter Medea. Medea warned Jason that Aetes meant to kill him, and they quickly took the Golden Fleece and escaped. Medea managed to stop pursuit by killing her own brother. On the way home, Medea saved them from the huge bronze man Talus by calling the hounds of Hades to help. When they reached home, Medea helped Jason take revenge on his father's murderer, Pelias. However, Jason did not remain faithful to Medea, despite all she did for him. He became engaged to the daughter of the king of Corinth. Medea was furious and sought revenge. She killed the princess, then killed her own children. She escaped from Corinth in a chariot pulled by dragons.

Phaëthon was the son of the Sun-god Helios. His father promised to give him anything he desired, and Phaëthon asked to drive the chariot of the sun for one day. Helios warned him that he would not be able to control the horses but he did not listen. Sure enough, Phaëthon lost control of the chariot and plunged to earth.

Bellerophon was the hero who rode the famous winged horse Pegasus, whom Athena helped him to catch. He used the winged horse to help kill the fearsome monster called the Chimaera, which had the body and head of a fire-breathing lion, a goat's head in the middle of its back, and a snake for a tail. After this victory he lived happily for a time, until his pride caused him to attempt to fly to Olympus. The gods would not allow this; Pegasus reared and Bellerophon fell to earth.

Otus and Ephialtes were giants who wanted to prove that they were the equals of the gods. They decided that they would try to carry off Artemis. She led them to a forest and sent them a vision of a beautiful white deer. As they threw their spears, the vision of the deer disappeared, and each was impaled on his own brother's spear.

Daedalus was a great inventor who built the labyrinth for the Minotaur. King Minos locked him up in his own labyrinth, but Daedalus constructed wings for him and his son Icarus to fly away. He warned his son not to fly too close to the sun, but he did not listen. The sun melted the wax holding the feathers together and Icarus fell to his death.



These stories show some of the important traits of Greek heroes. Usually a hero was strong and brave, but he could also be wise or cunning. He would often set forth on a journey, encountering strange creatures or carrying out difficult tasks. Heroes were also usually good leaders of men. However, heroes also always had a fatal flaw. In many, it was their ego. These stories all show the danger of too much pride. Jason was led by ambition to betray the person he really owed everything to. This betrayal led to his ruin. Phaëthon and Icarus did not heed their fathers' warnings and allowed their pride to take them into danger. Bellerophon and the giants allowed their egos to overrule common sense. These stories also show the absolute importance of proper respect for the gods. Bellerophon and the giants thought they were the gods' equals and dared to defy them. They were killed for their presumption.



Part Three. The Great Heroes before the Trojan War - Perseus, Theseus, Hercules and Atalanta

Part Three. The Great Heroes before the Trojan War - Perseus, Theseus, Hercules and Atalanta Summary and Analysis

Perseus was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman. He was famous for killing Medusa, a Gorgon whose gaze could turn a man to stone. To defeat her he used a sword given to him by Hermes and a polished shield from Athena which he used to see Medusa's reflection. On his return, he flew over Ethiopia where the maiden Andromeda was being sacrificed to a sea-monster to appease the anger of the sea-god and his nymphs. He slew the monster and married Andromeda. One of their descendants was the hero Hercules.

Theseus was the son of Aegeus, king of Athens, but was brought up in a city in southern Greece. When he travelled to Athens to meet his father, he killed a number of dangerous bandits on the way. He then saved Athens from the cruelty of King Minos of Crete, who demanded a tribute of seven maidens and seven young men every nine years to feed to the Minotaur. This time, Theseus went with them. With the help of King Minos' daughter Ariadne, Theseus was able to kill the monster and escape the labyrinth. He became a good and just king of Athens and took part in many more adventures, such as the Calydonian Boar hunt and the fight between Centaurs and Lapiths. He even went down to the underworld to help his friend Pirithoüs carry away Persephone. This was not successful, and Theseus was only able to escape when rescued by his cousin Hercules. Theseus married Phaedra, another daughter of King Minos, but she fell in love with his son Hippolytus. When Hippolytus refused her, she accused him of rape and killed herself. Theseus brought down a curse that killed his son, then found out the truth too late. Theseus was honored by the Athenians as a protector of the defenseless and a great king of their city.

Hercules was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman. He was hated by Hera, and one day killed his wife and children while under a madness that she had put on him. He undertook twelve seemingly impossible tasks for King Eurystheus of Mycenae in order to punish and purify himself for the murder of his family. These twelve tasks were as follows: 1) kill the Nemean Lion; 2) kill the nine-headed Hydra; 3) capture Artemis' stag; 4) capture the Erymanthian Boar; 5) clean the Augean stables in one night, which Hercules did by diverting two rivers; 6) drive away the Stymphalian Birds; 7) capture Minos' bull in Crete; 8) capture the man-eating mares of King Diomedes of Thrace; 9) bring back the girdle of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons; 10) bring back the cattle of the monster Geryon; 11) bring back the golden apples of the Hesperides, which



Hercules persuaded the Titan Atlas to do while he held up the sky in his place; 12) bring back Cerberus, the three-headed guard-dog of Hades. Hercules was successful at all the tasks. He had many more adventures, including wrestling Death to bring his friend's wife back to life. After Hercules' death, he was taken to Olympus where he was reconciled with Hera.

Atalanta was raised by a she-bear and became a great huntress. She took part in the Calydonian Boar hunt and it was she who had the first strike. She refused to marry and challenged all suitors to a foot-race that she knew she would win. One day, a young man called either Melanion or Hippomenes threw irresistible golden apples aside during the race. She stopped to pick them up and he won. They were married soon after.

Atalanta's story shows that it was not just men who could be heroes, though heroic women were much rarer. Strong, heroic women usually came in the form of warrior women such as the Amazons, or virgin huntresses such as Atalanta. All were shown as being at odds with the proper rules of society, not so much because of their deeds but because they refused to marry. Eventually, Aphrodite became annoyed with this refusal of the woman's proper role and saw to it that Atalanta would be married. It is interesting to note that as soon as she was married her heroic adventures had to end, unlike male heroes who continued to go off on quests even when married. Clearly the Greeks thought such behavior would not be appropriate for a wife.

These stories encapsulate what it meant to be a hero. Heroes were strong, brave and tough. They had adventures and fought villains and monsters over whom they were victorious. They were often related to the gods, and usually favored by one or more of them. They might be given gifts or magical items to aid them in their quest, or simply rely on their own strength and skills. They were admired and loved by others. Most importantly, they did things that no ordinary person could do. Heroes were also marked by their faults, usually exhibiting one fatal flaw that threatened to bring them down. As mentioned earlier, this could come in the form of excessive pride and inflated egos, which naturally follow from always having been the best at everything. It might also come from one's emotions, from being too quick to anger or judge others. Hercules was a hero who often let his emotions take hold, and Theseus lost a son from being too quick to judge without hearing both sides of the story. Heroes might also be brought down by the anger of a particular god or goddess, such as Hera's hatred of Hercules.

In comparison to Hercules, Theseus was a calmer, more cool-headed hero. He was strong and brave too, but also thoughtful, just and compassionate. He completed amazing feats not just for his own glory but also to protect those weaker than himself. Hercules represented all that was heroic to Greece, whereas Theseus was a very Athenian hero. He ruled fairly, allowing the people a great amount of control in the governing of the city. He was a more intelligent and democratic hero, more suited to the city famous for its philosophers, artists and thinkers. To the Athenians, Theseus was the civilized hero, as their city was the symbol of civilization.



Part Four. The Trojan War, and The Fall of Troy

Part Four. The Trojan War, and The Fall of Troy Summary and Analysis

When a Trojan prince called Paris was asked to judge a beauty contest between three goddesses, Aphrodite bribed him with the offer of the most beautiful woman in the world. This turned out to be Helen, wife of King Menelaus of Sparta. Paris travelled there, abducted Helen, and took her back to Troy. This began a ten year war between Greece and Troy, with plenty of heroes on both sides. The Trojan hero Hector was killed by the great Greek hero Achilles. Achilles was killed by Paris, who shot an arrow in his heel, and Paris was killed soon after. The Greeks finally won the war with a trick. They built a huge wooden horse and hid their own men inside. The Trojans believed it was an offering to the gods and brought it into their city. That night the Greek soldiers climbed out and captured the city. The only Trojan prince to escape was Aeneas, whose story will be told in a later chapter. The story of the Trojan War was one of the most important and popular myths of the Greeks, and one which every educated Greek and Roman would have been familiar with.

The reader has already observed the fatal flaw of most Greek heroes; their egos. Now we see what happened when those mighty egos clashed. Achilles could not stand the slight to his honor that Agamemnon brought about by claiming his slave-girl Briseis. His response was to refuse to fight, which almost devastated the entire Greek army. He only changed his mind when his friend was killed and he became desperate for revenge. He fought Hector, whose own ego would not allow him to try to hide from the fight, and killed him. He then allowed his anger to get the better of him and refused Hector a proper burial, even trying to mangle his body. This was a serious affront to the gods, as burial rites were incredibly important in ancient Greece. It seems that for a Greek hero, his personal pride trumped every other concern, and was even put ahead of his own people or proper respect for the gods.

The heroes of the Trojan War, also called Homeric heroes, were slightly different from the older mythological heroes such as Hercules, Perseus and Theseus. Whereas the latter were superhuman individuals who fought alone against monsters and strange creatures, the Trojan heroes fought other men as part of an army, and did so in order to win glory and gifts. Each was a king or prince of their own kingdom or city, as well as a powerful general and leader of men. Their prowess in war justified the tribute that their people gave to them, and the political power that they held. This is why Achilles and Agamemnon argued so fiercely over the girl and why Odysseus and Ajax argued over the armor. The tribute a hero received symbolized how great a hero he was. To have it taken away was a blow to his personal honor. To a Homeric hero, glory and fame were the most important things in life. This is why Hector went out to face Achilles, despite

knowing that he would die and despite the fact that he could do more good for his city and his family if he survived. His personal pride and sense of honor would not allow him to do anything that could be labeled 'cowardly.'



Part Four. The Adventures of Odysseus

Part Four. The Adventures of Odysseus Summary and Analysis

Odysseus' adventures were not over when the Trojan War came to an end. His journey home to Ithaca took him ten years, facing many fierce monsters and dangerous people along the way. When he blinded the Cyclops he angered the monster's father, Poseidon. The god sent a storm that blew him far off course. Odysseus and his men faced man-eating monsters and strange magic, losing all but one ship on the way. On Circe's island the men were turned into pigs. Odysseus rescued them, before visiting the dead prophet Tiresias in the underworld. After killing some of the Sun-god's cattle, all of Odysseus' men were punished, drowning in a storm. Odysseus alone survived, washed up on the shore of the island of Calypso, a sea-nymph who kept him captive for years. Finally, he was released and able to return home. There he killed the suitors who were courting his wife and plotting against his son, and was reunited with his family.

