Mythology

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDITH HAMILTON

Edith Hamilton was born in Dresden, Germany, as one of four sisters. Her father was a scholar who raised Hamilton on the Classics, teaching her both Latin and Greek starting at age seven. Hamilton graduated from Bryn Mawr College and briefly studied in Germany, but then returned to America to take over as head of the Bryn Mawr girls' school. Hamilton was long considered the "greatest woman Classicist," but she did not publish a book until she was 62. Her first works, *The Greek Way* and *The Roman Way*, both drew comparisons and contrasts between Classical life and modern times, though Hamilton is best known for *Mythology*. In 1957 Hamilton was made an honorary citizen of Athens, which she considered the proudest moment of her life. She died at age 95.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many of the stories of *Mythology* take place in the world of "Ancient Greece," which was in reality a complicated jumble of rival city-states and islands. Most of the myths originated in Athens, one of the strongest city-states of the time, and the one most dedicated to artistic and philosophical endeavors. The myths Hamilton retells span the Persian War (490-479 B.C.E.), when Athens first became a dominant power, the Trojan War (about which little is known historically, and which may not have actually occurred), the empire of Alexander the Great, when the cultural capitol of the region shifted to Alexandria, Egypt, and the rise of the Roman Empire, ending with the Latin poets Virgil and Ovid in the time of Caesar Augustus. The Norse mythology Hamilton describes mostly originated in Iceland, and was consolidated by the poet Snorri Sturluson in the 13th century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The actual texts Hamilton interprets and summarizes in *Mythology* have become fundamental works of World Literature, comparable to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* of ancient Mesopotamia or the *Ramayana* of ancient India. Most Western literature and thought, from Shakespeare to Freud to contemporary fiction, has descended from the Greek and Roman myths that Hamilton retells.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1942
- **Literary Period:** Classical scholarship
- **Genre:** Historical non-fiction, Classics, Mythology
- **Setting:** Ancient Greece and surrounding mythological areas, Iceland and Scandinavia
- **Climax:** The labors of Hercules, the Trojan War
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Discrimination. Hamilton received a fellowship to study for a Classics doctoral degree in Europe, but when she tried to take classes in Germany she was refused or alienated because she was a woman. In Munich, Hamilton was forced to sit on the lecturer's platform, separated from and facing the audience, so no one would be "contaminated" by her.

Sister. Hamilton's sister Alice also became a notable scholar and philanthropist. She became Harvard's first female professor in 1919.

PLOT SUMMARY

Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* is like a huge study guide itself, as it overviews the principle Greek and Roman myths and briefly delves into Norse mythology. The book holds only a loose chronological order, as the mythological world is so huge and entangled that Hamilton must often reference characters and stories that are explained much earlier or later. In her introduction, she gives her reason for studying these myths, as she sees them as precursors to Western thought and useful to modern Americans.

Hamilton then introduces the major Greek gods, who live on Mount Olympus: Zeus, the chief and god of thunder and sky, Hera, his sister and jealous wife, his fierce, independent daughters Athena and Artemis, his sons cruel Ares and poetic, prophetic Apollo, his brothers, Poseidon the sea god and Hades the god of the dead, Hestia, his sister and the protector of the hearth, the clever messenger Hermes, the craftsman Hephaestus, and Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. Other important gods are Demeter, goddess of corn, and Dionysus, the god of wine, both of whom live on earth. Lesser gods and supernatural creatures include Eros, nymphs of all kinds, and personifications of abstract concepts like Justice and Memory.

The Greek creation story begins with only Chaos, Night, and Death. Next comes Love, and with it Heaven and Earth, and then monsters and the godlike Titans. The gods, who are children of the Titan Cronus, overthrow their father (led by

Zeus) and rule the universe. They then create humans, who populate the earth along with other supernatural creatures. Hades is the land of the dead.

The stories begin to multiply and expand as the gods, especially the lecherous Zeus, copulate with humans and give birth to both heroes and tales of tragic love. Hamilton begins with early heroes like the Titan Prometheus, and then famous mortal heroes, which she describes in depth, like Theseus, Hercules, Achilles, Odysseus, and Aeneas. She groups the short biographies around the Trojan War, a mythological battle that involves many of the most famous heroes and is immortalized in Homer's epics.

The stories of heroes often explain the founding of cities or bloodlines (like Aeneas, the mythological forefather of the Romans), but other myths explain natural phenomena like the constellations or the origins of flowers, while others serve no purpose other than pure entertainment. The flower myths usually involve beautiful youths dying tragically, and Hamilton sees these as poeticized versions of early stories of human sacrifice. Throughout the book she traces threads of primitive barbarism – like **cannibalism** and human sacrifice – along with the more "civilized" ideals that gradually replace them.

Later in the book Hamilton describes the complex, tragic stories of the late Greek playwrights. These myths, including famously tragic heroes like Oedipus and Orestes, question the power of fate and the ability of mortals to have free will even in the face of the gods' prophecies. They also examine situations where Greek ideas of morality and justice are put at odds with each other, as with Orestes, who is caught between avenging his father and sparing his mother. These tragedies are connected to multi-generational families, where the sins of the parents are revisited or punished by the children, and bloodshed always leads to more bloodshed.

In the final section, Hamilton briefly discusses Norse mythology, as she sees this as another important influence on modern Western thought. Hardly any of the Norse tales have survived, and they lack any great epic poets like Homer to consolidate and empower the myths, though they are rich with tragic material. The Norse worldview is much more bleak than that of the Greeks and Romans, as all the gods and mortals are doomed to die in Ragnarok, the battle at the end of the world when evil will be victorious. Hamilton discusses some of the most famous Norse gods and heroes, and also explains the Norse idea of heroism, which was more extreme than that of the Greeks – because the Norsemen felt that tragedy was inevitable, they valued a heroic death over all else.

CHARACTERS

Homer – An ancient Greek poet who wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Ovid – A Roman poet who describes many myths in his *Metamorphoses*, but sees them as entertaining tales rather than essential truths.

Virgil – A Roman epic poet, the author of the *Aeneid*.

Apollodorus – A Roman writer who describes many myths in a dull, straightforward manner.

Aeschylus – A Greek tragedian who wrote about Agamemnon, Orestes, and Thebes.

Sophocles – A Greek tragedian who wrote about Oedipus and his family.

Euripides – A Greek tragedian who wrote about many mythological figures.

Zeus – Jupiter in Latin. The chief of the Greek gods, the God of Heaven and wielder of thunderbolts. Zeus is married to his sister Hera, but is famously unfaithful to her with a variety of mortal women.

Hera – Juno in Latin. Zeus's sister and wife, a jealous, spiteful goddess.

Poseidon – Neptune in Latin. Zeus's brother, the god of the sea and horses.

Hades – Zeus's brother, the ruler of the land of the dead.

Pallas Athena – Minerva in Latin. Zeus's daughter, a fierce, independent goddess associated with war, civilization, and craftsmanship.

Phoebus Apollo – The "most Greek" of the gods, the God of Light, Truth, and Music.

Aphrodite – Venus in Latin. The goddess of Love and Beauty.

Artemis – Diana to the Romans. The maiden goddess of hunting and the forests.

Hermes – Mercury to the Romans. A clever god with winged shoes and a winged hat, a messenger for Zeus.

Hephaestus – The only ugly Olympian, the beloved armorer of the gods. Vulcan in Latin.

Ares – Mars in Latin. The cruel, hated god of war and chaos.

Earth – One of the first entities in the universe, Mother Earth seems to create itself. She first gives birth to Heaven, then a race of monsters, and then the Titans.

Heaven – The counterpart to Earth, though also her child, and the father of the monsters and Titans.

Cronus – The ruler of the Titans, who gives birth to Zeus and is then overthrown by him.

Prometheus – A Titan who helps mankind by giving them fire, and is horribly punished by Zeus.

Dionysus – The God of Wine, one of the great gods of the earth who experiences a sacrificial death each winter. The first plays were written for Dionysus. He is called Bacchus by the Romans.

Demeter – The Goddess of Corn, the other great god of the earth, and the mother of Persephone. She is called Ceres in Latin.

Eros – Aphrodite's son, the God of Love, known as Cupid to the Romans.

Persephone – Demeter's daughter, a mortal who is kidnapped by Hades and made Queen of the Dead.

Odysseus – A famously clever hero of the Trojan War, who came up with the idea for the Trojan Horse. Odysseus's long, arduous journey home is the subject of the *Odyssey*.

Jason – The hero of the Quest of the Golden Fleece. He is saved by Medea but later rejects her.

Theseus – The favorite hero of the Athenians, Theseus kills the Minotaur and institutes democracy in Athens.

Hercules – The greatest Greek hero, the strongest and bravest of mortals. He completes twelve famous tasks, kills many monsters, and is only defeated by magic or his own shame.

Perseus – The hero who kills the Gorgon Medusa.

Aeneas – A Trojan hero, the only one to escape the fall of Troy. After journeying to Italy Aeneas becomes the father of the Roman people.

Atalanta – The greatest female hero, the killer of the Caledonian Boar. She only married the man who could outrun her in a race.

Achilles – Moody hero of the Trojan War, who kills Hector and is then killed by Paris.

Hector – The greatest Trojan hero, a tragic figure killed by Achilles.

Paris – The son of King Priam of Troy, Paris's judgment of Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera, followed by his abduction of Helen, leads to the Trojan War.

Helen – The most beautiful woman on earth, wife of Menelaus. The Trojan War begins when she falls in love with Paris and he carries her off.

Menelaus – The husband of Helen and King of Sparta.

Agamemnon – The King of Mycenae, leader of the Greek army in the Trojan War. He is later killed by his wife as vengeance for sacrificing their daughter.

Clytemnestra – Agamemnon's wife, who kills him to avenge their daughter.

Orestes – The son of Agamemnon, who kills Clytemnestra to avenge his father. After being pursued by the Furies he eventually finds atonement.

Iphigenia – Daughter of Agamemnon, sacrificed on the journey to Troy. In some stories she later becomes a priestess of the Taurians.

Electra – Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who longs to avenge her father.

Oedipus – King of Thebes who inadvertently kills his father and marries his mother, fulfilling a prophecy at his birth.

Laius – The father of Oedipus, who abandons him as a baby and is then killed by him years later.

Jocasta – Laius's wife, who later marries Oedipus.

Antigone – Daughter of Oedipus, who is executed for burying her brother.

Creon – Jocasta's brother, who becomes regent of Thebes after Oedipus abdicates.

Ismene – Oedipus's other daughter.

Polyneices – Oedipus's son, who fights for the throne and then lies unburied after being defeated by Creon.

Eteocles – Oedipus's other son, who also dies fighting for the throne.

Medea – A powerful witch who does many terrible things out of love for Jason, but then is abandoned by him.

Atlas – A Titan who is punished by having to ceaselessly hold up Heaven and Earth on his shoulders.

Penelope – Odysseus's wife, who is beset by suitors while he is away.

Telemachus – Odysseus's son.

The Muses – Nine goddesses associated with artistic and scientific inspiration.

Nemesis – The personification of divine vengeance.

