MAY THE GODS HELP US!

When I first started reading the stories of the Greek gods and goddesses, I thought they were a bit silly. Who wouldn’t? Like super hero comics they possessed an array of abilities and magic potions, they could shape shift, fly and throw lighting bolts around. These mythical figures seemed more suited for children’s stories than serious classical study! And yet, at the same time, they didn’t fit the usual role of a ‘God’ either. Petty, jealous and prone to rage, these divinities also exhibited a plethora of human weaknesses. The absurdity, however, does not end there.

Imagine the noble ancient Grecians and Romans, so advanced in philosophy, art, drama and military prowess, supplicating and sacrificing to the myriad of creatures in the sky. Did they believe all the stories? When did the myths begin? Who invented them and for what purpose?

Like many primitive religions, the first reason for its existence was to answer the unanswerable. Thus, mythology came to stand as our first attempt at philosophy and science. The Greeks and Romans relied on a dedicated god to pull the sun across the sky, and a deity for casting electricity down upon earth. Instead, we gaze through the lens of the telescope and the microscope for answers. However, science and logic can be traps for contemporary thinkers. In many ways, they make us believe we understand everything around us, and that we can control the world, the same way we maneuver machines. We might know how to drive a car, but does that necessarily mean we know where we are going?
And so, where modern man marvels at his own scientific explanations, the ancients conjured up special ‘men’ or ‘women’ to make sense of all the seemingly random natural occurrences in their world. But, and maybe more importantly, they also gave purpose behind these events. They knew to ask ‘why’ and not just ‘how’.

The Greco-Roman mind questioned more than just nature’s sources and its goals. They wondered why some people had fortunate lives, while others were constantly struck by tragedy. Was it all predetermined? Did some, by their actions, offend the Gods while others did not?

In addition to the ideas of fate and freewill, they considered the root of emotions and personalities. Why do we fall in love? Why are some men loyal and others full of deceit? Who decides which individual will be inspired by the muses or successful in battle?

For all these mysteries, the ancient Greeks looked to the Gods to explain the infinitely complex world, one that has never simplified. They sought comfort in an ordered existence, and an explanation for both themselves and their world. In this way their Gods were made in their image. They could look at them and see themselves, their flaws, and their own fortune. And failure to watch the gods was a failure to examine and understand their own lives. It was a mirror to view the full spectrum of human nature and an explanation for aberrations or deviations from the norm. For the Greeks there was no mental illness, only God driven madness, and the greatest heroes were given a divine help, else they’d fall victim to Hubris.
Further more, the Greeks employed the Gods to determine their own set of moralities. Learning from the divinities’ very immoral characters, ancient people were able to discuss whether actions were good or bad, question the rank of loyalties, as well as the rights and responsibilities of men.

Ultimately, we aren’t so different from the ancient Greeks. Much in our world we still can’t explain, though these unknowns continue to shape and impact our lives. Many of the questions above still plague our thoughts. We continue to see ‘fate’ in our lives, though we may not ascribe a ghostly phantom to such momentum. Current society doesn’t praise the pantheon for fortunate occurrences; it gives thanks to a ‘break’. At the same time, turns for the worse can be distilled to bad ‘luck’. We write books on why some people have everything and others nothing, trying to understand huge socio-economic patterns over the centuries. But when we look at our friends and family, we still wonder why a good man losses his mother too early…while elsewhere a scoundrel wins the lottery.

This brings us to the reason why we should learn about the Greek Gods and Goddesses. The ancients looked at their Godly reflection to both see and better themselves. Beholden, as we are, to the same profound questions, we can do likewise. The gods are relevant to us because they explain our mistakes and they prefigure our tragedies. In the end, discussing the divinities is not silly, but insightful, shedding light on the ancient world and revealing something about ourselves at the same time.

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SOCIETY’S SPOT FOR THE GODS

The stories of the Gods and Goddesses were very much ingrained in the Greco-Roman society. They worshiped them regularly, saw them in the plays, heard about them in the Epics. As such, ancient Grecians never had to ‘study’ the deities, they knew them as a matter of daily life. A modern comparison might be the prevalence of comic characters like Superman, or celebrities such as Tom Cruise. Ancient Athenians grew up knowing Achilles’ heel the same way we are informed of the perils of kryptonite or scientology. The Thebians of yore were able to recite Olympians’ abilities like we can distinguish members of the Beatles. It was woven into the fabric of their culture, stories, images and theatre. And if you weren’t acquainted with the myths and incestuous relationships, then you would lose out on the jokes, the profound points and maybe even the plot altogether.

