

MYTHOLOGY

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MYTHOLOGY

“Mythology” refers to stories that convey the beliefs of a particular culture at a particular time. Myths, which usually refer to the actions of divinities, can be distinguished from legends (which tell of heroic deeds and historical events, real or imagined) and folktales (stories, often humorous or exaggerated, involving ordinary people). Mythologies usually originated in preliterate oral traditions, at a remote but indeterminate time period. At some point they are written down and become systematized, though because of their oral roots variant and sometimes contradictory versions persist.

This section presents an overview of four traditions of mythology: those of the Classical world (Greece and Rome); Mesopotamia (the ancient Middle East); Egypt; and the Norse world of northernmost Europe. All four have had an influence on subsequent European religion, literature, art, and cultural life.

Classical Mythology

The prehistoric Indo-European settlers of the Greek peninsula and the Aegean islands brought some myths with them from their original homeland in western Central Asia, and borrowed others from their Mediterranean neighbors. With the development of literacy in Greece in the Archaic Period (ca. 800–480 B.C.), the myths began to be written down. Early sources for Greek mythology include the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, attributed to Homer (8th century B.C.); Hesiod’s *Theogony* (ca. 700 B.C.); the so-called *Homeric Hymns* (7th–6th century B.C.); and the surviving great works of ancient Greek theater, which often involve the interactions of humans and gods.

Greek trade and the establishment of Greek colonies in Sicily and elsewhere spread Greek myths throughout the Mediterranean world; the conquests of Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.) carried Greek culture far into Asia. When the Romans conquered Greece and the Hellenic world during the second and first centuries B.C., they absorbed much of Greek culture; they equated many of the Greek deities, and stories of their deeds, to figures in their own pantheon. The two most important Roman sources for classical mythology and legends are Virgil’s *Aeneid*

(unfinished; from ca. 30 B.C.) and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (completed A.D. 8).

In what follows, deities and legendary figures are listed by their Greek (or, in a few cases, customary English) names, followed by their Roman names in parentheses. Entries for figures that appear only in Roman myth are italicized in boldface.

Olympian Gods of Classical Mythology

Aphrodite (Venus) Goddess of love, beauty, and sensuality; patron of courtesans. Aphrodite is the daughter of Zeus and Dione in one account; in another she is born out of the foam created when Cronus castrates Uranus and throws his genitals into the sea. Aphrodite is the wife of Hephaestus but has numerous lovers, including Adonis, Anchises, with whom she has a son, Aeneas, and Ares, with whom she has Eros (Cupid) and three other children (see *Ares*).

Apollo (Apollo) God of healing, oracles, the sun, poetry, and music; son of Zeus and Leto; twin brother of Artemis. Apollo is one of the most prominent gods in Greek myth with many roles and attributes and a multitude of children and lovers, most notably Asclepius by Coronis. Apollo symbolizes order and the rational as opposed to the irrational world of Dionysus.

Ares (Mars) God of war; son of Zeus and Hera. Unmarried Ares’ most famous of many lovers is Aphrodite, with whom he sires Phobus (Panic), Deimos (Fear), Harmonia (Harmony), and Eros (Cupid). Ares is often accompanied by Enyo (Horror) and Eris (Strife).

Artemis (Diana) Virgin goddess of the hunt, wild animals, and animal and human young; daughter of Zeus and Leto; twin sister of Apollo. Artemis is usually accompanied by a group of nymphs and often appears with a bow and arrow.

Athena (Minerva) Virgin goddess of wisdom, war, crafts, and city life; protector of Athens. The daughter of Zeus and Metis (see *Metis* for birth), Athena springs from the head of Zeus in full armor with a helmet and spear. Athena gives the olive tree as a gift to Athens. She also gives mankind the loom, the plough, and the flute. (See also *Nike*.)

Demeter (Ceres) Goddess of the harvest, grain, earth, and fertility; daughter of Cronus and Rhea; mother of

Persephone. During the third of the year when Persephone is held by Hades in the underworld (see *Persephone*), Demeter will not allow anything to grow.

Dionysus (Bacchus, Liber) God of the vine, wine, and fertility; closely associated with theater, particularly tragedy; son of Zeus and Semele; husband of Ariadne. Dionysus's followers are maenads (also Bacchae), a drunk, frenzied, ecstatic mob of women, and satyrs, mythical creatures that are half man and half goat.

Hephaestus (Vulcan) God of fire, smiths, and crafts; son of Zeus and Hera or of Hera alone in some accounts; cuckolded husband of Aphrodite. Born lame, Hephaestus is ejected from Olympus, once by Hera and again by Zeus. Hephaestus is responsible for fashioning some of the most important objects in myth, including the chains that held Prometheus and armor for Achilles, Heracles, and Aeneas. He also crafts the first woman, Pandora.

Hera (Juno) Goddess of marriage and family; daughter of Cronus and Rhea; mother of Ares (by Zeus) and Heph-aestus (by Zeus in some accounts and alone in others). Hera is often seen in myth as the vengeful wife of the adulterous Zeus, causing havoc for his lovers and illegitimate children, most famously Heracles (Hercules).

Hermes (Mercury) Trickster god; messenger god; god of commerce; patron of travelers and thieves; son of Zeus and Maia. Hermes is often seen in myth wearing a winged helmet and winged sandals, and carrying a caduceus, a herald's staff entwined with snakes.

Hestia (Vesta) Virgin goddess of fire and the hearth; daughter of Cronus and Rhea. Hestia is the protector of the home, the household and the hearth.

Poseidon (Neptune) God of the sea and earthquakes; son of Cronus and Rhea; husband of the nymph Amphitrite. Poseidon is closely associated with horses and classically seen carrying a trident. He is one of the less benevolent gods, responsible for unpredictable and destructive forces.

Zeus (Jupiter, Jove) Chief Olympian god; son of Cronus and Rhea. Zeus ousts Cronus and the other Titans from Olympus and takes control as the supreme sky god while his brothers Poseidon and Hades take over the sea and underworld, respectively. Zeus often appears in myth having affairs (see *Danae*, *Europa*, *Io*, *Leda*, *Semele*), much to the dismay of his typically jealous wife, Hera.

TNote: In some accounts, Dionysus replaces Hestia as the 12th Olympian god. Hades' realm is the underworld, so he is not considered one of the 12 Olympians.

Other Figures in Classical Myth and Legend

Achilles Hero of the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad*; son of Thetis (sea nymph) and Peleus (mortal). Thetis dips Achilles in the river Styx at birth making him invulnerable except for the heel by which he is held. Fighting for the Greeks at Troy, Achilles kills Hector and is killed by Paris, who shoots an arrow into his heel.

Adonis Lover of Aphrodite. Adonis is a young man so beautiful that both Aphrodite and Persephone want to have him. When he is killed by a boar, a compromise allows him to live in the celestial world with Aphrodite for half the year and in the underworld with Persephone the other half.

Aegisthus See *Clytemnestra* and *Orestes*.

Aeneas Legendary Trojan warrior; son of Aphrodite and Anchises; lover of Dido. Aeneas is the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*, in which he is depicted as the father of the Roman people.

Aeolus God of the winds. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Aeolus gives Odysseus a bag of wind and warns him not to open it. Odysseus's men untie the bag, releasing dangerous winds that cause a great setback in the journey home.

Agamemnon King of Mycenae and leader of the Greeks in the Trojan War; son of Atreus; husband of Clytemnestra; father of Orestes, Electra, and Iphigeneia; brother of Menelaus. (See also *Clytemnestra*, *Iphigeneia*, and *Orestes*.)

Agave Daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia. In Euripides' *Bacchantes*, Agave's son Pentheus disrespects Dionysus. The god drives Agave insane, compelling her and her sisters to tear Pentheus to pieces.

Ajax Hero of the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad*; son of Telemon. Ajax kills himself when the prize of Achilles' armor goes to Odysseus instead of him.

Amphitrite Goddess of the sea; a Nereid (sea nymph); wife of Poseidon.

Anchises Trojan prince. Anchises is a lover of Aphrodite, with whom he has a son, Aeneas. Hearing of the affair, Zeus cripples Anchises with a thunderbolt.

Andromeda Daughter of Cepheus and Cassiopeia; wife of Perseus. When Cassiopeia boasts that her daughter is more beautiful than the Nereids, an oracle demands that Andromeda be sacrificed to defuse the wrath of Poseidon. She is about to be killed by a sea monster, when Perseus, flying past on his winged sandals, rescues her and gains her hand in marriage.

Antigone Daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta; sister of Eteocles, Ismene, and Polynices. In a fight for power, Eteocles and Polynices kill each other. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Antigone performs funeral rites for Polynices against the orders of her uncle Creon, the new king. He sentences her to be buried alive in a cave, where she hangs herself. When Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's fiancé, finds out, he kills himself, causing Creon's wife to kill herself.

Antiope (Hippolyta) Queen of the Amazons; mother of Hippolytus by Theseus. Theseus abducts Antiope and takes her to Athens, causing the Amazons to invade in retaliation.

Arachne A young woman who challenges Athena to a weaving contest. When Athena finds no flaw in Arachne's work, she tears it up and beats her. Arachne kills herself; Athena then turns her into a spider.

Argus 1) Hundred-eyed monster that Hera sends to guard Io to whom Zeus has taken a liking. 2) Odysseus's faithful dog, which drops dead upon seeing him after his 20-year absence.

Ariadne Daughter of King Minos of Crete. After she shows Theseus how to overcome the Minotaur, the two run away together. In one version of the story, Theseus then abandons her; in another she dies, and in another she becomes the mistress of Dionysus.

Asclepius (Aesculapius) God of medicine; deified son of Apollo and Coronis (mortal). The centaur Chiron was his mentor, and he is usually seen carrying a staff entwined by a snake.

Atalanta Beautiful girl who could outrun men. Atalanta says that she will only marry the suitor who can beat her in a foot race; losers will be killed. Hippomenes, distracting her by dropping golden apples from Aphrodite, wins her hand.

Atlas A Titan in some accounts and a giant in others; brother of Prometheus. Atlas sides with the Titans in their battle with Zeus. When Zeus emerges the victor, he condemns Atlas to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Bellerophon Slayer of the Chimera (see *Chimera*). With a golden bridle from Athena, Bellerophon mounts Pegasus and slays the monster. Bellerophon remains the master of Pegasus until he tries to ride the winged horse up Mount Olympus and is punished by Zeus.

Bellona Roman goddess of war. Bellona is the wife of Mars in some accounts, his sister in others.

Cadmus Legendary founder of Thebes; father of Agave,

Autonoe, Ino, Polydorus, and Semele. With his wife, Harmonia, Cadmus begins an ill-fated bloodline whose woes are popular subjects of myth.

Calydonian boar Legendary boar hunted by heroes, including Theseus, Jason, Castor, and Pollux (the Dioscuri) and Nestor.

Calypso Sea nymph. A marooned Odysseus spends seven years living on an island with her. She offers him immortality to stay, but he chooses to return home.

Cassandra Daughter of Priam and Hecuba, king and queen of Troy. Cassandra promises to marry Apollo if he gives her the gift of prophesy. When she backs out of the deal, Apollo gives her the ability but makes it so that no one will believe her. She is taken by Agamemnon at the end of the Trojan War. (See also *Clytemnestra*.)

Cassiopeia See *Andromeda*.

Castor Son of Leda and Tyndareus; mortal brother of the immortal Pollux (together known as the Dioscuri), Helen, and Clytemnestra (see *Leda*). Popular subjects of myth, the brothers figure in the story of Jason and the Argonauts and Theseus's abduction of their sister Helen. When Castor dies, Pollux splits his immortality with him so that they can remain together alternating days in the world and the underworld.

Centaur Mythical creature with the head and torso of a man and the body of a horse. Centaurs are mountain and forest dwellers often seen harassing nymphs and maidens passing through the woods.

Cephalus Husband of Procris. Eos (Dawn) falls in love with him and tries in vain to lure him away. Another story tells how jealous Procris, having heard that Cephalus was unfaithful, went to spy on him hunting in the woods. Cephalus hears a noise and hurls his javelin, accidentally killing his wife.

Cerberus Three-headed dog guarding the gates of Hades; offspring of Typhon and Echidna. Heracles captures the beast in the last of his labors.

Chaos The void from which Gaea (Earth) and all things in the universe came. This creation story is most famously told in Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Charon Ferryman of the dead. For the price of an obol, Charon steers the boat that carries the dead across the rivers Acheron or Styx in the underworld.

Charybdis Dangerous whirlpool mentioned in the *Odyssey* positioned near Scylla in the Strait of Messina.

Chimera Mythical creature with the head of a lion, the body

of a goat and a snake for a tail; offspring of Typhon and Echidna. The hero Bellerophon, riding his steed Pegasus, slays the Chimera, who is ravaging the city of Lycia.

Chiron Centaur son of Cronus. Chiron was Asclepius's mentor in the art of healing and reared Achilles and Theseus. When Heracles accidentally shoots him with an arrow, Chiron decides to relinquish his immortality to Prometheus.

Chloris (Flora) Goddess of flowers and fertility; personification of spring and the wife of Zephyrus, the west wind.

Circe Daughter of Helios (Sun). Circe turns Odysseus's men into swine when they land on her island. Swearing to do Odysseus no harm, she sleeps with him and releases his men from the spell. They remain on her island for a year.

Clytemnestra Daughter of Leda and Tyndareus; wife of Agamemnon; sister of Castor and half sister of Helen and Pollux (see *Leda*). In the first play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, she and her lover, Aegisthus, murder Agamemnon and his mistress, Cassandra, upon their return from Troy. She and Aegisthus are killed by her son Orestes, who plots with her daughter Electra in the second play of the trilogy.

Creon See *Antigone*.

Cronus (Saturn) Son of Uranus and Gaea; leader of the Titans; husband of Rhea; father of Zeus, Hera, Demeter, Poseidon, Hestia, and Hades. After Cronus ousts his father from the heavens, he swallows all his children to prevent them from ousting him. Rhea saves Zeus, who grows up to battle his father, release his siblings and hurl Cronus and his Titan allies into the underworld.

Cumaean Sibyl seer loved by Apollo. She agrees to sleep with Apollo in exchange for long life. When she refuses to follow through, Apollo grants her long life but not extended youth. She shrivels to the size of an insect.

Cyclopes One-eyed giants; children of Uranus and Gaea. Imprisoned by Uranus and then freed by Zeus, the Cyclopes become the blacksmiths of the gods, assisting Hephaestus. (See also *Polyphemus*.)

Daedalus Legendary inventor and architect who builds the Labyrinth to hold the Minotaur on Crete. When the hero Theseus slays the Minotaur and runs off with King Minos's daughter, the king imprisons Daedalus and his son, Icarus, in the Labyrinth. Daedalus builds wings so they can escape. Icarus flies too close to sun and his wings, held together by wax, melt, sending him plummeting to his death in the sea below. (See also *Pasiphae*.)

Danae Mother of Perseus; lover of Zeus. Zeus comes to

Danae as a shower of gold and impregnates her. A prophesy warned her father, Acrisius, of Danae's offspring. When he discovers the baby Perseus, he locks them both in a chest and sets it adrift at sea. They are retrieved by a fisherman's net near the island of Seriphus.

Daphne A nymph loved by Apollo. When Daphne refuses Apollo's advances, he tries to rape her. She begs her father, the river god Peneus, to save her. He turns her into a laurel tree. The laurel becomes a symbol of Apollo.

Deianeira Wife of Heracles. Heracles battles the river god Achelous for Deianeira's hand in marriage. The Centaur Nessus tricks her into poisoning her husband. Heracles dies and she hangs herself.

Dido Queen of Carthage. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dido falls in love with Aeneas. When he sails away without her, she throws herself on a funeral pyre.

Echidna Monster with the head of a nymph and the body of a serpent; mate of Typhon. Mother of many creatures involved in the labors of legendary heroes, including Cerberus, Chimera, Hydra, the Nemean Lion, and the Sphinx.

Echo Mountain nymph. When Echo tries to run interference for the unfaithful Zeus, Hera condemns her to say nothing more than a repetition of the last words she hears. She falls in love with Narcissus. When he rejects her, she shrivels up until only her voice remains.

Electra See *Clytemnestra*.

Enyo Goddess of war and violence. Enyo, meaning "horror," is often a companion of Ares, having varying familial relationships to him in different accounts.

Eos (Aurora) Goddess of the dawn; daughter of Titans Theia and Hyperion; sister of Helios (Sun) and Selene (Moon); mother of the winds Boreas, Eurus, Zephyrus, and Notus. Pictured as "rosy-fingered" and beautiful, Eos has many lovers including Ares and Orion. (See also *Cephalus*.)

Erinyes, Eumenides (Furies) The Furies, tormentors of the guilty. The Furies are a trio of female spirits born out of the spilled blood of Uranus when he is castrated by Cronus.

Eris (Discordia) Goddess of strife; sister and companion of Ares. The causes of the Trojan War can be traced back to Eris's handiwork at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis when she throws the golden apple of discord into the mix.

Eros (Cupid, Amor) God of sexual love. Eros is the son of

Ares and Aphrodite in some accounts; in others, the god was among the first to come out of Chaos along with Gaea. A mischievous winged boy in many stories, Eros usually carries a bow and arrow with which he inspires love or indifference in his victims.