Proteus – A shape-shifting sea god.

Charon – Boatman of the underworld, who ferries souls across the river to Hades.

Cerberus – The three-headed dog who guards the gates of Hades.

The Furies – Female goddesses who pursue and punish evildoers.

Castor and Pollux – Twins who become semi-immortal, the brothers of Helen.

Aeolus – The keeper of the Four Winds.

Boreas – The god of the North Wind.

Zephyr – The god of the West Wind.

The Sirens – Supernatural beings who lure sailors to death with their song.

Clotho – One of the three Fates, who spins the thread of life.

Lachesis – The second Fate, who allots a person's destiny.

Atropos – The third Fate, who cuts the thread at the end of a person's life.

Pentheus – A king who insults Dionysus and then is killed by his mother.

Rhea – Zeus's mother, who saves him as a baby from Cronus.

Epimetheus – The scatterbrained brother of Prometheus.

Pandora – The first woman, who introduces evil into the world by opening a forbidden box.

Io – A woman who Zeus loves and then turns into a white cow.

Argus – A god with a thousand eyes.

Europa – A woman whom Zeus loves and kidnaps; the namesake of Europe.

Polyphemus – A Cyclops who traps and then is outwitted by Odysseus. He loves a nymph.

Narcissus – A beautiful youth who falls in love with his own reflection.

Echo – A nymph who can only repeat what others say.

Hyacinthus – A youth Apollo accidentally kills and then memorializes with a flower.

Adonis – A beautiful youth whom both Persephone and Aphrodite love.

Psyche – A beautiful mortal, the wife of Cupid.

Pyramus and Thisbe – Two lovers who talk through a crack in the wall.

Orpheus – The greatest mortal musician, who tries to fetch his wife Eurydice from Hades.

Eurydice – Orpheus's wife, who almost escapes Hades.

Ceyx and Alcyone – Husband and wife who are turned into birds together.

Pygmalion – An artist who falls in love with his own sculpture.

Daphne – A nymph whom Apollo pursues, she is then turned into a tree.

Ætes – The King of Colchis, who sends Jason on the Quest of the Golden Fleece.

Phaëthon – The Sun-god's son, who fails to drive his father's chariot.

Bellerophon – The hero who tames Pegasus.

Pegasus – A horse with wings, born out of the beheading of Medusa.

The Chimaera – A monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a snake.

Otus and Ephialtes – Two Giant brothers who scorn the gods and are punished.

Daedalus – A famous inventor who built the Labyrinth and escapes by building wings.

Minos – The King of Crete, who feeds youths to the Minotaur.

Ariadne – Daughter of Minos, who loves Theseus and helps him through the Labyrinth.

Icarus – Daedalus's son, who flies too close to the sun with his father's man-made wings and drowns.

Danaë – The mother of Perseus, Zeus impregnates her in the form of a golden rain.

Medusa – A Gorgon, a monster with snakes for hair and a look that turns mortals to stone.

Aegeus – The father of Theseus and King of Athens.

The Minotaur – A half-man, half-bull monster who lives in the Labyrinth.

Hippolytus – Theseus's son who is exiled over a misunderstanding.

Pirithoüs – Theseus's ambitious but foolish friend.

Phaedra – Theseus's second wife, who kills herself and frames Hippolytus.

Eurystheus – The king who assigns Hercules his twelve labors.

Hippolyta – The queen of the Amazons.

Deianira – Hercules's wife, who unintentionally causes his death.

Omphale – A queen whom Hercules must serve as a slave.

Meleager – A man who loves Atalanta and finishes off the Caledonian boar.

Melanion – Atalanta's husband, who beats her in a race by distracting her with golden apples.

Priam – The King of Troy, father of Paris and Hector.

Leda – A woman Zeus seduces as a swan, the mother of Helen.

Thetis – A sea-nymph, Achilles' mother.

Ajax – One of the great Greek heroes of the Trojan War.

Diomedes – Another Greek hero of the Trojan War.

Andromache – Hector's wife, who later marries the prophet Helenus.

Patroclus – Achilles' friend who fights in his armor and is killed by Hector.

Oenone – A nymph who loves Paris, but then lets him die after he leaves her for Helen.

Cassandra – The daughter of King Priam, gifted with prophecy but cursed to never be believed.

Nestor – An old, clever hero of Troy.

Calypso – A nymph who loves Odysseus and holds him captive for ten years.

Circe – A witch who turns men into pigs.

Teiresias – A blind prophet of Thebes.

Eumaeus – Odysseus's faithful swineherd.

Helenus – A prophet of Troy, who later marries Andromache.

Dido – The founder and queen of Carthage, she loves Aeneas but then is abandoned by him and commits suicide.

Anchises – Aeneas's father, whom Aeneas visits in the underworld.

Lavinia – Aeneas's wife, the daughter of King Latinus.

Turnus – The leader of the Rutulians, Aeneas's main enemy.

Mezentius – Turnus's ally, the cruel former ruler of the Etruscans.

Evander – A king of a small, poor town, but who is helpful to Aeneas.

Tantalus – A mortal who inexplicably serves his own son as food to the gods.

Pelops – Tantalus's son, who is resurrected by the gods.

Niobe – Tantalus's daughter, she compares herself to the gods and is punished.

Atreus – A son of Pelops, who kills his brother's children and serves them as food.

Thyestes – Atreus's brother, who becomes an unwitting **cannibal**.

Aegisthus – The son of Thyestes, Clytemnestra's lover.

Pylades – Orestes' cousin and friend, who helps him in his endeavors.

Cadmus – Europa's brother and the founder of Thebes.

Semele – Dionysus's mother, who is killed by seeing Zeus's full glory.

Agave – The mother of Pentheus, whom Dionysus drives to kill her son.

Ino – A daughter of Cadmus who later becomes a sea-goddess.

Actaeon – A hunter who accidentally sees Artemis naked and is killed.

The Sphinx – A monster who is part woman, part lion, and kills people if they can't solve her riddle.

Cecrops – Half dragon, half man, the Athenian king who chooses Athena as the city's patron.

Erechtheus – A famous early king of Athens.

Procne – A daughter of Erechtheus who kills her son and serves him to her cruel husband Tereus.

Philomela – Procne's sister. Tereus cuts her tongue out and imprisons her.

Tereus – A cruel son of Ares, Procne's husband.

Procris – Procne's niece, who is unduly tested by her husband.

Cephalus – The husband of Procris, kidnapped by Aurora.

Orithyia – A woman kidnapped by the North Wind.

Creüsa – Procris's sister, who is raped by Apollo.

Midas – A foolish king who wishes that everything he touches would turn to gold.

Silenus – Drunken old man who accompanies Dionysus.

Chiron – A Centaur who mentors many young heroes.

Aesculapius – The greatest mortal healer, punished for raising a man from the dead.

Hypermnestra – The only one of fifty sisters to not kill her husband.

Glaucus – A sea-god who loves Scylla.

Scylla – A nymph who is turned into a horrible rock-monster that threatens sailors.

Arachne – A skilled weaver who challenges Athena and is turned into a spider.

Leto – The mother of Apollo and Artemis, a lover of Zeus.

Orion – A great hunter who becomes a constellation.

Sisyphus – A man punished by being made to eternally push a rock uphill.

Sigurd – The greatest Norse hero, the son of Sigmund. Sigurd loves Brynhilde but is made to forget her, and he is later killed by Gunnar.

Signy – Sigmund's sister, who bears him a child and helps kill her wicked husband.

Sigmund – Signy's brother, who kills her husband and his children.

Sinfiotli – The son of Signy and Sigmund, conceived as a helper for their vengeance.

Brynhild – A Valkyrie loved by both Sigurd and Gunnar.

Gunnar – Sigurd's friend, who marries Brynhilde and later has Sigurd killed.

Gudrun – Gunnar's sister, who marries Sigurd.

Odin – The chief of the Norse gods, a sky-god who constantly seeks out wisdom and is doomed to die at Ragnarok.

Balder – Odin's son, who is killed by Loki with a mistletoe twig.

Loki – A Norse trickster god and villain.

Frigga – The mother of Balder and wife of Odin.

Hela – The Norse goddess of the dead.

Freya – The Norse goddess of love and beauty, who also takes half of those slain in battle.

Thor – The strongest Norse god, the god of thunder.

Ymir – The giant whose body parts become the universe in the Norse creation story, Odin's grandfather.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FATE

The power of fate hangs over the lives of all the characters Hamilton describes, and even controls the gods themselves. In Greek mythology, Fate was personified as three sisters: Clotho, the spinner of life's thread, Lachesis, the allotter of a person's destiny, and Atropos, who cut the thread at death. These three are rarely mentioned by name, but their power seems to have control over even Zeus, the most powerful of the gods.

The Greek poets and playwrights found great irony in the fact that individuals might seal their fate by the very precautions they took to prevent it. The Titan Cronus learns that a child of his is destined to overthrow him, so he swallows all his children as soon as they are born. Gaia, his wife, hides the infant Zeus away, and later he does indeed overthrow his father, but it is perhaps Cronus's very bloodthirstiness that makes his own wife and son turn against him. Among mortals a famous example involves Oedipus and his father Laius. Laius also learns that his son will kill him, so he leaves the infant Oedipus to die – which only means that the two do not recognize each other when they quarrel on a highway years later, and thus fate is fulfilled.

In Norse mythology, Hamilton emphasizes the sense of doom that pervades the Norse worldview, as the universe will inevitably end and all the mortals and gods will be killed at Ragnarok. Because of this, there is only heroism and a brave death to strive for, as one's doom is already sealed. The Norsemen also have three Fate figures, the Norns.

PRIDE AND HUBRIS

The greatest sin in many myths is when a mortal grows too proud and claims to be the equal or superior of the gods. This arrogance, also called "hubris," is inexplicably common and always punished horribly. The Greeks clearly felt that hubris was a terrible sin, but often in punishing it so extremely the gods showed their spiteful, jealous sides. There are even cases where the mortal's pride is deserved, as with Arachne, who boasts of her skill at weaving but then is able to actually weave cloth as beautiful as Athena's. The jealous Athena turns Arachne into a spider for this.

Other punishments for pride include Niobe, who wanted to be worshipped like a goddess, and so has her sons murdered and is turned into a weeping stone, and the famous Icarus, who flies too close to the sun on his man-made wings and then drowns. In her introduction, Hamilton notes how the Greek gods were more familiar and human than the gods of most cultures, and it is perhaps because of this that so many mortals thought they could be like them – the gods were just human enough to relate to, but still all-powerful, jealous beings who relentlessly punished any mortal with too much pride.