ANCIENT ATHENIANS GREW UP KNOWING ACHILLES’ HEEL THE SAME WAY WE ARE INFORMED OF THE PERILS OF KRYPTONITE OR SCIENTOLOGY.

Today’s popular stories, embedded throughout YouTube clips, blogs, TV shows and e-books, don’t cover a lot Greek mythology. As such, a quick reminder is helpful in order to appreciate the backstory to some of the most compelling, tragic, morbid and heroic tales inscribed.

Fortunately for you, the whole sordid story is revealed here in as concise manner as the topic will allow.
WHAT DO YOU NEED KNOW?

Do you need to memorize all the gods, goddesses, nymphs, monsters and Greek heroes? Of course not! That would be ludicrous. In fact, you can read all the ancient Greek texts right away without knowing any of the Greek gods. You’ll be a bit confused sometimes and there will be whole stories and connotations you won’t get, but you’ll be able to read the book.

The most important thing to understand is the Olympians - the 12 major, ruling gods of the ancient world. (Interestingly enough, there are more than 12, but never more than 12 at any one time). If you have the gist on these guys, you’ll get along fine. They are the figures who feature regularly. In addition, the authors would have expected their audience to know them (and worship them!) and so they are not often explained within the tale.

There are, of course, other fantastic ‘characters’ that make appearances, such as the furies, who chase Orestes around for killing his mom. However, their role and characteristics are usually described in the story and it isn’t too necessary to know their back-story. (Such as in this case, when the furies were formed from castration.)

Saying all that, it’s great to read the chronology of what supposedly happened – not least because it’s an absolutely crazy story that will shock your friends at dinner parties.

One more point. There are many wonderful stories on how the Gods and Goddesses came to be, and also engaging myths on their love, revenge and all the emotions and actions that happen somewhere in between. However, there are often many versions, alterations and complete incongruences depending on which text you cite. So fret not if you know an alternative narration! The main point is usually the same.
HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The First Greek Gods

The first Greek Gods and Goddesses were essentially metaphysical representations of the world around the Ancient people. Not yet understanding the principles of astrophysics, geothermics, gravity and all that other science we take for granted, these superstitious folks made stories and personas around natural phenomena. Things like heaven, earth, love and night. This was basically their version of Cosmogony, or the creation of the earth.

According to Hesiod, one of the first Greek poets, the whole world and universe began with Chaos. As he explained in ‘Theogony’ (around 700 BC), the primeval state of existence was mostly just black emptiness. Incredibly, out of this sprang Gaea, or mother earth. Gaea then got busy making the mountains, valleys and all the rest that comprises the planet. Not satisfied with simply making something from nothing, Chaos went on to spawn Eros, or love, as well as Tartarus, the underground (which, subsequently mated with Mother earth to create Typhoon). Then Chaos gave birth to Erebus (dark silence) and Nyx, the symbol of night. Those two united, thanks to Eros, to create Aether (Atmosphere) and Hemera (the day).

Conveniently enough, Nyx (night) lived with her daughter, Hemera (day), in the underworld. They would alternate their journeys outside, pleasantly saying g’day as they passed each other twice a day. This charming folktale explains the movement of both the sun and the moon.

According to Hesiod, one of the first Greek poets, the whole world and universe began with Chaos.
Finally Gaea brought to the world Uranus (the Heaven) and the infinite Pontus (the Sea).

*And so the Incest Begins! Family Tree of the First Greek Gods:*

![Family Tree of the First Greek Gods](image)

**How the Titans were Born**

Now it starts to get even weirder. The universe had been created, but there were only a few Gods, not nearly enough to fill up a Pantheon. So Gaea, mother earth, formed a union with Uranus. He enveloped her in his starry skies and the two became the first divine couple in the universe. From this majestic union, Gaea gave birth to twelve titans (as well as a few other odd creatures).
This worried Uranus. Fearing the children would take him down; he imprisoned some in the underworld. Gaea, not surprisingly, wasn’t impressed and created a great sickle so that one of her children might take revenge. Only Cronus, the youngest one, had the gumption and wherewithal to do the deed...that being, somewhat bizarrely, the castration of his own father. During the process, however, Uranus warned his son that one day Cronus’ own offspring will rebel against him, just as he did against his own father. The castration process also created a few other gods. Aphrodite, for example, washed up upon an island shore, after Uranus’ genitalia was cast into the sea. The blood spilled from the severed member was used by Gaea to form the furies, along with giants and nymphs.

