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THE ASCENT
OF THE
OLYMPIAN
GODS





IN THE BEGINNING, there was nothing...

Picture it as a gap, a void filled with swirling movement, not emptiness. There was nothing that held together, nothing distinct, nothing measurable by any form of measurement. There were no borders or limits, but within the void appeared Gaia, the Earth, just as when building a house the foundation comes first.

And in the depths at the lowest extent of deep-rooted Gaia was Tartarus, the place of punishment, the world beneath the world. Earth and Tartarus emerged spontaneously, but Love is the

fundamental creative force. Love, coeval with Gaia, governs the subsequent stages of creation.

Gaia and Tartarus were surrounded by the darkness of night, but Night blended with Darkness and bore Brightness and Day. And so time came into being, measured by the onward-rolling day and night. By herself Gaia, the Earth, bore Uranus, the Heaven, to cover her completely. Heaven lay with Earth, and she conceived and bore Ocean, the water encircling the continents of Earth, and Tethys, the place of

punishment, the world beneath the world. Earth and Tartarus emerged spontaneously, but Love is the fundamental creative force. Love, coeval with Gaia, governs the subsequent stages of creation.

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From the prolific mingling

“From the mingling of Earth and Uranus there emerged, among many other children, the Titans”

of the waters the earth was clothed, and from the mingling of Earth and Uranus there emerged, among many other children, the Titans, twelve in number: Cronus and Rhea, Hyperion and Theia, Iapetus (the father of Prometheus), and the rest of the gods of old. Their names now are mostly unfamiliar, for these were the days of yore. Under the rule of Cronus the world was of a different order, and it is not easy to comprehend it, except to say that it was primitive.

Wide-shining Theia bore for Hyperion the blazing sun, the radiant moon, and the rosy-fingered light of dawn, which gently fills the sky even before the sun rises.

Helios the sun-god drives his golden chariot from east to west, and sails in a golden vessel each night on the Ocean back again to the east. Helios had a son called Phaethon, the gleaner, who was allowed by his father, in a moment of weakness, to drive his chariot for one day, much later in the earth's history. But none apart from Helios can control the blazing chariot drawn by four indefatigable steeds, and Phaethon hurtled to earth in a ball of flame. Much of the earth's surface was scorched and became desert, and the skin of those dwelling there was burned black for all time.



Phaethon's sisters were turned into trees, and the heavy tears of grief they shed for their brother solidified as amber.

In later times, sisters Selene, the moon, and Eos, the dawn, fell in love with mortal men. Endymion was a shepherd, who slept each night in a mountainside cave in Caria. Selene caught a glimpse of him from on high, and as her pale gleam fell on his features she fell too, such is the force of love's attraction.

Every night she lay with him while he lay cradled in sleep, not knowing that his reality was stranger than any

dream. Selene loved him so much that she could not bear the thought that he would age and die. She implored Zeus to let him remain as he was, and the father of gods and men granted Endymion eternal youth and eternal sleep—except that he awoke each night when Selene visited him to satisfy her longing.

Eos enjoyed numerous affairs, for once she went to bed with Ares, and in jealous anger Aphrodite condemned her to restless ardor. One of those with whom she fell in love was the proud hunter, Tithonus, as handsome as are

fell in love was the proud hunter, Tithonus, as handsome as are all the princes of Troy; and she begged Zeus that her mate should live forever.

Zeus granted her wish, but the love-befuddled goddess had forgotten to ask also for eternal youth for her beloved. In the days when their passion was new, the graceful goddess bore Memnon, destined to rule the Ethiopians for a time and meet his end before the walls of Troy. But as the years and centuries passed, Tithonus aged and shrank, until he was no more than a grasshopper, and Eos shut him away and loved him no more. If asked, he would say that death was his dearest wish.

And Helios too dallied for a while with a mortal maid, Leucothoe by name. He thought of nothing but her, and for the sake of a glimpse of her beauty he would rise too early and set too late, after dawdling on his way, until all the seasons of the earth were awry. The god had to consummate his lust, or the chaos would continue. He appeared to her as her own mother, and dismissed her handmaidens, so that he could be alone with her. Then he revealed himself to her; she was flattered by his ardent attention and put up no resistance. But when her

father found out he buried her alive by night, so that the sun might not see the deed, and by the time morning came there was nothing he could do to revive his beloved. But, planted as she was in the soil, he transformed her into the frankincense bush, so that her sweet fragrance should please the gods for all time.

Now, Uranus, the starry sky, loathed his children—not just the twelve Titans, but the three Cyclopes, one-eyed giants, and the three monstrous Hecatonchires, each with fifty heads and a hundred hands. Every time a child was born, Uranus seized it and shoved it back inside its mother's womb, deep in the darkness of Earth's innards.

In the agony of her unceasing labor pains, Earth called out to the children within her, imploring their help. But they were still and cowered in fear of their mighty father, all except crafty Cronus, the youngest son. Only he was bold enough to undertake the impious deed. He took the sickle of adamant that his mother had forged and lay in wait for his father. Soon Uranus came to lie with Earth and spread himself over her completely. Cronus emerged from the folds where he was hiding, wielding his sickle, and with one mighty stroke he

sliced off his father's genitals and tossed them far back, over his shoulder.

The blood as it scattered, and spilled on the soil, gave rise to the Giants and the Furies, the ghouls who sometimes, with grim irony, are called the Eumenides, the kindly ones. They protect the sacred bonds of family life, and hunt down those who deliberately murder blood kin. They drink the blood of the victim and hound the hapless criminal to madness and the blessed release of death. They are jet black, their breath is foul, and their eyes ooze suppurating pus.

But the genitals themselves fell into the surging sea near the island of Cythera and were carried on currents to sea-girt Cyprus. From the foam that spurted from the genitals grew a fair maiden, and as she stepped out from the white-capped waves onto the island grass grew under her slender feet. The Seasons attended her and placed on her head a crown of gold, and fitted her with earrings of copper and golden flowers; around her neck they placed finely wrought golden necklaces, that the eyes of all might be drawn to her shapely breasts.

Her name was Aphrodite, the foam-born goddess, and there is none among men and

gods who can resist even her merest glance. She is known as the Lady of Cythera and the Lady of Cyprus; and henceforth Love became her attendant.

Cronus, the youngest of the children of Uranus, usurped his father's place as ruler of the world—but inherited his fear, the typical fear of a tyrant. For his parents warned him that he in his turn would be replaced by one of his sons.

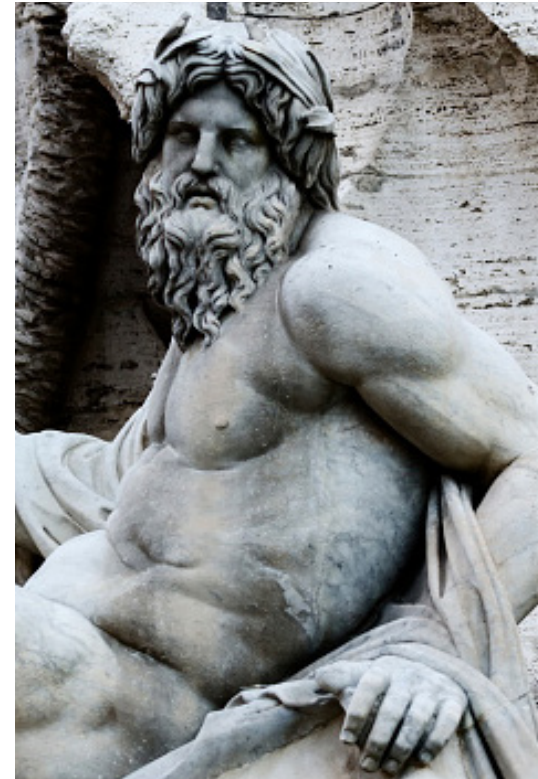
Each time, then, that a child was born to Rhea, his sister-wife, he swallowed it to prevent its growth. Five he swallowed in this way: Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon. Pregnant once more, Rhea appealed to her mother Earth, who promised to rear the sixth child herself. And so, when her time came, Rhea went and bore Zeus deep inside a Cretan cave, while to Cronus she gave a boulder, disguised in swaddling clothes, for him to swallow.

In the cave on Mount Dicte, the infant Zeus was fed by bees and nursed by nymphs, daughters of Earth, on goat's milk, foaming fresh and warm from the udder. Amalthea, the keeper of the goat, brought the boy all the produce of earth.

And so the mountains of Crete, Zeus grew in might, but in his heart he nurtured his mother's dreams of vengeance.

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WAR AGAINST THE TITANS





Zeus laid his plans with skill and cunning—with his witchy consort Metis, whose name means “skill” and “cunning.” There was nothing this shape-shifting daughter of Ocean and Tethys didn’t know about herbs, and she concocted for Zeus a powerful drug, strong enough to overcome even mighty Cronus.

Together, and with the help of grandmother Earth, they

drugged Cronus with narcotic honey. And while he was in comatose they fed him the emetic substance.

The result was exactly as intended: Cronus vomited up in order first the boulder, still wrapped in moldering rags, and then Zeus’ brothers Poseidon and Hades, and then his sisters Hera and Demeter, and finally Hestia, oldest and youngest.