Odysseus' adventures were told in the epic poem *The Odyssey*, composed by the Greek bard Homer. Modern scholarship usually dates it to around the 8th century BC. It was a very important and popular story among the ancient Greeks, and every educated Greek and Roman would have been familiar with it. It was in many ways a celebration of what it meant to be civilized, and to be a Greek. It was a moral tale that taught proper behavior towards one's neighbors, as well as proper respect for the gods. In the story, Odysseus was constantly pitted against various types of uncivilized peoples. The Cyclopes and the Laestrygonians were cannibals, the Lotus Eaters were drugged on a mind-altering plant, and Aeolus' family was incestuous. Circe was a dangerous woman who turned men into animals, upturning the normal social structure by dominating the men. Odysseus restored order by putting her back in her place. He also restored order in his home by punishing the suitors and the treacherous slaves. Most importantly, he learned what separated the civilized Greeks from the uncivilized barbaric societies he had encountered; good hospitality. For the Greeks, guest friendship was vitally important, and all guests were said to be under the protection of Zeus. The importance of treating others with friendship and respect was emphasized throughout the poem.

Odysseus was set apart from other Greek heroes by his intellect. He was cunning, quick-witted and eloquent. He came safely through his adventures by using his brain as much as his brawn. This was vital, as he was often pitted against magical enemies that normal brute strength could not defeat. It was Odysseus' intelligence that made Athena champion him, and it is perhaps this trait that has made him such an appealing and well-loved character. Like other heroes, Odysseus' fatal flaw was his ego. He was far too proud, and desperate for everyone to know of his brilliance. It was this that made him shout out his name to the Cyclops as he was leaving, which brought down the wrath of Poseidon on himself and his men.



Part Four. The Adventures of Aeneas

Part Four. The Adventures of Aeneas Summary and Analysis

After escaping from Troy, Aeneas travelled with his son, father and a group of other survivors to find a new home. After encountering some of the same dangers that Odysseus and Jason faced on their adventures, a storm washed them up near Carthage on the north coast of Africa. There Queen Dido welcomed them and fell in love with Aeneas. Aeneas stayed with her for a time, but eventually Jupiter sent a message telling him to remember his great destiny, and to sail for Italy. He obeyed immediately, and a heartbroken Dido committed suicide. Aeneas visited the underworld briefly, before sailing to a spot near the River Tiber on the Italian coast. When they arrived in Italy they were greeted warmly by the local king, Latinus. He had been told in a prophecy that his daughter Lavinia was destined to marry a stranger, and he believed this referred to Aeneas. However, his wife, Queen Amata, was not happy with this and neither was the Rutulian king Turnus, who wanted Lavinia for himself. Disagreements soon escalated into a war. Just like at Troy, heroes fought on both sides, until Aeneas finally defeated Turnus. The society Aeneas founded would one day flourish into the great Roman Republic.

This story is very different from the other myths in the book for several reasons. Firstly, it is mainly a Roman story about a Roman hero. Secondly, it is more literature than myth. The character of Aeneas himself existed long before Virgil wrote about him, and appeared in the Greek myth of the fall of Troy, but his story was not very developed. The Roman poet Virgil took the character and the basic myth and expanded on it, detailing his journey and adventures before reaching Italy, adding a trip to the underworld, and describing a heroic battle to claim his new home. These were the elements that were needed to be added to turn him into a proper hero, one who could rival the great heroes of the Greeks. In particular, visiting the underworld marked him out as a very special hero, as only a handful of mortals in the Greek myths ever went to the underworld and made it back out alive. In addition, Aeneas had something that few Greek heroes ever showed; piety. He respected the gods, obeyed his destiny, and cared for his family and his people. A great deal of responsibility rested on his back, more than any other hero ever had, and he never let his own feelings or desire for personal glory get in the way of this.

According to Roman legend, Aeneas founded the beginnings of Roman society in Italy. His son Ascanius founded the city of Alba Longa where Romulus and Remus, the sons of Mars, were born. Romulus and Remus went on to build Rome. Virgil used the story to create propaganda for the Roman leader Augustus, who was the first emperor of Rome. Augustus claimed to be descended from Aeneas through his adoptive father Julius Caesar. In this way his lineage included not only the founder of Rome, but also the gods themselves, as Aeneas was the son of Venus. Through showing all Aeneas' good,



heroic and noble qualities, Virgil was suggesting that similar characteristics lay in Augustus. The story of Aeneas also constantly praised the glory of Rome, showing a long line of great Roman generals and politicians in the underworld, and hinting at the Golden Age that would come. This was also a reference to Augustus, who was so loved that his reign was referred to as a new Golden Age. Virgil also used Aeneas' stay in Carthage and desertion of Dido to explain the long rivalry between Rome and Carthage, as Dido called down a curse that their cities would always be enemies. Rome was involved in three separate wars with Carthage.



Part Five. The House of Atreus

Part Five. The House of Atreus Summary and Analysis

The House of Atreus was one of the unluckiest families in Greek mythology. It began with Tantalus, who served up his own son at a banquet for the gods, perhaps to test or mock them. The gods were furious and sent him to Tartarus, a section for punishment in the underworld. He had an eternal thirst and hunger, surrounded by water and grapes, but was never able to eat or drink. His son Pelops was restored to life by the gods. He married Princess Hippodamia after defeating her father in a chariot race to win her hand. He had help from her father's charioteer Myrtilus, who sabotaged the king's chariot. However, Pelops then refused to honor his bribe and killed Myrtilus, who called down a curse on his already corrupted family.

Pelops' sons Atreus and Thyestes quarreled over Thyestes' affair with Atreus' wife. Atreus killed Thyestes' children and served them to him for dinner, echoing the terrible crime of Tantalus. Atreus' children were Menelaus, whose wife was the Helen who began the Trojan War, and Agamemnon. Agamemnon had sacrificed his own daughter to Artemis in order to set sail for Troy. His wife was furious, and had an affair with his cousin Aegisthus, a surviving son of Thyestes. Together they killed Agamemnon on his return from Troy. The tragedy did not end there, as Agamemnon's son Orestes was instructed by Apollo's oracle to slay the murderer of his father. This meant killing his own mother, which was a sin against the gods. He did the deed, and was pursued by the avenging Furies until he could eventually rid himself of the pollution at Athens.

This story shows how terrible acts could cause a form religious pollution, passed down through a family from generation to generation. It also shows that the gods were not always just or fair. Orestes was an honorable man who was faced with an impossible decision; either obey the oracle and kill his mother, or spare his mother and disobey the gods. Either act would curse him. The sufferings and impossible choices of the family made them ideal subjects for Greek tragedy, and many plays were written about them, including Aeschylus' trilogy and Euripides' *Electra*. Stories such as this held a moral message, that crimes against nature and the gods would be severely punished.

There is another version of the story of Iphigenia, the daughter Agamemnon sacrificed in order to sail to Troy. The alternate version says that she did not die, but was transported to the Taurians by Artemis. There her brother and his friend Pylades rescued her. This alternate version was a way to resolve the sticky issue of human sacrifice, which the Greeks of this age believed to be a terrible and sinful act. No god or goddess would demand it, and if they did then they were clearly evil. This alternate story clears Artemis of such accusations.



Part Five. The Royal House of Thebes

Part Five. The Royal House of Thebes Summary and Analysis

The House of Thebes was in many ways as unlucky as the House of Atreus, but their troubles seemed a lot less deserved. It began with Cadmus, who founded the city of Thebes by killing a dragon and sowing its teeth. The teeth turned into armed warriors who fought until five remained. These five helped to build Thebes and make it a glorious city. Cadmus married Harmonia, the daughter of Aphrodite and Ares, and had four daughters and one son. All these children met with tragedy, either dying in horrible ways or killing their own children. Most of these fates were brought about by their own disrespect for various gods, apart from Actaeon. He accidentally saw Artemis naked while bathing, and was turned into a stag and torn apart by his own hunting dogs.

King Laius of Thebes was a descendent of Cadmus, married to a distant cousin called Jocasta. He heard a prophecy that his own son would kill him, so sent the baby away to be left to die on a hillside. The servant did not obey this command, taking the baby instead to the king and queen of Corinth who longed for a child. This baby was Oedipus. When he grew up he heard a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified, he left home and travelled to Thebes, killing Laius on the way when he tried to push him off the road. Oedipus saved the city from the Sphinx, a monster that asked riddles of travelers who passed by and ate them if they got it wrong. The grateful citizens made him king, and he married Jocasta. Later, when disease fell on the city, Oedipus began investigating the murder of the old king and all the truth came out. He realized he had killed his own father and slept with his mother, and had children with her. Jocasta killed herself and Oedipus blinded himself before going into exile.

Jocasta's brother Creon took over as king of Thebes. When Oedipus' two sons killed themselves in a civil war, he would not allow one of the brothers proper burial. Their sister, Oedipus' daughter Antigone, ignored Creon's edict and buried her brother anyway. She was punished by being buried alive, hanging herself in the tomb rather than face death by starvation. Although Antigone had buried her brother, the other generals who had fought with him remained unburied. Their grieving mothers appealed to Theseus, who agreed to help. An Athenian army attacked Thebes, but did not harm the city or the people within, only properly burying the abandoned dead. Later, however, when the sons of the seven dead generals grew up, they marched on Thebes for revenge and destroyed the city.

This is another story that shows how a curse could be passed down through a family, affecting even the innocent. The religious pollution was so bad after Oedipus' dreadful deeds that it even manifested in the form of real physical pollution; a disease that ravaged the city. Important themes in the myths connected to the House of Thebes include the importance of proper respect for the gods, and the importance of proper burial. Burial was an incredibly important custom to the Greeks. Without proper burial, a



spirit might not be able to enter the underworld, but be forced to wander the earth as a miserable ghost. If a person was not buried with money to pay the ferryman Charon, their spirit might be forced to sit forever on the shore of Acheron, and never be ferried over to the underworld. Proper mourning was also considered very important in order to appease the spirits of the dead. This involved offerings at the grave of the deceased, which would be impossible if the body had not been buried. It was considered an especially terrible fate if a body was left to be picked at by wild animals, the fate decreed for the seven generals who fought against Thebes. Burial was also important to the gods, so to deny a man burial was to risk angering the gods themselves.