HEROISM

Heroism and the motif of the hero's quest are important elements in *Mythology*, and represent one of the highest ideals of ancient Greek culture. As she moves through the stories, Hamilton paints a picture of the varieties of Greek and Roman heroism. Theseus is the Athenian hero, and the most "heroic" seeming to the modern reader, as he slays monsters but also institutes a democracy. Hercules shows what the rest of Greece found heroic, however: he is passionate but unintelligent, and often kills innocent people because of his uncontrollable strength. Hercules's heroism consists of *great* deeds rather than *good* deeds; brute strength, self-confidence, and a simplistic but upright virtue are his most valued traits. Aeneas, the Roman hero, likewise exhibits the Roman values of strength, military prowess, and order. Many of the heroes do decidedly unheroic things as well, like Jason betraying Medea. Like the gods themselves, who can be cruel and childish, the heroes show that the Greeks often honored strength and song-worthy deeds over complex morality. When the later Greeks began to question the gods' moral superiority, this was a sign that their idea of heroism had changed.

The "hero's quest" is a recurring framework for many stories, notably Jason and Hercules. It usually involves a hero who is raised as an orphan, is given an impossible task that requires leaving home, and is offered the hand of a princess if he succeeds. Odysseus, the most famous "questor," actually shares few motifs with the rest, as he is returning home instead of leaving it, and is already married and middle-aged.

Hamilton briefly discusses heroism in Norse mythology, even more solemn subject because of the morbid Norse worldview in which the universe is doomed at Ragnarok. Tragedy is unavoidable for Norse heroes, so the heroic man is one who dies bravely for a doomed cause. This also connects to the idea of Fate and the Greek stories of prophecies, as the tragic end is already foreseen, but true heroism is when the hero faces his own fate and still fights to the death for what is right.

JUSTICE AND VENGEANCE

Justice is a complicated and sometimes inscrutable concept in the Greek myths, as neither the heroes nor the gods act as infallible moral authorities. There were certain rules held sacred in Greek society, like being hospitable to guests, respecting one's parents, or avenging a loved one's murder, and the poets often created situations where these rules contradicted each other, which led to situations of vengeance. A famous example is Agamemnon, who sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia; then Clytemnestra, his wife, kills him to avenge their daughter. Iphigenia's brother Orestes is then caught in this bind of justice and vengeance – it would be wrong not to punish his father's murderer, but it

would also be wrong to kill his own mother. The only rule that seems to hold true in such stories is that bloodshed begets more bloodshed.

The gods themselves contribute to the confusion regarding justice, as their punishments of mortals often far outweigh the crime and lean towards jealous revenge, like Hera tormenting Zeus's innocent lovers in horrible ways. Because of this, Greek mythology is very different from other religious stories like the Bible. The Greeks were not trying to create a consistent moral code or idea of justice with their stories, but instead preferred to heighten the elements of explanation and entertainment.

BEAUTY

Beauty appears in many of the myths, as the Greeks elevated art, music, and physical beauty above most other virtues. Beauty is often considered more important than morality or religious piety, and becomes a valuable resource that can be used for good or evil. Indeed, physical beauty more often than not causes trouble: Narcissus is ensnared by his own reflection, many beautiful women are raped by Zeus or Apollo, and the Trojan War begins over Helen's lovely face.

The idea of artistic beauty is also idealized, as Orpheus wins over Hades with his music and Pygmalion falls in love with the statue he created. But artistic beauty is no less troublesome than physical beauty, as the jealous Daedalus murders his nephew for his clever inventions. In whatever form it takes beauty is held up as an ideal, but it also becomes something desired and fought over by both mortals and gods.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CANNIBALISM

Though the ancient Greeks were as horrified by cannibalism as modern people are, there are a surprising number of stories in *Mythology* involving human flesh being served as a meal. Cannibalism in *Mythology* is almost always used as a method of revenge or punishment – usually it is a father being served his children. The Greek poets often stretched tragic ideas to their limits (like Oedipus committing the worst possible crime – killing his father and marrying his mother), and this notion of cannibalism was used as the most atrocious and potent method of vengeance.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grand Central Publishing edition of *Mythology* published in 2011.

Introduction to Classical Mythology Quotes

With the coming forward of Greece, mankind became the center of the universe, the most important thing in it... The Greeks made their gods in their own image. That had not entered the mind of man before.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Hamilton suggests in this passage that a central innovation of the "Greek miracle" was that the Greeks began to think of human beings as being important enough for their gods to be made in their own image. While in other cultures the gods had been inhuman, animal, or hybrid, the Greeks created gods who looked like humans and, more important, acted like humans--they were contradictory, fallible, and powerful. Hamilton posits this as an improvement on older mythologies that did not recognize the importance and power of humanity, but her formulation of the "Greek miracle" is not without its own biases. Hamilton writes that, "In Greece man first realized what mankind was," implying that Greek mythology reflects a truth that humans are at the center of the universe. While many people share that belief today, things like technology and the environmental movement have challenged the belief that humans are the most important and most powerful force in the universe. Furthermore, the fact that Hamilton makes these statements without really qualifying them or acknowledging alternative systems of belief seems dated and acknowledges her Eurocentric biases.

One could never tell where Zeus's thunderbolt would strike. Nevertheless, the whole divine company, with a very few and for the most part not important exceptions, were entrancingly beautiful with a human beauty, and nothing humanly beautiful is really terrifying. The early Greek mythologists transformed a world full of fear into a world full of beauty.

Related Characters: Zeus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Here Hamilton lays out in great detail a theory that seems, in light of the myths that follow, rather dubious. For Hamilton, Greek mythology's placement of the human at the center of the universe meant that fear became irrelevant. This supposed freedom from fear relies on the concept of beauty--Hamilton proposes that "nothing humanly beautiful is really terrifying." On the one hand, she could be saying that infusing something scary with a human quality made it relatable, so things that had once seemed scary, unfamiliar, and unpredictable suddenly seemed, at the very least, rational and relatable. This would seem to be a decent explanation of Hamilton's argument, except that some of the scariest and most destructive figures in Greek myth are the most human. (For example, the several examples of humans getting revenge on someone by killing their children and serving them as food to the unsuspecting victim.) So Hamilton's theory could be generally correct--Greek myth could be less permeated by terror than mythologies that came before it, because its gods were at least humanlike, instead of natural forces or animal-like demons--but it certainly does not account for everything in Greek mythology.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ You could not drag down Zeus... Nevertheless he was not omnipotent or omniscient, either. He could be opposed and deceived... Sometimes, too, the mysterious power, Fate, is spoken of as stronger than he. Homer makes Hera ask him scornfully if he proposes to deliver from death a man Fate has doomed.

Related Characters: Zeus, Hera, Virgil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

This passage helps us understand the power of fate in Greek mythology. Here, Hamilton is explaining the origin and role of Zeus, who is the supreme ruler of the Greek universe and the most powerful of the gods. Despite Zeus's position, however, even he is vulnerable. He's vulnerable to the other gods, to humans, and, above all, to fate, which Hamilton positions as being one of the most important forces in Greek myth. Zeus owes his position as supreme ruler to fate--he and his brothers drew lots--but fate also creates havoc in people's lives (like the sailor "Fate" has doomed to death that Zeus can do nothing to help). In a universe ruled by humanlike gods, fate is a force that, in a sense, humbles the gods and makes them relatable to humans. Despite the fact that the gods have power over humans, the gods do not have total power over even their own lives--they can be tricked, delighted, or destroyed by the workings of fate, just like anyone else.

Part 1, Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ This strange god, the gay reveler, the cruel hunter, the lofty inspirer, was also the sufferer... Like Persephone Dionysus died with the coming of the cold. Unlike her, his death was terrible: he was torn to pieces, in some stories by the Titans, in other by Hera's orders. He was always brought back to life; he died and rose again... He was more than the suffering god. He was the tragic god. There was none other.

Related Characters: Dionysus, Persephone, Hera

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

Dionysus, one of the two gods most relevant to the daily lives of humans, shares a central concern of mortals: death. Despite his divinity. Dionysus embodies a duality with which humans are familiar; he is someone of great joy, exuberance, and revelry, but also someone who experiences great suffering and even tragic perennial death. The implication of his life cycle seems to be the acknowledgement that there must be a balance in life between joy and sorrow, revelry and suffering, life and death. In Dionysus, this balance is also understood to be seasonal--Dionysus revels during the fertile months, and dies in Winter. This connects gods to humans to the earth; each must experience times of plenty and barrenness. This passage also shows the power of fate over the lives of the gods. Dionysus, though divine, cannot escape his yearly painful death, and he is also always reborn.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The idea of the great adventure was delightful to Jason. He agreed, and let it be known everywhere that this would be a voyage indeed. The young men of Greece joyfully met the challenge. They came, all the best and noblest, to join the company... Hera was helping Jason, and it was she who kindled in each one the desire not to be left behind... but even at the price of death to drink with his comrades the peerless elixir of valor.

Related Characters: Jason, Hera

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the beginning of Jason's quest for the golden fleece, in which Jason has decided to reclaim his kingdom from Pelias (who is fated to be killed by Jason). Pelias, knowing that Jason matches the description of his fated usurper, sends him on a hero's journey, hoping it will kill him. Here, at the outset, Jason is excited about the journey, despite its danger, which seems to show a heroic courage. This passage shows the social importance of the hero's journey in ancient Greece, as young men were eager to join Jason because of the "peerless elixir of valor." Each man wanted to prove himself as heroic in society and reap the admiration that bravery would bring. However, as in many ancient Greek hero's journeys, valor does not come without consequence. These men are ravaged by the obstacles they must confront, which shows that heroism, while highly valued, comes with serious consequences.

There is a story, too, that Medea restored Jason's father to life and made him young again, and that she gave to Jason the secret of perpetual youth. All that she did of evil and of good was done for him alone, and in the end, all the reward she got was that he turned traitor to her.

Related Characters: Jason, Medea

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

To a modern reader, the heroism in Jason's quest for the golden fleece is ambiguous at best. While Jason is the face of the journey and it is his ambition that fuels the trip, the Argonauts are able to overcome many of the obstacles that they face because of help from Medea, whose courage, cleverness, and sacrifice is much more apparent than Jason's. It's important to understand that Medea was a much less sympathetic character to ancient audiences--culturally, as a woman, a foreigner, and a betrayer of her family, she was a clear-cut villain who, perhaps, deserved her tragic fate. However, this passage shows the moral complexity of the story of the golden fleece. All of Medea's good and evil acts were done for love, and her loyalty to Jason was boundless until he betrayed her. With that in mind, her terrible vengeance seems, while perhaps not proportional to Jason's betrayal, comprehensible. Jason was certainly unjust to her, treating her badly while taking credit for everything she gave him.

Part 2, Chapter 4 Quotes

Here Phaëthon lies who drove the Sun-god's car,
Greatly he failed, but he had greatly dared.

Related Characters: Phaëthon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is what the naiads inscribe on the tomb ofPhaëthon after he is killed driving the Sun's chariot.Phaëthon, the mortal child of the Sun, is told by his divine father that he will grant any wish, andPhaëthon arrogantly asks to drive his chariot. Predictably,Phaëthon is killed because, as a mortal, he is unable to carry out this divine task without causing chaos and danger. This quote sums up the ancient Greek attitude towards heroism. As we saw with Jason, the ancient Greek culture rewarded deeds that were ambitious or powerful more than deeds that were unequivocally good, advisable, or even successful. Despite Phaëthon's failure--and the fact that his hubristic assumption that he could be equal to the gods got him killed--he is memorialized honorably for the scale of his ambition and daring. This story is somewhat unique in that the gods typically vengefully punish mortals for their hubris, but here their slaying ofPhaëthon seemed necessary for everyone's safety. Despite the fact thatPhaëthon was, perhaps, not even wrongly killed, he is still remembered as a hero simply for having done a stupid thing that was daring.

