

## Greek Mythology: Part Five

### Myth and Literature

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In this, the concluding number in our series on Greek mythology, we shall be examining myth as it appears in Greek literature. Although Greek mythology is a vast subject, and can be studied, like the mythologies of other nations, from a variety of viewpoints (historical, psychological, sociological), the most important and lasting legacy of the Greek tales is the literature they inspired. In contrast with the myths of the Near East or South America, Greek myths are highly literate and organized affairs. Most South American myths have never been written down by the natives themselves, but remain in purely oral form, passed by word of mouth; we have them only because modern anthropologists have gone into the region with tape recorders. The Ancient Near Eastern myths were not of course preserved by tape recorder, but the mainly oral nature of the widespread Gilgamesh epic is shown by the fact that we have it only in fragmentary, contradictory and scattered versions. Greek legends, by contrast, were from the earliest times actually shaped and passed on by poets.

There are several reasons for this. One is the unique and privileged position in society enjoyed by the poets. They were the wise men, the repositories of tradition. They could explain and interpret the past to you. In matters of religion they had a collective authority equivalent to that of the Bible in modern times. Poetry, too, was entertainment; at all manner of public and private occasions - festivals for the gods, sacrifices, weddings, symposia - music, song and dance were called for. In a world without newspapers, printing presses, television or movies, these gatherings became the chief form of relaxation, so that poetry played a much more prominent role in Greek society than it does in ours, or even in Roman society, given the Romans' consuming involvement in politics and business. Poets, in short, were important people; they mirrored the values of society.

But how did this situation come about? Why did tradition become so important, and what is it about Greek values that they are best explained by poets? I believe the answer is to be found in the unusual historical circumstances of the post-Mycenaean period. We saw in Part One how many of the legends are a reflection of late Bronze Age Greece, a period in which the mainland was dominated by overlords housed in strong fortresses, chief among them Mycenae. These are the barons who joined together to fight the Trojan War about 1250 B.C. The war may have exhausted them and left them weak for foreign invaders, since not long afterward the Mycenaean civilization collapsed. A Dark Age ensued, characterized at first by mass migrations, destruction and poverty, then by long and slow reconstruction. By the end of the ninth century the process was nearly complete, but it had taken four hundred years to climb back up to the point they had started from.

In the first century or two after the collapse, people struggled to retain some memory of the way things were. It was a great age, when people were larger than life and the gods walked the earth, unlike now, when the gods have abandoned us and life is miserable. Lovingly, carefully, the names were recorded, the geneologies were built up. Also an idea began to grow about

the nature of man, god, and the inspiring figure who stands between them, the hero: people like Agamemnon, Achilles, Odysseus, Jason - champions of the Mycenaean Age. The leading theme of Greek mythology took shape: that man is an insecure and insubstantial being, and above all mortal; that the immortal gods rule the world in their own interest, often cruelly, though somehow (we believe) justly; but that some hope for meaningful existence is provided by the possibility of achievement, of leaving a record for future men and women. The heroes show that; but they paid a price. They took terrible risks and were often struck down by jealous gods. But life is like that, said the Greeks, and indeed it was in the twelfth and eleventh centuries, when the world was violent and insecure. The problem is that we have no choice but to act, to take risks, to get on as best as we can. We are placed in a certain situation and have to make the best of it, even if we will lose in the end. Man is a tragic being.

Now these are very philosophical ideas, profound ideas. Not the normal stuff of mythology at all, but typical of Greek mythology. You need poets to deal with ideas such as these. Poets keep the record and tell you what it means. At bottom, the activity of Homer, the great tragedians and Pindar is the same. The same complex of ideas about man, fate and the gods emerges in all, though of course with varying emphases. Homer tells of Achilles on the field of Troy, and his fateful choice of the short and glorious life; Aeschylus examines the dreadful dilemma of Agamemnon, caught in a web spun by fate, the gods and human ambition; Sophocles probes the defiant character of Antigone, Ajax and Electra, who in their own way engineer their own destructions; Euripides shows us the agony of Heracles who comes face to face with the idea that, for all his labour, the world may make no sense at all; and Pindar glorifies his athletes, Olympic victors on whom Zeus' sunlight has shone for one exhilarating moment, knowing that that one moment is all we can hope for. Tomorrow the darkness may return, and man will once more be 'the dream of a shadow'. It is this acute Greek awareness of man's insecurity, combined with his hope for a solution to his predicament in his own terms, in this world, that strikes such a sympathetic cord in readers of the twentieth century, and accounts for the continuing immortality of the Greeks themselves, their poets and their mythology.