The stories of the House of Thebes and the House of Atreus also illustrated how revenge could only cause a cycle of more death and suffering. For the family of Atreus, each person to take revenge found themselves worse off for it, and it only led to more anger and vengeance. For Thebes revenge meant the eventual destruction of the city.



Part Five. The Royal House of Athens

Part Five. The Royal House of Athens Summary and Analysis

This chapter describes a series of myths concerning the earliest kings and queens of Athens, before Theseus became king. One of the earliest kings was Erectheus, who ruled at the time Demeter brought agriculture to earth. He had a son called Cecrops, who was the great-grandfather of Theseus. Erectheus had two sisters called Procne and Philomela. Procne was married to Tereus of Thrace, a son of Ares, who fell in love with Philomela and tricked her into a marriage before cutting out her tongue and locking her up. She could not speak, but wove a tapestry that told in pictures everything that had happened to her. She sent the tapestry to Procne, who was horrified, and came to release her. She then took revenge by killing her own son Itys and serving him to his father for dinner. The two sisters escaped but Tereus pursued them. The gods turned them all into birds. Procne became a nightingale singing mournfully for her dead son who she now regretted killing. The tongueless Philomela became a swallow, which can only twitter and never sing. Tereus became an ugly bird with a huge beak, sometimes said to be a hawk.

These two sisters had three nieces called Procris, Orithyia, and Creüsa, who all had unfortunate tales. Procris was happily married to Cephalus, until one day the goddess of the dawn, Aurora, took him away for herself. He remained faithful, and eventually she had to give him up. She persuaded him to test Procris' own faithfulness. He did so, testing her continuously until she finally hesitated, at which point he revealed himself and chastised her. She was angry at this cruel treatment and left him. He felt very sorry and searched everywhere for her. He begged her forgiveness and finally won her back. However, one day he killed her by mistake when they were both out hunting. Her sister Orithyia was carried away against her will by the god of the North Wind, Boreas. Her two sons were heroes who accompanied Jason on his voyage. Creüsa was raped by the god Apollo, who abandoned her afterwards. She had his son in secret in a cave and left it there. Years later she consulted the oracle to find out what had become of the child. There she found her son Ion, whom the god had protected. Athena appeared and told her that he would be a worthy king of Athens.

These myths show how cruel the gods could sometimes be. They often seemed to care very little for mortals, only concerned with their own whims and desires. By the 5th century the Greeks were beginning to doubt the truth of the myths, and were considering whether such tales represented the gods in a worthy light. An idea was developing that gods should behave better than mortal men and set a good example, which they certainly did not seem to do in the myths. If this was the case, perhaps the myths did not represent truth. Euripides was one ancient writer who explored the cruelty found in the myths, and the questionable morality of the gods. He wrote a play about Creüsa in which she appears as an unfortunate victim of Apollo's desire. However,



although the myths were questioned, Greek religion remained important and the gods were still respected.

These myths also helped establish a mythical past for Athens, connected to the gods. This gave the Athenians a sense of important identity, as the city that Athena and Poseidon fought over, with a royal line descended from gods and powerful kings.



Part Six. The Less Important Myths - Midas and Others

Part Six. The Less Important Myths - Midas and Others Summary and Analysis

Midas was a king rewarded by Bacchus with any gift he chose. He asked for whatever he touched to turn to gold, but soon regretted it when he tried to pick up food. Later, he was given asses' ears by Apollo for siding with Pan instead of Apollo in a music contest.

Aesculapius was the son of Apollo and a mortal woman whom Apollo killed for being unfaithful. He saved his son, however, who grew to be a great healer. One day he even brought a man back from the dead, for which Zeus struck him dead with a thunderbolt. Aesculapius was worshipped afterwards by the Greeks and the Romans as a god of healing.

The Danaïds were fifty women who killed their husbands on the wedding night, with the exception of Hypermnestra, who woke her husband and helped him escape. The murdering women were punished in Tartarus. They spent eternity trying to fill a well with water from a river, using only jars filled with holes.

Scylla was a beautiful nymph who was loved by a sea-god called Glaucus. Repulsed by his half-man, half-fish form, she refused him. He went to the witch Circe to ask for a love potion, but Circe was furious that Glaucus loved Scylla and not her. She poisoned Scylla, turning her into a hideous monster who attacked all who passed by her rock. It was this Scylla who attacked Odysseus on his journey home from Troy.

Erysichthon was punished for cutting down a tree sacred to the goddess Ceres. She gave him an eternal hunger that could never be satisfied. He spent all his wealth on food but was always hungry. Eventually he began to eat his own body until he was dead.

Pomona was a nymph of orchards who was loved by Vertumnus. He visited her in many guises until he eventually persuaded her to marry him.

These are mainly moral tales that taught Greeks the danger of greed, stupidity, and of not respecting the gods. The stories of Erysichthon and Pomona also taught that proper respect should be given to nature and all natural things, as everything was sacred to one divine being or another. The story of Aesculapius explained the origins of an important god. He was worshipped at special temples of healing, where the sick would come in the hopes of a cure.



Part Six. Brief Myths Arranged Alphabetically

Part Six. Brief Myths Arranged Alphabetically Summary and Analysis

This chapter gives brief summaries of thirty-one more myths. A selection of some of the different types of myth is given below, in alphabetical order.

Amalthea was a goat whose milk fed Zeus, or a nymph who owned the goat. She possessed the Horn of Plenty, or the Cornucopia, which was magically always full of fruit and flowers.

Amymone was pursued by a satyr but saved by Poseidon. He made a spring in her name.

Arachne claimed she could weave better than the goddess Minerva. Minerva beat her for her insolence and destroyed her work. Arachne hanged herself. Feeling sorry for her, Minerva turned her into a spider.

Aurora, goddess of the dawn, loved a mortal named Tithonus. She asked for immortality for him, but forgot to request eternal youth. He lived forever, but grew more and more withered and old.

Callisto was loved by Zeus, and so hated by Hera. Hera turned her into a bear and arranged for her son, who was a hunter, to come across her in the woods. Zeus snatched her to safety and put her in the stars, where she became the Great Bear constellation. Her son later became the Little Bear.

Chiron was a wise and noble centaur who looked after and trained heroes. One day Hercules accidentally wounded him and Zeus allowed him to die rather than live forever in pain.

Clytie was a mortal woman who loved the Sun-god, and pined away while watching the sun. She was turned into a sunflower, which always turns to face the sun.

Dryope was transformed into a tree when she accidentally harmed a nymph by picking flowers from a tree.

Leander swam across the Hellespont (the Dardanelles) every night to see his beloved Hero. She kept a light burning to guide him. One night a storm blew the light out and he was killed. She found his body and killed herself.

Leto was a daughter of Titans, loved by Zeus. She gave birth to Apollo and Artemis on the rocky island of Delos, which was afterwards sacred to the god and goddess.



Marsyas was a satyr who played the flute so well he challenged the god Apollo. Apollo won and flayed him for his insolence.

Melampus reared two little snakes after his servants killed the parents. As a reward they gave him the gift to understand what all animals were saying.

The Myrmidons were men created from ants on the island of Aegina. They were Achilles' followers in the Trojan War.

Orion was a hunter whom Aurora loved. He was killed by Artemis, perhaps in a fit of jealousy, and placed in the sky as a star constellation.

The Pleiades were the daughters of Atlas, pursued by Orion. They were placed in the sky as stars, where Orion still seems to pursue them across the heavens.

Many myths were origin myths, explaining the origin of certain plants, creatures, and star constellations, such as Clytie turned to a sunflower, Arachne turned to a spider, or the constellations of Orion, the Pleiades and the Big Bear. These were early ways of understanding the world, attaching a mythological connection to everything. This is what the author refers to as 'early science.' Other myths explained the background of various holy places such as Delos, or the origins of a people such as the Myrmidons. Other myths held morals, often about the importance of respecting nature and the gods. Finally, some myths were merely entertainment.



Part Seven. The Mythology of the Norsemen - The Stories of Signy and of Sigurd, and The Norse Gods

Part Seven. The Mythology of the Norsemen - The Stories of Signy and of Sigurd, and The Norse Gods Summary and Analysis

In Norse mythology, Odin was the Sky Father and king of the gods. He and his brothers created the world and the things in it from the dead body of the giant Ymir. Man was created from an ash tree, and woman from an elm. Dwarfs, ugly craftsmen who lived under the earth, and elves, sprites who looked after flowers and streams, also existed. A huge tree called Yggdrasil supported the universe, with roots that extended into the world of men, the realm of the frost giants, and the kingdom of Hel (the goddess of death). This tree was fated to die one day, after which the universe would fall, and gods and frost giants would do final battle. In this battle evil was destined to win and the gods to be destroyed. Heroes who were chosen by the Valkyries to go to Valhalla after death would also fight in this battle.

Other Norse gods included the trickster Loki, who was the son of a giant, Balder, who was killed when Loki tricked his own brother into throwing a mistletoe twig at his heart, Freya, goddess of love and beauty, and the war-god Tyr.

Signy was a woman whose husband killed her father and brothers. She managed to save one brother, Sigmund, and they vowed they would have revenge. She disguised herself and lay with him, and sent his son to him when he was old enough. Sigmund and his son visited Signy and killed her husband and their children. She came out of the burning house to praise their glorious deed, then went back into the house to die with her husband.

Sigurd won the Valkyrie Brynhild by crossing a ring of fire to awaken her from her enchanted sleep. However, when visiting King Gunnar he was slipped a love potion by the queen, to make him fall in love with their daughter Gudrun. Meanwhile, Gunnar had decided that he wanted Brynhild for himself. He got Sigurd to cross the fire once more, this time disguised as Gunnar. Brynhild thought Sigurd had abandoned her and that Gunnar had nobly won her. When she found out the truth she was furious. She told Gunnar that Sigurd had laid hands on her. Gunnar got his younger brother to kill Sigurd, after which Brynhild told him the truth, then killed herself.

Norse mythology had a surprisingly depressing side. Men were fated to suffer, the gods were fated to be defeated, the universe would fall, and evil would win. However, this was not only accepted with stoicism; it was turned into a positive thing. Men could only



be truly heroic when faced with disaster. It was the choice to keep on fighting evil, even when defeat seemed assured, that marked a person as truly good, strong and brave. In other words, this is what made a Norse hero. This was the same for gods and men. Unlike the Greek gods, the Norse gods were fully capable of being heroic and noble, and acted as better friends to men. The stories of Signy and Sigurd reflect this essence of Norse mythology. The characters in both myths faced a doomed future, but did so bravely. Signy had already decided she would die with her husband. Sigurd knew he was fated to disaster. Both never stopped fighting for what they believed to be right.