Once Cronus took the throne, he shared the cosmos with his kin (except those who he had re-imprisoned). He then set about marrying his sister, Rhea, with whom he proceeded to create the next generation of Gods, the Olympians. But the apple does not fall far from the tree. Scared that the young ones would overthrow him as his dad foretold, Cronus ate his kids. Once again, the wife was not happy with this turn of events and so tricked her husband into eating a stone, instead of the last child, Zeus.

This mini God safely grew up in Crete where all the animals and nymphs took care of him until he was old enough to rescue his brothers and sisters. At this point Zeus started the great Titanomachy - or war against the Titans (and his father).
The entire creation story of the Gods laid out

Chaos

Uranus (Heaven)

Gaia (Mother earth)

Tartarus (Underworld)

Eros (Love)

Erebus (Silence)

Nyx (Night)

Aether (Atmosphere)

Hemera (Day)

Thyphoon

Creatures & Cyclops

Zeus

Hera

Demeter

Hades

Hestia

Maea

Semele

Metis

Leto

Apollo

Artemis

Athena

Dionysus

Mneosyne

Cronus

Atlas

Prometheus

Cris

Iapetus

Themis

Oceanus

Tethys

Coeus

Phoebi

Hyperion

Theia

Rhea

Cronus

Blood

Furies

Giants

Nymphs

Genitals

Apadite

Deucalion

Pyrrha

Survived a Great Flood (Just like Noah). Their children became the HELLEN PEOPLE (Greeks)

Deucalion’s Wife

12 Titans

Zeus

Hera

Demeter

Hades

Hestia

Poseidon

Ares

Hephaestus

Aphrodite

OLYMPIANS

CRONUS CASTRATES HIS FATHER
The battle of the titans lasted 10 years, after which the Olympians emerged victorious and took the throne on Mount Olympus. Most of the losing Titans were cast into the underworld. A select few of the enemy were met with even harsher punishment. Atlas and Prometheus, for example, were awarded unique and grueling torture. The former was famously sentenced to holding on his shoulders the weight of the world, the latter with having his liver eaten daily.

After the battle with the Titans, Zeus shared the world with his elder brothers, Poseidon and Hades, by drawing lots: Zeus got the sky and air, Poseidon the waters, and Hades the world of the dead (the underworld). The ancient Earth, Gaia, could not be claimed; she was left to all three, each according to their capabilities. This provided a nice explanation as to why Poseidon was the "earth-shaker" (the god of earthquakes) and Hades could claim the humans that died.

After that, the King and Queen of the Olympians got busy making babies and more Olympians. The Gods, keen to increase their kin, mated with each other, mortals, beasts and what not to create a whole slew of creatures with all sorts of varying divinity.
Genealogy of the Olympians
In Greek Mythology

Uranus
Gaea

Oceanus
Hyperion
Coeus
Crisus
Iapetus
Mnemosyne

Cronus
Rhea
Tethys
Theia
Phoebe
Themis

Zeus
Hera
Hestia
Demeter
Hades
Poseidon

Ares
Hephaestus
Hebe
Eileithyia
Enyo
Eris

Metis
Maea
Leto
Semele

Aphrodite
Athena
Hermes
Apollo
Artemis
Dionysus
The Olympians

As previously mentioned, the mighty Olympians are the main Gods you need to know. At least one of them will make an appearance in any play or epic. They are revered and referred to in all the philosophical debates and historical recordings. Essentially, you can’t swing a toga in ancient literature without hitting an Olympian God. Conveniently enough, the Romans took on, more or less, the same Gods as the Greeks; they just renamed them so they could feign originality. As a result, you can see an alternative, Roman name beside the Greek title.

