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CHAPTER 1

A World of the Imagination

We are meaning-seeking creatures. Dogs, as far as we know, do not agonise about the canine condition, worry about the plight of dogs in other parts of the world, or try to see their lives from a different perspective. But human beings fall easily into despair, and from the very beginning we invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting, that revealed an underlying pattern, and gave us a sense that, against all the depressing and chaotic evidence to the contrary, life had meaning and value.

—KAREN ARMSTRONG, *A SHORT HISTORY OF MYTH*

But a myth, to speak plainly, to me is like a menu in a fancy French restaurant: glamorous, complicated camouflage for a fact you wouldn't otherwise swallow, like maybe lima beans.

—WILLIAM PETER BLATTY, *THE EXORCIST*

Every Greek lived in at least two worlds. On the one hand, there was the mundane world of the everyday: for women, childbearing and homemaking; for men, farming, sometimes commerce; for citizens, soldiering and politicking; for slaves, backbreaking work of all kinds. On the other, there was the extraordinarily imaginative world of myth, vibrantly alive in literature, art, religion, and in simply every Greek mind. Some fiercely, others with a bemused sense of irony, the Greeks believed in a

glorious past that was in every sense fabulous. Few Greeks had much sense of a historical past. What we would call social studies was not part of the school curriculum, and in any case written records with which the past might be reconstructed were scarce. But to grow up in ancient Greece was to be exposed to a pool of amazing tales about a very different universe, a remote past in which gods and mortals mingled comfortably, indeed interbred—a realm in which Earth, having mated with Sky, produced one-eyed giants and creatures who might sport fifty heads and a hundred arms; where the king of the gods seduced the queen of Sparta in the guise of a swan; where a man accidentally married his mother; where people were transformed into birds and bears and stars and trees; where a goddess killed a giant by picking up Sicily and throwing it at him and a god was so afraid of being overthrown by one of his children that he swallowed each of his offspring at birth. Love affairs both heterosexual and homosexual, jealousy, dismemberment, herbs that restore people to life, prophecies and vain attempts to escape them, fiery battles, thrilling chase sequences—it was all there.

These tales had in turn been invented at some point in the past by other Greeks who had also farmed and reproduced and kept house and fought and traded—mostly by men, to judge from their largely sexist and patriarchal cast, but some surely by women. The story of how the unsuspecting Persephone was kidnapped by her uncle the king of the Underworld as a child but was eventually enabled to spend a good chunk of her time at home with her mother smacks of invention by some female longing for the secure days before she was snatched from the care of her female relatives and compelled to marry an older man she barely knew. Some were invented from whole cloth, some derived from observations of the natural world, some inspired by riveting tales from the Near East. Like all myths, those of the Greeks fall into certain readily identifiable categories, with considerable interconnection and overlap. There are myths of origin designed to explain and justify the existence of the basic building blocks of civilization, which for the Greeks included such phenomena as patriarchy, marriage, law, and animal sacrifice. These stories sometimes overlap with myths about relations between gods and humans. There are myths of conflict between parents and

children, particularly fathers and sons. Some of these intersect with myths of origin, as when the reign of Zeus on Olympus is traced first to his overthrow of his father Kronos and ultimately to Kronos's overthrow—and castration—of his own parent, Ouranos. Some myths explain how the universe came to be, while others set up rules for how humans are to define their place in it. (The same can be said of philosophy.) There are myths of progress and myths of decline. A number of myths offer variations on the theme of the hero's quest, while others showcase the rite of passage from one stage of life to another—from virgin to wife, or from adolescent boy to responsible adult member of the community. The latter often intersects with myths of subduing monsters of one kind or another—which in turn intersect with myths of the establishment of order out of disorder.

The Greeks were born storytellers, and what is a myth if not a story? A story, moreover, is a way of organizing information and of explaining the mysteries of life. What science and philosophy would later approach in theory and abstraction, myth approached in concrete stories: told around a campfire, recited beside an altar, related to children by their elders, chiseled in stone or painted on a vase. The stories we call myths made themselves felt in every aspect of culture in the Greek world, where art and literature were unimaginable without them. But what exactly is a myth, and why does myth come into being in all cultures? What need does it fill?

We might say that myths are narratives that have special meaning for a culture, set in a distant past when the universe with which people later became familiar had not yet taken shape: narratives that unveil a sacred world. All Greek myths, for example, posit a world of kings and queens, princes and princesses rather than of oligarchies and democracies; before that a world with no people at all, only gods; and before that a world without either gods or people. The principal characters must include some supra-human beings: gods, demigods, heroes with extraordinary powers no longer accorded to mortals. Greek heroes are not necessarily altruistic or kind like modern heroes, who put others before themselves. They can be very self-centered, like Achilles. Living in a mythical time, heroes do not have paying jobs. Monster-slaying

is not so much a job as an avocation (sorry, Heracles). Heroes do not run for office. They do not read or write or trade; they do not come down with colds or develop acne. They may, like Zeus, pile one wife on another, but they never divorce. Myth lies somewhere on the spectrum between history and fiction. It is closer to history in that at least at some time it was believed actually to have happened, closer to fiction in that the events it describes are more exciting and unusual than those of everyday life. Aristotle maintained that poetry—the only kind of fiction he knew—was superior to history because history dealt with a small range of particulars and poetry with a wide range of possibilities (*Poetics*, 1451b). Myth, however, goes poetry one better, for it also deals with impossibilities alternately horrifying and delightful.

A priceless guide to the ideology and organization of a civilization, myth remains of uncertain origin, and we must ask with K. K. Ruthven whether it is "an expression of our freedom to invent alternative realities or . . . merely an agent of those powerful forces (personal and traumatic, or racial and primordial) which determine our lives."[1] In the nineteenth century the Scottish scholar William Robertson Smith maintained that myths were developed to explain rituals, whereas the British classicist and polyglot Jane Ellen Harrison maintained that while myth was closely bound up with ritual, it was not designed to explain it; rather it functioned as the narrative correlative of ritual. For anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski myth served as a pragmatic charter of wisdom, faith, and values designed to undergird the basic structure and ethos of a society. Structuralist Claude Levi-Strauss saw myth as encapsulating fundamental binary oppositions. Myths, he argued, work to organize perceptions of the world by setting up oppositions like chaos and order, sky and underworld, male and female, old and new. Sigmund Freud viewed myths, much like dreams, as a reflection of a particular society's anxieties and desires, a construction that allotted a substantial role in the formation of myth to the unconscious. Though each civilization's myths are distinctive, however, underlying patterns certainly appear—what psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who saw myth as the product of a collective unconscious, called "archetypes."