Characters

The Greek Gods

The Greek gods were anthropomorphic, meaning that they had human features and characteristics, rather than being abstract powers or forces of nature. This meant that they were more familiar to the people who worshipped them than the gods of other peoples. For example, the Egyptian and Assyrian gods might have animal features, wings and beaks, or other strange characteristics. Because the Greek gods were more familiar, their myths and religion seem in some ways more rational. The gods could be rash, vindictive, selfish and petty, but these are all very human traits. Their behavior might not have always been kind and honorable, but at least it was always understandable. The gods could be appeased by offering them proper respect, giving them gifts, praising them and flattering them. In other words, they could be kept happy in the same sorts of ways that a normal human being could be won over. Their human behavior also made the myths more lively and fun; they were not simply moral tales or religious truths, but also very entertaining stories. A good example is the many love affairs of Zeus, his often rather pathetic but sometimes ingenious attempts to hide them, and Hera's predictable anger.

However, this behavior also meant that they were not always very praiseworthy. They were not necessarily worshipped because they deserved to be, but rather in order to keep off their anger and seek their goodwill. In comparison to modern understandings of God, they can seem very strange. Over time, the Greeks began to feel the same way, and some of the gods began to lose their less desirable characteristics and take on more noble ones. Zeus became more associated with ideas of morality and justice, and was said to be the protector of guests and strangers. Ideas about the proper ways for a person to behave towards others were connected with the gods. Aspects of human sacrifice were dropped from some myths, or changed into more acceptable ideas, such as the changing of a mortal into a flower. Later, the myths themselves were questioned, as it seemed almost blasphemous to some to believe their gods capable of such despicable behavior. Euripides, a famous fifth century BC playwright, questioned the goodness of the god Apollo, who raped unwilling girls in some of the myths. Eventually, the myths came to be held as simple entertainment. While the gods were still worshipped and respected, the myths were treated more like fairy-stories that held very little truth. This is reflected in the attitude of later writers of the Roman period, such as Ovid, Apuleius and Lucian.

The gods were created by the Greeks initially as a means of 'early science', as Edith Hamilton describes it. In other words, each god explains some mysterious or inexplicable aspect of the universe, such as the forces of nature, weather, the stars, or even human emotions. For example, Zeus was the god of the sky and thunder, Hera of women and marriage, Aphrodite of love, Poseidon of the sea, earthquakes and horses, Ares of war, Apollo of light and truth, Helios of the Sun, Artemis of hunting and the woods, Eos or Aurora of the dawn, and so on. The myths about these gods and



goddesses might explain the origins of various plants or animals, or connect them to real places in the world. By connecting the gods to real places, the Greeks were able to gain a sense of identity, as well as grounding the tales in reality, by connecting themselves to their myths. For example, Apollo and Artemis were born on the island of Delos. This gave the reason and origin for the important sanctuary of Apollo that existed there, as well as giving the island a sense of divine importance. It also gave the people of the island a sense of identity that connected them with the gods.

The gods existed in a kind of hierarchy reflecting the importance of their roles and powers. Zeus was the most powerful, being the king of the gods and lord of the sky and thunder. This meant he controlled rain, which was vitally important in dry, rocky Greece. His brothers, the next most powerful, were Poseidon and Hades, lords of the sea and death respectively. Again, the sea was incredibly important to the ancient Greeks, most of whom relied on fishing and trade. A lot of Greece is made up of small islands surrounded by the sea. It is clear why Poseidon would be an important and fearsome god to them. Death, too, is a very important aspect of life. It comes to all mortals, and it is natural that they would connect a powerful god with it. Demeter was an incredibly important goddess to humans, as she was in charge of crops and brought agriculture to man. Dionysus was important too as the god of grapes and wine, a prominent aspect of Greek culture and one of their main products. Dionysus gained even greater importance when he was later associated with the idea of rebirth and life after death. Other gods and goddesses would be more important at different times or stages of life, or more important depending on one's gender or profession. For example, Hermes was important to traders and travelers, Artemis to hunters or young women, and Hera to married women, especially those wishing to start a family. Ares would be vital to worship at wartime, and Aphrodite in any matters of the heart. Athena would be important to craftsmen, women, and in any matters of state or civilization. Different gods were also more important at different cities. For example, Athena was the patron of Athens, but Apollo was more important to Delphi. Zeus was particularly worshipped at Olympia. Gods and spirits of the underworld were also not forgotten. At any funeral or memorial for the dead, libations would be poured onto the ground to pay respects to those below.

The Norse Gods

The Norse gods were similar to the Greek gods in that they had human appearance and characteristics. They felt the same emotions as humans, which meant they were relatable to and understandable to a certain extent. The Norse gods were not as petty as the Greek gods and did not indulge in as many affairs or questionable behavior. They were capable of much more honorable deeds. The Norse gods were also capable of being heroic. Whereas the Greek gods were immortal, never aged, and were largely untouched by the troubles of man, the Norse gods suffered the same as the mortals. They were ageless, but they could suffer pain and injury. Odin even lost an eye in his pursuit of knowledge, and Balder was killed and sent to the underworld, despite being a god. Like the Norse heroes, the gods also battled against a dark fate. They knew that they were fated to one day fight a war with the frost giants, and that the frost giants would win. This might seem a very gloomy view of the future, but for the Norse gods



and heroes, it gave them a chance to be heroic. The Norse people believed that true heroism could only be shown by continuing to fight even when disaster seemed assured. As this is exactly what both Norse heroes and gods do, then both can be held up as true heroes.

The Norse gods were also different from the Greek gods in their care for mankind. Unlike the Greek gods, who often behaved selfishly and seemed to care little for man, the Norse gods helped humans whenever they could. Odin himself shared knowledge of runes with man. This can be sharply contrasted with Zeus, who punished Prometheus for bringing fire to man. Whereas the Greek gods were worshipped mainly through necessity, the Norse gods were held up as examples of honorable and heroic behavior, and so could be more respected. The Greek gods seemed set apart from humanity. The Norse gods would one day fight side by side with humans to the same goal.

The roles and powers of the Norse gods were similar to those of the Greek gods, but their hierarchy was a little different. The king of the gods in both mythologies was the god of the sky, or the sky-father as he was known in Norse mythology. These were the Greek Zeus and the Norse Odin. Zeus also controlled thunder, whereas this belonged to a separate god in Norse mythology, called Thor. Thor was actually the strongest of the gods, though Odin was the wisest and bravest. Although the Norse people focused on the importance of battle and heroics more than the Greeks, it is interesting to note that even they thought brute strength alone was not enough to make one king. Tyr, the god of war, was more respected than his Greek counterpart Ares, as might be expected. Freya, goddess of love and beauty, was given a more minor role than Aphrodite. Women took a much less important role in general in Norse mythology. There was no Norse equivalent of the powerful and wise Athena. However, it was a woman who was assigned the role of death and the underworld: Hela. This reflected Norse society's attitude towards women; they were important in a domestic sense and for the lesser roles in life, but played no part in battle. Most women would go to the dreary underworld rather than ever see Valhalla, the hall of the heroes.

Hercules

Hercules was the hero who completed twelve tasks to make up for the murder of his family. As the son of Zeus, he was incredibly strong and prone to rash, hot-headed behavior. He often let his emotions get the better of him. However, he was always well-meaning, and felt extremely sorry for any pain or trouble he caused. He brought about the deaths of several innocent people, including tutors in lessons that he did not care for as a child, simply because he did not know his own strength. His main flaw was that he tended to act before he thought, allowing his anger to take over. This included such ridiculous behavior as threatening to beat up the sun because he was feeling too hot. As a hero he did a lot of good too, however, killing many fierce monsters and saving various innocent people's lives. He was also fiercely loyal to his friends, rescuing Theseus from the underworld and returning Admetus' wife Alcestis from Death. In other words, he could be a bit of a bumbling brute, but was always a well-meaning one.



As the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, he naturally earned the hatred of Hera. Hera was determined to punish him for his father's infidelity, and succeeded in driving him into a madness that caused him to kill his own wife and children. Hercules was devastated and determined to kill himself before Theseus persuaded him not to. To make up for his terrible crime, Hercules completed the famous twelve tasks, and was later permitted to enter Olympus. He was reconciled with Hera, who married him to her own daughter Hebe, the goddess of youth.

Perseus

Perseus was the hero who fought and killed Medusa. He was naturally stronger and more capable than most mortals, being the son of Zeus and a mortal woman, but he was also aided by the gods a lot during his quest. Hermes gave him a sword capable of killing monsters and instructed him on how to get what was needed to slay Medusa. He was guided through each task until he had gathered a collection of magical items. These included a bag that could hold Medusa's head, a cloak of darkness or invisibility, and winged sandals to fly away from the other Gorgons. Finally, Athena gave him a polished shield so that he could look at Medusa's reflection and so avoid staring directly at the monster. As if these items were not enough, as he struck Medusa, his blow was guided by the gods too, so that he could not fail to miss. With Medusa destroyed, he travelled home, passing the spot where Andromeda was being sacrificed. He used the special sword once again to slay the sea-monster, winning the beautiful maiden for his wife. He returned home, where he was made king.

Perseus seems like the typical fairytale hero. He was aided by higher powers in almost every task, and acquired magical items to help him in his quest. He succeeded at his main task, then won a beautiful princess and lived happily ever after as the ruler of his own kingdom. This makes him a very different sort of hero from Hercules, or from any of the heroes who came after him. Hercules relied on his own brute strength, and later heroes relied on their skills and intelligence. Perseus was marked out by divine favor, and it is this that made him special.

Theseus

Theseus was the hero who famously fought the Minotaur. However, he had many more adventures, rivaling Hercules for the sheer amount of incredible deeds he performed. He was the son of Aegeus, king of Athens, but was born in a city further south. When he was old enough he travelled to Athens, but was determined not to go the safe way. Instead, he went over land, battling a string of fierce bandits on the way and clearing the land of dangers. When he arrived at Athens, he found that it was time for the tribute of Athenian youths to King Minos of Crete, which happened every nine years. The youths were to be fed to the Minotaur. Theseus immediately demanded to be part of the tribute so that he could slay the beast and rescue the youths. This he did, with the help of King Minos' daughter Ariadne, who had fallen in love with the hero at first sight. He travelled home, but abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos, where she was taken by the god



Dionysus. Other heroics included taking part in the battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs and going to the underworld to attempt to steal Persephone to be his friend's bride.

As a hero he was one of the best. He was strong and brave, and always willing to fight evil. He was also more concerned than other heroes about saving innocent people. He was beloved by his people and his friends, and was such a fine figure that Ariadne fell in love with him on first sight. Many heroes had this effect on women, and it is one of the main characteristics of a Greek hero. Unlike Hercules, Theseus was also a wise and thoughtful hero, not as likely to commit rash acts or be carried away by emotions. The exception to this was when his wife accused his son of rape. In a fit of fury he cursed his son, who was killed before he could explain his side of the story. When Theseus found out his wife had lied, he was distraught that he had killed his son.

Theseus was also a more democratic hero than any other. He gave power back to the people in Athens, allowing assemblies of people to vote on laws and actions rather than ruling as a typical king. This element of the myths may have been added afterward by the Athenians, who were famously the first to introduce democracy and were immensely proud of it. To them, Theseus was a hero who represented the ideals and virtues of their great city; wisdom, intelligence, bravery, democracy, and protection of the weak. Whereas Hercules was a hero simply because of his great strength, and Perseus was a hero because he was divinely favored, Theseus represented the idea that a hero should have something more, that he should be a more rounded and excellent person in many different ways. Most importantly, he should possess moral virtue. This was the Athenian idea of a hero.

Jason

Jason was the man who sailed on the Argo with a crew of heroes to retrieve the Golden Fleece from Colchis. They faced many different dangers on the way, each hero contributing in their own way. Jason was by no means the strongest or most skilled man on the ship, but as their leader he was the most important. He proved himself to be a good leader, despite being young and inexperienced, and succeeded at his task. Like Theseus, he was aided by the daughter of his enemy, who fell in love with him at first sight. For Jason, this was a woman named Medea, to whom he owed his victory. She not only helped him get the Fleece, she helped him escape and defeat the murderer of his father. Unfortunately, Jason forgot how much she had helped, or else he did not want to admit it. He was the great hero who had brought back the Golden Fleece, and did not want to acknowledge that he could not have done it without a woman. He let his pride and his arrogance get the better of him and abandoned her for another woman. She would not take this lightly, and punished him by killing the other woman, then murdering her own sons. Jason was distraught over these deaths, but Medea escaped.



Achilles

During the Trojan War, Achilles was the great hero and hope for Greece. He was the son of the mortal Peleus and the goddess Thetis. When young, she had bathed him in a magical spring, missing only his heel where she had held him. As a result, his body was impervious to harm, apart from that one spot on his heel. He came to Troy knowing that if he fought he would die, but win great glory in the battle. He also knew that if he stayed at home he would live a long life in obscurity, with no fame and glory. He chose glory, despite knowing his fate. This makes him more like the Norse gods and heroes, who proved their heroism by battling on despite certain disaster. His choice also marks him out as a true 'Homeric hero', one who cared more for glory and fame than anything else. Homeric heroes would pursue personal glory over any other concern, including the victory of their own side. Achilles showed these concerns when he refused to fight after being insulted by Agamemnon. He saw his glory and honor being questioned, and responded with anger, caring little for how his decision might affect the fortunes of the Greek army. He only returned to the battle when his friend was killed, out of a need for vengeance. In the end, it was this great anger of Achilles that brought him down, and proved to be his fatal flaw. He was so angry with Hector for killing his friend that he would not allow Hector's body proper burial. This was an affront to the gods themselves, who quickly made it clear that Achilles was in the wrong. Finally, Achilles was killed by an arrow to the heel, shot by Paris but guided by Apollo.

Hector

Hector was the great Trojan hero during the Trojan War. He was strong, skilled and brave, as all Homeric heroes were, and like them was concerned more with his personal glory than anything else. When challenged by Achilles, he was determined to fight, despite knowing that he could not possibly win. To refuse would have been to seem a coward, and to lose honor and glory. He explained this to his wife and family, who begged him to stay inside the city walls. If he had done as they asked, he might have lived longer to help the Trojans win. By facing Achilles, he was almost certainly dooming his entire city. However, he was not presented as a bad man for choosing this, but as a true hero who chooses glory and honor over all other concerns.

Odysseus

Odysseus was a very different type of hero from the other heroes at Troy. He was strong and skilled, but also very intelligent. He tended to win more through the power of his brain than the power of his arm. He was the one who came up with the idea of the wooden horse, which finally won the war for the Greeks. On his journey home, he encountered many magical dangers and monstrous creatures. Unlike other heroes of his time, he did not face other men but fantastic beasts and sorceresses. Brute strength alone would never work against these dangers. Instead, he used his wits to get out of almost every situation he was in. Because of his intelligence and wits, he was particularly favored by the goddess Athena. Nevertheless, she could not aid him in his



travels until he reached Ithaca again, as she was afraid of the anger of Poseidon. Odysseus therefore managed to survive without the aid of the goddess, relying on his own wits and skills.

When Odysseus did finally reach home, twenty years had passed and his wife was being courted by a rabble of presumptuous suitors who plotted against his son and abused his servants. He plotted revenge, and rather than letting his anger get the better of him, waited until the right moment to strike. He killed all the suitors, punished any bad servants and rewarded the loyal ones. He was then reunited at long last with his faithful wife. Odysseus was a very special hero, cleverer and more resourceful than other Homeric heroes, more enduring and sensible than older heroes such as Hercules and Jason, and more able to rely on his own skills than divinely favored heroes such as Perseus. Odysseus is one of the most famous and best loved of all Greek heroes.

However, Odysseus did have one fatal flaw; his pride. He was desperate to seek fame and glory as other Homeric heroes were and would allow this desire to override common sense. When he blinded the Cyclops, he was determined that everyone should know it was he who had done the deed. He shouted out his name, which Poseidon, the father of the Cyclops, heard. This brought down the wrath of Poseidon, leading to many disasters on his journey home. Odysseus would have had considerably less trouble if he had managed to keep his ego in check.

Aeneas

Aeneas was a Roman hero and the Trojan equivalent to Odysseus. He also went on a journey and faced many of the same dangers that Odysseus did. He did not share Odysseus' flaw, however, as he never let pride get the better of him. He was an honorable and pious man, who respected the gods and looked after his family and men. He was a good leader, and was very capable in battle. He was also sensible and wise when he needed to be. In other words, he was the perfect hero. He was led by a great destiny to found Roman society in Italy. The reason Aeneas appeared to be the model of the perfect hero, without obvious flaws, is that his stories were told in a propaganda poem for Rome and its first emperor Augustus. The poet who wrote about him, Virgil, wanted to create a hero that could rival the great Greek heroes and be a good role model for Romans. This is also why Aeneas appeared a more thoughtful hero who would never risk his people or his destiny over thoughts of personal glory. It is the latter that really marks him as so very different from any Greek hero.

Atalanta

Atalanta was a female hero who took part in the Calydonian Boar hunt. She vowed never to marry and challenged all suitors to a foot-race that she knew she would win. However, one day a man beat her, aided by Aphrodite. When she married she stopped being a hero, as such behavior would not have been thought appropriate for a married woman.



Bellerophon

Bellerophon was the hero who defeated the monstrous Chimaera and rode the winged horse Pegasus. He displayed the typical flaw of a Greek hero: his ego. He thought he could ride to Olympus and join the gods themselves, but was struck back to earth for his presumption.

The House of Atreus

The House of Atreus was one of the unluckiest families in Greek mythology. Its members included Tantalus, who served his own son to the gods; Pelops, who broke a vow and was cursed for it; Atreus, who punished his brother for sleeping with his wife by serving his children to him as dinner; Agamemnon, who sacrificed his own daughter and was killed by his wife; Clytemnestra, who killed her husband and was killed by her own son; and Orestes, who killed his mother to avenge his father and was pursued by the Furies. The family represents the danger of not respecting the gods, and shows how the curse of terrible deeds can be passed down a family for generations.

The Royal House of Thebes

The House of Thebes was another unlucky family. Its members included the children of Camdus, who all met terrible fates through not respecting the gods; Oedipus, who killed his father and slept with his mother; Oedipus' sons, who killed each other in a civil war; Antigone, who was killed for burying her brother against an edict; and Creon, who lost a son over killing Antigone. As with the House of Atreus, this family also shows how a curse can be passed down from generation to generation, with daughters and sons paying for their parents' crimes. It also shows how such religious pollution can manifest as real, physical pollution. Both Oedipus and Creon had to face the terrors of a plague in the city.

Sigurd

Sigurd was a Norse hero who managed to win a Valkyrie through his great courage. However, he was tricked into taking a love potion and fell for another woman. He was eventually killed by the Valkyrie, Brynhild. Both Sigurd and Brynhild suffered through no fault of their own, and both continued to fight despite knowing that only tragedy lay in their future. This was the Norse idea of heroism.

Signy

Signy was a Norse heroine who was determined to have revenge on her husband for the murder of her father and brothers. She also knew that when she had this revenge

she would die with her husband. She fought on anyway, was successful, and died with dignity.



Objects/Places

Mount Olympus

In the Greek myths, Mount Olympus was the home of the gods, a realm that mortals could never reach. It was both a real, physical mountain in north-west Greece, and at the same time was thought to exist on another plane of reality. When mortals died they did not ascend to Olympus as a kind of heaven, but instead went down to the underworld, which was ruled over by the god Hades. Olympus was ruled by Zeus, the king of the gods.

Ancient Greece

Most of the Greek myths were set in an early period of Bronze Age Greece. At this time Greece was not a unified country, but rather made up of many kingdoms ruled by individual kings. Most of the heroes of the myths were kings or princes. For example, Odysseus was the king of Ithaca, Theseus of Athens, and Menelaus of Sparta.

The Underworld

In the Greek myths, the underworld was the place where mortals went when they died. It was a dreary place, ruled over by the god Hades, where souls remained forever in a monotonous existence. Later, cults centered around Dionysus and Demeter offered some hope for a better life after death, which was particularly appealing in comparison with this depressing view of the underworld. The underworld also contained an area called Tartarus, where terrible sinners were punished. It existed separately from the mortal world but could be reached in some places from the real world, such as at certain rivers or caves.

Ambrosia

In the Greek myths, ambrosia was the food of the gods. It granted immortality to those who ate it.

Troy

Troy was a city in modern Turkey, on the coast near the Hellespont (what is now called the Dardanelles). The Trojan War was a famous mythological battle fought between the Trojans and a combined Greek force. Many heroes fought on both sides. In the myths, the war began when the Trojan prince Paris stole King Menelaus of Sparta's wife, Helen.



Midgard

In the Norse myths, Midgard was the realm of men, and the mortal world.

Asgard

In the Norse myths, Asgard was the realm of the gods. It was ruled by the king of the gods, Odin. Like Mount Olympus, it was not a heaven that mortals went to when they died. Instead, ordinary mortals went to the underworld, called Niflheim, and heroes went to Valhalla.

Valhalla

In the Norse myths, Valhalla was the realm where heroes, or those who died gloriously in battle, went to when they died. They were brought there by battle-maidens called Valkyries. They dwelt there happily until the end of the world (Ragnarok), when they were destined to fight on the side of the gods against the frost giants.

Gorgon

In the Greek myths, a Gorgon was a monster that could turn a man to stone with a single glance. They were usually female, with snakes for hair. Medusa, the monster who the hero Perseus fought, was a gorgon.

Cyclops

In the Greek myths, a Cyclops was a giant with one eye. In the Odyssey, the hero Odysseus was forced to blind the Cyclops called Polyphemus, who was eating his men.

Minotaur

In Greek mythology, the Minotaur was a beast half-man, half-bull. It was born from the union of Pasiphae, queen of Crete, with a beautiful bull that the gods had caused her to fall in love with. Pasiphae's husband, King Minos of Crete, locked the creature up in a labyrinth and every nine years sacrificed youths from Athens to it. The Minotaur was killed by the Athenian hero Theseus.

Hydra

In Greek mythology, the Hydra was a multiple-headed serpent beast that the hero Hercules killed as part of his twelve tasks.



Nymph

In Greek mythology, a nymph was a minor nature goddess, usually associated with a particular natural feature such as a stream, cave, wood or hill. Nymphs always looked like beautiful young women.

Naiad

In Greek mythology, a naiad was a water nymph. They might be connected with any kind of water, such as lakes, rivers, streams, springs, wells, coves or the sea.

Centaur

In Greek mythology, a centaur was a creature with the body and legs of a horse, and the chest, head and arms of a man. They were usually troublesome and aggressive, with the exception of Chiron, the noble centaur who looked after and trained heroes.

Satyr

In Greek mythology, a satyr was a woodland creature with the legs and hoofs of a goat, a man's chest, arms and head, and goat's ears. They were animalistic in their behavior, and constantly desired wine and sex. They were ridiculous rather than dangerous, and were the followers of Dionysus.

Erinyes/Furies

In Greek mythology, the Erinyes were goddesses of vengeance, particularly associated with terrible acts such as kin murder. They would avenge the victim by pursuing the criminal endlessly wherever he went, driving him mad with fear. They were known as the Furies to the Romans.

Siren

In Greek mythology, the Sirens were women who lived on an island in the sea. They lured sailors to their death on the rocks with their beautiful singing.

Aegis

In Greek mythology, the aegis was a type of shield or protective garment held by both Zeus and Athena. The aegis was a symbol of their power. Athena's aegis was often represented in art as a kind of cuirass with snaky strands at the edges. In the center of it she placed the head of Medusa, brought back by the hero Perseus.



Greek Ships

Many of the Greek myths involved heroes travelling on ships. Greek ships at the time were long and shallow, constructed from wood, with a sail and banks of oars. They were designed to travel close to the coasts, and were not really sturdy enough to stay long in deep, open sea. They were also not big enough to carry a lot of supplies, so travelers would have to put in to port often to get food and water. The Greeks did not usually sleep on their boats, so they would come to shore each night to make camp. This is why heroes travelling by sea made so many stops at various islands along the way.

Sacrifice and Libations

The Greeks performed sacrifices as a way of showing proper respect to the gods. This often came in the form of the ritual killing of an animal. After it had been killed, the animal's bones would be wrapped in some fat and burned, the smoke rising as an offering to the gods above. Alternatively, its blood could be poured onto the ground to go to the gods and spirits of the underworld. Any liquid poured onto the ground as an offering was called a libation. Honey, milk, oil, perfumes, wine or blood could all be offered. Sometimes different animals were connected with particular gods. For example, the sacrifice of a pure black or white bull was particularly associated with Poseidon. Bigger and stronger animals went to more important gods. Zeus would probably have been offended at the sacrifice of a rabbit, for example, but for Aphrodite a dove might suffice.



Themes

Heroes

The Greek and Norse mythology contained ideas of what made a hero, what it meant to be a hero, and the different kinds of heroism that could exist. Early Greek heroes came in three different forms. First was the fairytale type hero such as Perseus. He was special because he was the son of a god, favored by the gods, and given plenty of divine assistance on his adventures. He went to strange places and met strange beings, then used a range of magical items to help him defeat the monster and save the princess. He married the princess and lived happily ever after. This basic tale will be familiar with the reader as it is very like our own fairytales. Consider the prince of Sleeping Beauty, who is aided by magical beings, given magical weapons, and fights monsters and magic to save the princess. The divine favor marked Perseus out as a hero worthy of attention, not as an inferior hero who desperately needed help. Despite the magical assistance, he was still a very brave and skilled man.

The second type of early hero is summed up by the hero Hercules. Hercules was the son of Zeus, incredibly strong and brave, and capable of amazing feats that no other mortal could ever accomplish. He was one of the greatest heroes of Greek mythology. He completed most of his tasks using brute strength alone. Thinking was not his strong point, and often he got himself into trouble or harmed others by acting before he thought. Whenever he accidentally harmed or killed another he was very sorry for it, and was always a very well-meaning hero. His flaws were that he was too quick to give in to his emotions and sometimes did not realize his own strength. In some ways he was a bit of a brute, but one who was famous for great deeds and eventually even became one of the gods. The latter was a rare accomplishment even for a hero.

The third kind of early hero was the more skilled or thoughtful hero, who did not rely on strength or magical assistance alone, but nevertheless still displayed a great deal of heroism and bravery. He did not necessarily have to be the son of a god, or even a man! Atalanta is a good example of a female hero, an incredibly swift runner and skilled in the hunt. Theseus is also a great example of this third kind of hero. He was strong, brave and skilled, but also thoughtful and clever. He was intent on winning fame and glory for himself, but also cared about protecting innocent people. He defeated many monsters and bandits that were harming those weaker than himself. He also loved adventure, and was happiest when he was on some quest or another. Finally, he ruled as a wise and fair king of Athens. To modern readers he may seem the best example of what we would imagine a truly great hero should be.

Later heroes, such as those of the Trojan War, were a little different. They did not fight great monsters or succeed at impossible tasks, but fought other heroes on the battlefield. They were written about by the Greek bard Homer in two great epics, and so are often referred to as Homeric heroes. Homeric heroes cared about personal fame and glory more than anything else. They hated their honor to be insulted and would



react with extreme anger if it was. They were strong, brave and skilled fighters in battle, as well as good leaders of men. Whereas earlier heroes tended to fight alone, Homeric heroes were the leaders of armies. Nevertheless, when they met another hero on the battlefield, they would always fight one on one, as this was more honorable and would win them the greatest glory. Two great examples of these Homeric heroes are the Greek Achilles and the Trojan Hector.

Finally, there is one more hero who stands out from the rest. Odysseus was a Homeric hero, concerned with his personal fame and glory, but he did not fight with strength and bravery alone. He was famed for his great intelligence and cunning, more so than any other hero. He came up with clever plans, used disguise and trickery, and won the day more often through using his brain rather than his brawn. This was necessary because he found himself pitted against strange beasts, fierce monsters and magic, more like the heroes of old. Strength and courage were not enough to defeat these dangers; he needed wisdom and clever plans. Odysseus is one of the most famous and well-loved of all Greek heroes.

There are certain traits that all these heroes have in common. All were divinely favored in some way, Achilles because of his great skill in battle, Hercules because of his strength and connection to the gods, Perseus because he was Zeus' son, Odysseus because of his wits, and so on. Often they were aided in particular by a specific god or goddess. All possessed strength and bravery, though some needed to rely on brute strength more than others. Most were good leaders of men, with the exception of some of the older heroes. All were handsome and impressive to look at and could make women fall in love with them at first sight. All completed amazing journeys, feats or tasks that non-heroes could not accomplish. All of them also possessed a fatal flaw that hindered them in their adventures. For most, this was their ego, as they were always a little too proud and pleased with themselves. For others it was their emotions, especially if they were quick to anger, as Hercules and Achilles were. Finally, many heroes were hated and hindered by a god or goddess that they had somehow angered. For Hercules this was Hera, for Odysseus it was Poseidon.

Norse ideas of heroism were similar to the Greek ideas. Heroes should be strong, skilled and brave, and should accomplish things that ordinary people would not be able to do. However, the most important mark of a hero was his courage in the face of suffering. If a man knew his fate was doomed, then to carry on fighting despite certain disaster was to show true heroism. In this way, all the Norse gods, unlike the Greek ones, could also be considered heroes.

Fate

Fate is an important aspect of both Greek and Norse mythology. The idea that a governing force of fate controlled the lives of mortals and gods appeared in the Greek stories, and was absolutely vital to Norse mythology. In the latter, the whole universe ran on a pre-determined plan. At some point in the future, a final battle would rage between gods and frost giants. In this battle, the gods were fated to lose. The frost



giants would win, the great tree would be killed, many of the gods would be destroyed, and the universe would end. On a smaller level, each mortal human also lived with their own destiny. If they were fated to suffer and die then they could never change this future, no matter how hard they tried. However, it was the fight that was important. The Norse idea of heroism rested on the courage to fight on, despite knowing that one's efforts were ultimately doomed. To them, knowing one's fate did not mean that a person was doomed. He or she could still choose between two options, to fight for what one believed to the bitter end, or to submit. To choose the former was to show true heroism. As both gods and humans were controlled by an overriding fate, it gave them the chance to show this kind of honor and courage. Because of the existence of fate, the Norse gods could be heroes too.

Fate also played a part in Greek mythology. Some heroes were aware of their fated future long before it came to pass. Others might not know their fate, but it certainly existed, and was often discussed by the gods. A good example of a hero for whom fate played a major role is Achilles. Achilles had known for a long time that if he went to fight at Troy he would die, but win everlasting fame and glory. If he stayed at home, he would live a long and happy life but die in obscurity and be forgotten in years to come. This was not quite as doomed a future as the Norse heroes were faced with. Achilles actually had the option to survive and be happy. Whereas Norse heroes had to choose whether to struggle or not, knowing suffering was assured either way, Achilles actually faced a much harder choice. He chose to go to Troy, rejecting the happier alternative for the fame and glory he knew he could win in battle. This proved him to be a true Homeric hero, who values personal glory above everything else. Through knowing his fate, Achilles was able to prove himself a true hero, just like the Norse heroes.

However, in Greek mythology a hero did not have to know his fate to be a hero. Most other heroes fought with bravery and honor despite not knowing for certain what would happen to them. Achilles may have been faced with a difficult choice, but at least the alternatives were made clear. Other heroes could not choose between death and life in the same way. Each fight was uncertain to them, and it was this bravery in the face of their mortality that made them true heroes. In the Iliad, the Greek epic that tells the story of the Trojan War, one hero gave a similar sentiment. He explained that the gods could never know true heroism because they could not die. They had nothing to risk. Mortals must go into battle with uncertainty, and it is this that makes them heroes. According to this view, it was not fighting one's fate that made a man a hero, but bravery in the face of uncertainty. This also sums up the main difference between Greek and Norse gods. The Greek gods were ageless, immortal and without suffering, with the exception of Dionysus and Demeter, who at least understood a little of what it meant to suffer. The Norse gods could suffer, and would one day be destroyed. The Greek gods never had uncertainty and never had anything to lose, so could never exhibit true bravery.

The Greek gods may have been untouched by death and suffering, but like the Norse gods, they were still governed by fate as much as mortals. At Troy, Zeus expressed a wish to save some of his favorite heroes from death, but was reminded by the other gods that he did not have the power to alter fate. Fate itself was sometimes spoken of as a mysterious force and at other times personified as a goddess. She was not given



the same myths and stories as other gods, and never seems to have sat amongst them in Olympus. Her origins and dwelling place remain a mystery. The Moirae, sometimes called the Fates, were three women who spun the thread of a mortal's life and determined his destiny. It is not clear whether they are meant to be a manifestation of fate itself or whether they simply work for Fate. They were thought to either be the daughters of Zeus and a Titan, or of primordial gods like Night. A very similar idea existed in Norse mythology, with three women called Norns allotting men's fates. Perhaps fate was simply too mysterious and frightening a concept to be given a clear personality and mythology like the other gods.

Respect for the Gods

The Greek myths all have one thing in common. They emphasize the absolute importance of showing proper respect to the gods. The gods were represented in the myths as behaving a little like ordinary humans. Like humans, they could be insulted and get angry, they could be vindictive and cruel, and they had desires and fell in love. They could therefore be appeased and angered in the same kinds of ways as humans. They took offense when mortals were rude to them, put them down, disobeyed them, thought themselves better than them, or made them jealous. They could be won over or placated with gifts and praise, or through completing tasks that they set. It was important not to deny them their proper due. When Prometheus tricked the gods into taking the worst bits of the sacrifice from man, he was severely punished. When Minos was given a beautiful bull to sacrifice to Poseidon but kept it for himself instead, he was also quickly punished. Poseidon was angry and went to Aphrodite for help, who made Minos' wife Pasiphae fall in love with the bull. She mated with it and gave birth to the monstrous Minotaur. In this way, Minos was punished for his disrespect. The story also shows two other things, firstly that the gods did not care which other innocents suffered when they went about punishing someone. Not only did the innocent Pasiphae suffer, but so did all the Athenian youths who were later sacrificed to the Minotaur. Secondly, it shows that the gods would unite to punish someone who wronged them. Angering one god would likely anger the rest, and punishment might therefore come in unexpected forms. Minos was incredibly stupid for insulting the powerful Poseidon, but it could be just as dangerous to anger a minor deity. When Cassiopeia compared her beauty to the sea-nymphs, it was Poseidon who punished her by sending a sea-monster to eat her daughter. Small gods and goddesses had powerful friends. It was certainly wise to do as little as possible to annoy any one of the gods, no matter how minor that god or goddess might seem.

Another bad idea was to sin against the gods. This meant performing any act that caused the gods extreme distaste, such as crimes against family and nature. Terrible acts such as kin-murder, cannibalism, or trying to rape a goddess were amongst these crimes. These kinds of wrong-doers were always punished in the worst possible ways.

Kin-murderers were pursued by the fearsome Erinyes, or Furies, who would drive the criminal mad. Tantalus, who fed his own child to the gods, was condemned to eternal hunger and thirst in Tartarus. His crime was so bad that his whole family inherited some



of his guilt, suffering for his act. A kind of religious pollution was passed down the family, condemning each member to tragedy. This was the House of Atreus, the family that included Agamemnon and Orestes. A similar fate was given to the House of Thebes, whose members included Oedipus and Antigone. They too, passed the pollution of great sins down for generations.

Another important lesson learned from the myths was that a person should beware of harming or angering nature. A mortal could never know where a nymph or other natural spirit or deity might live, or whether a specific tree or spring might be sacred. Everything in nature had a reason or force behind it, and everything was protected. Man was allowed to live within nature, but to do so reasonably. Excessive hunting, or cutting down a forest, or other violent acts against nature, might be looked on with extreme anger by the gods. If a mortal wanted to cut down a tree or pick a flower, he should make certain first that it was not the special place or home of a nymph, or even a goddess in disguise! If a mortal was successful in the hunt, he should offer gifts and thanks to the gods. Nature and the gods should be respected at all times, as the cost was too great if they were not.

Myths as 'Early Science'

Edith Hamilton describes myths as a kind of 'early science.' In other words, they were used to explain various mysterious or inexplicable things in the world. This might be the forces of nature, human emotions, or the origins of plants and animals. Flowers, in particular, seemed special in dry, rocky Greece, as did the beauty of a bubbling spring, that would seem to come magically from the ground. Some flowers, birds, animals, springs and rivers were said to have been mortals originally, who were transformed either to escape the lust of a certain god, out of the gods' love or pity, or even as a punishment. Stories involving beautiful young men who died in their youth and became flowers may reflect earlier traditions of human sacrifice. The author wonders if young men may once have been sacrificed to ensure a good harvest, their blood sprinkled onto the ground to make crops grow. If so, it must have seemed a little like a part of them somehow grew into the plants that sprung there. Perhaps the flower myths are the remnants of those times. If so, they were probably made more appealing to later ages, who looked down on human sacrifice, by taking out the ritual killing and replacing it with tales of gods and misfortune.

Other 'early science' myths explain star constellations as mortals or demi-gods who were put into the sky either as a reward or a punishment. So Orion was actually once a real mortal hunter, and the Pleiades were beautiful girls who he now pursues across the sky. Cassiopeia was a woman who disrespected the gods, so was tied to a chair and placed in the sky to suffer forever. When the ancient Greeks looked up at the night sky and saw the beautiful stars, it must have seemed natural to them that there was some special reason behind their existence. Other natural phenomena also tended to be associated with gods and goddesses, so Helios was the sun and Selene the moon, Zeus was thunder and lightning, and Poseidon was behind every storm at sea. Demeter made the crops and flowers come up every spring, and her mourning caused them to



die in winter. Dionysus gave grapes their special property of merriment when turned into wine. The Norse gods and myths also explained the natural world. For example, earthquakes were caused by Loki convulsing in pain and rage when the snake's venom dripped on him. Thunder was caused by Thor, and rain brought by Odin.

Hospitality

Hospitality was an important concept to the ancient Greeks. They were a sea-faring people who relied a great deal on fishing and trade. Their land was rough and sometimes harsh, and the sea could be even more dangerous. Travelers, traders and sailors might often be washed up on a strange shore, or forced to seek shelter in a stranger's home. Ships were not sturdy enough to travel long in open sea, and not large enough to hold many supplies. Travelers by boat would therefore have to put ashore each night to make camp, and stop often to take on supplies. In the myths, too, heroes often wandered, either going on fantastic journeys or clearing the land of bandits. All these things meant that hospitality to strangers was considered a mark of true civilization, and held up to be very important. Guests were said to be sacred to Zeus, the king of the gods. To abuse or harm a guest was a terrible crime. Many myths reflect this idea. The old couple, Baucis and Philemon, offered good hospitality to the disguised gods Jupiter and Mercury, when no-one else in the land would take them in. Baucis and Philemon were rewarded greatly, while the less hospitable neighbors were drowned in a flood. On Odysseus' travels, he encountered many different societies, some welcoming and others not. The Cyclops, who tried to eat his guests, and Circe, who turned them into pigs, represent barbarism in its worst form. Whenever Odysseus neared civilization again, however, such as with the Phaeacians, he was offered perfect guest-friendship.

Another aspect of hospitality was the giving of gifts. It was an established part of the mythology that guests, especially heroes, princes and other important people, were to be given gifts whenever they visited someone. That person could then be assured of his own gifts if he were ever to visit them. This gift exchange was part of the honor due to these important guests. The amount and quality of gifts given would be determined by the visitor's fame, glory, eloquence and importance. A powerful king such as Agamemnon would receive many gifts, as would a great hero such as Theseus or Achilles. Odysseus also acquired many gifts, partly through his own fame and glory, and partly through his charm and eloquent speeches.

It was not just travelers who relied on hospitality. Ordinary people who worked the land also lived by rules of friendship and kindness. This was a time when an early winter or bad harvest might ruin a man's chances at survival. Such an event could mean that his family would not have enough food for the winter. He would then rely on the help of his neighbors and friends to get him through. This help could mean the difference between living and starving. His neighbors might then need the same help from him a few years down the line. Good friendship and neighborly kindness was vital in such a society. Hesiod talked of this neighborly duty, and it was thought that the gods honored such behavior and looked badly on those who were selfish.



Rebirth and Life After Death

The Greek concept of the underworld was very depressing. The afterlife was a dreary place where souls existed in miserable boredom for eternity. There was nothing to look forward to after death except the fame and glory that one could win in battle. This is one reason why Achilles chose to die early, winning fame and glory, rather than live a long life but be forgotten. Since there was nothing good beyond death, the only form of immortality that could be won was in the praises of men. This was all very well for the heroes, but the ordinary folk really had nothing to give them hope. Even for heroes, this bleak future was terrible. Achilles may have chosen death and glory, but in the *Odyssey* he appeared to regret this choice, as being dead was so much worse than being alive. On his journey, Odysseus encountered other dead spirits, all of whom were weak and pitiable.

Given this depressing view of the afterlife, it is not hard to understand why any hope for salvation might mean so much to the Greeks, and later to the Romans. Two deities offered this hope. Demeter had suffered like humans, and understood what pain and loss meant. Her daughter Persephone was taken to the underworld by Hades. However, Persephone did come back for half the year, during which time Demeter rejoiced and the world experienced spring and summer. Persephone represented the idea of a cycle of death and rebirth, which was reflected in the natural world. Humans saw how plants died and sprung up again year after year and heard the story of Persephone, and this gave them hope. They worshipped Demeter at a special ceremony called the Eleusinian Mysteries, which were supposed to be kept secret. As a result, one knows little about what happened in them, but it is known that it was something to do with death and rebirth and that it offered participants hope for a better existence after death. The Eleusinian Mysteries were incredibly important even into Roman times.