Zeus (Jupiter)

Zeus was the King of the Gods - the Big Kahuna in the sky. The youngest child of Cronus and Rhea, he led the Olympians in the Battle of the Titans and earned his throne on Mount Olympus. He was given the power of the thunderbolt from Cyclops, Gaea’s child, after Zeus freed him from the underworld. Although he was brother and husband of Hera, this divinity didn’t keep to one bed, but rather was famous for his romantic escapades. As a consequence of his amorous affairs, Zeus was father to literally hundreds of children, both mortal and godly. A few of the latter are even Olympians. His symbols include the thunderbolt, eagle, oak tree, scepter and scales.
Hera (Juno)

Hera, the youngest daughter of Cronus and Rhea, was the Queen of the gods and held this high status with her husband and brother, Zeus. Tragically united with a husband renowned for his extra-marital affairs, Hera was ironically the goddess of marriage and family. As a result, she was usually inflamed with jealousy and rage and often tried to take revenge on her hubbie’s lovers and their children. Symbols include the peacock, pomegranate, crown, cuckoo, lion and cow.

Poseidon (Neptune)

Poseidon was the middle son of Cronus and Rhea and brother of Zeus and Hades. He was the moody man behind the seas, earthquakes and horses. As such, he was often pictured riding horses in the ocean (trident in hand), while an earthquake may or may not be rumbling. His equine love extended further, as he once transformed himself into a stallion in order to realize a mating opportunity. Unfortunately the Goddess Demeter, who was disguised as a horse at the time, was the one to bare him a colt. While Poseidon was technically married to the Nereid, or sea nymph, Amphitrite, he continued the Greek God tradition of infidelity, though not always with a mare. Interestingly enough, he was also the ‘cause’ for epilepsy. Symbols include the horse, bull, dolphin and trident.
Demeter (Ceres)

Kelloggs should put this God on their box, as Demeter was the Goddess of agriculture, in particular those yummy breakfast grains. In fact, her Latin name, Ceres, gave us the word "cereal". The middle daughter of Cronus and Rhea, Demeter had a few other domains as well, such as fertility, nature, and the seasons. In regards to the latter, there’s a convenient story. Essentially, Hades stole Demeter’s virgin daughter, Persephone, into the underworld. When she was down there her mother grieved, causing autumn and winter. In the end Zeus made a deal so Persephone could return yearly, which initiated spring and fertility from her happy mother. Symbols include the poppy, wheat, torch, and pig.

Dionysus (Bacchus)

Everyone’s favorite God, Dionysus gave the good people wine, celebrations, epiphanies, theatre, ecstasy and little sprinkling of good old-fashioned ritual madness. A symbol of the exotic, dangerous and unexpected, he was the champion for the unconventional souls in the city. He was also the protector of foreigners, gifter of the Midas touch and the Patron god of the art of theatre. But it was not all drunken acting and revelry. The dark side of this god involved mysterious cults, blood sacrificing and the blind murderous frenzies he liked to inspire. Dionysus was the son of Zeus and the mortal Theban princess.
Semele, and was married to the Cretan princess Ariadne. Symbols include the grapevine, ivy, cup, tiger, panther, leopard, dolphin and goat.

Apollo (Apollo)

Apollo (who the Romans also called Apollo, as there was not an equivalent Latin God) was Nietzsche’s nice guy. In contrast to Dionysus he represented intellectual order and was the archetype of the young, strong unbearded youth. In addition, he was the god of light, knowledge, music, poetry, prophecy and archery. He did, however, use his poisoned arrows from time to time to bring on the plague. Like many of the Gods before and after him, Apollo was no stranger to promiscuity, though he didn’t confine his trysts to strictly female companionship. The son of Zeus and Leto and the twin brother of Artemis, Apollo’s symbols include the sun, lyre, bow and arrow, raven, dolphin, wolf, swan and mouse.

Artemis (Diana)

Artemis was Apollo’s twin sister and daughter of Zeus and Leto. Breaking from popular family tradition, she remained a virgin and took her chastity very seriously – so much so that she transformed a peeping tom into a stag to be devoured by his own dogs. Being the goddess of the hunt, Artemis both protected and killed animals. She also got particularly uppity about men who claimed to be better hunters than her,
which usually resulted in the arrogant fellow’s untimely death. Lastly, she was a divinity for childbirth after astonishingly helping her mother bear her twin brother. Symbols include the moon, deer, hound, she-bear, snake, cypress tree and bow and arrow.

**Hermes (Mercury)**

The quick-witted trickster, Hermes was the Messenger of the gods as well as the god of commerce and thieves. Slipping between the two worlds, Hermes played pranks for his own amusement and often got involved in the mortals’ affairs. He was the son of Zeus and the nymph Maia and married Dryope, the daughter of Dryops. Their son Pan became the god of nature, lord of the satyrs, inventor of the panpipes and comrade of Dionysus. Symbols include the caduceus (a staff entwined with two snakes), winged sandals and cap, stork and tortoise (whose shell he used to invent the lyre).

**Athena (Minerva)**

Athena, not surprisingly, was the patron saint of her namesake city, Athens. She won the honor in a competition with Poseidon by giving the people an olive tree, which they preferred over the Sea God’s salty offering. Athena was also the virgin goddess of wisdom, courage, mathematics, defense, strategic warfare, law and justice. She was essentially the polar opposite of Ares, the unpopular God of bloodlust. In addition, Athena
was the divinity of skill and crafts. When challenged on the latter, she turned her weaving competitor, Arachne, into a Spider. Daughter of Zeus and the Oceanid Metis, her father had swallowed her mother and then suffered a splitting headache. After his skull was split open, Athena jumped from her father's head already grown and in full battle armor. Symbols include the owl and the olive tree.

Ares (Mars)

Ares was the God the other Gods didn’t really like. They knew he was important for winning wars, but his propensity to violence and bloodshed made the others wary. In fact, he was usually ridiculed whenever possible. However, as the founding father of the Romans, his Latin counterpart took on a much more dignified role. In fact, his name, Mars, gave us the word "martial." While Ares, Son of Zeus and Hera, was the God of war, he also made plenty of love, fathering a plethora of little god-lets, including Eros (Roman: Cupid). Many of these were born to the married Aphrodite (the only God that didn’t hate him), which brought him additional flack from her much smarter husband, Hephaestus. Symbols include the boar, serpent, dog, vulture, spear and shield.

Aphrodite (Venus)

Aphrodite, according to some narratives, was the product of her father’s castrated and discarded genitalia. Following this version, she was actually older than Zeus, being a Titan derived from Uranus' blood. Despite these morbid beginnings, she was renowned as the Goddess of love, beauty, and
desire. Due to Aphrodite's irresistible appearance, Zeus married her off to the ugliest God, Hephaestus, so that the other divinities wouldn't get jealous and threaten the peace. However, she did not remain loyal to her blacksmith husband and took many lovers, including Ares, the god of war, and Adonis. Aphrodite featured heavily in many myths, usually causing trouble. The most famous example is her role in starting the Trojan War, by giving the Trojan prince, Paris, the most beautiful woman in the world, who was inconveniently married to someone else. Aphrodite's name gave us the word "aphrodisiac", while her Latin name gave us the word "venereal". Symbols include the dove, bird, apple, bee, swan, myrtle and rose.

**Hephaestus (Vulcan)**

The only ugly and deformed God, Hephaestus resided underground and created all the magnificent weapons used by the Gods. This Master blacksmith and god of fire was married off to Aphrodite, however unlike most divine husbands, he was not the licentious type. Son of Hera, either by Zeus or alone, Hephaestus was the only God to be exiled from Olympus and allowed to return again. All he had to do was hold his mother hostage in a throne, forged by his hammer. His Latin name, Vulcan, gave us the word "volcano." Symbols include fire, anvil, axe, donkey, hammer, tongs and quail.
**What now?**

With this easy Guide to the Greek Gods and Goddesses, you’re now ready to begin enjoying the tales that brought forth a sweeping history of storytelling, mythology, tragedy and delight. We suggest beginning with Sophocles’ masterpiece, Oedipus Rex, the tragic unfolding of a man’s life and destiny, featuring, among other famous names, “Nietzsche’s nice guy,” Apollo.

Begin today by reading Classical Wisdom Weekly’s copy of *Oedipus Rex* [here](#).

Also, if you’d like to read along with a partner or a friend, please feel free to [spread the word](#) on Classical Wisdom Weekly. You can also like us on Facebook and enjoy tips, quotes and discussions from the [Classical Wisdom community](#).