Europa Daughter of King Agenor of Phoenicia; mother of Minos, Rhadamanthus, and Sarpedon by Zeus. Zeus comes to Europa in the form of a white bull and carries her off to Crete, where he keeps her as his mistress. She later marries King Asterius of Crete.

Eurydice See *Orpheus*.

Fates (Greek, Moirae: Clotho, Atropos, Lachesis; Roman, Parcae: Decuma, Nona, Morta) Daughters of Zeus and Themis (Law). Often depicted spinning thread, the three goddesses are responsible for the destinies of all.

Gaea Earth goddess; among the principal deities to come out of Chaos. Gaea is the mother of Uranus (Sky) and Pontus (Sea) and, from her coupling with Uranus, the Titans.

Graces (Greek, Charites; Roman, Gratiae) Daughters of Zeus and Eurynome (an Oceanid). Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and Thalia, usually seen together, represent splendor, joy, and blossoming, respectively.

Hades, Pluto (Orcus, Pluto) God of the dead; son of Cronus and Rhea; husband of Persephone. When Zeus overthrows Cronus, he divides control of the universe with his two brothers leaving Poseidon to lord over the sea and Hades the underworld.

Harmonia Daughter of Ares and Aphrodite. (See *Cadmus*.)

Harpies Malevolent female spirits depicted as birds with human heads. Meaning “snatchers,” the Harpies are associated with Hades’s taking of bodies. (See also *Phineus*.)

Hebe (Juventas) Goddess of youth and cupbearer of the gods; daughter of Zeus and Hera. Hebe marries the deified hero Heracles.

Hecate Goddess of night, darkness, and crossroads. Hecate is often associated with witchcraft and malevolence, but she can also be a benevolent force, as in the case of Persephone, whom she saves from Hades. She is closely associated with both Artemis and Selene.

Hector Legendary Trojan prince; son of Priam and Hecuba; husband of Andromache; father of Astyanax; brother of Paris. When Hector kills Patroclus in Homer’s *Iliad*, Achilles kills Hector and drags his body from the back of a chariot until Priam convinces Achilles to let him

give Hector a proper burial.

Hecuba Wife of King Priam of Troy; mother of Hector and Paris.

Helen Daughter of Zeus and Leda; sister of Pollux and half sister of Castor and Clytemnestra (see *Leda*). Helen, known for her amazing beauty, was first abducted by Theseus and rescued by her brothers, Castor and Pollux. She marries Menelaus, king of Sparta, and has a daughter, Hermione. Paris, prince of Troy, abducts her (or she willingly goes with him), and so begins the Trojan War.

Helios (Sol) Sun god; son of Titans Hyperion and Theia; brother of Selene (Moon) and Eos (Dawn); father of Circe and Pasiphae, among others. Helios drives the chariot of the sun across the sky. In a story told by Ovid, he lets his son Phaethon drive the chariot. Phaethon loses control, nearly crashes and scorches vast areas of the earth.

Heracles (Hercules) Deified hero; son of Zeus and Alcmena. Constantly persecuted by jealous Hera, Heracles is driven mad and kills his wife, Megara, and their children. An oracle orders him to perform 12 labors to redeem himself: in order, the Nemean lion, Lernaean hydra, Ceryneian hind, Erymanthian boar, Augean stables, Stymphalian birds, Cretan bull, horses of Diomedes, girdle of Hippolyta, cattle of Geryon, apples of the Hesperides and Cerberus. He succeeds and marries Deianeira, who, fooled by Nessus, accidentally poisons and kills him. After death Heracles is made immortal and marries the goddess Hebe. (See also *Cerberus*, *Chiron*, *Hydra*, *Jason*, and *Prometheus*.)

Hermaphroditus Beautiful son of Hermes and Aphrodite. In Ovid a nymph, Salmacis, falls in love with Hermaphroditus and, clinging to him, prays that they never be separated. Her wish is granted, and they become one being, half male and half female.

Hippolytus Son of Theseus and Antiope (Hippolyta), queen of the Amazons. Theseus leaves Antiope for Phaedra. In Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, Phaedra falls in love with Hippolytus. When he rejects Phaedra’s advances, she tells Theseus that he raped her and then kills herself. Theseus orders the death of his son only to find out too late that he was innocent.

Horae (Eunomia, Dike, Irene; in another version, Thallo, Auxo and Carpo) The seasons; daughters of Zeus and Themis. The Horae are goddesses of agriculture and universal order.

Hydra Nine-headed monster; offspring of Typhon and Echidna. Eight of its heads are mortal but will grow back

as two when cut off; the ninth is immortal. In Heracles' second labor, he kills the Hydra by burning the stumps of the eight mortal heads so they cannot grow back and burying the immortal one.

Hypnos (Somnus) God of sleep; son of Nyx (Night) and Erebus (Darkness); brother of Thanatos (Death).

Icarus See *Daedalus*.

Ino Daughter of Cadmus and Harmonia; wife of King Athamas of Orchomenus. Ino raises the god Dionysus, offspring of her sister Semele and Zeus. Jealous Hera drives Ino and her husband insane, and they kill their children. She jumps into the sea to commit suicide and is turned into Leucothea, a sea goddess.

Io Lover of Zeus. Zeus turns Io into a heifer to spare her from Hera's wrath. Suspicious Hera places the heifer under the guard of the hundred-eyed Argus. Io is freed by Hermes, but Hera sends a gadfly to torment her. After a long journey, she regains her normal form and has a son by Zeus, Epaphus, an ancestor of Heracles.

Iphigeneia Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Agamemnon is ordered to sacrifice his daughter so the Greek ships can make it safely to Troy. Hearing that her husband has sacrificed Iphigeneia, Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon upon his return from Troy.

Iris Messenger goddess, particularly for Zeus and Hera; goddess of the rainbow.

Janus Roman god of the gate. Janus is depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions from gateways and doorways. Representing beginnings and endings, Janus presides over agricultural cycles, the onset and conclusion of battle, births and marriages.

Jason Son of Aeson; raised by Chiron. King Pelias of Iolcus sends Jason on a seemingly impossible quest for the Golden Fleece because it is prophesized that Jason will kill him. Along with heroes such as Heracles, Orpheus, Castor, and Pollux, Jason sets out on the ship *Argo*. With the help of the sorceress Medea, Jason takes the fleece and returns with Medea to Iolcus, where Jason kills King Pelias. They are banished from the city and move to Corinth, where after a few years Jason tries to leave Medea and marry another. In Euripides' *Medea*, Medea kills their children and flees to Athens. (See also *Calydonian boar*.)

Jocasta See *Oedipus*.

Laertes Father of Odysseus.

Laius See *Oedipus*.

Lares Roman household gods protecting the home, family and the hearth; patron spirits of travelers and crossroads. The Lares are usually seen in the plural, often as a pair of spirits. (See also *Penates*.)

Leda Lover of Zeus; wife of Tyndareus. Zeus comes to Leda in the form of a swan and impregnates her right around a time when she has also been with her mortal husband. She gives birth to four children, Pollux and Helen by Zeus (from an egg, in some accounts) and Castor and Clytemnestra by Tyndareus. (See also *Helen*, *Castor*, and *Clytemnestra*.)

Leto Daughter of Titans Coeus and Phoebe; mother of Artemis and Apollo. When Zeus falls in love with Leto and she becomes pregnant, Hera chases her away until she finally lands on Delos, where she gives birth to the divine twins, Artemis and Apollo.

Medea Daughter of King Aetes of Colchis. A sorceress and lover of Jason, Medea uses her power to aid Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece. (See also *Jason*.)

Medusa The only mortal of the three Gorgons, winged creatures with snakes for hair that turn anyone who looks at them into stone. When legendary hero Perseus beheads Medusa, the winged horse, Pegasus, and the giant Chrysaor spring from her neck.

Menelaus Legendary king of Sparta; son of Atreus; husband of Helen; brother of Agamemnon. When the Trojan prince Paris abducts his wife, Helen, Menelaus enlists Agamemnon to lead the Greek forces in a war against Troy.

Metis Goddess of wisdom; mother of Athena. When Metis becomes pregnant by Zeus, he swallows Metis to protect his offspring and Athena is born from his head.

Midas King of Phrygia. Granted one wish by Dionysus, Midas asks that everything he touches turn to gold. Unable to eat or drink, he realizes his folly and has the wish reversed.

Minos King of Crete; son of Zeus and Europa; husband of Pasiphae; father of Ariadne, Phaedra, and others. Minos is a main player in many of the legends of Crete (see *Ariadne*, *Daedalus*, *Minotaur*, *Pasiphae*). The great king and lawmaker becomes a judge of the dead after his death.

Minotaur Mythical creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull kept by King Minos of Crete in the Labyrinth; offspring of Pasiphae and a bull (see *Pasiphae* for birth). The Minotaur is killed by the Athenian hero

Theseus.

Muses Nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (Memory) that serve as inspiration for the arts and sciences. Each muse is assigned a particular art: Calliope, epic poetry; Clio, history; Erato, love poetry; Euterpe, lyric poetry; Melpomene, tragedy; Polyhymnia, music and song; Terpsichore, dance; Thalia, comedy; and Urania, astronomy.

Narcissus Beautiful son of Liriope (nymph) and Cephissus (river god). When Narcissus rejects the advances of a nymph, the goddess of love, Aphrodite, damns him to fall in love with his own reflection. (See also *Echo*.)

Nemesis Goddess of vengeance, justice, and retribution; daughter of Nyx (Night).

Nereids Sea nymphs; daughters of Nereus and Doris (an Oceanid). Often numbered at 50, many Nereids have roles in Classical mythology, most notably Thetis, mother of Achilles, and Amphitrite, wife of Poseidon.

Nereus Sea god; son of Pontus and Gaea; husband of Doris (an Oceanid), father of the Nereids.

Nestor King of Pylos and hero of the Trojan War. In Homer's *Iliad* Nestor is portrayed as the voice of wisdom for the Greeks.

Nike (Victoria) Goddess of victory. She is usually winged and often seen as an aspect of Athena.

Niobe Wife of Amphion. Niobe boasts that she is better than Leto because she has seven sons and seven daughters while Leto only has two. Unfortunately, Leto's two children are Artemis and Apollo who avenge Niobe's hubris by killing all of her children.

Nyx (Nox) Personification of night; mother of Hypnos (Sleep), Thanatos (Death), and Nemesis (Vengeance), among others. Nyx is one of the principal entities to arise out of Chaos.

Oceanids Sea nymphs; daughters of the Titans Oceanos and Tethys. The most famous Oceanids in myth include Metis, mother of Athena, and Doris, mother of the Nereids.

Oceanos Sea god; Titan son of Uranus and Gaea; husband of Tethys; father of the Oceanids.

Odysseus King of Ithaca and hero of the Trojan War; son of Laertes; husband of Penelope; father of Telemachus. In Homer's *Iliad* Odysseus is the most clever of the Greeks. His lengthy return home from the war is the subject of Homer's *Odyssey*. (See *Aeolus*, *Argus*, *Calyso*, *Charybdis*, *Circe*, *Penelope*, *Polyphemus*, *Scylla*, *Sirens*, and *Telemachus*.)

Oedipus Legendary king of Thebes; son of Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes; father of Antigone, Eteocles, Ismene, and Polynices. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus was abandoned as a child and raised in Corinth. As an adult he returns to Thebes and unwittingly kills his father and marries his own mother after solving the riddle of the Sphinx. When the truth is revealed, he blinds himself and goes into exile.

Orestes Son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. In Aeschylus's trilogy, the *Oresteia*, Orestes avenges his father's death by killing Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, who plotted Agamemnon's murder. Orestes is tormented by the Furies for the murders but is eventually released from their persecution by a jury in a court presided over by Athena.

Orion Son of Poseidon. Orion is a giant and a great hunter with whom Eos falls in love. In one version, Artemis disapproves of the union and kills Orion. He is made into a constellation.

Orpheus Great musician and poet; son of the muse Calliope and Apollo (in some versions); husband of Eurydice. Having been bitten by a snake, Eurydice dies on their wedding day. Orpheus convinces Hades with his beautiful music to let him escort her out of Hades on the condition that he does not look back at her until they have left the underworld. He turns around accidentally and Eurydice is sent back to Hades permanently. Orpheus is later ripped to pieces by a group of maenads, followers of Dionysus.

Pan (Faunus, Inuus) God of flocks, the forest, and fertility. He is depicted in myth as a satyr (see *Satyr*) and sexual aggressor, often seen chasing nymphs in the woods.

Pandora The first woman. Zeus enlists Hephaestus to create Pandora. When Prometheus steals fire from Olympus and gives it to man, Zeus sends Pandora to Prometheus's brother Epimetheus along with a jar that she is ordered not to open. Curiosity gets the better of her, and she opens the jar, releasing evil and misery into the world. The only thing remaining in the jar when she closes the lid is hope.

Paris Prince of Troy; son of Priam and Hecuba; brother of Hector. Paris's kidnapping of Helen causes the Trojan War. In Homer's *Iliad* he kills Achilles by shooting an arrow into the Greek warrior's weak heel.

Pasiphae Wife of King Minos of Crete; mother of Ariadne, Phaedra, and others. When Minos insults Poseidon, the god inspires Pasiphae to yearn for a bull. She enlists Daedalus to construct a wooden cow that she hides in to mate with the

animal. The offspring of this union is the Minotaur. (See also *Daedalus*, *Minos*, and the *Minotaur*.)

Patroclus Greek hero of the Trojan War. Patroclus is the constant companion of Achilles. When Hector kills Patroclus, Achilles reenters the fighting, killing Hector and many others in a spree of vengeance.

Pegasus Winged horse; offspring of the gorgon Medusa and Poseidon. Along with the giant Chrysaor, Pegasus springs from Medusa's neck when Perseus decapitates her. (See also *Bellerophon*.)

Peleus Father of Achilles; husband of Thetis. Attended by the gods, the wedding of Peleus and Thetis is a popular theme in myth.

Penates Roman household gods; protectors of home, family, and hearth. Always seen in the plural, the Penates are often worshipped along with the Lares (see *Lares*).

Penelope Wife of Odysseus. Besieged by suitors throughout Odysseus's 10-year absence after the Trojan War, she remains faithful. She tells the suitors that she cannot remarry until she has finished weaving a shroud, but every night she unravels the work she has done, thus never finishing.

Persephone (Proserpina) See *Demeter*.

Perseus Son of Zeus and Danae (see *Danae* for birth). Challenged by King Polydectes, who is trying to get rid of him, Perseus sets out with various magical items from the gods (winged sandals, a special sword, and others) to slay the gorgon Medusa. When he returns with the gorgon's head to find Polydectes pursuing his mother, Perseus holds up the head and turns the king and his men into stone. (See also *Andromeda* and *Medusa*.)

Phaedra Daughter of Minos and Pasiphae. See *Hippolytus*.

Phaethon See *Helios*.

Phineus Legendary king of Salmydessus. Apollo gives Phineus the gift of prophesy but forbids him to reveal what he sees. When Phineus discloses details about the future, Zeus blinds him and sends the Harpies to snatch away anything he tries to eat. Jason and the Argonauts thwart the Harpies in exchange for information about the future of their journey.

Pollux (Greek, Polydeuces) See *Castor*.

Polynices See *Antigone*.

Polyphemus Cyclops encountered by Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus and his men escape the cave of

Polyphemus by blinding the one-eyed giant and hiding under his sheep as they go out to pasture.

Priam King of Troy; husband of Hecuba; father of Hector and Paris.

Priapus God of gardens, vines, flocks, and fertility. Statues of Priapus with an exaggerated phallus were often placed in Greek and Roman gardens.

Procris See *Cephalus*.

Prometheus Creator of man; son of the Titan Iapetus. Having fashioned man out of earth and water, Prometheus steals fire from Olympus and gives it to mortals. As punishment Zeus chains Prometheus to a rock with a bird incessantly pecking at his immortal liver. He is eventually freed by Heracles. Prometheus is also responsible for providing man with crafts, medicine, writing, and many other gifts.

Psyche Personification of the soul. Eros falls in love with Psyche, a beautiful nymph. Aphrodite forbids the affair, so Eros will only come to her in the dark when she cannot see who he is. Curious Psyche tries to get a look at him, but a drop of oil from her lamp falls and wakes him. He leaves her, but they are eventually reunited.

Pygmalion Sculptor in myth. Pygmalion creates a statue of a beautiful woman, which he calls Galatea. He falls in love with it and prays to Aphrodite that he find a wife like the statue. Aphrodite, impressed with his work, makes Galatea real.

Pyramus The Romeo and Juliet of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pyramus and Thisbe grow up next door to each other and fall in love. Their parents forbid them to marry, so they elope. Thisbe encounters a lioness, bloody from the hunt, at the meeting spot and runs away, leaving behind her veil. When Pyramus sees the veil and the lioness, he assumes Thisbe has been killed and stabs himself. When Thisbe sees Pyramus dying, she stabs herself and they die in each other's arms.

Remus See *Romulus*.

Rhea See *Cronus*.

Romulus Legendary founder of Rome; son of Mars and Rhea Silvia (priestess); twin brother of Remus. Abandoned as infants, the twins Romulus and Remus are nursed by a she-wolf and eventually found and raised by a shepherd. They grow up to co-found a city, but a power struggle leads to Romulus killing Remus. The new city is thus called Rome after its sole leader. Romulus is deified as Quirinus