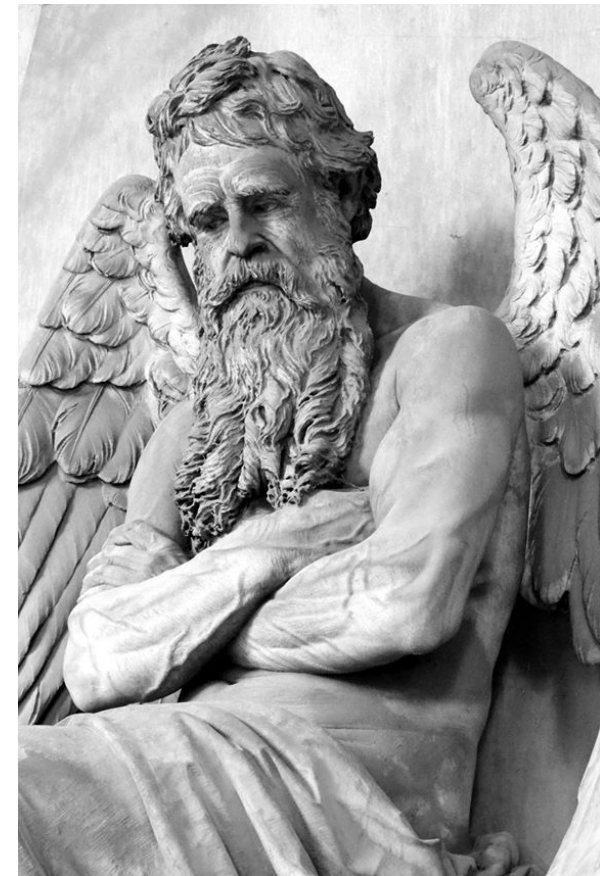
For the forthcoming war—

for war was inevitable—these were Zeus’ bosom allies. Cronus, for his part, was joined by all his fellow Titans and their offspring, with the notable exception of Themis, for right was on Zeus’ side and victory was destined to be his.

Zeus made his headquarters on Mount Olympus in northern Greece, while Cronus chose Mount Othrys, a little to the south. This was the first war



“Zeus made his headquarters on Mount Olympus in northern Greece, while Cronus chose Mount Othrys, a little to the south. This was the first war in the world, and there has been none like it since.”





in the world, and there has been none like it since. For ten years the conflict raged ceaselessly and without result; for ten years earth and heaven resounded and shook with the frightful din of battle. Neither the Titans nor the Olympians could gain the advantage.

Long ago, in the early days of the war, Prometheus, resident on Olympus with his mother Themis, had offered Zeus some advice. Still imprisoned deep within Gaia were the Hundred-handers and the Cyclopes. Zeus considered them too

monstrous, too hard to control, but now he was desperate to break the deadlock.

He extracted from them the most solemn oath, that if he released them and armed them, they would be his grateful allies. The former could hurl boulders the size of hills with their hundred hands, while the latter, cave-dwelling smiths, would create for Zeus his weapon of choice, the thunderbolt—the missile that accompanies a flash of lightning. And at the same time they made weapons for his brothers in their forge: a

trident for Poseidon and a cap of invisibility for Hades. The earth, the seas, and the heavens resounded as hammers met anvils; the sparks were as the stars in the sky.

Now Zeus sallied forth from Olympus, the acropolis of the world, and confronted the enemy face to face. Hurling lightning and thunderbolts in swift succession, he overwhelmed the enemy. The land blistered and blazed with fire and the waters boiled; steam and flame rose and filled the sky. It sounded as though Earth and Heaven had

collapsed into each other with a ghastly crash. It looked as though all the subterranean fires of the earth had boiled up from the depths and erupted on the surface of the earth.

The heat of Zeus' missiles enveloped the Titans, and the blazing lightning blinded them. Meanwhile, Aegicerus, half goat and half fish, the foster brother of Zeus from the Cretan cave, blew a trumpet blast on his magical conch-shell and sowed panic in the Titan ranks. And now the Hundred-handers played their part. As thick and fast as hailstones,

“Overcome, the Titans were bound and sent down to the gloom of Tartarus, from where nothing and no one can escape but through the pardon of the Ruler of All.”

huge boulders rained down on the Titans, darkening the sky and crushing even Cronus.

It is like a gigantic jar, with walls of impenetrable bronze, and its entrance is stopped with three layers of darkness and guarded by the Hundred-handers. It is the place of uttermost punishment, lying as far beneath the earth as the heaven is above it. Nine days it would take a blacksmith's anvil to fall from the edge of heaven to the earth, and a further nine days still to reach Tartarus. But easy though the descent may be, the return journey is

impossible.

And so the sons of Uranus mostly pass from our knowing, for no bard sings in praise of the defeated. The noble but misguided Atlas, for allying himself with his uncle Cronus, is forever compelled to shoulder the tremendous burden of the heavens. The female Titans—Leto, Memory, Tethys, Phoebe, Themis, Theia, and Rhea—were allowed to remain under the upper sky, honoring the will of loud-thundering Zeus. Leto bowed to his desire and on the sacred island of Delos bore him the twin deities Artemis and Apollo; Memory lay with Zeus and from her were delivered the divine Muses, nine immortal daughters, patronesses of culture and all the arts; and Themis gave birth to the three reverend Fates, whom the unfortunate castigate as blind hags.

Among the Muses who dwell on Mount Helicon, the province of Calliope is epic poetry; of Clio, history; of Urania, science; of Euterpe, the music of the pipes; of Melpomene, tragedy; of Thalia, comedy; of Terpsichore, lyric poetry and dance; of Erato, love poetry; and of Polymnia, sacred music.

Sweet Muses, delighting in song and dance, but they know also that true sadness may

inspire poets to their greatest work, and like all deities they are proud of their domain. The nine daughters of Pierus of Pella challenged the goddesses to a singing contest, and were turned into chattering magpies for their presumption when they lost. And once Thamyris of Thrace, the foremost musician of his age, desired to sleep with the Muses, all nine; and his eyes, one blue, one green, sparkled at the thought. The Muses agreed—if he could demonstrate his superiority to them as a musician. He lost the contest, and they took his eyes from him along with his talent. There is a lesson here for a

pious man, if he takes the time to ponder it. It's a fool who vies against the immortals.

Of the three Fates, Clotho sits with her spindle and whorl, twisting and spinning out the thread that is assigned for every creature from birth to death. At her left hand, her sister Lachesis, the dispassionate apportioner, marks the length of the thread. By their side stands the implacable Atropos, ready to cut the thread at the chosen point and bring a life to an end.





ZEUS
& HIS
BROT
HERS

H

“Great Zeus, the wielder of the thunderbolt and lightning, took for himself the heavens and the halls of Olympus, but treated his two brothers as equals.”

&

“Hades became lord of the underworld, while horse-loving Poseidon gained the surface of the earth, and especially its waters.”

P



Zeus had cleared the world of the most potent forces of disorder and chaos, a burden that would also fall on some of the heroes of later time, in proportion to their lesser abilities. By force of arms, he had confirmed his right to the high, golden throne of heavenly Olympus.

In order to ensure ongoing stability, every major domain of life on earth was given into the care of one of the gods, so that each had his or her unique province and none should be dissatisfied. Above, there spread the wide heavens; below, the misty underworld stretched down to Tartarus, the place of woe; between lay the surface of the earth. Great Zeus, the wielder of the thunderbolt and lightning, took for himself the heavens and the halls of Olympus, but treated his two brothers as equals. Dark Hades became lord of the underworld, while horse-loving Poseidon gained the surface of the earth, and especially its waters.

And so Zeus is the cloud-gatherer, the hurler of thunderbolts, the shining lord of sky and weather. Men pray to him for many things, for all the other gods obey his commands; but especially they pray for sufficient rain to impregnate the earth, so that their flocks fatten and their

crops multiply.

From high Olympus he looks down on the earth and ponders its fate. Effortlessly, he raises a man up or brings him low, makes the crooked straight and humbles the proud. The earth trembles at his nod. If he descends to earth, he comes as a flash of lightning, and the scorched ground where he alights from his chariot is sacred. His majesty is second to none, and he may also appear as a soaring eagle, aloof and magnificent. He speaks to mortal men through the rustling of his sacred oak at Dodona; the oracle at Olympia is his, and the four-yearly games there are sacred to him.

Men think of Poseidon as the trident-bearing lord of the sea, and they pray to him for safety, for they and their craft are puny, and he is mighty and of uncertain temper. But he is also the earth-shaker, the maker of earthquakes, when the very land seems to ripple like the sea and yearn to be water. And he delights in horses, for a free-running horse flows like a mighty wave, with muscles gleaming and tail streaming. All he has to do is stamp a hoof, or strike a blow with his trident, and sweet water gushes from solid rock. His wife is Amphitrite, who dwells in the booming of the sea and the whisper of

too. Poseidon drives over the sea in a chariot drawn by horses with brazen hoofs and golden manes, and at his approach the waves die down and the sea gives him passage.

What can be said about Hades? No living man has ever beheld his face, and the dead do not return from his mirthless domain. He is the invincible one, for death awaits all; with his staff, he drives all in their time into the echoing vaults of his palace. No one knows for sure where the entrance is to his subterranean realm. Some say that it is in the far west, where the sun goes down to darkness; others that certain caves or chasms conceal an entrance.

Through the gloom of his underworld realm flit the feeble remnants of men of old, pale spirits, gibbering and forlorn, and dust and mist is all their food; and the River Styx, never to be re-crossed, surrounds the domain of Hades, as Ocean surrounds the continents of the earth and the Milky Way surrounds the heavens.

Charon the ferryman, dreaded by all, transports the dead across the river to their eternal home, if they bring the coin to pay him. Otherwise, they remain as pale ghosts, whimpering feebly on the banks of the

river and imploring all-comers for a proper burial; but those who come are only the dead themselves, and can help no more.

This is the doom that awaits us, except for the few, righteous or unrighteous. Those whose brief dances have pleased the gods are allowed to dwell forever on the Isles of the Blessed, or in the Elysian Fields, where temperate breezes gently stir meadow flowers, nurtured by sweet springs and showers. But warmongers and tyrants, murderers and rapists, perpetrators of all foul and abnormal crimes against the gods or hospitality or parents, are cast into the depths of Tartarus and suffer endless torment. Hades is the lord of the dead, but his lady Persephone shares his powers, and the souls of the dead are judged by three stern judges: the two wise sons of Europa by Zeus, Minos and Rhadamanthys of Crete, and Aeacus, son of Zeus and Aegina. And Hades is also Pluto, the giver of wealth, because all crops arise out of the under-earth, and he bears rich minerals deep in his secret places.

The regime of Zeus is marked by order. Essentially, the world is stable: goats are not born to men or cows, but



where it should day by day; the seasons follow in an orderly fashion. This was the change that marked the end of the era of Cronus and the beginning of our familiar world. And it was the job of many of the heroes to tame the world.

The will of Zeus is that the world should continue as a stable entity. Just as no single one of the natural elements of earth, water, fire, and air prevails, so the power of one deity cannot usurp pride of place. Each of the gods is, on his or her own, invincible. If Aphrodite prevailed, the

world would be nothing but copulating couples; if Ares prevailed, the madness of war would be all that we know. The cloud-gatherer has no need to move from his throne. He rules by wisdom, but he brooks no disagreement. Even his wife Hera, when she displeased him, had her hands bound with golden chains, and was suspended from heaven on a rope, with anvils attached to her feet. The strength of Zeus is such that it surpasses that of all the other gods put together, and they dare not oppose his will, even if they desired it.

“The gods that dwell with Zeus on high Olympus are these: Aphrodite, primordial deity; Zeus’ sister-wife Hera, and his other sisters, Demeter and Hestia; and the children of Zeus: Athena, Ares, Hephaestus, the twins Apollo and Artemis, Hermes, and Dionysus. These are the immortal gods who dwell on Olympus, and ichor flows in their veins. They are many, but their purpose is one: to carry out the will of the Father of All.”

HERA &
MARR
IAGE



SISTER & WIFE

Sister-wife of lord Zeus, white-armed Hera preserves the sanctity of marriage and guards the keys of wedlock. Unlike him, she has no time for the frivolity of extramarital affairs. She is held in respect as the golden-throned queen of heaven, and she is called cow-eyed, for she looks on the world with stately and serene regality; all mortal queens should aspire to be like her. She it is to whom women pray for a good marriage, and for healthy offspring, Hera is the goddess of childbirth.

Though she sleeps with her husband—and it is said that meadows bloom beneath them as they make love—she renews her virginity each year by bathing in a spring at Nauplia. She is virgin, wife, and matron, and all womanly life is hers.

When Heracles was born, Zeus brought him to Hera to suckle, hoping thereby to make his favored son immortal. But the strapping babe bit her nipple, and in shock Hera pushed him away. The divine milk spraying from her breasts formed the Milky Way, though

some fell to earth and from the rich drops sprouted beautiful purewhite lilies.

Though Hera is known to be the faithful consort of the Ruler of All, yet the tale is told of Ixion, king of wide lands in Thessaly, who fell prey to his passion for the fair queen of heaven when he came to the hallowed halls of Olympus, invited guest of Zeus himself. For Zeus had offered to purify Ixion after he had killed his father-in-law. Ixion sought to betray his host, another heinous crime, but Zeus was not caught unawares, and fashioned a replica of his wife from mist. This cloud, Nephele, lay with Ixion, who believed he made love to Hera.

But disaster comes to all who seek to deceive the gods. For his transgression, for desiring golden-sandaled Hera, though he lay not with her in truth, Zeus had him lashed to a fiery wheel, which revolves through the universe for eternity.





DEMETER & THE CROPS

D

“Demeter is the goddess of cereal crops—of lovely wheat and barley, oats and rye.”

Without her blessing, mortal men face sure starvation, for her fare is staple in every culture. She watches over the plowing and the sowing, the reaping and the threshing, and the storage of crops. She is every ear of grain on every stem that has ever grown. She is the foundation of law and morality, for without food in their bellies men turn to crime.

“Now, Demeter had by Zeus a daughter, and she loved Persephone with all her heart. But Zeus promised the maiden goddess to his brother Hades, dark lord of the underworld.”

One day, Persephone was out gathering flowers with her friends, the Ocean nymphs, in the garden of the gods. And Gaia, the Earth, put forth a new flower, never before seen, of especial beauty, the narcissus; and the sweetness of its fragrance made the earth smile and the seas laugh aloud.

Persephone, straying from her friends, found the precious flower. But when she reached out her hand for the pale bloom, the earth split open and Hades emerged on his chariot and snatched her away. The maiden’s cries to her father fell on deaf ears. No one heard her, none of the gods, save Hecate in her distant cave, conjuring spirits. And in a moment Persephone’s screams of terror faded as Hades bore her down, down into the depths of the underworld—but a last, faint cry came to the ears of her mother, borne by a kindly wind.



Demeter lit two torches in the fires of Etna, and for nine days she roamed the broad earth over hill and dale, denying herself sleep and rest, but nowhere was her daughter to be found. All she found was a bunch of dried narcissus blossoms lying on the healed earth. Poseidon took advantage of her distress to press his suit, and when Demeter changed herself into a mare to avoid his attentions, he became a stallion and had his way with her. And in due course of time she gave birth to a wonderful stallion called Arion, and a daughter whose name is known only to the initiated.

On the tenth day somber Hecate came and told her what little she knew—that her daughter had been abducted. Together they went to Helios, the sun-god, who sees all, and he explained that it was the will of Zeus that Persephone should be the bride of his brother Hades, and consoled her with the thought that Zeus' equal was no mean husband for her daughter.

But Demeter was not to be consoled, nor was she of a mind to give up. She wanted nothing now to do with the gods of Olympus, who had betrayed her and her daughter. She disguised herself as a mortal and roamed over the earth ceaselessly, in grief and

despair. Only Hesperus, the evening star, could persuade her to quench her parched throat with a little water. For mother and daughter are inseparable, and are ever worshipped together.

At last she came to Eleusis, where Celeus was king, and seated herself by the Maiden's Well in the shade of an olive tree. There came to the well to collect water the daughters of Celeus, and they addressed her with the respect due to her venerable years. For Demeter had disguised herself as an elderly woman named Doso, a refugee from pirates. And in this matronly guise, she begged for work.

Lovely Callidice answered her: "Our mother Metaneira has but lately borne a son. No one in this town would turn you away, for your demeanor is stately and godlike, but let me ask her. She would appreciate help in rearing our brother Demophoön." When the girls returned from the well, Metaneira was delighted and told them to bring Doso back home. And the goddess followed them, her heart grieving and her head veiled. But when she stood in the doorway, Metaneira looked up and for a moment saw her as a goddess, only to dismiss the vision.

The weeks and months

passed, and in the goddess's tender care the babe grew bonny and blithe. For by day Demeter anointed him with divine ambrosia, and at night she buried him in the embers of the fire, for she knew how to make him immortal. Her heart was filled with the joy of tending to the boy, though she yearned ceaselessly for Persephone.

But one night Metaneira saw Demeter burying her son in the coals and screamed out loud for sheer terror. In fury, Demeter snatched the boy from the fire and cast him aside. "Fools! Ignorant mortals!" she cried, revealing herself in her godhood. "I would have made your son deathless, but now he shall be no more blessed than others, except that he has been nursed by a goddess. For I am Demeter, and all worship me." And she commanded the people of Eleusis to build her a temple, where her mysteries would be celebrated for all time.

But Demeter mourned her missing daughter with fresh tears, and devised a terrible punishment for gods and men. Crops were stillborn in the barren soil, or, if they appeared at all, it was only to wither with blight. First their cattle died, their sheep and goats, and then human beings themselves were starving to death.

Moreover, the gods were not receiving their due in sacrifices, for there was nothing for men to give.

This was intolerable to Zeus, and he sent many-hued Iris, the rainbow messenger of the gods, arcing down to where Demeter sat in Eleusis. "Come back!" implored Iris. "Let Zeus the cloud-gatherer make you welcome once more in the high halls of Olympus!" But Demeter hardened her heart and shut her ears. She vowed that never again would she tread the paths of fragrant Olympus unless she could do so with her daughter at her side.

Taking matters in hand, Zeus sent swift-darting Hermes to escort Persephone out of the underworld and into the light of day—to rejoin her mother. "Come with me," he said, "or all mortal men will perish, whose lives are but the shadow of a dream, and the gods will have no one to honor them."

Hades understood, and turned to his bride, who was seated beside him, as befits the queen of the underworld; but still in her heart she pined for her mother. "Go, my dear!" he said. "Console your sorrowing mother. And when you return, you shall have high honor as my wife." But he did not entirely trust her to return of her own accord, and

he gave her the sweet seed of a pomegranate to eat, the forbidden food of the dead, so that she was bound to come back, and not to dwell forever on Olympus with her dark-cloaked mother.

Hades loaned Hermes his own chariot, and Hermes sped with Persephone by his side to Eleusis. The reunion of mother and daughter was as joyful and tearful as may be imagined—but suddenly Demeter pulled out of their embrace, sensing a trick. “Tell me, daughter,” she asked, “did you eat anything while you were there in the underworld? If you did not, you will be free to dwell with me and the immortal gods forever on Olympus. If you ate even the slightest morsel, you are bound to return, to live as Hades’ bride in the underworld for a third of every year; for so the Fates have ordained it. And for that time, the soil shall be barren in its mourning.”

So it is. Demeter returned to Olympus and the fields began once more to produce their rich harvests. And Triptolemus, the son of Celeus, received from her the gift of agriculture, and became her missionary. On a chariot drawn by dragons, he traveled the earth, teaching men how to cultivate the soil. But the time comes every year when Persephone goes back to

dread Hades and takes her seat beside him as his bride, with somber Hecate as her handmaid. On earth, the fruits begin to fade and the leaves of the trees to fall; but when she returns to the light of Olympus and the upper world, the flowers bloom afresh and roots spread deep and wide in the fertile soil.

So Demeter has the respect of the gods who live on Olympus, and dwells there forever in high honor. Once she took a human lover, Iasion, in a thrice-plowed furrow, but hard-hearted Zeus blasted the man with his thunderbolt for his boldness. And she too was once angry with a mortal man and punished him.

Erysichthon, grandson of Poseidon, took twenty of his men, full giants in size, to cut down trees to make a banqueting hall, and chose trees from a grove beloved of the goddess. When the tree nymphs cried out loud in their pain, she appeared to him as her own priestess and tried to dissuade him, but he rashly threatened her with an ax. “Away!” he cried. “Or I fix my keen blade in your flesh!” For his greed and impiety she cursed him with insatiable and relentless hunger.





APHRODITE & BEAUTY

LOVE



“Sing of Aphrodite, all you Muses!
Sing of her pale loveliness, that no
man can resist!”

“Sing of the fair-crowned, laughter-
loving goddess, born in the foam
off Cyprus, wife of Hephaestus and
lover of grim Ares!”

“For her the seas grow calm,
the meadows put forth flowers and
butterflies, the storms abate. For her
gardens bloom.”



have sworn it had merely paused for a moment before continuing on its way. And Pygmalion fell in love with his creation, kissed it and caressed it gently for fear of bruising its pale loveliness, and called it Galatea. He brought it gifts and love tokens, and dressed it in the finest clothes and jewelry.

It was the day of Aphrodite's festival, and everyone turned out for the procession.

Pygmalion accompanied his offering at the altar of the goddess with a prayer, which he dared not utter aloud. But kindly Aphrodite understood his need and the flame flared bright on her altar. When Pygmalion returned home, he greeted his statue with a kiss—and it seemed to him that she was warmer, softer than before. Cautiously, but with rising anticipation, he looked into her face and saw beautiful eyes shining back at him with equal measures of love and astonishment. He touched her breasts, caressed her body. She was alive! His unspoken prayer had been answered! Praise be to the goddess!

The grandson of Pygmalion was Cinyras, and he in his turn had a daughter called Myrrha. Though courted by many for her beauty, Aphrodite inflamed Myrrha with an unholy passion for her father, for her mother had boasted that her

daughter was more fair than the goddess. Myrrha lay awake night after night, wrestling with this demon, consumed by her ungodly passion. Eventually, with the help of a servant, she consummated her love in the secret spaces of dark night. When Cinyras found out that he had been sleeping with his own daughter, he was terrified and filled with anger. To hate one's father is a lesser crime than to love him like this. As she fled from his wrath, Myrrha prayed to the gods for deliverance, and was turned into the myrrh tree, forever shedding bitter tears.

But Myrrha was pregnant and the child continued to grow inside the tree, until his day came. The baby boy was born, and tended by nymphs, and his name was Adonis.

The child, so unlawfully begotten, was so lovely that Aphrodite wanted to keep him for herself, and she hid him in a chest, and gave him to Persephone for safekeeping. But Persephone peeked inside the chest, and wanted the child for herself. The cries of the quarreling goddesses came to the ears of Zeus on Olympus, and he decreed that the boy would spend a third of the year with each of the two goddesses, and a third of the year wherever and with whomsoever he chose. And

fair Adonis chose to stay with Aphrodite for that third of the year as well.

Adonis grew up to be the ideal of young masculinity, and Aphrodite's heart was pierced. Love shook her mind like a storm wind falling on tall trees. She was so much in love that she shunned the lofty halls of Olympus, and lingered no more in the shade on soft pillows, but joined her lover every day in his hunting, until her fair skin was darkened and scratched.

But one day, when Aphrodite was not with him, Adonis was fatally gored by a wild boar, the most savage and unpredictable of the huntsman's quarry. Even the best have been known to fail, and this boar was sent by Ares, Aphrodite's jealous lover. Aloft in her chariot, trim-ankled Aphrodite heard the youth's dying groans and raced down, only to find him a corpse. With a prayer to Persephone, she sprinkled nectar in a death rite on the boy's spilled blood, and a delicate flower sprang up. Like Adonis, the anemone clings poorly to life and spreads its frail beauty for but a brief spell. And ever after women mourn in the name of Adonis the uncertain swiftness of life's passing.

Adonis was not the first mortal man to receive the fair goddess's love, but his

wretched predecessor had been a puppet manipulated by divine intrigues. Zeus wanted to teach sly Aphrodite a lesson. She had proved very expert at causing other gods to fall for humans, but she had always stood apart from such unions herself. So the lord of gods and men showered handsome Anchises, who tended cattle in the hills above Troy, with the essence of virility. So smitten was the golden-haired goddess that she would let nothing stand in the way of their love.

She returned straight away to Cypriot Paphos, to her great temple, adorned with star and crescent moon, and there the Graces bathed her and anointed her with divinely perfumed oil of ambrosia, heavenly in its sweetness. But deep in her aching heart she knew that Anchises was a mortal, due to die.

That night she found her beloved alone in the hills. She appeared to him in the form of a ripe young virgin, and the moonlight silvered the swell of her breasts. Anchises met the passionate longing in her gaze; he loosened her willing girdle and, all unknowing, made love to a goddess. When he awoke, Aphrodite showed herself to him in her true form, and he was afraid and cast down his eyes. He knew that those who sleep with goddesses lose their

potency ever after. But she said: "Fear not! For the beds of the gods are not unproductive, and I shall bear for you a son, Aeneas. He shall be raised in the mountains by nymphs, and his children's children will rule the earth!" And so it came to pass. Aeneas escaped from the sack of Troy, bearing his father on his back, and, after many adventures, founded the seven-hilled city of Rome. But Anchises boasted of his night with Aphrodite, and was crippled for his arrogance.

Without Aphrodite, the weaver of snares, Paris would never have won fair Helen, whose face launched a thousand ships. Without Aphrodite, Hippomenes would never have loosened the girdle of majestic Atalanta. The stately daughter of Schoeneus of Boeotia delighted in nothing so much as hunting. She let all her suitors know that she would wed only the one who could beat her in a crosscountry race. She was fair of face and slender of body, so her suitors were many, but none could defeat her, and for all the price of defeat was death. Often she would give the hapless man a head start, and then run after him and kill him when she caught up; for they ran bearing shield and sword. It was not that she hated men, but an oracle

had warned her to beware of marriage.

But Hippomenes, son of Megareus, loved the tall maiden and was determined to wed her. He brought with him three golden apples, imbued by Aphrodite with irresistible charm. When he and Atalanta raced, he rolled one apple in front of her and, tempted, she picked it up. This delayed her, but soon she caught Hippomenes up again—and he rolled the second apple. And then the third was enough to allow him to reach the finishing line before her. True to her vow, she happily married Hippomenes, but her foolish husband forgot to thank Aphrodite for the gift of the apples. In punishment, the slender-ankled goddess had the two lovers comport themselves with passionate indiscretion in the shrine of the Mother of All, who turned them for their sin into sexless lions to draw her chariot. So the oracle was true that told Atalanta to beware of marriage. By such stories as these we may come to some little understanding of the power and nature of the gods.

By Hermes, Aphrodite bore Hermaphroditus. One day, the youth was wandering in the hills of Caria when he came across a beautiful pool, limpid and fresh. It was the

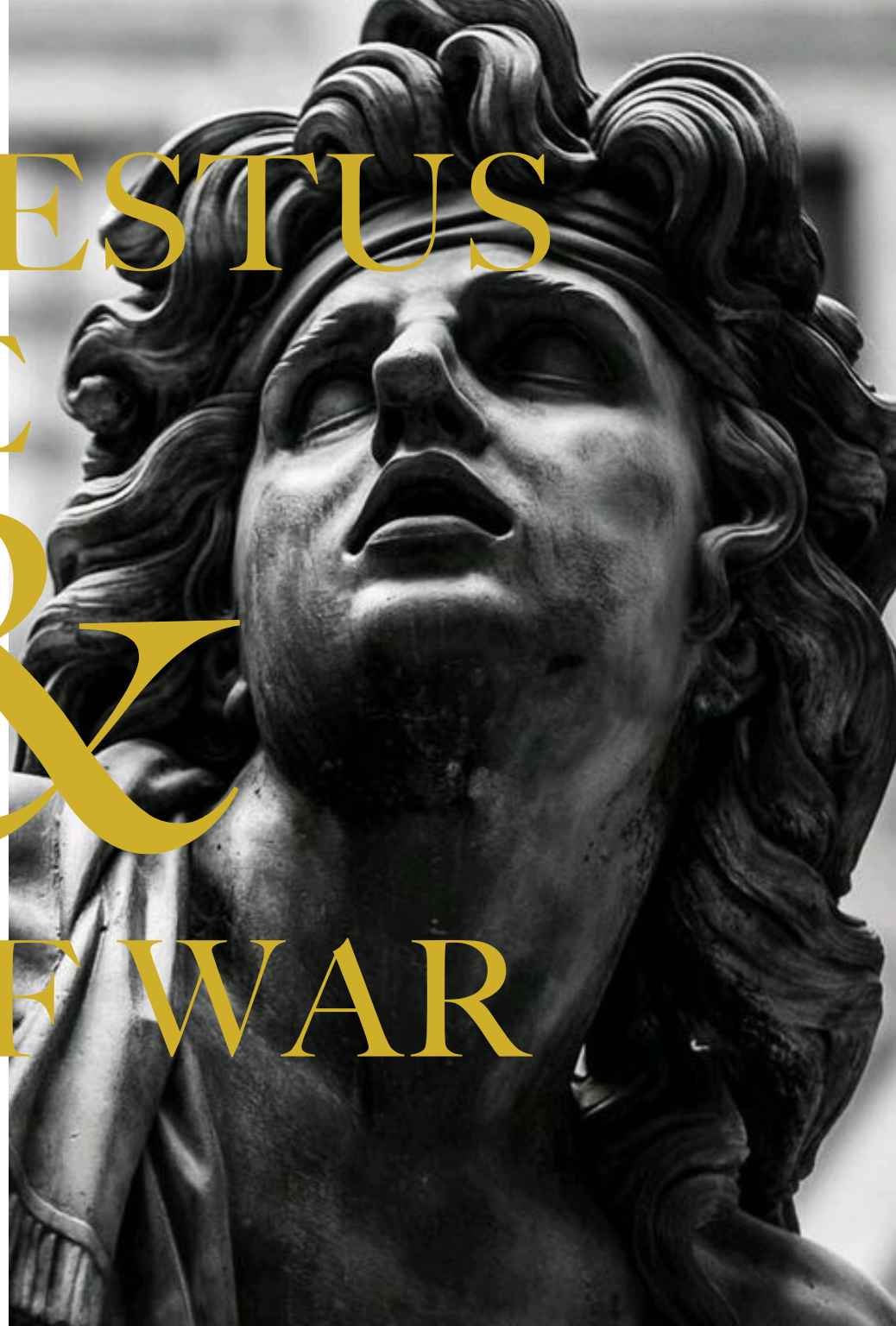
home of the nymph Salmacis, and she was unable to resist her desire for the handsome lad. When he undressed and entered the pool to bathe, she stripped off her clothes and joined him. The virgin boy was frightened and tried to fight her off, but Salmacis clung to him and entwined herself around him. "You shall never escape me!" she cried. "May the gods hear my prayer: let us never be separated!" From then on they became as one being, but with both male and female attributes. In his distress Hermaphroditus cried out to his parents, that they should curse the pool. And ever thereafter, any man who steps into the pool emerges less than a man.

By Dionysus Aphrodite bore Priapus, the lecherous god of gardens. With his gnome-like figure and enormous, swollen phallus, he scares all evil from the gardens of those who worship and pray to him, and his curses fall on those who presume to trespass on ground that is under his protection. He it was who taught infant Ares first to dance, and only then to make war.

HEPHAESTUS
OF FIRE

&

ARES OF WAR



“Hephaestus is the god of fire, an outsider, unkempt and accustomed to mockery.”

He works in his forges underground while the other gods are idle, as if he were of another caste. Driven to the margins by his deformity and his work, he is the blacksmith magician, encrusted with soot and dirt from his furnace, but creating objects of extraordinary beauty and utility out of dull rock. Magicians must always work on the margins, or lose their objectivity.

Many are the marvelous and intricate devices made by the hands of Hephaestus, and all artisans, but especially metal-workers, honor him in their hearts. He is attended in his workshop by the Cyclopes, the first forgers of Zeus' thunderbolt, but also by golden automata, made by Hephaestus himself. He made the gods' homes, Zeus' aegis with its hundred golden tassels, greaves for Heracles, and a full set of armor for Achilles.

Hunched from birth, he disgusted his mother Hera, who flung him off high Olympus into the depths of the moaning sea, and the

twisting of his ankle as she whirled the baby around lamed him forever. Thetis reared him in her cave on the shores of Ocean, and he made for her jewelry of surpassing fineness. But he was angry with his mother, and wanted to humiliate her as she had humiliated him.

He wrought for her a beautiful golden throne, of palpable majesty, and sent it to her Olympian palace as a present, a token of peace between them. All unwitting, Hera delighted in the ornate throne—but as soon as she sat in it, it held her fast and rose high into the air.

The enraged goddess, the embarrassed queen of gods and men, sent Ares to bring Hephaestus back to high Olympus and free her. Ares sped to Ocean on a chariot of fire, but Hephaestus beat him off with his torches, shouting in his pain and grief that he had no mother. But Dionysus was the friend of Hephaestus, and he went to visit him in his volcanic forge, and plied him with cup after cup of the finest wine, sufficient even for a god. The wine loosened Hephaestus' limbs and freed his caged anger. Dionysus escorted the drunken deity back to Olympus, slumped astride a mule, and he agreed to release his mother, if his

FIRE

father would grant him a favor.

Once the throne had been rendered harmless, Hephaestus begged the almighty son of Cronus to allow him to make stern Athena his bed-partner. Zeus smiled in pity and gave him permission to try.

Though lame and ugly, Hephaestus approached her with brash confidence, but she spurned him, and he spilled his seed upon the ground. In later

years, from the impregnated soil arose Erichthonius, earth-born king of Athens.

But Hephaestus, having failed with Athena, asked instead, as his reward for freeing cow-eyed Hera, that Aphrodite herself might become his wife; and great Zeus granted his wish, for she was surely not a sworn virgin. But the marriage was neither of Aphrodite's choosing nor to



When men meet in hand-to-hand combat, as they frequently do in this Age of Iron, there is Ares. His domain is not strategy, not distance killing, but the frenzy, the rage, the screaming madness born of the stark immediacy of killing or being killed, when you can smell the breath and salt sweat of your adversary.

“Ares is the madness, and he is the most feared and hated of the gods, for there is no one and nothing, save only Father Zeus, who can control his lawlessness.”

At the same time there is no god to match him for virility, for only men of courage can be possessed by him, while others shrink and flee. Goldenhelmeted, bronze-armored, strong-fisted Ares launches himself eagerly at every battlefield, and if he is

seen by mortal men, it is as a dark storm hovering over the combatants, and he moves with the muscular menace of a wild boar. He is the war whoop, and his sons are Fear and Terror, and goat-footed Pan rides by his side to panic those who are destined to be the losers. At Ares' shout the mountains tremble, the sky darkens, and all creatures run for cover.

Now, Ares, born of Hera, fathered heroic warriors on a number of mortal women, but his natural partner is and always was Aphrodite. As the Magnesian stone attracts iron, so the two of them are drawn to each other. And though Aphrodite was given by Zeus to Hephaestus, Ares scorned her marriage and seduced the fair goddess, though she was not unwilling. None knew of their affair, but in time they were seen by Helios, the sun-god, who told lame Hephaestus. In his wrath, the cuckolded god went straight to his workshop, and made a net of gossamer strands, so fine that they were invisible even to immortal eyes, and so

strong that not even the god of war could break them in his rage. It was as though the net were made out of the strength of non-things: the stillness of dawn, the sinews of the winds, the potential of an acorn, the sound of a bluebell. And he cunningly fastened the web-like trap to Aphrodite's bed.

Then Hephaestus took his leave of lofty Olympus and pretended to go to the island of Lemnos, his beloved retreat. Ares wasted no time. As soon as he saw the blacksmith god limp away, he went straight to Aphrodite and found the goddess bedecked with flowers. The lovers retired without delay to the bed chamber, anticipating joy; but when they sank down upon the cushions and turned to each other, Hephaestus' magic net closed around them and pinned Hephaestus returned on cue and found the lovers lying there, and the sight was as a sword in his heart. He cried out in his pain and bitter anger: “Father Zeus, and all you gods! Come and see how Aphrodite despises me for my lameness and incapacity, and takes as her lover Ares, just because he is a fine figure of a god. But at least I have my revenge. I shall keep the two of them trapped there, until Father Zeus has returned to me all the gifts I gave him as

the bride-price of Aphrodite. He owes me: it's because of him that I've become lame and despised.”

While the goddesses stayed away out of modesty, all the gods ran up to see the sight, and roared with laughter at the plight of the lovers. Seeing Aphrodite lying naked there, they gazed lustfully on her, and bold Hermes declared that it would be worth the netted humiliation to spend time in bed with the beautiful goddess of love. But Poseidon begged Hephaestus to free them, and promised that he would be paid all that he felt was due.

“Hephaestus freed the lovers, and Ares fled in shame to Thrace, while Aphrodite retired to her temple at Paphos, where the Graces attended her and restored her wounded pride.”

WAR

ATHENA & WISDOM



WAR

&

WISDOM

“Sing now, Muse, of keen-eyed Athena, whom Metis bore for Zeus. But when Metis was close to her time, Zeus swallowed her, anxious lest a son be born mightier than him, who would take his place and rule over gods and men. For even the gods cannot always turn aside Fate.”

“But divine Athena was compelled to her birth, and in her great need sought a channel out of her father. Every avenue she explored, until she came to his head. In the extremity of his labor Zeus cried out for relief, and the halls of Olympus trembled at the sound.”

Even in the din-filled depths of his forge, Hephaestus heard the cries and hobbled as fast as he could to where Zeus sat on his throne, holding his head with his hands. Without hesitation, he boldly raised his ax and split open the head of Zeus, the mighty lord of gods and men, and out sprang Athena, fully formed and fully clad in golden armor, her gray eyes flashing.

Lofty Olympus shuddered in fear at the power of the goddess, and the earth shrieked. Waves billowed on

the sea and then fell into a dead calm, and Helios the sun-god stopped his chariot for a timeless moment in the sky, until new-born Athena unstrapped her armor, and Fear slunk out of the room.

Her appearance is that of a fair and stately woman in the prime of life, but she was born of her father, and her mind is wholly her father's; her masculine mind and her martial prowess keep her apart from the other goddesses. She has a rare beauty, but it trumpets her untouchability, and no man or



god dares to approach her, as she has sworn to virginity.

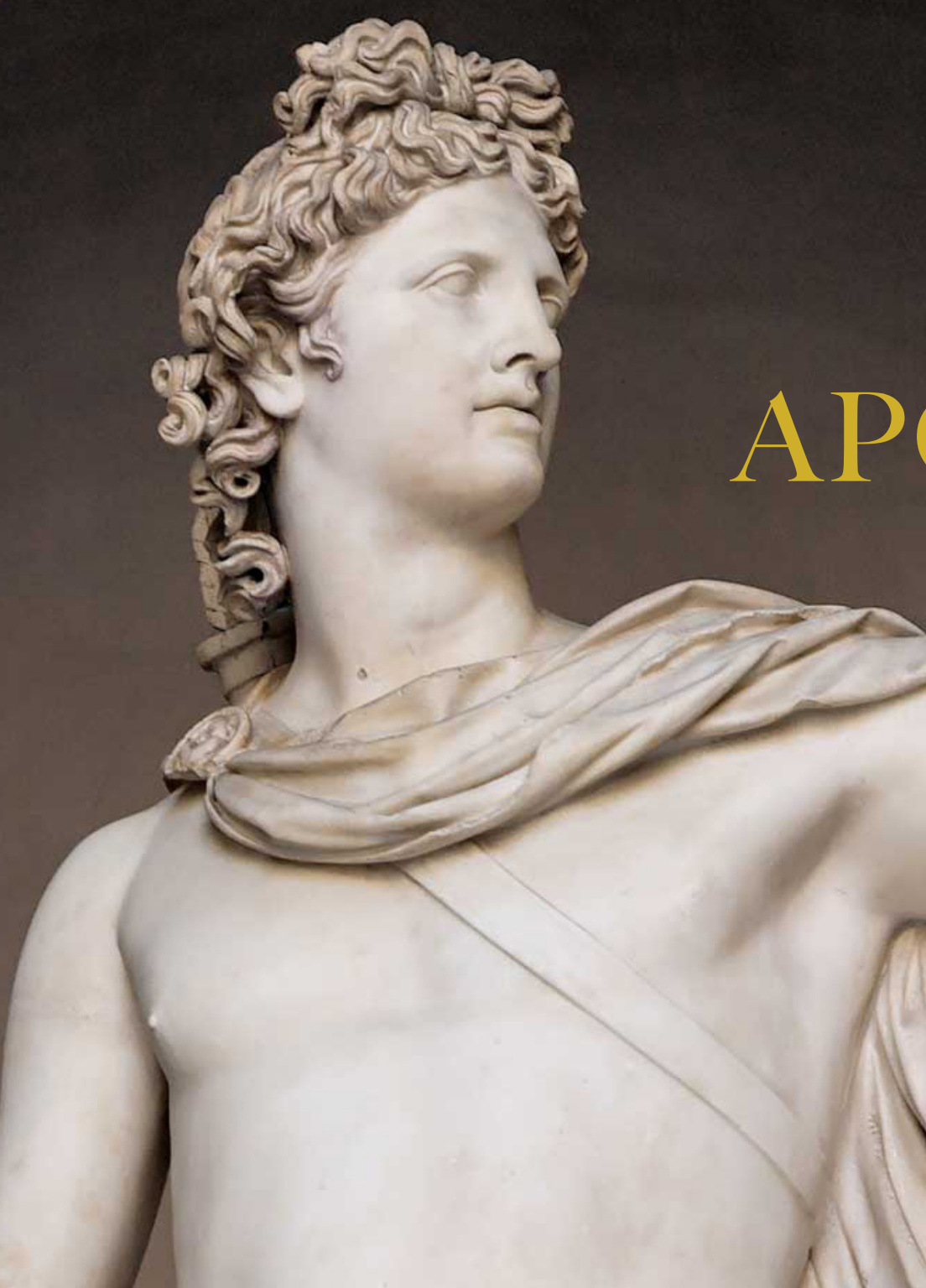
“Athena was the first teacher of all the household crafts that form the basis of society.”

She made the first ship and wagon, the first plow and loom. Perfection in craft is also hers, and so she is both the ever-near protector of the household and the owl-eyed cities; if they are threatened, she will surely respond. She fights not with passionate rage, like Ares, but with skill and prudence; he loves danger, but she finds ways to make danger safe. She is the strategist, the leader of hosts, and Ares carries out her will. Victory and glory she holds in her hands. And Zeus honored his beloved daughter with the gift of his aegis, for it may be cast as protection over a whole city. It is a mighty weapon, as well as a shield, for the sound of the aegis, shaken over a battlefield, terrifies all that hear it.

There was a time when Arachne of Colophon won fame throughout Lydia for her spinning and weaving, though she was of humble birth. Even the nymphs of the mountains and winding rivers traveled far to see her handiwork, or

just to see her hands at work. And when they compared her to Athena, Arachne said: “Let her compete with me if she wants.” Athena came to her in the guise of an old woman and said: “You would do well to heed my advice, girl. Seek only to surpass other mortals in your craft, but leave first place for the goddess. Pray for forgiveness for your rash words.” But Arachne’s response was full of scorn. “Woman, old age has stripped you of your wits!” she cried. “See how the goddess refuses my challenge.” “No!” cried Athena, casting off her disguise. “She is here!”

The two set about their embroidery. The theme of Athena’s work was her own victory over Poseidon in the contest for patronage of Athens, and she embellished the border with examples of the folly of mortals who challenge the gods. But Arachne showed the gods as seducers and deceivers of mortal women, and her work was perfect. Even Athena could find no fault with it, and in her pride and anger the dread goddess forced the girl to suicide. But as the maiden was gasping out her last breath in the stranglehold of the noose, Athena let her live, but as a spider, so that she could hang and spin forever.



APOLLO OF
THE
SUN

SUN

maidens serve as Apollo's Sibyls. But though Apollo speaks through the mouths of maidens elsewhere as well, he declares the law most clearly from Delphi, and the heavens there are filled with light that gleams on the precipices of the Shining Rocks and sparkles on the crystal waters of the sacred spring. For he is the source of the light of law, education, and civilization. The lyre is his, and his minstrels play sweet music that soothes the savage breast; for poetry, as we bards know well, is the sister of prophecy.

“Rich in gold is Apollo, with golden lyre and golden bow, golden locks and golden tunic.”

But he is vast, a god who is great enough to contain multitudes. He is the far-shooter, for he must stand apart to do his work, and as well as the lyre, he lays claim to the bow. Sweet music is his, but also the paeon—le Paian—sung in triumph or as a war-cry. He is the god who both spreads the miasma of sickness and disperses it. He is gentle and violent, fair of face and dark of brow, healer and destroyer. Praise the god in his greatness! May he grant us only good and avert all evil

in our days! Whoever knows Apollo is raised to greatness; whoever does not know him is bound to be of lowly estate.

Now, Athena, stately goddess, invented the pipes to imitate the sweet, keening sound of the dirge the Gorgons made to mourn Medusa's death. She delighted in the reedy tone, stepping lightly in time. But as she was playing the pipes one day, she caught sight of her reflection in a pond, and hated the way she was disfigured by the straps that bound the pipes to her face. Away she hurled the loathed instrument, and it flew to Phrygia. There it was picked up by a Satyr, Marsyas, who learned to play so sweetly that the clouds wept with sadness at the plaintive melody.

In pride at his accomplishment, Marsyas challenged Apollo to a contest, pipes against lyre. “So be it,” agreed golden-haired Apollo, “and let the winner do whatever he likes with the loser!” Marsyas spent some time in contemplation, listening to the source of sound, and when he played it was as if he had heard the secret song of the world. Apollo himself, with his lyre, could do no better—but he was a god, and tolerated no such insult as Marsyas' challenge. He flayed all the skin from Marsyas' body,

and the Satyr's tears formed the river that still bears his name.

Many are the tales that are told of Apollo. Ever fair and ever young, he has loved and been loved by many a maiden and youth. He loved Daphne, fair nymph, daughter of the river Peneus. His passion for her was as none before or since, for he had sneered at the arrows of Eros, saying that his aim was more true; in response the god of love simply loosed a single barb at the golden god. Even he, the healer, had no cure for this sickness. But Daphne had sworn to remain a virgin, and repulsed his advances. She was loved also by Leucippus, the son of Oenomaus, who dressed as a woman to join her throng and be close to her. So Apollo, in his jealousy, put it into Daphne's head to bathe in the river. Poor Leucippus! He desired to see her nudity, but not that she should see his. When he refused to undress and swim with the other girls, his deceit was revealed, and in their outrage Daphne and her friends pulled him into the river and drowned him. But Apollo was not to be put off, and he pursued her as a hunter pursues a hare, though she ran from him as a lamb flees a wolf. Away she sprinted, but the god sped close on



her heels. In desperation she prayed to her father for release from her beauty, so that she should suffer wrong no more. Peneus had no quarrel with Apollo, but he honored his daughter's vow of chastity, and in an instant her prayer was answered. Even as she was running her limbs stiffened and her toes sought the darkness of the earth. There, in her place, stood a laurel tree. But Apollo loved her still, and made the laurel his sacred tree. Even now the winners at the Pythian games of Delphi receive no material reward but a garland of berried laurel—and the

blessing of the god.

Apollo also loved Cassandra, princess of Troy, and when she agreed to give herself to him, he rewarded her with the gift of prophecy. But then she insulted the god by changing her mind. Apollo asked her for one last kiss, and when she turned her face up to him he spat a curse into her mouth. Ever thereafter she was doomed to prophesy in vain, for no one believed a word she said and all took her for a madwoman.

Apollo loved Hyacinthus of Sparta too, and it was their pleasure to anoint themselves

with olive oil and test each other's athletic prowess. Once Apollo took into his hands the weighty discus and hurled it true and far. Hyacinthus in his joy ran after the discus, laughing, to pick it up and take his turn at the fair sport. But the Spartan prince had spurned the advances of Zephyrus, the west wind, and in his anger Zephyrus turned the discus back. It struck Hyacinthus full in the face, and he died cradled in Apollo's arms.

Two exalted sons were born to Apollo: the healer Asclepius, and the minstrel Orpheus.

Coronis was loved by Apollo, and was pregnant with their son Asclepius; but the white raven, Apollo's bird, saw her lying with another, and told his master. Quick-tempered Apollo seized his bow and shot her dead. But he could not bear that his son should die as well, and even as Coronis lay on the pyre, the mighty god snatched his son out of the flames and his mother's womb, and brought him to the cave of the Centaur Cheiron, for him to raise the boy. But he changed for evermore the raven's color from white to black, a bitter reward for the bearer of

bitter tidings.

Meanwhile, Asclepius grew up to bear his father's gifts as a healer, and even to surpass them, for the time came when the lady Artemis asked him to heal her follower Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, though he was dead. Peerless Asclepius exerted all his skill and at last the young man breathed again—but as a mortal Asclepius had breathed his last, for Zeus blasted him with a thunderbolt for violating the laws of nature. But Asclepius was taken into the heavens, and is the patron god of medicine, beloved by many for his healing power.

Apollo, however, was furious at the killing of his son, and in revenge his swift arrows soon found the hearts of the three Cyclopes, Hephaestus' assistants, makers of Zeus' thunderbolt. But the will of Zeus is not to be scorned, and the son of Cronus, the cloud-gatherer, was ready to hurl Apollo down to Tartarus, to be imprisoned there forever. But kindly Leto intervened, and instead Apollo was sentenced to serve for one year under Admetus, the king of Thessalian Pherae.

Now, Admetus had but a short time to live, and Apollo took pity on his master and begged the Fates to stay his death. The Fates agreed—

provided that someone could be found to take Admetus' place. No one was willing, save only loyal Alcestis, his wife, and Admetus accepted her sacrifice. But Heracles wrestled Death himself for the life of fair Alcestis, and won, and restored her to her husband.

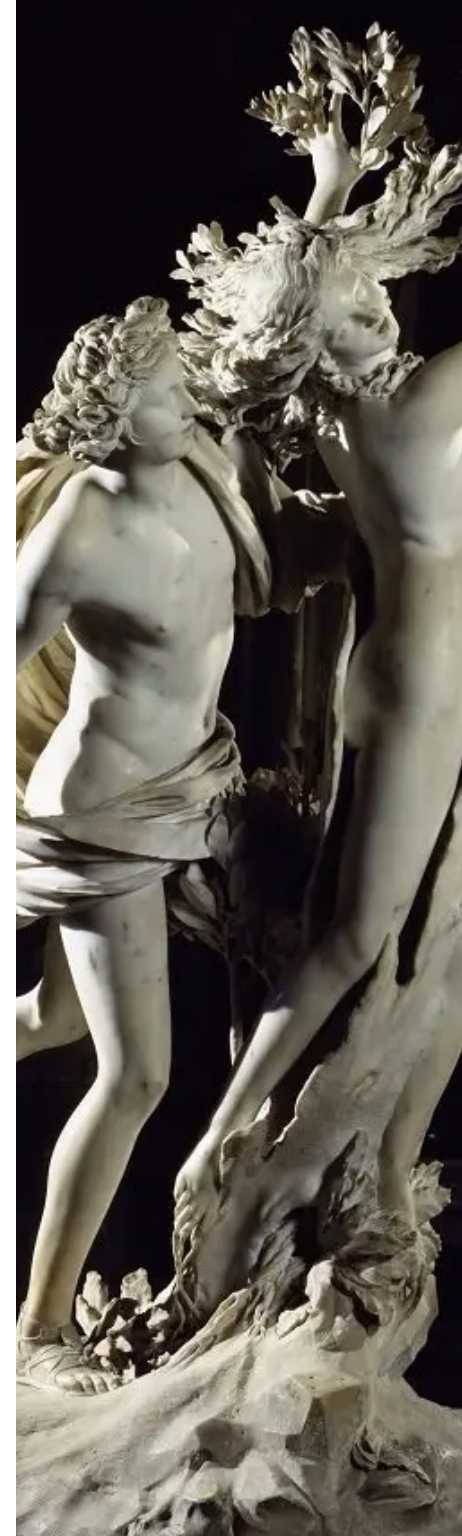
Orpheus, son of the far-shooter by the Muse Calliope, was such a gifted musician that, as he sang and played on his lyre, the breezes stopped to listen in, wild beasts followed tamely in his train, and the trees bent down their lofty crowns to hear the sweet strains. Now, Orpheus loved the beautiful oak-nymph Eurydice, and the charm of his music won her heart. But on the day of their wedding, the very day, she was being pursued by Aristaeus, the lusty god of beekeeping and olive-growing. Deep into the woods she plunged to escape him, where she was bitten by a snake and died.

The world has seen no grief like that of Orpheus. He dared to descend into the underworld, and sang his request to grim Hades and his veiled wife Persephone. At the sound of his song, Cerberus pricked up his ears, Tityus' vultures raised their gory beaks, Sisyphus sat on his boulder and listened.

Entranced, the dark deities

laid aside their habitual indifference and heard his heartfelt plea, and allowed Eurydice to return from the dead. There was only one condition: Orpheus was not to look back at her until they had left the halls of Hades. Long, dark passages they traversed, and at last they were on the threshold—and just then Orpheus glanced over his shoulder for his beloved, whose footfall behind him he could no longer hear. Immediately, Eurydice lost substance and fell back from whence she had come.

However much he pleaded, however long he lingered on the banks of the Styx, foul river of the dead, gloomy Charon refused to ferry him across a second time. Orpheus left the banks of Styx and wandered disconsolate in Thrace, choosing wilderness to spare lives, for many would have died from sorrow on hearing his songs of mourning. Only the birds of the air and beasts of the earth suffered the shafts of his bitter strains. But Maenads too choose the wilderness when Dionysus possesses them, and a band of them found him asleep and mistook him for an enemy. They tore him to pieces, and his head and lyre, still lamenting, floated down the Hebrus to the restless sea. But he and his



ARTEMIS OF THE MOON



“She is the Mistress of Animals, and her pleasure is in wild and remote places; and she is a chaste virgin, disdainful, undefiled, and free.”



As Apollo stands apart, so too does his twin sister Artemis. She is the Mistress of Animals, and her pleasure is in wild and remote places; and she is a chaste virgin, disdainful, undefiled, and free. Men are not to her liking, and as a girl she begged her father Zeus for chastity, and that she should be as great a deity as her noble brother. And great Zeus granted her every desire. She ranges with her attendant nymphs over shady hills and the windy heights of virgin wilderness, unsullied by man. Pan gave her Arcadian hunting hounds, the best of their kind, and she deals death with arrows crafted by the Cyclopes that well fit her silver bow. She wears the horns of the cold, chaste moon on her headdress. She is the overwhelming and fearsome presence within untamed lands, where mortal men find how puny they are, and as she passes through the moonlight the hills tremble and the valleys with them, and all beasts cry and howl. She is the V of flying geese and the yellow glare of a lynx's eye. She is the All-Mother, the protector of all young creatures, and some she allows to live, while the weaklings are culled. She abides on the margins, at change-over points, especially when girls become women, and women become mothers.

The people of Thebes gave Leto great honor as the mother of the twin deities Apollo and Artemis, but arrogant Niobe, wife of King Amphion, disagreed. As the daughter of Tantalus and granddaughter of Atlas, she claimed that her lineage was greater than that of Leto. She also bragged that, since she had borne and raised

MOON

a greater number of children, her life was more filled with blessings. And she might indeed have been the happiest of mothers, if only she had not boasted of it.

For the insult to their mother, Apollo and Artemis removed Niobe's blessings: Apollo shot down her six sons, while Artemis did the same with her six daughters, except one called Chloris. The twanging of their bows mingled with the screams of the dying, and the corpses remained unburied for nine days. Niobe was turned to stone and carried away by a tornado to her native Lydia, where her tears still trickle from the obdurate rock of Mount Sipylus.

Apollo and Artemis again avenged Leto's honor when huge Tityus, the son of Earth, tried to rape her as she was on her way one day to Delphi. The twin deities hunted down the giant, and when they found him they riddled him with their arrows. Down to Hades he lurched, where his body is

spread out massively over the ground, and on either side sits a vulture, feasting forever on his liver.

Actaeon of Thebes, learned in the lore of the forest, was relaxing at midday after a morning of good hunting. He loved his aunt, Semele, but she was the beloved of Zeus, and jealous anger swelled in the breast of the great god, father of gods and men. He put it into the mind of Actaeon to take his rest, all unknowing, in a grove favored by Artemis, where the goddess came to be bathed by her attendant nymphs in a limpid pool of cool water, sheltered by a cave. No mortal man sees Artemis naked and lives! While the nymphs screamed at the sight of a man and tried to cover their mistress's nakedness, she rose to her feet, majestic and unafraid, and revealed all her glory to him in his last moments as a mortal man.

With a mere flick of her wrist, she splashed him lightly with water from the pool, and before the last drops

had rolled like tears down his cheeks, antlers were already sprouting from his head. The stag dropped onto all fours and fled, while Actaeon's own hounds gave chase with slaving jaws. He tried to shout at them, to calm them as he had in the past, but instead of their master's voice, they heard only the bellowing of a terrified stag. Soon they caught him and brought him down, and the pack leader's powerful

jaws closed over his windpipe and gripped tight, until the stag breathed no more.

With none to command them, the rest of the pack set to and tore him to pieces, who had once been their beloved master. And Artemis, Mistress of Animals, was pleased, for the purity of the goddess is not to be tainted, even by any "accidents."

Callisto spent her days and nights in the mountains of



Arcadia, hunting and living wild with Artemis and her nymphs. But she was very fair, and desire flared in Zeus' heart and loins. He came to her, taking on the appearance of Artemis, as she rested alone one day in a dell. Too late did the maiden discover his trick when he forced his embraces on her. She fought back, but no mortal or god can resist the power of Zeus. The weeks and months rolled by, and the time came when Artemis called on all her followers to bathe with her, for there was no man to see them. Callisto blushed and hesitated, but she had no choice, and her nakedness made her pregnancy plain for all to see. Artemis in anger turned the maiden into a bear and banished her from her entourage; and the bear gave birth to a son, Arcas, who was raised by Maia, the mother of Hermes. But later Callisto wandered into a forbidden sanctuary of Zeus, and was about to be killed by Arcas himself, for he had become a masterful hunter; but Zeus took pity on his former lover and translated her into the heavens as the Great Bear constellation in the sky.

Orion was a mighty hunter, the son of Poseidon, and lover of Eos, the dawn light. So vast and fleet of foot was he that he could cross valleys at a bound and his father endowed

him with the ability to walk on water. But once, drunk on Chios—for the island produces the best of wines—he raped the king's daughter, and for this sin he was blinded. He took a young boy onto his shoulders, and commanded him to lead him eastward; and as the sun rose, Eos shone her light straight into her lover's eyes and cured him, and he returned to Crete, where he was awarded the unique honor of hunting in the company of Artemis and Leto.

So successful was he at clearing the earth of the ferocious beasts that preyed on men's flocks and livelihoods, that he fell to boasting. "There's no creature," he cried, "that I could not bring down with my strong spear or my swift arrows!" Zeus' brow darkened at this foolish boast, and in anger he sent against Orion a giant scorpion. The contest was over as quick as the flick of the monster's tail. Zeus raised the victor to the heavens, and, at Artemis' request, did the same for Orion; and in the heavens the scorpion chases Orion forever. Orion, however, chases the Pleiades, the seven daughters of Atlas after whom he had lusted in life. For seven years he had pursued them, until Zeus made them stars out of his mercy.

HERMES OF
MISCHIEF

&

DIONYSUS
OF WINE





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Many tales are told too of crafty Hermes, son of Zeus by the nymph Maia. From the moment he came into being, his restless nature was plain. It is said that, on the very day of his birth, he found and killed a tortoise, scooped out the soft flesh, and strung the hollow shell to make the first lyre. Then, that same night, he stole the cattle of the archer-god Apollo. To mislead any who should give chase, he drove the cattle backward, while walking backward himself and disguising his barefoot baby prints with oversized sandals, strapped to his feet like snowshoes.

Having corralled the cattle, he invented the fire-stick, and used it to light a cooking fire on which he roasted two whole cows, and ate them. Then he returned to the cave of his birth and clambered into his cot, cooing innocently. But Apollo guessed who the

culprit was and threatened to toss the baby down into Tartarus. At first Hermes lied—“I’m just a baby! How could I have stolen any cattle?”—but then he confessed, and to be reconciled with Apollo gave him the lyre. Apollo took the instrument as his own, and in return made for Hermes the three-pronged caduceus wand, the living, golden staff that will be his symbol and sign forever.

Hermes is the god of the sudden and unexpected, the elusive and edgy. He governs thievery, trade and bargaining, messages and mischief, invention and inspiration. He is the trickster and the eternal adolescent, for he comes when least expected, and not always when called. He is the restless god of magic and of luck, his countenance never still. He is the god of borders and crossings; the guardian of flocks, which stray without his guidance; and the wayfinder, into whose hands travelers commend themselves. He appears out of the blue, bringing good fortune or a message from the gods, perhaps in the form of a lucid dream; or he snatches a dying man and guides him to the underworld. For the journey between life and death takes but an instant. When a sudden silence falls or joy thrills a heart, there is Hermes;

unanticipated opportunities for love or fortune are his gifts.

Some say that Hermes fathered Pan, goat-footed deity of the mountains and valleys, of the remotest crags and peaks and meadows, and the sweet sounds of his reed pipes echo in the canyons in the late afternoon as the shepherds call their flocks. Pan invented the pipes when he lost the nymph he was chasing and turned his attention instead to the reeds where she had hidden. Another musical maiden he loved was Echo, who could imitate any sound in the world. When she spurned him, he drove some shepherds insane, and they tore the fair nymph to pieces; but Earth buried each scattered piece of her, and still the secret places where her parts are buried return the sounds of others. Pan is the god of shepherds and the hunter of small animals, of the kind that keep men alive during their months of vigil, watching over their flocks in the hills and mountains. But he is also the bringer of panic, when flocks—or men in battle—for no reason stampede and turn to frantic flight. And he was called Pan, “All,” for he was pleasing to all the gods, but especially to Dionysus.

“Hermes is the god of the sudden and unexpected, the elusive and edgy. He governs thievery, trade and bargaining, messages and mischief, invention and inspiration. He is the trickster and the eternal adolescent, for he comes when least expected, and not always when called. He is the restless god of magic and of luck, his countenance never still. He is the god of borders and crossings; the guardian of flocks, which stray without his guidance; and the wayfinder, into whose hands travelers commend themselves. He appears out of the blue, bringing good fortune or a message from the gods, perhaps in the form of a lucid dream; or he snatches a dying man and guides him to the underworld. When a sudden silence or joy thrills a heart, there is Hermes: unanticipated opportunities for love or fortune are his gifts.”



“Dionysus is the god of viticulture and wine, a joy for mortal men, and hence of ecstasy and liberation from the conventions of society.”

D Sweet Muse, tell at last of twice-born Dionysus. His mother was Semele, daughter of Cadmus, whom Zeus loved. But when Hera found out, in her jealousy she plotted her rival's death. She appeared to Semele in the guise of her aged nurse and persuaded her that, as the bedmate of the Ruler of All, she should be the equal of Hera—that Zeus should appear to her as a god, not as a mortal man. And Semele listened to the goddess's honeyed lies, for she wanted to know the greater



pleasure of lying with a god not in human form.

When Zeus next came to her in his earthly disguise, she teased her lover and made him promise to do whatever she asked. Her request, of course, was for him to reveal himself. The great god hesitated, for he knew what would happen. But he had given his word and came blazing to her bed. As Hera had planned, Semele was consumed by the brilliance of Zeus' majesty, but the cloud-gatherer took up his unborn son from her lifeless womb and sewed him up in his thigh, from where he was born again when his time came. Later on, Dionysus went down to Hades to recover his mother, and she dwells now forever with the blessed gods on Olympus.

Dionysus is the god of viticulture and wine, a joy for mortal men, and hence of ecstasy and liberation from the conventions of society. He is the sap of life, the blood throbbing in the veins, the sweet burst of the grape in the mouth. He is the god of the theater, for men permit themselves to release their emotions, for better or for worse, when absorbed in the marvelous productions of playwrights. Dionysus is known as Bromius, the rebel, and his robe is as gorgeous as any girl's.

His gift is freedom, and so little regard has he for what men call “law” and “custom”

that his followers, the raving Maenad women, are said to tear apart wild animals and eat them raw, when they are possessed by the god and endowed with superhuman strength. They drink his blood as wine, and eat his flesh. For the other gods keep their distance, but Dionysus possesses his followers completely and is wholly possessed in return. Clad in fawnskins and clutching the sacred thyrsus staff, entwined with ivy and topped with a pine cone, they revel with wild abandon in the countryside to the sound of the pipes and the cymbal, grasping poisonous snakes with immunity and petting tame panthers. Meanwhile, the horse-eared Sileni and goat-bearded Satyrs who attend the god go about their lusty business.

Many a tale is told of the fate suffered by those who resist the entry of his shocking and unconventional religion. When Lycurgus of Thrace drove his followers off the mountain, great Zeus, the father of Dionysus, blinded the man for his blindness. And when all the women of Thebes thronged to the hills and forests to worship the god, King Pentheus persecuted them, and for his pains was killed by his own mother and sisters. The fool spied on their worship and was discovered, but the women

failed to recognize him in their god-induced frenzy. They tore him limb from limb as easily as they would a rabbit, relishing their gruesome task as a sign of their devotion to the god.

And in Boeotian Orchomenus the daughters of Minyas refused to acknowledge the god's divinity and join the other women in the countryside. They preferred to stay indoors, as they believed good women should, and get on with their weaving. Dionysus appeared to them as a girl to warn them of their folly, for the god is not without pity, but they ignored him. He drove them mad, and one of them tore her own baby to bits.

In the course of his missionary travels, spreading the word of his religion, Dionysus came to Athens. There he taught King Pandion the art of nurturing the vine and turning its fruit into blessed wine, but some drunken peasants, not appreciating the divine gift of the god, thought their king had poisoned them. They killed Pandion and hid his body. His daughter Erigone, led to the woodland grave by her father's faithful dog, hanged herself in grief from a sturdy branch. But Dionysus always retaliates. He drove the women of Athens mad, and forever after they propitiate the god by hanging little fetishes of Erigone in trees

and setting them to swing.

Once, as a youth, Dionysus was captured by pirates as he walked on the shore, and they were pleased, for they thought him the son of a king and worth a fine ransom. They bound him with strong rope, but the ropes fell in worthless coils to the deck of the ship. When the pirates remained heedless of this warning, further signs appeared: the ship's hull flowed with sweet wine; vines and ivy, thick with fruit and blooming flowers, entwined the mast and the sails; and phantom shapes, as of tigers and panthers, prowled the deck. Then the god became a lion and devoured the ship's captain, while the rest of the sailors leapt into the sea and were turned into dolphins. Only the helmsman survived, for he had recognized the god's divinity, and carried him safely over the waters to his holy haven, the lush island of Naxos.

On high Olympus, the gods are attended at their golden feasts by Hebe, daughter of Zeus and Hera, for she is the ideal of young nubile womanhood, loyal to her elder kin and dedicated to their service. But Zeus' special cup-bearer is Ganymede, once the mortal prince of Troy, so fair of face and form that Zeus could not resist his charms and had him carried up to Olympus by a whirlwind, though some say

Zeus bore him off himself, in the form of an eagle. The lad's father Tros was grieved, for he did not know where his son had gone; but Zeus sent Hermes to give him the glad tidings that Ganymede was held high in Zeus' honor and would remain youthful forever.

As further recompense for his loss, Zeus gave Tros immortal horses, the pick of his shining herds. And so fair Ganymede stands devotedly by the throne of Zeus, ready with the golden cup of sweet nectar. And Hebe modestly supervises the feasting and assures that all appetites are satisfied at the banquet table of the Gods.

These are the gods and goddesses who dwell forever

in bliss in the halls of high Olympus. The tales that are told about them imbue them with traits like our own, as though they were simply many times more powerful and wise than mortal men and women. Yet one unbridgeable chasm is set between them and creatures of mere flesh and bone: the gods cannot die! They are eternal and carefree, while men soon wither and die like leaves from a tree, and their lives are filled with toil and sorrow. The gods are, then, finally incomprehensible to mortal minds, just as a monkey cannot understand a man, and that is why we speak of them in parables. The storyteller's job is to shed light, no more.

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