Dionysus also understood what death and suffering were, having suffered much himself. He was almost killed as a baby when his mother died, but Zeus wrapped the growing baby up in his thigh, from which the infant Dionysus was later born. He suffered much at the hands of mortals, and he even went down to the underworld to bring back his dead mother. As the god of grapes and wine, he was also connected with things that grow, die and are reborn. He was associated with death and rebirth in a similar way to Persephone. Moreover, his gift of wine brought joy to men as well as a curse, for too much wine can be a very bad thing! Theater was performed in his honor, representing the truth, joy and transcendence offered by wine, as well as the tragedy. Dionysus was later worshipped in his own mystery cult, particularly popular with the Romans at various points. He also came to represent the hope of a better existence after death. Early Christians even associated Dionysus with the figure of Christ. Other mythological figures who had gone to the underworld and returned to the living world were used in similar ways, such as Hercules and Orpheus.



Style

Perspective

The book is written mainly in third person, relating the various myths and stories of the Greeks and the Norse. This gives the book an authoritative tone. Sometimes short extracts of ancient poems or tales are given, which are also usually in third person.

Occasionally the author gives her own view on a particular story or writer. She is generally very complimentary of the Greek writers and less so of the Romans. In particular, she is quite scathing of Ovid and Apollodorus, finding the former too disrespectful and fanciful, and the latter too dull. She also feels that the Greeks had more belief and respect for their myths than the Romans did, which she finds more charming. She sees western civilization as owing a lot to the ancient Greeks, more so than to the Romans, and so likes to view them as a rational and civilized people. These views are often apparent in her writing and affect the telling of some of the myths. In particular, the more brutal and distasteful aspects are sometimes downplayed, whereas the virtues of some heroes are emphasized, such as Theseus' democratic leanings. The reader should be aware of this when reading the book. Even though the author's style seems authoritative, she can be biased.

Tone

The author writes with authority and describes each myth in an easy-to-understand manner, summarizing the story with diversions only when necessary. It is clear that she has a great love of the myths she is telling, and this enthusiasm is conveyed through her descriptions of people and events. Sometimes her descriptions verge on being poetic, as she attempts to conjure a sense of the mystical or the grand, or to fill the story with a sense of adventure. Her writing is always interesting and never too factual and rarely strays from the point.

Different myths can sometimes seem more poetical than others. This is because the author has used different sources to tell the story of the myth. When using Apollodorus, the descriptions tend to be to the point, the Greek bard Homer inspires beautiful descriptions, Ovid and other Roman writers add a lot of detail to liven the story, and anything from one of the playwrights is always dramatic, with a sense of irony and tragedy. Even when telling the stories in her own words, the author has tried to capture a sense of what these original sources wrote like. Readers should pay particular attention to the short piece of information in italics at the beginning of each chapter, as these explain which sources have been used and the language that can be expected from them. The author does also sometimes include extracts from these original sources, which are usually written in verse and can be very elaborate. It should be remembered that these are all in translation from the original ancient Greek or Norse.



Structure

The structure of the book is very simple and easy to understand. It begins with an introduction to Greek mythology, which explains basic concepts and theories about the mythology. This is one of the most important chapters to read when analyzing the myths. Then the various gods and their roles are given, as well as a more detailed look at two very important gods to mankind, Demeter and Dionysus. The next chapter explains how the world, gods and people were created. These chapters all help to provide essential background to the myths.

The book then takes the myths in a very logical order, starting with some of the earliest, then moving on to group them by theme. Stories of love and adventure are given next, including some of the best known stories like Jason and the Argonauts and the tale of Cupid and Psyche. Then the most important heroes before the Trojan War are discussed: Perseus, Theseus, Hercules and Atalanta. This allows the heroes and their traits and adventures to be compared and contrasted with each other. These chapters show what the Greeks considered the best and greatest heroes to be. The next chapter tells one of the most important myths of the Greeks: the story of the Trojan War. It details how the war began, what happened in it, some of the heroes of the war, and how it was won. These stories are often referred to in other Greek stories and texts, so are very important to be familiar with. The author then describes the famous journey of Odysseus, and the similar adventures of the Trojan hero Aeneas. This allows these two heroes to be compared and contrasted, one a great Greek hero, and the other a much more Roman hero. With these important myths and the three great epics of Greek and Roman literature discussed, the author can then move on to the myths that surrounded some of the greatest families. These are the House of Atreus, the House of Thebes and the House of Athens. These myths, especially those of the House of Atreus and the House of Thebes, are used often in Greek tragedies and are referenced in many other places. By grouping them into one chapter, the reader can compare the fortunes of these very different families and think about any moral lessons that might be implied.

Having described all the most important myths of the Greeks, the author rounds up by summarizing some less important ones, listing them in alphabetical order. If the reader encounters a name they are not familiar with while reading the other chapters, looking it up here may provide additional background. Finally, the author describes the basics of Norse mythology, gives two myths that she feels sum up the Norse spirit, and explains Norse beliefs concerning the gods and the universe. These are interesting to compare with the Greek myths that made up the bulk of the book, and give the reader a sense of how similar and yet how different two mythologies can be.



Quotes

"Fishes and beasts and fowls of the air devour one another. But to man, Zeus has given justice. Beside Zeus on his throne Justice has her seat."

A quote from the ancient writer Hesiod. Introduction to Classical Mythology, p. 14

"That is what men asked themselves when the first stories were told to explain what was so mysterious, the changes always passing before their eyes, of day and night and the seasons and the stars in their courses."

Referring to using gods and mythology to explain natural phenomena and the changing seasons. The Two Great Gods of Earth, p. 56

"I know that you give no belief to such assertions because of those sacred and faithful promises given in the mysteries of Bacchus which we who are of that religious brotherhood know. We hold it firmly for an undoubted truth that our soul is incorruptible and immortal. We are to think (of the dead) that they pass into a better place and a happier condition."

Plutarch, a Greek writing around 80 AD, reassuring his wife that their dead child had moved on to a better place. The Two Great Gods of Earth, p. 76

"To the people who told these stories all the universe was alive with the same kind of life they knew in themselves."

How the World and Mankind Were Created, p. 78

"[T]hey personified everything which had the obvious marks of life, everything which moved and changed: earth in winter and summer; the sky with its shifting stars; the restless sea, and so on."

How the World and Mankind Were Created, p. 79

"They gave natural forces distinct shapes. They thought of them as the precursors of men and they defined them far more clearly as individuals than they had earth and heaven."

Discussing how the forces of nature were personified and became gods. How the World and Mankind Were Created, p. 79

"Shipwrecked warriors from Troy are we, and your suppliants, under the protection of Zeus, the suppliants' god."

Odysseus. The Earliest Heroes, p. 107

"Cyclops, Odysseus, wrecker of cities, put out your eye, and do you so tell anyone who asks."

Odysseus, letting his ego take over and shouting out his name to the Cyclops. The Earliest Heroes, p. 109



"All things in heaven and earth were mysteriously linked with the divine powers, but beautiful things most of all."

The Earliest Heroes, p. 112

"One unfortunate maiden after another beloved of the gods had had to kill her child secretly or be killed herself."

Eight Brief Tales of Lovers, p. 155

"Ships did not sail by night, and any place where sailors put in might harbour a monster or a magician who could work more deadly harm than storm and shipwreck. High courage was necessary to travel, especially outside of Greece."

The Quest of the Golden Fleece, p. 161

"His eager ambition along with his great success led him to think "thoughts too great for man," the thing of all others the gods objected to."

Discussing Bellerophon, but also applies to many other mortals in the myths. Four Great Adventures, p. 190

"The Great Athenian hero was Theseus. He had so many adventures and took part in so many great enterprises that there grew up a saying in Athens, 'Nothing without Theseus.'"

Theseus, p. 209

"Theseus was, of course, bravest of the brave as all heroes are, but unlike other heroes he was as compassionate as he was brave and a man of great intellect as well as great bodily strength."

Hercules, p. 225

"Nevertheless he had true greatness. Not because he had complete courage based upon overwhelming strength, which is merely a matter of course, but because, by his sorrow for wrongdoing and his willingness to do anything to expiate it, he showed greatness of soul."

Discussing the hero Hercules. Hercules, p. 227

"That which is fated must come to pass, but against my fate no man can kill me."

Hector. The Trojan War, p. 268

"Virgil and all his generation were fired with enthusiasm for the new order, and the Aeneid was written to exalt the Empire, to provide a great national hero and a founder for 'the race destined to hold the world beneath its rule.'"

The Adventures of Aeneas, p. 319

"The cause the forces of good are fighting to defend against the forces of evil is hopeless. Nevertheless, the gods will fight for it to the end."

Discussing the Norse gods. Introduction to Norse Mythology, p. 443



"The only sustaining support possible for the human spirit, the one pure unsullied good men can hope to attain, is heroism; and heroism depends on lost causes."

Discussing the Norse concept of heroism. Introduction to Norse Mythology, p. 444

"All the best Northern tales are tragic, about men and women who go steadfastly forward to meet death, often deliberately choose it, even plan it long beforehand. The only light in the darkness is heroism."

Introduction to Norse Mythology, p. 446



Topics for Discussion

Which Greek god or goddess do you think was the most important? In your answer you could consider which gods and goddesses are the most powerful, which bring the greatest benefit to humanity, or can cause the greatest harm, which gods and goddesses can be affected by each other's powers, and which have the biggest roles in the myths.

What makes a man a hero? In your answer you should consider the shared traits and characteristics of the different heroes, what tasks they complete or adventures they go on, whether they are given divine assistance or not, how they treat their fellow men and adventurers, and the motivations that drive them. In your answer you might also want to compare Norse heroes with Greek heroes.

In what ways do the myths of Demeter and Dionysus represent rebirth, salvation and life after death, and what did this mean for the Greeks and Romans? How is this reflected in the ways they were worshipped?

How is fate represented in Greek and Norse mythology? In what ways do heroes meet or fight against their fate? Are the gods bound by fate?

How do Greek myths, in particular the story of Odysseus, present the importance of hospitality? How should guests be treated? What differences does Odysseus encounter between civilization and barbarism on his journey?

In what ways can the myths be thought of as 'early science'? In your answer you should consider all the various origin myths and what they explain, as well as how myths might have connected to different people's and places' sense of identity.

What are the main similarities and differences between the Greek and Norse gods?

Who is the greatest hero and why? In your answer you should consider their deeds, virtues and flaws, any victories or failures, and the kinds of monsters or people they fought. You can bring both Greek and Norse heroes into your answer.