Even different practitioners of the same approach can differ widely among themselves in interpreting myths. In his study of myth and psychoanalysis, Robert Eisner has identified several contrasting psychoanalytic approaches to the myth of Oedipus, treated most famously by Sophocles in his tragedy *Oedipus the King*. The story is well known. Having heard a prophecy that their son would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother, King Laius of Thebes and his wife Jocasta give the baby to a shepherd with instructions to abandon him to his fate, with his ankles pierced and tied to prevent his crawling to safety, a development that seems to explain his name *Oedi-pus* (swollen foot), although it's certainly suggestive that the Greek verb for knowing was *oida*, and knowledge plays a large role in his story. The shepherd, however, takes pity on the infant, who is instead adopted by the king and queen of Corinth. Returning as an adult to Thebes, and having no idea of his true identity, he kills Laius in a fight along the road and marries his widow, thus fulfilling the prophecy. For one psychoanalyst, the myth is plainly the story of a deprived child. No, says another; rather it is the case history of a child who has been adopted. A third analyst has a different interpretation: Oedipus has an inferiority complex because of his handicap—the lameness that ensued from having his ankles pierced. Another sees him as a battered child: for heaven's sake, his parents tried to kill him! Still another focuses on his relationship with his mother/wife and sees Oedipus in patients who have been seduced as children by psychotic parents.[2]

No single scaffold can hope to accommodate the rich fabric of Greek myth. Certainly, myth serves to connect people with an imagined past and with another, transcendent dimension of reality. Shared belief enhances community cohesion. It was probably their myths above all that united the far-flung Greeks into a cohesive culture, for myths provided a huge body of shared cultural referents. Some myths are plainly etiological (from Greek *aition*, cause), articulating the rationale behind the organization of society or accounting for natural phenomena. The story of the subordination to Zeus of Hera, previously a powerful goddess in her own right, normalized patriarchy. (Hera's perpetual ill temper is normally ascribed to her husband's compulsive philandering, but

resentment over her demotion might have played a part as well.) Some explain natural phenomena. The snatching of Persephone, daughter of the agriculture goddess Demeter, by Hades, god of the Underworld, accounted for the existence of seasons. When Persephone was with her husband in the Underworld, Demeter was so disconsolate that nothing could grow, but when she began to divide her time between her husband and her mother, the land was barren when she was in the Underworld but fruitful when she was on earth. Why are crows black? At one time all crows were white, but when the crow Apollo had sent to keep an eye on his beloved Coronis informed the jealous god that Coronis was having sex with the mortal Ischys, the enraged Apollo, conflating the message with the messenger, turned it black.

Some myths seem to be etymological. When an irate Zeus decided to destroy the human race by flooding the earth, the oracle of the goddess Themis instructed the survivors Deucalion and his wife Pyrrha to repopulate the world by throwing the bones of their mother over their shoulders, whereupon they picked up stones—*laas*—from "mother Earth" and tossed them backward. The Greek word for "people" was *laos*, though the derivation is fanciful. The island Anaphe (*Revelation*) owed its name to the rescue of Jason and Medea by Apollo as they were returning to Greece with the golden fleece. When they found themselves imperiled by a violent storm at sea, Apollo shot an arrow into the water, causing a flash of lightning that illuminated an island offering safe anchorage, and this island they named Anaphe because it had been *revealed* to them by Apollo.

Indubitably, some myths do explain a ritual—or at least were believed to do so. Several of these are scattered through the first- or second-century CE compendium *The Library of Greek Mythology*, sometimes thought to be written by a man known as Apollodorus, although that was probably not the author's real name. Apollodorus tells how when Jason and Medea erected an altar to Apollo on Anaphe and sacrificed there, twelve of Medea's slave girls lobbed indecent jokes at the Argonauts; this, Apollodorus says, is why women make jokes during sacrifices to Apollo on Anaphe. When Minos received word of his son's death while he was in the middle of sacrificing to the Graces on the

island of Paros, Apollodorus writes, he completed the sacrifice but cast the ritual garland from his head and demanded that the customary flutes be silent; and that, Apollodorus explains, is why people sacrifice to the Graces on Paros without flutes or garlands.

The women's festival of the Thesmophoria was grounded in several myths, some of which were surely invented to explain the proceedings there. Demeter, so the story went, was so disconsolate after Persephone's disappearance that upon her arrival in Eleusis she at first declined the couch offered to her by the queen Metaneira and only agreed when the queen's slave Iambe offered her a fleece-covered stool:

> The goddess sat a long time on the stool,
> Silent and sorrowing, and by no word
> Or sign would she greet anyone at all;
> She sat, unsmiling, would not eat or drink,
> Pining and longing for her deep-girt child,
> Until astute Iambe intervened
> With jests and quips. Then did the goddess smile,
> The holy lady; then with joyful heart
> Demeter laughed, and ever afterward
> Iambe never failed to cheer her moods.
> (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 198–205)

It was this playfulness that was put forward to explain the cutting jests exchanged by women at the Thesmophoria, and a parallel tale about the elderly Baubo accounted for the evident vulgarity of the women's remarks. Injured by Demeter's rejection of the food and drink she had offered, Baubo evidently lifted her dress and exposed herself to the goddess—which delighted Demeter so greatly that she happily received the proffered sustenance. Iambe's name meanwhile became enshrined in the name iambics given to a genre of Greek poetry that involved invective (usually, though not always, in an iambic meter) aimed sometimes at society as a whole, sometimes at individuals, and very frequently at women. Archilochus, Semonides, and Hipponax were the most famous of the iambic poets. Archilochus was said to have lambasted the family of a young woman whose father had broken

their engagement in such savage lines that they hanged themselves; Semonides composed a satire on women, discussed later in chapter 5, in iambics. The searing iambics of Hipponax were said to have had a similar impact on the sculptors Bupalus and Athenis, whose comical likenesses of him had provoked his wrath.[3] From being embedded in a happy story of female bonding, the word came to be associated with punitive verbal assaults.

Still other phenomena were reflective of the particularly dramatic aspects of real life, like kidnappings and rapes and cattle rustling. Tragedies happen that parallel those with which real humans were familiar. Athamas, maddened by an irate Hera, killed his oldest son when he mistook him for a deer; this still happens today, even leaving Hera out of the equation. Snakes abound, and numerous discarded snakeskins dot the Greek countryside. Orpheus's bride Eurydice was said to have died after stepping on a poisonous snake. The poet Anyte from Mytilene on Lesbos commemorated a dog of whom she (or the person who commissioned the verses) was fond who suffered the same fate:

> You too, beside the tangles of a bush
> With all too many roots, dear Locrian hound,
> Swiftest of all the pups who loved to bark—
> Into your nimble paw a gleaming snake
> With speckled throat injected cruel poison. (*Palatine Anthology* 16. 291)

The various myths that congregated around the figure of Prometheus served to explain a good bit. Hesiod tells how Prometheus's theft of fire, which Zeus had hidden from mortals, improved the lot of humankind no end, accounting for both heat and cooking. Another tale explained why it was that sacrifice, the central ritual of Greek religion, was followed by a delightful banquet in which humans got to divide up the meat while the gods luxuriated in the savory aroma of the smoke rising from the barbecue. Prometheus, it seems, tricked Zeus into choosing an offering of the bones of a sacrificed animal rather than the meat by dressing them artfully in glistening fat. Zeus was not best pleased, and the antics whereby Prometheus sought to benefit mankind so angered the king of the gods that he devised a dreadful punishment for man in

the form of woman: "An evil thing," wrote Hesiod, "in which they may all delight while they embrace their destruction" (*Works and Days*, 57–58). Ordering Hephaestus to craft the basics—a beautiful, strong female body with the voice of a human but the beauty of a goddess—he commanded the other gods to provide the new creation with a variety of other gifts, hence her name, Pandora, "all gifts." Athena, goddess of crafts, would teach her weaving; Aphrodite, goddess of love and sex, would lavish her with charm and sex appeal; and the versatile messenger god Hermes, also the god of robbers, would be responsible for endowing her with a mind shameful as a dog's and the sly cunning of a thief. She was, in short, trouble. Appearances, the story served to suggest, are not to be trusted. As in the case of Prometheus's deception of Zeus, what looked good on the outside was not good on the inside, and a vast corpus of Greek literature would go on to paint women as deceitful. As if the appearance of woman on earth were not affliction enough, Pandora was also given an ominous jar. For, Hesiod wrote,

> The tribes of men had once lived on the earth
> Free utterly from evils, from harsh toil,
> And innocent of death brought by disease,
> For men who suffer always grow old fast.
> The woman, though, removed the jar's huge lid
> Lifting it in her hands, and then she spread
> Its contents—miseries for men, they were.
> She knew it, too. (*Works and Days*, 90–95)

Prometheus had a great deal to account for. Zeus certainly thought so, since he had him chained to a rock where an eagle fed perpetually on his liver. Not only did his well-meaning appropriation of sacrificial meat and his theft of fire result in saddling man with the plague of women, but man's erstwhile life of ease was also replaced with one of hardship. Before the arrival of Pandora, Hesiod says, men lived free of the hard work and illness that led to early death. The post-Pandora world, by contrast—the world problematically composed of two sexes—was ridden with disease and endless toil. The comfortable relationship that had once existed between gods and mortals (all the mortals evidently being

male) had been severed. Once similarly lighthearted, the lives of gods and mortals had now become dramatically differentiated, the one remaining carefree, the other full of apprehension. In Hesiod's construct, then, women were created as a means for separating men—for there had as yet been no women—from the gods.

What were these gods like who endowed Pandora with her various attributes? The Greeks conceived their gods as outsize humans in appearance, albeit consistently good-looking where mere mortals varied drastically in pulchritude. They were often surrounded by an aura, although not when they were in disguise (which was a great deal of the time, as they were able to change into animal or human form at will), and sometimes they manifested themselves simply as forces of nature. They had considerable knowledge about the future, but they were not omniscient, as the dynamics of polytheism precluded both omniscience and omnipotence. The gods were temperamental and prone to quarreling with one another: god Alpha often plotted against god Beta, deceived god Gamma, or stymied the plans of god Delta. No god, however, could undo what another god had done. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Artemis is helpless to save her devotee Hippolytus and his stepmother Phaedra when Aphrodite has plotted their destruction. She explains:

> This is the custom here among the gods:
> No god can contravene another. We must yield,
> Standing aside, and let things take their course. (137–39)

Greek gods could not simply snap their fingers and will something to be done, as the god of the Hebrew Bible did when he said, "Let there be light." When they want someone dead, for example, they go about it in a very literal way. To gratify his priest Chryses by bringing plague upon the Greeks encamped at Troy, Apollo strides down from Olympus, his bow and quiver clanging on his shoulder, and showers them with poison arrows. In the battle between the gods and the giants, Hephaestus kills Mimas with missiles of red-hot iron while Dionysus kills Eurytos

with his wand; Athena for her part does away with Encelados by hurling the island of Sicily at him. At other times, however, gods could be conceived as disembodied principles, possibly even figures of speech, as when people used "Aphrodite" to mean sex.

While not unlimited, however, the gods' powers were extraordinary. Though I have never tried, I should imagine that it takes a great deal of strength to pick up Sicily and throw it. They showed their exceptional nature even in earliest childhood. No sooner had he emerged from his mother Maia's womb than Hermes cast off his swaddling clothes and stole a herd of cattle belonging to his older brother Apollo, concealing them in a cavern except for two that he sacrificed and cooked for his dinner. He then returned to his cave and his swaddling clothes to play the wide-eyed innocent. Not surprisingly, he grew up to be hailed as the god of thieves. Gods developed at an astonishing speed. Zeus reached adulthood within a year of his birth, and his daughter Athena was born fully grown, clad in armor. Their diet was radically different from that of mortals, for in place of bread and wine they dined on ambrosia and drank nectar.

The myths of the Greeks were rife with conflict, struggle, and bloodshed—though the gods did not literally bleed, as their veins were filled not with blood but rather with a thin, watery ethereal substance called ichor. Nectar, ambrosia, ichor: divine DNA was not like yours or mine. The violence that ran like a leitmotif through Greek mythology took many forms. The slaying of monsters was one obvious way in which a hero like Heracles or the Athenian prince Theseus could manifest his heroism and enact his masculinity: monsters were always done in by males, never by females. It is hard to decide which came first, heroes or monsters. Were heroes created to dispatch monsters, or were monsters created to give heroes a way to discharge their energies in a socially constructive way? Greek myth teemed with unnatural creatures of various kinds, some more dangerous than others. By sketching out these inhuman beings the Greeks explored and played with what it meant to be human. Monstrosity defined humanity. Some were rather appealing, such as the satyrs, men with horse features, going on two cloven legs but with equine ears, mane, and tail. Greek satyrs were particularly partial to both drink and nymphs and were associated with Dionysus. They

embodied lack of self-control and were regularly portrayed with erections, often masturbating, and they were more amusing than frightening. Also to be found in the woods were centaurs, who sported the bodies of horses but the heads and torsos of men and were more social than satyrs, generally congregating in groups. As nearly all satyrs and centaurs were male (visual evidence shows occasional exceptions), there was some disagreement as to how they reproduced their kind. Centaurs were perceived as every bit as lustful as satyrs but with a tendency toward violence when inebriated, which was a great deal of the time. Relief sculpture on the south side of the Parthenon shows a battle that ensued when the centaurs, guests at the wedding of Theseus's friend Peirithous, king of the Lapiths, tried to carry off the bride and many of their fellow invitees. Although centaurs were generally considered to be wild and uncivilized, one of their number, Chiron, possessed extraordinary wisdom and served as tutor to Achilles, Jason, and Apollo's son the healing god Asklepios (hence Chiron's modern nickname, Centaur for Disease Control). Although they could be dangerous, they were not grotesque.

The same could be said of the Minotaur. Though he fed eagerly on hapless humans who inadvertently wandered his way, he was hardly responsible for the awkward circumstances of his birth. The child who resulted from the Cretan queen Pasiphae's passion for a beautiful bull, he was an embarrassment to his family and thus consigned to the maze of the labyrinth; one wishes the unfortunate creature, blameless in the circumstances of his conception, had been able to enjoy a fuller life. The Cyclops Polyphemus who gobbled up Odysseus's crew might well frighten children, to whom all adult authority figures appear as big as giants, but his creepiness quotient is not high enough to strike cold terror in adults. Still other creatures were positively helpful, like the winged white horse Pegasus who assisted the hero Bellerophon in killing the Chimera. In fact, Pegasus was quite lovely to look at. The Chimera's particular combination of characteristics was fearsome—she was a conglomeration of a lion, a goat, and a snake—and she breathed fire to boot. Bellerophon was finally able to kill her only by approaching on Pegasus and thrusting his spear into her mouth with a lump of lead attached, which, melted by the creature's flaming breath, choked her.

Inevitably, the scariest monsters that sprang from the Greek imagination—the ones who really instilled primal terror—were those who most departed from accepted bodily norms and were most inclined to do harm. Among the most unsettling were creatures who had once been beautiful women, as these occasioned profound anxiety in both women who feared the loss of their looks and men who feared powerful females. Medusa, for example, had been a stunner (with, of all things, unusually beautiful hair) before she had the bad luck to catch Poseidon's eye. When the god raped her in Athena's temple, Athena was so aggrieved that she thought punishment was in order. As so often, this punishment fell not on the rapist but on his victim. The goddess turned Medusa into the forbidding Gorgon she is still known as today, a hideous creature, her lovely locks now hissing snakes, whose gaze turned anyone on whom it fell to stone. The motif of snaky hair crops up again in the dread Furies who leave their homes in the Underworld to avenge murdered kin. Even Athena in Aeschylus's *Eumenides* is taken aback at their appalling appearance. Who might they be? she inquires, for in them she sees

> no race of creatures ever brought to birth,
> neither of goddesses seen by the gods
> nor formed with shapes resembling those of mortals. (410–12)

It is not actually flippant to suggest that both Medusa and the Furies epitomized "bad hair days," symbolizing the inability to tame a serpentine tangle that has taken on a life of its own beyond the control of the head from which it sprang.

Other creatures were horrifying more in behavior than in appearance. The woman-bird hybrids known as the Harpies, though surely disconcerting to behold, repelled not by their looks but by their habits. They seem, like Medusa, once to have been normal women with exquisite hair. In their hybrid incarnation, however, they were given to snatching away the tasty dishes hopeful consultants brought the seer Phineas just as he was about to start eating—and seeing to it that the little they left was disgusting. Apollonius Rhodius tells the tale in the *Argonautica*:

Sometimes they left not a morsel; at other times, only a little.
And thus they ensured that the man would endure a life full of torment.
Over it all they would pour a stench that was utterly loathsome.
Nobody dared even stand near the food, let alone lift it
Up to his mouth, so great was the stink of the creatures' leavings.
(2. 189–93)

Granted the gift of prophecy by Apollo, Phineus had gotten carried away and revealed the will of Zeus in all its detail, whereupon the king of the gods took away his eyesight and sicced these sadistic creatures on him. Their name derived from the verb *harpazō*, to snatch, but the vile odor they imparted to their leavings made clear their truly fiendish nature. They did not simply want Phineus's food for themselves. Rather, they were determined that he should starve—just as he thought he was about to be fed.

Hurtful deeds are not the province of sadistic monsters alone. It comes as something of a shock when in the *Iliad* the ghost of the exceptionally gentle Patroclus recalls how he came to be so close to the hero Achilles: his father had spirited him away when still a child to safety in the home of Achilles' father Peleus because he was, in effect, wanted for manslaughter. Just like a fool, he says,

not really meaning to do it, but angry because of a game
A silly game of dice, I killed Amphidamas's son. (23. 85–88)

The celebrated inventor Daedalus was said to have come to Crete, where he designed the famous labyrinth, because he had been exiled for killing his nephew. The most revered of all Greek heroes, Heracles, in adolescence had struck and killed his music teacher out of frustration during a lesson, and it was as a penance for killing his wife and children in a fit of madness that the priestess at Delphi had ordered him to perform his famous twelve labors.

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The mythology of the Greeks was both national—if one may use that word of a civilization that spread over hundreds of nation-states—and

regional. While some myths were recounted in all parts of the Greek world, others pertaining to deified local heroes were of more limited distribution. Thebes was particularly rich in local myths. Thebans enjoyed telling how Semele had given birth there to Dionysus, how their founder Cadmus had brought the alphabet from Phoenicia, how Teiresias had been born there; they also had the dubious honor of being home to the unfortunate house of Oedipus. Athenians were particularly fond of myths that featured their tutelary deity Athena or their local hero Theseus, whose journey to Athens to assume his rightful place as the king's son afforded one opportunity after another to enact his heroism, dispatching a series of high-profile malefactors. The most famous was the rogue smith Procrustes, known for the iron bed to which he insisted on fitting all passersby, stretching the short and lopping off the legs of the tall; administering a dose of his own medicine, Theseus put an end to Procrustes by fitting him to the very same bed. The Spartans, meanwhile, though they certainly had a temple to Athena, were heavily invested in the cult of Helen—the hometown girl made bad in the *Iliad*, but good, as we shall see, in the *Odyssey*—and Heracles, believed to be the ancestor of the Spartan kings. Like the Spartans, Heracles was renowned more for brawn than for brain. He slept with each of the 50 daughters of Thespios on consecutive nights under the impression that they were all the same person. To be sure, it was probably dark at the time. Nonetheless . . .

The cast of characters tended to be gods, Olympic and otherwise; demigods; and illustrious individuals (along with their families) believed to have lived around the time of the Trojan War. The countryside, moreover, was believed to teem with wild creatures of various kinds, and these regularly made their appearance in myth. Nymphs abounded—tree nymphs (dryads), mountain nymphs (oreads), and water nymphs (naiads). (Champion swimmer Diana Nyad is aptly named.) Nymphs were universally fair of form and face, with appealingly careless locks that never required the ministrations of a professional. They were fond of dancing, and very good at it. The occasional nymph was immortal, like Achilles' mother Thetis, but most nymphs simply lived for a very long time, though they never lost their looks—unless like the unfortunate Callisto, they were turned into animals by wrathful divinities, or

like poor Echo, who, falling in love with the self-absorbed Narcissus, so lost her sense of self that she eventually dwindled into nothing but an . . . echo. Most nymphs, however, remained beautiful until the end, which came, in the wry calculations of folklorist William Hansen, at the conclusion of 194,400 years. Hesiod, Hansen points out, shows us a nymph declaring that a crow lives for nine human generations, a stag four times as long as a crow, a raven three times as long as a stag, a phoenix nine times as long as a raven, and a nymph ten times as long as a phoenix; and so, calculating a human generation at twenty years . . .[4] The lives of nymphs were largely free of care. The sorrows sparked in Thetis by the sufferings of her beloved son Achilles were exceptional, for few nymphs married or bore children. Nymphs were generally atypical of Greek females in their sexuality. Although some were chaste followers of Artemis (herself something of a super-nymph), many were promiscuous and frolicked uninhibitedly with such males as frequented the forests—satyrs, for example.

Greek myth contained a strong dose of folktale. From folktale comes the motif of the poisoned gift that appears in the story of Heracles' death at the hands of his jealous wife Deianeira. Similarly, the wronged Medea murdered her husband Jason's new bride by bestowing on her the gift of a flammable garment. The stories of both Bellerophon and Jason are built on the folk motif of the man sent on a seemingly impossible quest meant to end in his death. He is then set a series of extraordinarily dangerous and seemingly impossible tasks, which he completes successfully, thereby not only avoiding death but winning the hand of the local princess as well. When Proitos, king of Tiryns in the Peloponnesus, suspects his guest Bellerophon of having tried to seduce his wife, he sends Bellerophon to visit her father King Iobates in Anatolia. With him he sends a letter instructing Iobates to kill him, but, squeamish about killing a guest at his hearth, Iobates instead assigns him three tasks. The first entails killing the fearsome fire-breathing Chimera, which he accomplishes by stuffing a block of lead down her throat. When Bellerophon is equally successful in the other tasks put before him, Iobates marries him to another one of his daughters—and splits his kingdom with him to boot.

The story of Jason and the golden fleece is better known. Alarmed by a prophecy suggesting that Jason might murder him, his wicked uncle Pelias, who has wrested the throne of Iolcos from Jason's father, its rightful occupant, sends the young man off to Colchis on the Black Sea (the modern Sochi, where the winter Olympics were held in 2014) with instructions to retrieve the famous golden ram's fleece in the possession of King Aietes. Setting out on the ship *Argo*, Jason and his crew become known as the Argonauts, sailors of the *Argo*. Their journey requires them to overcome many challenging obstacles, not least of them the terrifying Sympleglades, mobile cliffs that clashed together as ships passed through them, crushing ship and crew alike. When the crew finally arrive safely in Colchis, King Aietes promises to hand over the fleece on condition that Jason perform two daunting tasks, yoking a pair of fire-breathing bulls and sowing dragon's teeth. With the aid of the king's daughter the sorceress Medea, who has conveniently fallen in love with the stranger (as princesses are wont to do), Jason successfully yokes the bulls and defeats the armed men who spring up from the ground sown with the dragon's teeth. Aietes still proving unwilling to surrender the fleece, Jason and Medea make off with it and return to Iolcos, where they take vengeance on Uncle Pelias.

The story of Theseus and the Minotaur offers a variant on the motif. After several years during which the Athenians regretfully accede to King Minos's demand for seven youths and seven maidens to be sent to Crete to be devoured by the Minotaur in compensation for the death of Minos's son Androgeos in Athenian territory, Theseus demands to be one of the youths, hoping to put an end to both the Minotaur and the tribute. After Theseus has slain the Minotaur with the help of the local princess Ariadne, he abandons her (though she has the good fortune to be rescued by, indeed married to, the god Dionysus). Returning to Athens, he forgets to put up the white sail that was to serve as reassurance to his father, Aegeus, that he had survived his ordeal, and it is his father who dies: seeing the black sail Theseus has forgotten to change and believing his son to have perished, he jumps to his death into the sea that now bears his name. Indirectly, then, Theseus too kills the man who had sent him on his mission. Oedipus was only one of many figures

who brought about the death of his father in Greek myth, where intergenerational tension plays a prominent role.

Except for Zeus's brother Hades, who ruled the land of the dead, the principal gods were thought to live on Mount Olympus in northern Greece. At nearly 10,000 feet and shrouded in cloud cover, Olympus was sufficiently formidable to discourage any cheeky climbers bent on refuting this belief. In historical times, the Olympian gods formed an extended patriarchal family with Zeus at the head. But it was not always so. It was Homer and Hesiod, said the historian Herodotus, "who taught the Greeks the descent of the gods, giving them names and allotting to them their special skills and honors and describing their appearance" (2. 53. 2). While the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* depict the Olympian gods manifesting the personality traits and family relationships with which all Greeks came to be familiar, it was Hesiod who took it upon himself to integrate the various tales about the Olympians into a cohesive narrative, and to add to it an account of the very origins of these gods—and indeed of the universe that begat them.

The underlying leitmotif of Hesiod's narrative is the movement from an amoral and unstable universe to a just world subject to Zeus *pater andrōn te theōn te*, father of gods and men. Much of Greek mythology concerns the ill-considered attempts of both gods and mortals to tamper with this order and the punishments that attend them. Hesiod's *Theogony* is organized around the story of Zeus's rise to power and subsequent consolidation of his masculine authority. The poet makes plain, however, that the universe came into existence well before Zeus made his appearance. In Hesiod's construct, the universe is anterior to the gods and was not created by them; indeed various forces of nature are their ancestors. The poet does not say just when or how or why, but at some point *Chaos*, as he calls it in Greek, came into being: not chaos as the English word is understood today, but a yawning gap, an empty space of darkness and disorder. Chaos was soon joined by Gaia (Earth), who literally grounds the previously formless universe; by Tartarus (the deepest part of the Underworld); and by Eros, the dynamic force of desire that will facilitate generation. Most components of what came to be the natural world descended in one way or another from either

Chaos or Gaia, created sometimes by sexual intercourse, sometimes by asexual reproduction, something of which deities were evidently capable. Much later the goddess Hera while estranged from Zeus was said to have engendered Hephaestus in this way, without any sexual partner. Chaos on its own produced Darkness and Night, who in turn mated to produce Brightness and Day. Gaia reproduced parthenogenically as well, giving birth to Ouranos—Sky. After this, however, sex was normally requisite for reproduction.

In no way discouraged by the fact that they were mother and son, Gaia mated with Ouranos. After all, choice of partners was then severely limited. To Ouranos Gaia bore Kronos and eleven other formidable deities of colossal force known as the Titans, as well as a number of unusual creatures: the three one-eyed giants known as Cyclopes (Orb-eyed ones) and the three so-called Hundred-Handers (who also boasted fifty heads). Ouranos, though inordinately fond of sex, was less than enthusiastic about its consequences. In fact, he hated his children so much that no sooner did they appear than he shoved them back into Gaia, causing her no small amount of suffering both emotional and physical. So painfully distended that she was ready to burst, the earth goddess persuaded Kronos to attack his clingy sex maniac father with an adamantine sickle she had wrought from the molten metal deep within her. When next Ouranos visited her, he got quite a surprise:

> Huge Ouranos, full of desire, brought on night,
> And spread himself all over Earth, his mate.
> The son then from his hiding place, his ambush,
> Stretched out his left hand; in his right, he took
> The long and jagged sickle. One fell stroke
> Sufficed to reap his father's genitals
> And cast them off where they would fall to ground.
> Not vainly did they fall from Kronos's hand,
> For earth receiving all the bloody drops
> Bore the strong Furies as the seasons passed.
> She bore the Giants with their gleaming armor.
> . . .

Genitals floating far across the main
Gave rise to shining foam, the product of
Immortal flesh, and in it grew a maiden.
. . .
Her gods and men alike call Aphrodite. (*Theogony* 176–95)

The rage of father against child and child against father gives birth to both sexual passion and a cycle of vengeance, for the Furies, ghastly to look upon with writhing snakes for hair, had as their charge the relentless hounding of those who had murdered the most inappropriate of victims—parents, guests, suppliants. And not only that. Ouranos's vain attempt to stop time and have the earth to himself has been foiled by the maternal love that will move history forward in succeeding generations.

Kronos, however, was no more cut out for parenthood than his father. Having discovered that he was fated to be overthrown by one of his sons, he made a point of gulping down each of his children as it was born. His sister and increasingly unwilling consort Rhea understandably sought a means of both protecting their next child and avenging herself upon Kronos. Hiding her new baby in a cave on the island of Crete, she presented Kronos not with the infant he was expecting but rather with a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes, for which trick, the poet Corinna maintains, "she won great honor from the immortal gods."[5] This stone Kronos obligingly swallowed, leaving baby Zeus to grow to maturity in the care of the nymph Adamanthea. Or the goat Amalthea—who was also sort of a nymph. Or his grandmother Gaia. Greek myths were not known for their consistency. Another female poet, Moero, wrote that Zeus was nursed by birds, who brought him ambrosia from the ends of the earth, with the assistance of an eagle,

Who, ever drawing nectar from a rock.
Brought cunning Zeus the beverage in his beak.[6]

Indeed, another myth made Aphrodite the daughter of Zeus by one of his many consorts, Dione, a Greek word really just meaning "female counterpart of Zeus"; Swiss historian Walter Burkert has wittily dubbed Zeus and Dione "Mr. and Mrs. Heaven."[7]

In the fullness of time Kronos was forced to vomit up the children he had swallowed. Zeus then set about establishing himself as ruler over a well-ordered cosmos, a project in the course of which he underwent many trials. His aunts and uncles the formidable Titans resisted him vigorously, though after a war of ten years Zeus was finally able to prevail. More trouble, however, lay in store, for the monster Typhon challenged Zeus for supremacy, a challenge that threatened everything for which Zeus had worked, as the forces of chaos made one final stand against justice and harmony. Typhon's appearance was so horrifying that upon laying eyes on him even the Olympian gods fled in terror. Out of his shoulders grew a hundred dragons' heads, their snaky tongues flickering ominously. Each fearful head burned with fire, and in each one were voices uttering the most unsettling sounds, the indescribable cries of every imaginable creature. The earth, the sea, and even the Underworld felt the heat generated by the struggle as Typhon's raging fires did combat with the scorching winds from Zeus's lightning bolts, but Zeus at last prevailed and hurled the monster deep into the pit of Tartarus.

It is difficult to know whether the persistent topos in Hesiod's narrative of mothers inciting their sons to harm and displace their fathers derived from the patterns of real life. After all, adolescent Greek girls often as young as fourteen were customarily married off to men of thirty or so, generally in arranged marriages. Frequently having a limited attachment to their husbands, they probably did bond closely with their children, who generally arrived not long after they had put away their dolls. According to Hesiod, however, his remarkable account of how the world came to be as it was had been poured into his ears by the Muses "while he was shepherding lambs by Mount Helicon, reverend and holy" (*Theogony* 23).

If so, we must wonder where the Muses had gotten these stories. Who were the Muses' muses? Similar tales were circulating to the east, and it seems impossible to determine the relationship of these yarns to one another. The narrative traditions of Anatolia and Mesopotamia shared Hesiod's conception of the beginning of time as a period of disorder and anarchy followed by a violent succession of rulers. The discovery of cuneiform tablets recording Hittite myths about the origins of the gods has

brought to light striking parallels between Greek and Hittite accounts.[8] The Hittite poem *Kingship in Heaven* tells of a succession of gods similar to the one recounted by Hesiod. After deposing the god Alalu, we read, Anu took over the monarchy and was served by his son Kumarbi, who sat at his feet and gave him his food and drink. In the ninth year of Anu's reign, however, Kumarbi challenged him for the kingship, biting off and swallowing his penis, whereupon his father informed him that he had impregnated him with several gods, including the storm god Teshub. Having heard that Teshub would usurp his power, Kumarbi . . . at this point the tablet is damaged, but it seems that Kumarbi gives birth to another god, whom he announces he will destroy by eating him—and is given what seems to be a stone in the child's place. He subsequently gives birth to Teshub, evidently through his penis.[9]

Both the *Theogony* and *Kingship in Heaven* feature a succession of male gods, the castration of a god by his successor, inappropriate swallowing, male pregnancy, and the conflation of a god and a stone. The parallels are striking, and there are also conspicuous similarities to other Greek accounts. In 1962 a papyrus was discovered near the Derveni Pass in northern Greece. The poem it contained was written around the middle of the fourth century BCE and purports to be the work of the legendary poet Orpheus, who, if he really lived (Aristotle had his doubts, and so do I) would have died centuries earlier. The creation myth the Orphic text contains departs from Hesiod's in several ways, the most arresting of which is that it depicts Zeus swallowing the genitals of a god who appears to be Kronos and thereby becoming pregnant with all the other gods and goddesses, just as Kumarbi gives birth to various gods after swallowing the genitals of Anu.[10]

What are we to make of these parallels? Though the Hittite account is far earlier than the Greek ones, it is not at all clear that Hesiod and his successors were familiar with Hittite literature. Quite possibly they both descended from a common source, but some of these motifs appear in other cultures as well—Egypt and Babylon, for example. It may well be that contact among cultures offered access to a common store of constructs and motifs, or that we need to fall back on Jungian notions of archetypes.

Never dethroned, Zeus ruled eternally. Conflicting family trees accounted for the dozen or so gods who were believed to enjoy carefree lives on Olympus. Zeus, Hesiod reports, first married the clever Titan Metis, profiting from her wise counsel: in many ways Metis was intelligence personified (or, I suppose, deified). Whereas Kronos had swallowed his offspring after hearing that he was fated to be overthrown by one of them, Zeus, having heard that Metis would give birth to a son greater than his father, dealt with the problem by swallowing Metis herself while she was pregnant with Athena, thus ensuring that she would never bear this dreaded boy. Born directly from the head of Zeus (an interesting fantasy of male pregnancy), Athena came to join the small cadre of Olympians already in existence—her father Zeus and his siblings Poseidon, Demeter, and Hades. The rather unexciting Hestia was the goddess of the hearth and its flame. Hades had equal status to the Olympians, though he was not technically one of them, as he presided over the kingdom of the dead in the Underworld—or, as it was called after him, Hades: confusingly, Hades was the name both of the god and of the Underworld over which he presided. The earth not only housed the dead. It was also the source of life in the form of vegetable and mineral products, and thus Hades had another name, Pluto, meaning "wealth," a happier designation by which he came to be known at Rome. Zeus married his sister Demeter, fathering Persephone; his subsequent marriage to a second aunt, the Titan Themis (divine law), produced the Fates and the Horai (hours/seasons). From his final marriage, to Hera, was born Ares, and during that marriage Hera gave birth to Hephaestus—on her own, Hesiod says, the forger god having no father (although other traditions claimed that he was sired by Zeus). Having married both Intellect and Law, Zeus has now brought a just order out of mindlessness and anarchy. Significantly, he does marry, unlike grandfather Ouranos and father Kronos, who simply forced themselves on Gaia and Rhea. Civilization has arrived, and though patriarchy has been tamed a bit, it has also become entrenched as part of the order of things.

Finding marriage confining, however, Zeus expanded the roster of gods through a series of couplings with other females both mortal and

immortal, often taking advantage of his Olympian powers to sneak up on them in disguise. Spending nine nights with his aunt Mnemosyne in the guise of a shepherd, he fathered the nine Muses. Perhaps things might have proceeded differently had Hera suggested some role-playing in the boudoir, but then there would have been far fewer gods on tap. His liaison with his cousin Leto produced Artemis and Apollo. On Semele he fathered Dionysus, but poor Semele never lived to see her divine son. Making the mistake of asking her lover to appear to her in his full majesty, she was incinerated by his lightning bolt, whereupon Zeus sewed the embryonic god of wine and fertility into his thigh until the fetus had become viable—a second instance of male pregnancy. The king of gods and men was not above rape. Maia, who became the mother of Hermes, does not seem to have had any choice in the matter, and the busy god also slept with Maia's two sisters. And then there were twelve. Or rather, fourteen, but Hades was really only an honorary Olympian, and to get an even number the Greeks normally left out either Dionysus or the colorless Hestia. There were also many lesser deities who inhabited a variety of places on land and sea, such as the goddesses Calypso and Circe who became lovers of Odysseus.

Following the pattern set down by Zeus, the Olympians were generally prone to restoring order by punishing the hybris that threatened it when humans transgressed their bounds. Determined to drive the chariot of his father the Sun, the inexperienced Phaethon loses control of the horses and falls to his death; disregarding his father Daedalus's caution not to fly too near the sun lest it melt the wax in his artificial wings, Icarus meets a similar fate. When Arachne boasts that she rivaled Athena in weaving, the irate goddess turns her into a spider. It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that the Greeks considered misfortune simply the result of divine punishment in some simplistic sequence of causes and effects. When the gods work their will, an enormous amount of collateral damage frequently ensues. Perhaps the most flagrant example of offspring punished for the sins of their parents is the death of Niobe's children at the hands of Leto's twins Apollo and Artemis. When Niobe boasted that she had seven sons and seven daughters to Leto's mere two, Leto sent her two to kill Niobe's fourteen. Children frequently suffer for

the transgressions of ancestors long dead as well, as witness the curse of the house of Atreus, Agamemnon's father.

Both Hestia and Dionysus were outliers among the Olympians. Hestia had too little personality, Dionysus too much. Transgression and disorder were Dionysus's hallmarks, along with a large dose of paradox. Associated with wine and partying and the attendant loss of control, he was male but effeminate and encouraged his followers to cross over into a frenzy of madness; the English word ecstasy, which characterized the condition of his feverish nocturnal followers, means literally standing outside oneself (*ek-stasis*), and appropriately so. Yet though he embodied a life-affirming exuberance, he was also linked to death and the Underworld. The god of play, he would in classical Athens become the god of plays, both tragic and comic: the dramatists that we associate with Athens—Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes—presented their plays at the annual spring festival in his honor, the City Dionysia. Disguised after his birth (sometimes as a girl, sometimes a goat) to avoid the wrath of his divine father's jealous wife, Dionysus was in close touch with an animalistic side. He was often portrayed in art surrounded by wild creatures. Elusive in every sense, he formed a counterweight to the orderly cosmos his divine father had gone to so much trouble to establish. The order of Zeus is all very well, but real life is messy, and in Greek thinking—and feeling—that messiness was embodied in the figure of Dionysus. In the words of French philosopher Luc Ferry, "whenever we need reminding, he makes us newly aware of how the cosmos was constructed out of chaos, and of how fragile is this edifice, stemming from the victory of Zeus over the Titans—all the more fragile if we forget the origins of this precariousness. This is why the carnivalesque frightens us, just as madness frightens us, because we feel undeniably how close it is to us: how it is inside us."[11]

Each of the Olympian gods had a distinct sphere of interest and influence. Zeus was associated with monarchy and justice—"kings," Hesiod proclaimed in a line quoted hundreds of years later by Callimachus in his *Hymn to Zeus*, "are from Zeus" (*Theogony* 96; *Hymn to Zeus* 79)—but also with lightning and thunder, which manifested themselves in the sky; his name was related to the Greek word *dios*, bright or shining.

It comes into English as "day," and the Spanish for "day" is *día*. The first letter of his name had a little bit of a "d" sound in Greek, and from it are descended the English words deity and divine, as well as the words for God in the romance languages, starting with the Latin *deus* and proceeding to the Italian *Dio*, the Spanish *Dios*, the French *Dieu*. (Curiously, the Greek word for a god, *theos*, from which theology derives, is unrelated and comes from a completely different root.) From *Zeus-pater* (Zeus-father) the Romans named their chief god Ju-piter. Zeus's brother Poseidon, generally perceived as the god of the sea, was also the god of horses and earthquakes; the Greeks may have had some understanding of the relationship between earthquakes and tsunamis. Of Zeus's other siblings, Hades ruled the land of the dead, and Demeter governed the fertility of the land and was particularly associated with grain. Hera was the goddess of women, marriage, and motherhood. She had a great deal to contend with, and her lot was not a happy one. Having been dethroned from her original position as a revered goddess in her own right, as consort to Olympus's philanderer-in-chief she came to be characterized as the prototypical nagging wife who never lets her husband have any fun—a disposition easy to understand given that Zeus's idea of fun frequently involved disguising himself as an animal to seduce a mortal woman; Helen, it was said, was conceived after he appeared to the unsuspecting Leda in the form of a swan. Hestia came in a poor sixth, the rather drab goddess of the hearth. Rarely depicted anthropomorphically, she was often represented simply as a flame and symbolized the family and the household, the *oikos*. When she is about to die, Euripides' Alcestis prays to Hestia to take care of her children (*Alcestis*, 163–69). As a symbol of the *oikos*, however, Hestia had great importance, and a deed that would be vile anywhere was considered far more heinous when performed by the hearth. In depicting Clytemnestra's ghost reminiscing at her hearth about the offerings she had made to ward off retribution for the murder of her husband Agamemnon (*Eumenides*, 106–9), Aeschylus is underlining the transgressive nature of her attitude to family, whose integrity women, guardians of the hearth, were charged with preserving.

The gods of the next generation had their own provinces as well. Those of Apollo were numerous: music, arts, medicine, reason, prophecy, the

sun. His twin Artemis was in charge of hunting, childbirth, and the moon. The hypermasculine Ares was the pitiless god of war. Unlike that other virgin goddess Artemis, who had unquestioned sex appeal, scrambling across hill and dale in a skimpy outfit suited to quick motion and archery, Athena was rather asexual. She was also something of a gender-bender. She had a good bit to do with war and was often depicted with weapons, but unlike the brutal Ares she was associated more with military valor, strategy, and fighting for just causes, and she was the goddess not only of wisdom but also of handicrafts in general and that prototypically female handicraft, weaving, which embodied wifely virtue. But not the craft of the blacksmith, for that fell to the lame Hephaestus. Smithing was the perfect profession for a god with his handicap, requiring as it did primarily upper body strength. Hermes with his winged sandals served as the messenger of the gods but also was held to be the patron of travelers, including those traveling from the world above to the Underworld after death, and in time he also came to be associated with democracy. When the Athenians awoke one morning to find that the dozens of the images of the god known as herms that served as boundary markers throughout the city had been vandalized during the night, they had no doubt that a conspiracy to overthrow the democratic government was afoot. Aphrodite presided over love and sex. Not surprisingly, none of the male gods was a virgin.

Once the forces of chaos had been overcome, giving birth to a new order over which the "just" Zeus presided, harmony prevailed in the cosmos. In the human community, however, there was trouble. In his *Works and Days*, Hesiod schematizes the history of his own kind in terms of five successive races. First came the men of gold, who enjoyed the carefree life of gods and for whom death was just a tranquil sort of "falling asleep." Next came a race of silver, people who had so little judgment that they not only wronged one another but also failed to sacrifice to the gods; these Zeus destroyed. The race of bronze that followed them required no divine intervention for its extinction, for they were so quarrelsome that they killed one other off. The next race was a major improvement, consisting of the heroes known as demigods. Precisely because of their gallant natures, however, many died fighting in the great

wars—at Thebes, at Troy; the others Zeus transported upon their deaths to the isles of the blessed at the ends of the earth. Last came the modern world in the form of the fifth generation, who live in the iron age. Once again fighting is constant, even within families, and the gods are even denied reverence. Finally the time will come, Hesiod says, when the race has degenerated so badly that babies are born already with gray hair, and Zeus will destroy this race too. Curiously, however, Hesiod seems to leave the door open to some improvement at an unspecified time, though he does not indicate how, saying

> If only I were not one of these men,
> Men of the fifth race; would that I had died
> Beforehand, or had been born afterward. (174–75)

Most Greek myths originated very early and were passed down by oral tradition before first being recorded in writing. As time went by, variants were rung on the traditional tales. Both Pherecydes of Syros around 500 and Apollodorus much later sought to exonerate Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens, from the charge of abandoning his fiancée Ariadne on the island of Naxos after she had been instrumental in his escape from the labyrinth: Pherecydes claimed that Theseus left the princess on the island at the orders of Athena, and Apollodorus suggested that Dionysus had fallen in love with her and carried her off even before the Athenian prince set sail. Others elaborated greatly on what they had heard, like Apollonius of Rhodes, whose *Argonautica* detailed the adventures of Jason and Medea. The tragedians of the fifth century often presented conflicting versions of the myths that formed their plots. Greeks took their mythical heritage seriously. When they were drawing up their battle lines before Plataea in 479, Herodotus reports, the Tegeans, arguing with the Athenians over which of them should have the honor of holding one of the wings, appealed comfortably to the evidence of myth, maintaining that Sparta had always granted them the honor of holding a wing in all Peloponnesian campaigns since their king

Echemus had defeated Heracles' son Hyllus in single combat when the descendants of Heracles invaded the Peloponnesus. By way of reply the Athenians listed their own good deeds from the heroic age, adducing their hospitality to those same Heraclids, their attack on Thebes to retrieve the dead bodies of those lost in the war between Oedipus's sons, and their defeat in battle of the invading Amazons; "and in the arduous struggle at Troy," they add, "we were second to none" (Herodotus 9. 27). Not even the rationalist Athenian historian Thucydides was able to excise myth entirely from his consciousness. In discussing the Athenians' attempt to ally with the Thracian king Sitalces, he makes a point of stressing that Sitalces' father Teres was in no way related to Tereus, the husband of Procne who with her sister had murdered Tereus's son Itys when she discovered Tereus's rape of her sister and was subsequently turned into a nightingale to escape his wrath. Indeed, he says, the two men lived in different parts of Thrace, Tereus having lived in Daulis, "and it was here the women slaughtered Itys; and many of the poets in seeking an epithet for the nightingale have dubbed it 'Daulian'" (2. 29. 3). Are we to understand that Thucydides believed women can turn into birds?

Late in the fourth century, Euhemerus put forward the theory that myth was nothing but history misremembered: tales that acquired elements of the fantastic as they grew in the retelling. The gods, he claimed, were nothing but illustrious men, generally kings, whose achievements were magnified after death to the point that they were held to be divine. Euhemerus was not the first to explore the origins of the Greeks' myths. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, written a couple of generations earlier, Plato depicted Socrates and Phaedrus walking along the banks of the Ilissus River on the outskirts of Athens when suddenly Phaedrus realizes that they are in the neighborhood of the spot where Boreas, god of the north wind, was said to have carried off Oreithyia. Do you think, he asks Socrates, that it could have happened in this very spot? After all, the waters here are very clear and pleasant, and this would be a natural place for girls to have been playing. Phaedrus evidently finds the story credible. Actually, Socrates says, the place you're thinking of is a bit farther downstream. But, Phaedrus inquires, do you think the story is true? Socrates replies at length in a speech that alludes to the

famous prescription carved in the forecourt of Apollo's temple at Delphi, "know thyself":

> It would be nothing out of the ordinary if I were to mistrust the story, as the wise men do; then I might rationalize the tale by saying that a blast of Boreas, the north wind, pushed her off the nearby rocks as she was playing . . . and that when she had died in this way she was said to have been carried off by Boreas. But I, Phaedrus, think such explanations, though as a rule very entertaining, are the inventions of a very clever and not altogether enviable man, and a very hard worker at that, for he then has to explain the forms of the centaurs, and then that of the Chimera, and he is swamped by a whole slew of such creatures of peculiar, unimaginable, portentous natures. Anyone who disbelieves in these, and with a rustic sort of wisdom, takes it upon himself to explain each in accordance with probability, will need a great deal of free time. But I, my friend, have no time for them at all, for I am not yet able, as the Delphic inscription puts it, to know myself; so it seems silly when I have not yet achieved that, to investigate irrelevant things. For this reason I just let these things go, and allowing myself to accept the customary belief about them, as I was just saying, I investigate not these things, but rather myself, to learn whether I am a monster more convoluted and more furious than Typhon or a tamer and simpler creature, to whom a divine and humble lot is assigned by nature. (229c–230a)

But what a lovely place this is to which you have led us, he adds. Judging by the figurines and statues here, it must be sacred to the nymphs!

In response to Phaedrus's question, Socrates punts, giving an eminently reasonable explanation for the myth that he attributes to "wise men" but then promptly undercutting it by saying that once you start trying to rationalize myth you find yourself stuck with quite a host of improbable creatures to explain away. In fact, Socrates—or at any rate, Plato—reveled in myth when it served his purposes and indeed, as we will see in chapter 8, enjoyed making original myths of his own. The centaur problem also captured the imagination of the mythographer known as Palaephatus, who may have no more been named Palaephatus

(continued...)

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