He lived happily thus for a long time; then he made the gods angry. His eager ambition along with his great success led him to think "thoughts too great for man," the thing of all others the gods objected to. He tried to ride Pegasus up to Olympus. He believed he could take his place there with the immortals. The horse was wiser. He would not try the flight, and he threw his rider. Thereafter Bellerophon, hated of the gods, wandered alone, devouring his own soul and avoiding the paths of men until he died.

Related Characters: Bellerophon, Pegasus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 191

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes afterBellerophon's successful hero's journey, in which he becomes Pegasus's rider and defeats all the obstacles that King Proetus requires. Hamilton indicates here that hadBellerophon been satisfied with his already outrageously good fortune, he could have remained happy and successful. But whenBellerophon decides to ride Pegasus to Olympus (revealing his hubristic assumption that he is fit to mingle with the gods, despite being a mortal), he angers the gods, Pegasus bucks him, and he lives out his life in misery. It's important to note that the hubrisBellerophon shows in attempting to reach Olympus is not his first prideful ambition of the story; wanting to be Pegasus's rider, for instance, is arrogant, as well as his facing all of Proetus's obstacles. However, hubris was only condemned when it was seen to affect the gods. This is revealing of ancient Greek morality; some kinds of arrogance were seen as boldness worthy of reward, while others were considered unacceptable and required vengeance.

Part 3, Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The greatest hero of Greece was Hercules... He was what all Greece except Athens most admired. The Athenians were different from the other Greeks and their hero therefore was different. Theseus was, of course, bravest of the brave as all heroes are, but unlike other heroes he was as compassionate as he was brave and a man of great intellect as well as great bodily strength... But Hercules embodied what the rest of Greece most valued... Hercules was the strongest man on earth and he had the supreme self-confidence magnificent physical strength gives. He considered himself on an equality with the gods – and with some reason.

Related Characters: Hercules, Theseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout much of Greek mythology, we see a complicated cultural appreciation of heroism and bravery. Unless a mortal crossed the line into trying to be godlike, any act of ambition or daring was admired, regardless of whether it was unkind, reckless, or even arrogant. However, this passage shows that the culture of Athens was slightly different from the rest of Greece. Greece admired Hercules above all (who was the strongest man alive, despite being somewhat stupid and making poor choices). By contrast, the people of Athens idolized Theseus, who was the "bravest of the brave," but whose courage was tempered by intelligence and compassion. Hamilton suggests here that Athens had a more sophisticated, nuanced, and even healthier culture of heroism than Greece overall.

It's also worth noting that Hercules transgressed the sacred boundary present in most other stories—considering himself equal to the gods—but the ancient Greeks did not themselves begrudge him that, or require the vengeance that the themes of Greek myth indicate he should receive. This suggests that the Greeks might have themselves been hungry to be equal to (or at least relate to) the gods, and thus eager to cheer someone who could do so without consequence.

❝ There is no other story about Hercules which shows so clearly his character as the Greeks saw it: his simplicity and blundering stupidity; his inability not to get roaring drunk in a house where someone was dead; his quick penitence and desire to make amends at no matter what cost; his perfect confidence that not even Death was his match.

Related Characters: Hercules

Related Themes:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at a moment when Hercules is at a friend's house whose wife has just died, but Hercules doesn't know about the tragedy so he behaves disrespectfully. When he realizes what happened, he makes amends by bringing his friend's wife back from Hades. Hamilton holds this story up as being exemplary of Hercules' character overall, and she insists that it showcases the characteristics that the Greeks most associated with him. Not all of these qualities are good--he is stupid and disrespectful and brutish--but, despite this, he is still considered an admired hero. This shows, again, the complexity of ancient Greek heroism. In many cases one simply had to be brave and ambitious to be heroic, not skilled or kind. This story does, however, show Hercules'

innate desire to do good, which, perhaps indicates (since Hamilton cites this story as exemplary) that the Greeks saw kindness as ideal, even if not a required one, for heroism. Hercules' act of bravery in bringing his friend's wife back from the underworld is an act of contrition for his previous inappropriate behavior, which shows that he has a good heart, even if his stupidity often gets him into trouble.

Part 4, Chapter 1 Quotes

The Goddess of Love and Beauty knew very well where the most beautiful woman on earth was to be found. She led the young shepherd, with never a thought of Oenone left forlorn, straight to Sparta, where Menelaus and Helen received him graciously as a guest. The ties between guest and host were strong. Each was bound to help and never harm the other. But Paris broke that sacred bond.

Related Characters: Helen, Menelaus, Paris, Aphrodite

Related Themes:

Page Number: 257

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes as part of Hamilton's explanation of the causes of the Trojan War. Aphrodite has promised Paris the love of the most beautiful woman in exchange for proclaiming her to be the most beautiful goddess, and so Aphrodite must now deliver Paris to Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world--but Helen is married to Menelaus. This passage is culturally revealing in several ways. First, the shallowness and selfishness of the gods and mortals are equated here--Paris and Aphrodite behave equally reprehensibly, which will eventually bring vengeance upon the guilty and innocent alike. Second, this shows the complicated place of beauty in ancient Greek society. While beauty is often uncritically revered in Greek myth, here it is shown to be a mixed blessing. Because beauty is so valued and loved, it is also something that causes gods and mortals to fight and wrong one another. Of all the Greek myths, this one is, perhaps, most damning of the power of beauty.

"If I must slay
The joy of my house, my daughter.
A father's hands
Stained with dark streams flowing
From blood of a girl
Slaughtered before the altar."

Nevertheless he yielded. His reputation with the Army was at stake, and his ambition to conquer Troy and exalt Greece.

"He dared the deed,
Slaying his child to help a war."

Related Characters: Agamemnon, Iphigenia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes as the Greek warriors are headed to Troy to fight, and Artemis, angry that somebody killed one of her sacred deer, demands the sacrifice of the Greek leader Agamemnon's daughter as retribution. This is a story full of retribution, in fact--Agamemnon ultimately agrees to sacrifice his daughter because he is eager to get retribution against the Trojans for taking Helen from her husband, who is Agamemnon's brother. Agamemnon is also fated to perish at the hand of Clytemnestra, his wife, who is seeking vengeance for Agamemnon's sacrifice of their daughter. So, in many ways, the story of the Trojan war is a story of the ways in which "justice" being pursued through vengeance only begets more and more violence. This is also an example of the gods being just as petty and cruel as the humans. Artemis worsens the bloodshed already inevitable due to war because of her petty need to inflict a disproportionate punishment on Agamemnon. Despite the heroic nature of brave men heading off to war, this story is not one that casts anyone in a particularly good light.

Priam, the King, and his Queen, Hecuba, had many brave sons to lead the attack and to defend the walls, one above all, Hector, than whom no man anywhere was nobler or more brave, and only one a greater warrior, the champion of the Greeks, Achilles. Each knew that he would die before Troy was taken... Both heroes fought under the shadow of certain death.

Related Characters: Priam, Hector, Achilles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes as the Greeks and Trojans begin to battle one another, and it describes the two most heroic soldiers: Hector on the Trojan side, and Achilles on the Greek side. These men are strong, brave, and good warriors, but their heroism has a different tone than the heroism we have previously seen. Achilles and Hector are tragic heroes because they are both destined to die during this war (according to prophecies), and they both fight anyway, though Achilles tries to shirk his fate for a while. As the role of fate in Greek mythology has made us come to expect, Achilles, despite his resistance to fighting, is compelled to fight and die anyway. Despite their knowledge of their own certain death, both heroes fight hard and do not let their knowledge of their fate take away their ability to care about their friends and communities. Achilles' and Hector's heroism is not a victory against fate, then, but it is certainly one against fatalism.

Part 4, Chapter 2 Quotes

Troy has perished, the great city.
Only the red flame now lives there.

The dust is rising, spreading out like a great wing of smoke,
And all is hidden.
We now are gone, one here, one there.
And Troy is gone forever.

Farewell, dear city.
Farewell, my country, where my children lived.
There below, the Greek ships wait.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

This comes at the end of Hamilton's description of the destruction of Troy, and is a quote from Euripides' play *The Trojan Women*. Though the Greeks were nearly defeated, their clever use of the Trojan horse allowed them to enter the city walls and win the war. However, this passage reflects that the Greeks did not stop at just winning the war--they ravaged Troy, massacring its people, enslaving the women and children, and destroying its legacy. The Greeks were not content with victory alone--they required vengeance, which was a cruelty and arrogance that the gods would ultimately punish them for. This passage is meant to show the tragedy, cruelty, and senselessness of war, and it's significant that Hamilton doesn't explain this in her own voice, but rather quotes an ancient text so we get a sense of the personal tragedy of its author (himself a Greek) looking upon the destruction of Troy. While the Greeks were technically heroic in war in that they fought bravely and successfully, this passage undercuts the way we understand Greek heroism by also forcing us to see the Trojan perspective, which was one in which the Greeks were guilty of excessive cruelty.

Part 4, Chapter 4 Quotes

Aeneas, we are given to understand, married Lavinia and founded the Roman race – who, Virgil said, "left to other nations such things as art and science, and ever remembered that they were destined to bring under their empire the peoples of earth, to impose the rule of submissive nonresistance, to spare the humbled and to crush the proud."

Related Characters: Aeneas, Lavinia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 344

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the end of Hamilton's narration of the story of Aeneas, the sole male survivor of the sack of Troy who goes on to become the founder of Rome. This story, which is the story of his hero's journey, is unique in the book because it is told from the Roman perspective rather than the Greek perspective, and it illustrates several differences between the two cultures. Perhaps the most salient difference here concerns the ideals of heroism. The Greeks generally measured heroism in terms of ambition and daring; Greek heroes were not always unambiguously good, and they were often punished for their misdeeds or arrogance, despite being widely admired as heroes. Aeneas, a Roman hero, causes a lot of trouble on his hero's journey, but is allowed unambiguous success afterwards, which would seem unlikely in Greek myth. This being the founding myth of the Roman empire, it also shows the cultural value placed by the Romans on strength and order above all else (including art and science, which the Greeks prized). In the context of the book, this representation of Roman culture comes off as being less morally complex and sophisticated than Greek culture, but also arguably more "just."

Part 5, Chapter 1 Quotes

Insolent words uttered in the arrogant consciousness of power were always heard in heaven and always punished. Apollo and Artemis glided swiftly to Thebes from Olympus, the archer god and the divine huntress, and shooting with deadly aim they struck down all of Niobe's sons and daughters... she sank down motionless in stony grief, dumb as a stone and her heart like a stone within her. Only her tears flowed and could not stop. She was changed into a stone which forever, night and day, was wet with tears.

Related Characters: Phoebus Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Niobe

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 349-350

Explanation and Analysis

This passage concerns the tragic fate of Niobe, daughter of Tantalus, who has, because of her familial curse, been fated to a terrible life. This is an interesting story because it puts fate in tension with hubris. The gods supposedly kill all of Niobe's children in front of her as punishment for the arrogance of considering herself godlike, but it also seems that Niobe *had* to display that arrogance in order to bring the gods' vengeance down upon her, so she could fulfill her tragic role in the family curse. In other words, her bad behavior was fated because of her father's sins, so it might not really be her fault, and yet she had to suffer the consequences anyway. This shows the great moral complexity of Greek myth--viewed from different perspectives, this story can be seen as an example of the saying that "sometimes bad things happen to good people," and it can also be seen as an example of righteous retribution for multi-generational sins.

"Slay the two who slew.
Atone for death by death.
Shed blood for old blood shed."

And Orestes knew that he must work out the curse of his house, exact vengeance and pay with his own ruin.

Related Characters: Orestes

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 358

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes within a complex description of the familial curse affecting the House of Atreus. The story of Orestes is one example of a life consumed by this curse. The quote comes from an oracle (speaking in the voice of Apollo) who confirms Orestes' intuition that he must kill his mother to avenge his father, even though he knows that to do so will destroy him. This story makes us contemplate the senselessness and inevitability of vengeance. Because of old sins and violence, Orestes is doomed to repeat patterns of bloodshed even while he knows they will ruin him and beget more violence and despair. Even so, Orestes is considered brave because he carries out this task, despite knowing its end, because it is what is fated and it is what the gods will. On the one hand, Orestes is brave to do as he is asked without complaint or attempting to escape his fate, but on the other hand, Orestes kills his mother without much thought--usually an unforgivable sin. This is another example of the complex and even contradictory moral system of the ancient Greeks.

Part 5, Chapter 2 Quotes

Apollo was the God of Truth. Whatever the priestess at Delphi said would happen infallibly came to pass. To attempt to act in such a way that the prophecy would be made void was as futile as to set oneself against the decrees of fate. Nevertheless, when the oracle warned Laius that he would die at the hands of his son he determined that this should not be. When the child was born he bound its feet together and had it exposed on a lonely mountain where it must soon die. He felt no more fear; he was sure that on this point he could foretell the future better than the god.

Related Characters: Phoebus Apollo, Laius, Oedipus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 377

Explanation and Analysis

This passage begins Hamilton's narration of what is, perhaps, the most famous Greek tragedy of all: the story of Oedipus. Oedipus's father, King Laius, learns that he is fated to die at the hands of his son, so he leaves baby Oedipus on a mountain to die. As one would expect based on the body of Greek myth that Hamilton has detailed so far, Oedipus still manages to survive and kill his father, a fate in fact secured by Laius's actions and thus his ironic inability to recognize the grown Oedipus as his son. This passage is an example of hubris, in that Greeks are supposed to know

better than to defy fate. Laius is also committing a cardinal sin of ancient Greek life; he thinks that he can "foretell the future better than the gods." While he believes that this hubris is helping him defy fate, Laius's hubris is actually contributing to his eventual tragic fate. This combination of hubris and fate is among the most common ironies of ancient Greek tragedy.

"You knew my edict?" Creon asked. "Yes," Antigone replied. "And you transgressed the law?" "Your law, but not the law of Justice who dwells with the gods," Antigone said. "The unwritten laws of heaven are not for today nor yesterday, but from all time."...

As she was led away to death, she spoke to the bystanders: -
"... Behold me, what I suffer
Because I have upheld that which is high."

Related Characters: Creon, Antigone

Related Themes:

Page Number: 388

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the climax of the story of Antigone, who defies Creon's unjust order not to honorably bury her brother, and is executed for her defiance. Antigone is a unique hero and her story is a unique tragedy in Greek myth. While heroism has often meant ambition and bravery regardless of goodness, Antigone sacrifices her life for what she sees to be justice and respect. Antigone is brave and visionary, but she is not unduly strong or blustering--she is a quiet and morally forceful heroine, which is uncommon in Greek myth. This is also a different kind of tragedy from the ones we've commonly seen before, in which a mortal defies the gods in some way, intentional or not, and is punished for it. Instead, in this story Antigone violates the laws of men in order to act in accord with divine justice, and she is still punished for it. The tragedy here is that divine justice is not being served, and Antigone, who stands up for divine justice to a powerful king, is not rewarded.

Part 6, Chapter 1 Quotes

He was a universal benefactor. And yet he too drew down on himself the anger of the gods and by the sin the gods never forgave. He thought "thoughts too great for man." He was once given a large fee to raise one from the dead, and he did so... Zeus would not allow a mortal to have power over the dead and he struck Aesculapius with his thunderbolt and slew him.

Related Characters: Zeus, Aesculapius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 414

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes in Hamilton's narration of the story of Aesculapius, the mortal son of Apollo who is an adept and generous doctor. Aesculapius is so skilled that he finds himself raising a man from the dead, seemingly from generosity more than hubris. However, the gods (predictably) are enraged that a mortal could have control over life and death (which the gods feel is their realm), and Zeus strikes Aesculapius dead. As we have seen several times before, however, Aesculapius's death at the hands of Zeus did not shame him in the eyes of mortals--he was honored as a hero (and even a demigod) rather than disregarded as a fool, which shows the Greek appetite for humans ambitious and daring enough to take on or rival the gods. This story also illuminates the uneven temperaments of the gods, who could not differentiate between genuine hubris and a good deed that accidentally transgressed a line. The slaying of Apollo's son further brings forth a cycle of senseless and destructive vengeance that seems hardly merited by Aesculapius's supposed transgression.

Part 6, Chapter 2 Quotes

Minerva did her best and the result was a marvel, but Arachne's work, finished at the same moment, was in no way inferior. The goddess in a fury of anger beat the girl around the head with her shuttle. Arachne, disgraced and mortified and furiously angry, hanged herself. Then a little repentance entered Minerva's heart... Arachne was changed into a spider, and her skill in weaving was left to her.

Related Characters: Pallas Athena, Arachne

Related Themes:

Page Number: 425-426

Explanation and Analysis

This is the end of the myth of the mortal Arachne, who is challenged to a weaving contest by Minerva (the Latin Athena) and wins. In many instances when gods punish mortals for daring to try to usurp them, the gods are unrepentant and their disproportionate punishments engender more violence rather than any sense of justice. This myth is different. Minerva does unjustly punish Arachne, which leads to her death (though she has done nothing wrong except participate successfully in a contest Minerva suggested). Minerva, in this case, does feel regret, though, and changes Arachne into a spider so that she can continue to use her weaving skills. The reasons for Minerva's repentance are left open, but it's possible that Minerva felt bad because of the ancient Greek worship of beauty. Minerva had punished Arachne for making a beautiful thing, which might have, in combination with her recognition of the excessive violence of a punishment that led to Arachne's death, changed Minerva's mind. Regardless, this is an example of vengeance that has a relatively happy ending because Minerva at least had the humility to make amends.

Part 7, Introduction to Norse Mythology Quotes

❝ The gods know that a day will come when they will be destroyed. Sometime they will meet their enemies and go down beneath them to defeat and death… necessarily the same is true of humanity… The heroes and heroines of the early stories face disaster. They know that they cannot save themselves, not by any courage or resistance or great deed. Even so, they do not yield. They die resisting.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 442

Explanation and Analysis

Hamilton introduces Norse mythology by suggesting that the foundation of the Norse worldview was an acceptance by gods and mortals alike that one day they will all be defeated by their enemies. With this large-scale death looming over all of Norse myth, the ethical imperative--and the source of culturally-valued heroism--becomes to die in the midst of futile but noble resistance to their fate. Fate emerges here as a force similar to fate in Greek mythology; it's something more powerful than the gods whose inevitability anyone would be foolish to deny. However, like Hector and Achilles showed at Troy, it is also noble not to allow fate to drain a struggle of its meaning. Despite the pervasive understanding that fate will prevail, Norsemen and gods were only noble and heroic if they struggled against fate rather than yielding to it. Fate for the Greeks was less pervasive--only some were fated to tragic deaths. Here, the fated catastrophe of Norse myth presents a much darker worldview, one with fewer possibilities for joy, redemption, and lasting success.

❝ Although the Norse hero was doomed if he did not yield, he could choose between yielding or dying. The decision was in his own hands. Even more than that. A heroic death, like a martyr's death, is not a defeat, but a triumph. The hero in one of the stories who laughs aloud while his foes cut his heart out of his living flesh shows himself superior to his conquerors.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 443

Explanation and Analysis

This passage clarifies the power of fate, the definition of heroism, and the possibilities for redemption and honor within the bleak Norse worldview. Since all Norsemen and Norse gods were doomed, life's meaning was found in how one faced that doom--to give up was dishonorable, but to die resisting was, in a sense, to triumph. In Greek myth, death often came as a result of hubris or foolishness, but in Norse myth death is expected, so it is not, in itself, a sign that somebody has erred or showed weakness. Hamilton's example of the man who laughed while his heart was cut out shows that, essentially, heroism to the Norse was to accept your bleak fate without allowing that knowledge to break you. Hope and luck are not possible for the Norse, only courage in the face of certain doom. Norse heroism is, then, a contest of who can retain composure and courage in the face of catastrophe.

Part 7, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Never shalt thou be stained by baseness.
Yet a day of doom shall come upon thee,
A day of wrath and a day of anguish.
But ever remember, ruler of men,
That fortune lies in the hero's life.
And a nobler man shall never live
Beneath the sun than Sigurd.

Related Characters: Sigurd

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 451-452

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes as Sigurd is on the way to Brynhild for the first time and he stops to ask a wise man to tell him his fate. Despite the dark talk of wrath and doom and anguish, this is actually the best possible fate a Norseman could anticipate. Sigurd knows that he's destined to die cataclysmically (because all Norse are), but the wise man confirms that Sigurd's fate is to die honorably and courageously, and that, because of his bravery and spirit, he will be the noblest of all the Norse. So Sigurd goes about his life of bravery, performing good deeds for others and facing trouble and danger with courage. He eventually is murdered, but he has done nothing to dishonor himself in the process, so he is remembered as a hero. This story is tragic in that, despite Sigurd's goodness and courage, he cannot escape a horrible fate, but it is also hopeful and optimistic within the Norse worldview because it represents the best of possible fates.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION TO CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

Hamilton first draws attention to the mistaken view that the humans of mythological times were innocent creatures in harmony with nature and their own creative imaginations. Hamilton reminds us that what we actually know about early humans is that they lived in constant fear and hardship, and that their gods were monsters who often demanded human sacrifice.

In the rest of the book Hamilton will act mostly as an interpreter and compiler, but in this introduction she clearly states her own theories about the myths. She begins by explaining what she finds so beautiful and unique about Greek mythology.

Hamilton then holds up the ancient Greeks as a beacon of light in this dark world – she sees them as having suddenly advanced far beyond other primitive, violent peoples. By the time Homer wrote the first major Greek epic, the *Iliad*, Greek civilization was already refined and advanced. Hamilton states that learning about how ancient Greeks thought is important to Americans of today, as we are their artistic, intellectual, and political descendants.

Hamilton is writing in the early to mid-1900s, and this part of her theory feels dated and Eurocentric to the modern reader. She creates a clear divide between the "primitive" cultures of the rest of the world, and the sudden, miraculous "civilization" of the Greeks, and then a direct line from the Greeks to "us" – white, Christian Europeans and Americans of her time.

Of the "Greek miracle" – the sudden flower of civilization and art that occurred in ancient Greece – Hamilton emphasizes the importance of how the Greeks put humanity at the center of their universe. They made their gods in their own image, unlike the Egyptian or Mesopotamian part-animal deities. This suddenly made the world seem more rational, as the Greeks could understand their gods.

This part of her theory is mostly valid, although other cultures, like the early Hindus, also had human-like deities. The gods of Ancient Greece did indeed show their worshippers' love of rationality and the beauty of the human form.

The Greek gods not only looked human, but they acted like humans as well, even exhibiting the full range of human flaws. The gods are physically beautiful, but often characters of comedy or spitefulness, like Zeus constantly trying to hide his love affairs from the jealous Hera.

The importance of beauty will be emphasized over and over in the myths, though the frequent cruelty and randomness of the gods seems to undercut Hamilton's theory of a rational universe.

The Greeks also made their religion accessible by making Mount Olympus, where the gods dwelt, a comfortable place that even had a physical location in Greece. All the tales of the epic heroes took place in real cities as well, so a familiar location made the myths seem more real. The goddess Aphrodite was born from the foam in a physical location that anyone could visit, and the mythical Hercules lived in the real city of Thebes.

The geographical familiarity of the Greek myths may be part of their fascination for modern readers, and have certainly made some physical locations in Greece incredibly famous. Aphrodite's birth from the sea-foam again seems to contradict Hamilton's larger theory about a rational Greek universe.

Because the gods seemed so familiar, Hamilton argues that the Greeks changed the idea of the "magical" to a human kind of magic, and made the world a beautiful place with a human beauty, which was no longer terrifying. There was less strange and horrible magic in the Greek myths than in most other civilizations, and though the gods often acted irrationally, the universe itself seemed relatively rational and benign.

The myths Hamilton goes on to describe do not seem to support this theory very well, as there is plenty of strange magic and horrifying punishments even from the beautiful, "benign" gods themselves.

Hamilton then reminds us of the negatives that still remained in Greek mythology. The gods themselves often acted more despicably than most humans, getting angry and jealous and inflicting terrible vengeances against the slightest provocation.

Hamilton will point out these frequent injustices throughout the book, and how they complicate the Greek notions of morality and justice. The gods' capriciousness seems just as terrifying as evil magic.

The Greeks had also not totally purged themselves of their more "barbaric" past, and elements of it remained in their mythology, like the satyrs, who were half-goat, half man, or horrible monsters like Gorgons or chimaeras (though the Greek heroes always defeat these monsters in the end). There are also hints of earlier practices of human sacrifice, though Hamilton emphasizes that what is important is how *few* instances of human sacrifice there are as compared with the early mythologies of other nations.

Hamilton will continue to trace these threads throughout Mythology, *expanding her theories about which myths had evolved from tales of human sacrifice, and how the later Greeks became repulsed by the idea of the gods desiring human sacrifices. Again Hamilton only focuses on religions of Europe and the Mesopotamian.*

Hamilton then reminds us that though Greek mythology consists of stories of gods and goddesses, it is not an account of a religious system – it is not a "Greek bible." The myths are meant to explain something in nature, like why the Great Bear constellation never dips below the horizon. Many of the other myths are purely for entertainment, and are basically the earliest form of literature.

Even if the Greeks did intend to explain a moral system with their myths, the gods themselves act too inconsistently to allow it. The Greek love of dramatic, poignant storytelling in their myths may be why they continue to resonate so deeply with modern readers.

Hamilton says that later Greek myths do seem to grow more "religious" in nature, particularly regarding the god Zeus. He probably began as a rain god, and then progressed into a jealous, moody thunderbolt-wielder, but by the time of the *Odyssey* he is more powerful and compassionate, a protector of suppliants and orphans. Later Zeus is accompanied by the figure of Justice, and Hamilton implies that he ultimately evolves into a concept similar to the Judeo-Christian God – a benevolent, all-powerful creator and father.

This is another theory that feels dated and unsupported by evidence, as Hamilton assumes that Christianity is the natural peak of civilization, and that Zeus evolved into the Christian god. The myths Hamilton will actually retell show Zeus acting just as foolishly and lecherously as ever in the later myths. The evidence will show that the Greeks began to lose respect for their gods, rather than venerate one of them above the rest.

Hamilton then describes the literary record of mythology, and the sources she uses for her book. The Roman poet Ovid is one of the most important and exhaustive sources of stories, but Hamilton tried to avoid using his versions of myths, as Ovid came so much later in history that he treated mythology as unbelievable tales rather than important religious stories.

In trying to get modern readers to deal seriously with the myths, Hamilton wants to use writers that took them seriously. Obviously she does not expect her readers to take the myths as religious truths, but she at least hopes to find the deep humanity in them.

Homer is the earliest known Greek epic poet, whose tales the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were written sometime around 1000 B.C. Next came Hesiod, who was a poor farmer, and his mythology reflects his religious piety and humble lifestyle. Hesiod was also the first poet to wonder about the origins of the universe and the gods.

Homer is one of the most famous writers in the world, and most readers' first introduction to Greek mythology. Hamilton has clearly done all the hard work in compiling each story from the best sources.

The Homeric Hymns came next chronologically, though Hamilton rarely uses them. Pindar came next, and Hamilton calls him the greatest lyric poet of Greece. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were tragic playwrights from the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., and their plays are one of Hamilton's most important sources.

Part of Hamilton's storytelling method will involve giving a "flavor" of the writer telling the actual myth – stories by the flowery Ovid will be told with more detail, while those by the Greek tragedians will be filled with poignant ironies.

Next came Aristophanes, the writer of comedy, and then Apollonius of Rhodes, who wrote about Jason and the Quest of the Golden Fleece. Apollonius wrote around 250 B.C., when Greek's literary capitol had moved to Alexandria, Egypt. By the time Lucian wrote about the gods, they had become subjects of satire rather than piety. Apollodorus wrote extensively about mythology, but Hamilton describes him as "very dull."

Ironically, the two most extensive writers about the Greek myths are Ovid and Apollodorus, both of whom Hamilton tries to avoid as they are both Roman, neither believed the myths were true, and one is excessively ornate and one excessively dull. The gods became satirical figures rather than evolving into an omnipotent God.

Of the Roman writers, Hamilton emphasizes Virgil as the most important. Like Ovid, he did not believe in the myths he described, but he did treat them seriously and found the humanity in the gods and heroes.

Virgil is a Roman writer, but he did what Hamilton is trying to do – find the deep human truths in ancient mythology, without needing to believe in them as religious truth.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

In Greek mythology the universe created the gods, rather than the other way around. Heaven and Earth existed first as vague entities, and their children were the Titans. The children of the Titans were the Olympians, the principal Greek gods. The Titans, or Elder Gods, ruled the universe until the gods overthrew them. Cronus (in Latin Saturn) is the most important and powerful, and other notable Titans include Ocean, Mnemosyne (Memory), Atlas (who holds up the earth), and Prometheus, who became the helper of mortals.

The fact that the gods are created rather than creators affirms a uniqueness of Greek mythology. This also supports Hamilton's theory that the Greek gods were more human and familiar than the deities of most other cultures. Heaven and Earth are interesting deities, as they are both physical places and living beings. The Greeks felt an "aliveness" in all of Nature, which would later manifest itself as nymphs and sea-gods.

Hamilton then describes the home of the gods, Mount Olympus. There is a physical Mount Olympus in Thessaly, Greece, but the home of the gods is mysteriously conceived of as both a high mountain and a vast, heavenly region. It is not part of heaven, however, but neither is it on earth, the sea, or the realm of the dead. Olympus is a perfect place where rain never falls and the gods spend their time feasting and listening to music.

The Greek heaven is also familiar and merely an exaggeration of human pleasures. Though its physical qualities are left mysterious and self-contradictory, Olympus is basically a place where the Greeks could imagine the "purer" pleasures being fully enjoyed at all times – music, food, and beauty.

Hamilton then names the twelve proper Olympians with their Greek and Latin names: Zeus (Jupiter), the leader, his brothers Poseidon (Neptune) and Hades, also called Pluto, their sister Hestia (Vesta), Zeus's wife Hera (Juno), their son Ares (Mars), and Zeus's other children: Athena (Minerva), Apollo, Aphrodite (Venus), Hermes (Mercury), Artemis (Diana), and Hera's son Hephaestus (Vulcan).

Mythology is something like a large, complex study guide, and Hamilton logically begins by listing the main characters. These gods will reappear throughout the tales and develop characters of their own, but at first it is useful to have them all listed here at once for easy reference.

When they first began to rule, Zeus and his brothers drew lots and Zeus became Lord of the Sky and supreme ruler, while Poseidon got the sea and Hades the underworld. Zeus is the mightiest of the gods, and wields the thunderbolt, but despite his power he can also be opposed and tricked. The mysterious power of Fate is often more powerful than he is as well.

Hamilton introduces the power of fate here, which will be an important theme in many myths. Even the fact that Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades "drew lots" shows that they themselves are not supreme deciders of destiny – there is still randomness and fate that controls their lives as well.

Zeus mostly has two seemingly contradictory traits. He is constantly falling in love with new women, and then using a variety of tricks to hide his trysts from Hera, his wife. At the same time, Zeus is the most glorious god, and he demands upright moral actions from his followers.

Many of the gods have these contradictory sides, which makes sense as the Greeks were using them to explain life itself, which is often self-contradictory, and simultaneously both foolish and solemn.

Hera is both Zeus's sister and his wife. She is the protector of marriage and married women, but otherwise she an unlikeable goddess. She is constantly punishing Zeus's lovers, whether they are innocent are not. She holds long grudges, like making sure Troy was destroyed just because Paris, a Trojan, had judged another goddess to be more beautiful.

Hera is the epitome of the jealous, capricious side of the gods, as her punishments usually outweigh the crimes, and sometimes there is no crime at all, she is just jealous of a mortal's beauty or luck. Her character shows that the gods are certainly not always shining examples of justice.

Poseidon is the ruler of the sea, and second to Zeus in power. He carries a trident and gave the first horse to mankind. His brother Hades rules over the dead and the metals buried underground. Hades rarely leaves the underworld to visit Olympus, and the gods do not welcome him. He is not an evil god, but terrible and just.

The sea was very important to the Greeks as a method of travel and source of food, so Poseidon was a very significant god, and he will be accompanied by a host of other creatures.

Pallas Athena is the child of Zeus alone, as she sprang fully-armored from his head. She is warlike and fierce, but she also protects cities and civilizations. Phoebus Apollo is a beautiful god who plays the lyre. He is the god of both Light and Truth, he taught mortals the art of Healing, and he wields a bow. His oracle at Delphi is important in many myths. There are a few stories where Apollo is cruel and merciless, but mostly he is civilized and poetic.

Apollo is the "most Greek" of the gods, almost entirely pure and holy, the representative of truth, light, and music. But at the same time he can be terrifying with his bow, and he is on occasion randomly cruel. Athena also shares this dichotomy. She was the god most beloved of the city of Athens, the first democracy.

Artemis is the Lady of Wild Things, hunting, and the protector of maidens. In some myths she is terrible and frightening, but in others she is the epitome of purity and chastity. Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love and Beauty, is sometimes the daughter of Zeus and sometimes is born of the sea-foam. Aphrodite is joyful and mischievous, but also sometimes weak and malicious.

There are a surprising number of unmarried, forest-loving maidens in the myths, and Artemis and Athena both scorn love. Like most of the gods, Artemis and Aphrodite have both a purer, more civilized side and a more brutal, frightening side. For Aphrodite this describes the extremes of love itself.

Hermes is Zeus's messenger, who wears winged sandals and a winged hat. He is the most cunning god, both the lord of Commerce and the Divine Herald leading dead souls to the underworld. Hermes appears in more myths than any other god. Ares, the God of War, is a hated god with little personality who delights in chaos and bloodshed. The Romans liked him more than the Greeks did, and to them Mars was a noble, powerful warrior.

Hamilton will slowly piece together the different ideals valued by the Greeks and the Romans, and these will define many of their gods and heroes. It is significant that Ares was hated by the Greeks, but honored by the Romans – generally, Roman culture celebrated warfare for its own sake more, while the Greeks preferred strength to protect beauty.

Hephaestus is the God of Fire, and the only ugly god. He is the armorer and smith of the gods, and along with Athena is the patron of handicrafts. Sometimes his forge is associated with volcanic eruptions. Hestia is a virgin goddess who rarely appears in the myths, but she was important in every Greek home as she was the Goddess of the Hearth.

Hestia's character shows how the myths are not necessarily accurate portrayals of Greek religious life – Hestia rarely appears, but she was important in daily life. The other gods are more important for the great stories they inspire and the natural phenomena they explain.

Besides the twelve Olympians, there are other lesser divinities in Olympus as well. The most important is Eros (Cupid in Latin), the God of Love. He is Aphrodite's son, and carries arrows of sudden passion. Hebe is the Goddess of Youth, and the Graces incarnate aspects of beauty and happiness. There are also nine Muses who inspire art, music, and science.

The Greeks also used their mythology to help explain abstract concepts, which for them also had a sort of "aliveness." In this way it made sense that some people had been blessed with gifts of poetry or song, as they had been blessed by the Muses.

Other abstract ideas are also vaguely personified as gods, like Themis (Divine Justice), Dike (Human Justice), Nemesis (Righteous Anger), and Aidos, the feeling of shame that keeps humans from doing wrong.

Themis becomes more important later, at least according to Hamilton, by signifying Zeus's divine morality as well as his power – Justice herself resides with him.

Supernatural figures live in other places beside Olympus. The sea is associated with Ocean, the Titan who rules a river that encircles the earth. In the sea dwell Pontus (the Deep Sea), Nereus (the Old Man of the Sea), the Nereids (sea nymphs), Triton (the trumpeter of the sea), Proteus (a shapeshifter), and the Naiads, who are water nymphs.

The sea and waterways were very important in Greek daily life, and they explained the many currents, storms, and sea life with a host of supernatural creatures. This helped make sense of the seeming randomness of Nature.

The underworld is ruled by Hades and his queen Persephone. The underworld itself is often called Hades as well, and is a mysterious place somewhere beneath the earth. Tartarus and Erebus are its two realms: Tartarus is where the Titans are imprisoned, and Erebus is where mortals go when they die.

The underworld only occasionally appears in the myths, and Hades himself rarely so. The poets preferred not to "linger there," though its complex geography was necessary to make sense of death.

Different poets describe Hades differently – to Homer is a vague, unhappy, dreamlike place, while to Virgil and others there are parts where the wicked are punished and the righteous rewarded. Virgil describes the geography of Hades as well: there are five rivers, Acheron (river of woe), Cocytus (river of lamentation), Phlegethon (river of fire), Styx (river of the gods' unbreakable oath), and Lethe (river of forgetfulness).

The different poets' descriptions of Hades show how ideas about death changed. The earlier Greeks, more concerned with entertainment and explanation, saw the underworld as it seems from a naturalistic perspective, while the later Romans desired divine justice, and so had the sinful punished and the righteous rewarded.

Charon is an old boatman who guides souls across the Acheron and Cocytus, and then a three-headed dog called Cerberus guards the gate of Hades. Rhadamanthus, Minos, and Aeacus are three former kings who judge the dead souls. Good souls are sent to the blissful Elysian Fields, while evil ones are sentenced to eternal torment. Somewhere in the underworld is Pluto's ghostly palace. The Furies, who punish the wicked, live in Hades also, along with the personifications of Sleep and Death.

The underworld became a realm of the both the mysterious – sleep and dreaming – and the frightening – punishment and torture. The characters and geography recur throughout the myths, with a different emphasis each time. Many of these figures have become archetypal in modern Western literature.

Many lesser gods dwell on Earth as well. Earth herself is called "All-Mother," but she is never personified as a goddess. Pan is the chief of the half-goat Satyrs. He plays the pipes and dances with the Oreads (mountain nymphs) and Dryads (tree nymphs). Silenus is Pan's son, a fat old man who rides a donkey and is always drunk.

The Greeks were especially fond of trees, as the myths will show, but like everywhere else they populated the earth with many supernatural creatures to explain natural phenomena and provide entertainment and beauty.

Castor and Pollux are twins who are sometimes gods. There are different stories about them, but always they represent brotherly devotion, as when Castor was killed, Pollux asked to die also to be with his brother. Zeus rewarded their love by letting them spend half their time in Hades and half in Olympus. They are represented by the Gemini (Twins) stars, and they protect sailors.

Many "explanation" myths have to do with stars and constellations, like this one. The idea of spending part of one's time dead and part alive will repeat with Demeter and Dionysus, and reflects the mystery of winter and spring – for half of the year the earth seems dead, and then everything is reborn.

Also on earth are the Sileni and the Centaurs, who are both part human, part horse, as well the wind gods: Aeolus the King of Winds, Boreas (the North Wind), Zephyr (the West Wind), Notus (the South Wind), and Eurus (the East Wind). The Gorgons are three sisters, dragonlike monsters whose look turns mortals to stone. The Graiae are also three sisters, old women who share one eye between them. The Sirens live on an island and lure sailors to death with their song.

These half-humans and monsters seem to go against Hamilton's theory of the Greeks' rational, human universe. The Gorgons mostly exist for a hero to slay, but the Sileni and Centaurs are part of the natural world, neither good nor evil. These are the parts of the myths that Hamilton saw as "still primitive."

The three Fates are very important but have no assigned home in heaven or earth. They are three sisters who control the destinies of mortals. Clotho is the spinner of life's thread, Lachesis assigns one's destiny, and Atropos cuts the thread at death.

The Fates rarely appear, but sometimes they seem like the most powerful forces in the universe, as even Zeus cannot go against them. They live outside of space and time, and are perhaps a rationalization of the sometimes cruel randomness of life.

In general the Romans adopted the Greek gods and Greek mythology, changing only the names of the deities. The original Roman gods were vague, abstract divinities without personality: The Numina presided over various daily practices, the Lares were spirits of a family's ancestors, and the Penates guarded hearths and storehouses. Saturn was one of the Numina, but he later merged with Cronus, the father of Jupiter (Zeus).

The Romans, as conquerors of many cultures and countries, adopted many of those cultures into their own, but they were clearly most enthralled with Greek mythology. Except for these few examples, Greek mythology became Roman mythology, with only the names changed and more emphasis on the martial aspects of the stories.

Janus was another of the original Numina, "the god of good beginnings" who had two faces, one young and one old. Other notable Roman deities were Faunus, Quirinis (the deified Romulus, Rome's founder), the wicked Lemures, Pomona, and Vertumnus.

Like the Greeks, the Romans also had gods who were important in daily life but had few myth-worthy stories told about them.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

The twelve Olympians were not very useful to the average human, and in fact they often caused more trouble than not. There were two important gods who lived on Earth and helped mankind, however: Demeter (Ceres), the Goddess of Corn, and Dionysus, also called Bacchus, the God of Wine.

These gods are important for daily life – like Hestia, or the Penates – but they also have tragic stories and interesting lives. Because of this they were more beloved than the other Olympians.

Demeter is the older of the two. She provides fruitful harvests, is a friend of women, and protects the threshing-floor. Demeter was celebrated at harvest time every five years with a nine-day festival. Her great temple was at Eleusis, and her worship was a central part of daily life. There were mysterious rites that took place in Demeter's temple which we still do not know about, as they were protected by vows of silence.

With Demeter the divine and the human are very closely linked, as the miracle of the corn harvest each year was also a necessity for survival for the Greeks. The mysterious rites of her festival increased the sense of holiness surrounding the harvest.

Dionysus later came to be worshipped at Eleusis as well, which was fitting as both were gods that brought gifts of the earth, and were also yearly defeated by winter. Both Demeter and Dionysus were gods of sorrow as well as joy – unlike the blissful Olympian gods, they knew yearly grief. The early humans used stories about Demeter and Dionysus to explain winter, when everything died and the earth seemed sad.

Many of the myths explain natural phenomena like flowers and constellations, but the great mystery of these earth gods is the continual change of seasons – that each year the earth should seem to die, and then be reborn in the spring. Demeter and Dionysus put this in human terms.

Demeter had only one child, Persephone, who was kidnapped by Hades, lord of the dead, to be his queen. Demeter disguised herself as a mortal and wandered the earth in grief and despair. Eventually she came to Eleusis, and there she was taken in by a hospitable family. They accidentally offended her one night and then Demeter revealed herself, and she told Metaneira, the mother, to build her a temple nearby to win back her favor.

This is also the origin story of Persephone, who will become the beautiful, mysterious queen of the underworld. More myths will reveal that hospitality was sacred to the Greeks, partly because of myths like this – you should be kind to strangers, as they might by gods in disguise.

Once her temple was built Demeter lived there, but the earth began to die as her grief continued. Nothing would grow, and it seemed that mortals would starve to death. Finally Zeus sent Hermes to try and make amends. Hermes convinced Hades to let Persephone visit her mother, but first Hades made her eat a magic pomegranate seed that would make her return to him.

This is the first winter, and it associates the death of the fields with Demeter's motherly grief. The pomegranate seed comes to symbolize the time Persephone must stay in the underworld. It was a sacred fruit in several ways to the ancient Greeks.

Persephone and Demeter greeted each other joyfully, but were saddened by their inevitable parting. Eventually Zeus sent his mother, Rhea, to make a compromise. Persephone would stay with Hades for a third of the year and with Demeter for the other two thirds. Demeter was sorrowful, but she agreed. When Persephone returns to Hades, Demeter grieves and makes the world barren with winter, but when she returns each spring Demeter makes the earth blossom with her joy.

Rhea, Zeus's mother, is a mysterious figure associated with Earth itself. The origins of winter and spring are explained in the story's conclusion. The joy of spring is always colored by the knowledge of future sadness, as Persephone and Demeter's joyful reunion cannot escape the shadow of their inevitable parting.

Hamilton emphasizes the importance of sorrow in the story of Demeter and Persephone. They are both goddesses of life and beauty, but it is a fragile beauty that knows also the power of death. Mortals could find more comfort with Demeter and Persephone – goddesses who understood sadness and death – than with the Olympians, who knew neither.

Hamilton implies that in Demeter and Dionysus, the gods became more "human-like" than ever before, taking even the act of dying and making it divine. The special kind of beauty and heroism that exists within the knowledge of future death will recur many times.

Dionysus was the last god to enter Olympus, and the only god who had a mortal parent. Zeus was his father, but his mother was a Theban princess called Semele. Zeus loved Semele passionately and promised to grant her any wish. The angry, jealous Hera made Semele wish to see Zeus's full glory. Zeus was forced to show himself (as he had sworn by the river Styx), and his glory killed Semele, but Zeus saved her unborn child and hid it in his own side to protect it from Hera.

Semele will reappear much later in the book as Hamilton untangles the complicated web of character relationships in the myths. This is the first example of the jealous, spiteful Hera punishing Zeus's relatively innocent lover with death. The Styx, one of the rivers of Hades, is often mentioned as something that can make an oath unbreakable.

When the baby, Dionysus, was born, Hermes carried him away to be raised by the nymphs of the magical valley of Nysa. Dionysus then wandered the earth, teaching mortals about the secrets of wine and his worship. He was usually accepted as a god, but once a group of pirates kidnapped him and would not let him go despite his obvious divinity. Eventually he transformed into a lion and changed the pirates into dolphins.

Dionysus seems even more familiar, as he is born of a human mother. Dionysus is often compared to Jesus Christ (who came later) as a god who walks the earth, proclaiming his own divinity and being scorned (and then killed) by mortals. Hamilton later implies this connection with her language about resurrection, but she never explicitly says it.

Dionysus also punished a Thracian king, Lycurgus, who insulted him. In Crete, Dionysus saved and fell in love with Ariadne, who had been cruelly abandoned by the Athenian hero Theseus. Dionysus always longed for Semele, his mother, and eventually he defied Hades himself to save her from death and bring her up to Olympus, where she became an immortal.

Dionysus moves through myths that Hamilton will later describe in detail, like Semele's family, Theseus, and Ariadne. Several mythological figures will go down to Hades to seek a dead loved one, but Dionysus is one of the few successful ones.

Dionysus was one of the gods most contradictory in his nature, as was fitting for the lord of wine. He could be kind and generous, but he was also the god of madness and insane violence. His followers were the Maenads, women driven mad by wine who tore apart and devoured wild animals. They worshipped in the wilderness rather than in a temple. Dionysian worship was made of these two components: freedom and wild joy, and uncontrollable brutality.

The mysteries of wine were surely perplexing to the early Greeks, and so they explained it with this dual-natured god. In Dionysus, the contradictions of many of the gods are heightened and used to explain how alcohol can make people happy and friendly, but also wild and dangerous.

Dionysus' cruelest deed took place in Thebes, where Pentheus, the king (and Semele's nephew), refused to worship him and even imprisoned Dionysus. As punishment Dionysus drove Pentheus' mother and sisters mad, so that they thought Pentheus was a mountain lion and tore him apart with their bare hands.

Dionysus, like many of the gods, shares this capricious temper when it comes to being insulted by mortals. In this case the punishment is far worse than the crime. The idea of justice is shaky when it comes to the God of Wine.

Dionysus' double nature came naturally, as the Greeks knew that wine could make men friendly and happy but also angry and violent. Dionysus eventually became one of the most important gods, representing not just drunken joy but also holy inspiration. The first theater was performed at the festival in his honor. The greatest poetry in Greece was written for Dionysus, and in this way he became an unrivaled deity.

He was beloved for his stories and the wine he represented, but Dionysus is most important historically as the father of the theater. The philosopher Nietzsche would later discuss the primal, undifferentiated "Dionysian" aspect of human nature, which combined with the more structured "Apollonian" to create the great art of the Greeks.

Like Demeter, Dionysus was also a god that understood suffering and death. Every winter he died like Persephone, but his death was more brutal – he was torn to pieces. Then he rose again every spring, and it was his resurrection that the theater celebrated. He was the "tragic god," and so the god of the great Greek tragedies. He became a symbol of hope for the immortality of the soul, and for life beyond death.

Dionysus is the "tragic god" because his wild, primal life exists in the shadow of his inevitable death every winter. He lives fully and gloriously despite his fate to be torn apart. Life in the face of a brutal fate becomes the subject of many of the later Greek tragedies, which were originally inspired by Dionysus himself.

PART 1, CHAPTER 3

Hamilton begins by explaining the sources she used for this chapter (as she will do from now on). She takes this chapter mostly from the Greek poet Hesiod, but some from Aeschylus. The Greek universe begins with nothing but Chaos. Somehow this amorphous nothingness has two children, Night and Erebus (the underworld where death lives). Then, miraculously, Love is born golden-winged from the darkness and death. Love then creates Light and Day.

The diversity and intricacy of the stories partly comes because Hamilton uses such wildly different sources. The creation story is vague and mysterious, but it is significant that personified Love is the first force of life and light in the universe. Love will be an important theme in many of the myths, and is often associated with beauty.

Earth then appears, though it is never explained how, and Earth gives birth to Heaven. Both entities are simultaneously places and vague personalities – they are alive, but also make up everything at once. Mother Earth and Father Heaven first give birth to monsters. Hamilton compares them to our modern knowledge of dinosaurs and mammoths, though the Greek monsters were vaguely human.

In her introduction, Hamilton compared Greek mythology with the religions of other cultures – those she finds more "primitive" – and praised the lack of monsters and terrifying magic among the Greeks. But this creation story shows the monsters of their past, along with surprising violence and incest – as Heaven is both Earth's son and her husband.

Three of the monsters have a hundred hands and fifty heads each, and three are Cyclopes, giants with only one huge eye. Then come the Titans. These are just as strong as the monsters, but not quite so destructive.

The ugliness of these monsters is comparable to the monsters of other early cultures. They feature a natural characteristic like hands and eyes subtracted or multiplied it until it becomes grotesque.

Father Heaven hates his monstrous children, so he imprisons them within the earth, except for the Cyclopes and the Titans. Earth asks her children to help her against cruel Heaven, and the Titan Cronus wounds him badly. From his blood come the Giants and the Furies (terrible creatures who pursue and punish sinners). After that Cronus and the Titans rule the universe for long ages.

The violence and patricide that spawns creation begins here, as Cronus overthrows his father Heaven. This is only the beginning of this cycle, however, in which there is little sense of justice or vengeance, but only the surety that bloodshed will lead to more bloodshed.

Then comes the gods' rebellion. Cronus had learned that one of his children would overthrow him, so he tried to avoid his fate by swallowing them as soon as they were born. When Rhea (Cronus' sister-queen) gives birth to Zeus, however, she is able to secret him away to Crete, and she gives Cronus a stone wrapped in baby clothes to swallow instead.

This story shows that the mysterious power of fate – at the very least as a story-telling device – is older and stronger than the gods themselves. Even a Titan could not avoid his destiny.

When Zeus is grown, he forces Cronus to disgorge the stone along with Cronus's five earlier children, and the stone is later set up at Delphi as a holy place. After this the sibling gods rebel against Cronus and the Titans. The war almost destroys the universe, but Zeus and the gods eventually win with the help of the hundred-handed monsters and one sympathetic Titan: Prometheus.

The irony that will be emphasized in later tragedies is already apparent here, as in trying to avoid his fate Cronus unwittingly sealed it. Zeus and Rhea might not have decided to overthrow their husband and father if he had not so cruelly swallowed all his infant children.

Zeus punishes the Titans by chaining them in Tartarus, far beneath the earth. Prometheus' brother Atlas is forced to constantly hold up heaven and earth on his shoulders. After that Earth gives birth to a terrible monster called Typhon, but Zeus was is able to defeat it with the help of his thunderbolts. Later there is a rebellion of the Giants, but again the gods are victorious. After that Zeus and the Olympians rule undisputed.

Prometheus and Atlas will become important figures in later myths, and are still familiar archetypes even in modern society. Zeus seems secure in his dominion, but time will soon show that he too is fated to be overthrown by one of his children. This is the kind of tragic fate that will later be exploited by writers like Sophocles.

In Greek mythology the Earth was a round disk divided by the Mediterranean Sea and Black Sea (which they first called the "Unfriendly Sea," but later the "Friendly Sea"). Around the disk flowed the great river Ocean.

This picture of the earth seems especially foreign to the modern reader, and seems incongruous with the familiar humanity of many of the myths.

Outside of Ocean's perimeter lived mysterious peoples like the Cimmerians, who lived in a land of endless night, or the Hyperboreans in the far north, a blissful land near the dwelling of the Muses. The Ethiopians were in the far south, where they were often visited by the gods. Also on Ocean's bank was the happy land of the blessed dead.

These strange, unreachable lands rarely appear in the myths. Beyond the real, dynamic lives of the gods and mortals Greek mythology seems to grow vague around its edges.

At this point it was time for humans to be created. There are three stories about how it came about. In one Prometheus and his brother, scatterbrained Epimetheus ("afterthought") are assigned with making mortals. Epimetheus foolishly gives all the best gifts to animals first, but Prometheus fashions humans in the shape of the gods, and then he steals fire from the sun for their gift.

Prometheus, who had helped the gods against the Titans, now helps mortals against the gods. He will become a symbol of heroism and bravery in the face of injustice because of this, and beloved by mortals for helping them when they were weak.

A second creation story has the gods making humans using metals. They start with gold, and these humans are almost perfect. Then the gods experiment with metals of progressively lower quality; the silver race is foolish and keep injuring themselves, the bronze race loves war and eventually destroys itself, and then comes a race of heroes. The last is the iron race, the humans that now reside on earth. They are the worst humans yet, each generation more sinful than the last, and one day Zeus will destroy them too.

Like the creation story of the gods, this version of the creation of mortals also paints a bleak picture, filled with violence and degradation. The present-day humans are the worst that have ever been, with little hope for redemption, and they are doomed to be destroyed by Zeus someday.

Hamilton returns to the first myth, and describes how Prometheus tricks Zeus on mankind's behalf again – he arranges it so that humans get the best part of a sacrificed animal, and the gods are left with the bones and fat. Zeus is enraged, and he avenges himself first on humans and then on Prometheus.

Prometheus is an almost wholly good character, and Zeus appears as the villain in the stories they share. Again the first stories about the world seem full of cruelty and trickery.

In both of these myths only men are created. Zeus creates the first woman – Pandora – as a punishment for men, implying that all women have a nature to do evil and act as "beautiful disasters" to men. