



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1983 Volume II: Greek and Roman Mythology

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## Introduction

No one—or no one who would be educated in even the most superficial sense of that term can side-step the massive presence of the ancient Greeks and Romans in our culture. If we want to know ourselves we must get to know our heritage. Not that this influence, for all its splendors, has been wholly good; one of the units in this volume (John Severi's), for example, suggests one way in which it has been pernicious. Recognizing the roots of our culture, however, is the necessary first step in thinking critically about our forebears and ourselves. Ours is becoming a disoriented society because Americans are losing a sense of their past. The obvious place to set about checking this tendency is the schools, and teaching mythology is a superb way to put students in touch with ancient cultures. The Greeks, and after them the Romans, projected in mythical examples their deepest hopes and desires, fears and anxieties, and their mythology as a whole expresses their sense of the world. For better or for worse, these preoccupations and attitudes are also ours, their cultural heirs. But our interest should also be wider. The Greeks and Romans thought with extraordinary sensitivity about the problems of being human in a world that is by nature not entirely sympathetic to man. The narrative versions in which their myths have come down to us use these stories to probe man's relation to divinity and his own mortality, the need for coming to terms with consuming passions like love and anger, and other fundamental themes. Whatever are the overt emphases and aims of the units collected here, all have as their ultimate effect engaging the students' thought about their culture and their humanity. They also have a further, and crucial, goal: to reveal through myth the profound working of the human imagination, and to stimulate this faculty in the students.

As we have it, Greek and Roman mythology is atypical in one important respect. Whereas field anthropologists can record oral versions and variants of the myths of many cultures, the myths with which we are dealing survive only in literary treatments, although they too were originally oral. They thus represent a later stage of thought than the purely "mythopoeic," and the literary recounting of any one of them is itself an interpretation which brings out one aspect of the meaning latent in the underlying myth. This fact was heavily emphasized in the seminar. When one of the units that follow here suggests, as many of them do, that students be asked to re-tell a myth they have read in their own words or to create their own myths, that is a recognition of the original oral nature of different versions (even literary versions). This activity is also a way of inviting the students to enter the world of the mythic mentality and think in terms other than, but no less valid than, those of discursive logic.

The nature of this mythology suggested a convenient way of organizing the syllabus for the seminar meetings: to read in translation Greek and Latin literary works which are important treatments of myths. We proceeded, in the main, chronologically from Homer through Virgil, although we disrupted this order when there was good reason to do so (Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, for instance, came relatively early because it is a collection of many

prominent myths engagingly and perceptively narrated). There were other possible approaches; we might, for example, have considered various categories of myth (creation myths and so forth), using modern handbooks to avoid the expense of buying too many books. But the method adopted had the great advantage of allowing us to go behind the modern, doctored versions, such as Hamilton or Bulfinch, to the original sources. As a result, even those teachers who, for pedagogical reasons, propose to adopt modern handbooks in the classroom will be able to make informed judgments about them. An added benefit was that participants in the seminar were introduced to some wonderful classical literature with which they had not been familiar.

Partly because of the format adopted, but also for other reasons, there were limits on what the seminar could accomplish. In the first place, we could not give much attention to the many and diverse theories about the nature of mythology, because to do so would not have met the teachers' interests and needs. This omission raised one problem: we were constantly faced with the difficulty of defining myth, especially in distinction to other forms of narrative. In the end, we considered several different kinds of story: myth proper, heroic and historical legend, and folktale. We observed characteristics of each, but without being too precise about definitions (these types often blur into one another anyway). Secondly, although ancient as well as modern art on mythological subjects figured prominently in our discussions, we could not, for obvious reasons, survey classical civilization systematically despite the need felt by some participants for such a study. Still, mythology serves as a good introduction to the broader cultures for both the teacher and the student and could stimulate further interests.

Mythology is a very broad field, and the units gathered here reflect the diversity of approaches that it allows. There is even a fine unit on myths about marine mammals: In general, the units are of two types: those that treat mythology or a particular text (Homer's *Odyssey*) in itself, for its intrinsic interest, and those that use mythology as a pedagogic device to teach a fundamental skill (reading, English as a second language, analysis and interpretation of narrative). Both are equally valid approaches, and in fact in each unit both are represented though one or the other is stressed. Most of the units also fall into smaller categories of two or three according to their concerns, and the order in which they appear in this volume reflects this grouping. Those within each group, however complement, and never merely duplicate, one another. That the units are so various testified to the versatility of the subject, and also to the resourcefulness and ingenuity of the teachers who wrote them.

The teachers felt that a list of the major Greek and Roman gods and goddesses, with their functions and attributes, would aid users of this volume. Such a list follows this introduction. We are grateful for it to Professor Richard Goodkin of the Yale French Department, and to Michael Conte for typing it.

William G. Thalmann

## **THE GODS OF OLYMPUS**

Provinces and functions listed under symbol A; attributes under B.

*ZEUS (Jupiter, Jove).*

A. (1) Sky and weather, especially the rain, thunder, lightning. (2) Sovereignty of the world: he was king and father of gods and men. (3) Protection of political and social institutions; state, family contracts, oaths, relations of host and guests.

B. Thunderbolt, staff, scales, aegis, eagle, lion, garland of wild olive or oak leaves, Nike, beard

and flowing locks.

*HERA (Juno).*

A. (1) Queenship of the world as Zeus's sister-wife. (2) Marriage. (3) Motherhood, especially the protection of women in childbirth.

B. Crown, a high headdress, scepter, wedding veil, peacock, cuckoo.

*POSEIDON (Neptune).*

A. (1) All waters, both salt and fresh. (2) Horses. (3) Earthquakes.

B. Trident, dolphin, horse, bull, Triton, beak of a ship.

*HADES (Dis).*

A. Sovereignty over the underworld and dead. (2) Lordship of all mineral wealth beneath the earth. (3) Fertility.

B. Cap of darkness, scepter, throne, chariot, and horses.

(He is an Olympian of Zeus's brother, though he does not live in heaven.)

*APOLLO (Phoebus).*

A. (1) Prophecy. (2) Medicine. (3) Music, poetry, dance. (4) Archery. (5) Youth and manly beauty. (6) Flocks and herds.

B. Tripod, omphalos, lyre, bow and quiver of arrows, crown of laurel, peplos, hawk, raven or crow, fawn.

*ARTEMIS (Diana), twin sister of Apollo.*

A. (1) Wild life, as mistress of wild things. (2) Hunting. (3) Virginity. (4) Protection of women in

childbirth. (5) Archery. She is not properly a moon goddess, as is often said; but she does have a fairly early connection with the moon through her identification with Hekate, who was identified also with Selene.

B. Bow and quiver of arrows, short sleeveless hunting dress, narrow ribbon in hair, deer, wild goat, bear, quail, and torch.

*ATHENA (Minerva). Zeus daughter without a mother*

A. (1) War.(2) Protection of the state. (3) Handicrafts, both women's and men's; weaving, spinning, embroidery, chariot making, shipbuilding, etc.. (4) Wisdom in general.

B. Helmet, shield, spear, aegis, Nike, lamp, distaff, owl, and snake.

*APHRODITE (Venus).*

A. (1) Love. (2) Fertility. (3) Beauty (4) Carnal desire.

B. Mirror, apple, dove, attractive garments, cosmetics.

*HEPHAISTOS (Vulcan).*

A. (1) Smithy and men's handicrafts. (2) Fire.

B. Smith's garb, hammer, anvil, bellows, forge, fire.

*DEMETER (Ceres).*

A. (1) Agriculture, especially the grain. (2) Fertility in general.

B. Sheaf of grain, polos, scepter, torch, sacrificial bowl.

*HERMES (Mercury).*

A. (1) Commerce. (2) Theft . (3) Heraldry. (4) Flocks and herds. (5) Youth and manly beauty. (6) Music. (7) Conducting of souls to the lower world. (8) Patron of the traveller and of the lucky find.

B. Hat (usually broad-brimmed), Herald's staff, winged sandals, tortoise-shell lyre, ram shepherd's staff.

*DIONYSOS (Bacchus).*

A. (1) Vegetable life, especially the grapevine and ivy. (2) Wine and wine-making. All liquid. (3) Fertility. (4) Poetry, song, and drama.

B. Grapevine, ivy vine, crown of ivy, cluster of grapes, vine wrapped staff, drinking cup, clothes of fawnskin or leopard skin, leopard-drawn chariot, leopard, deer, Satyrs, Pan, Bacchantes, Phallus.

*HERAKLES (Hercules).*

Zeus's son, was taken into the company of the Olympians after his death on earth and became Hebe's husband.

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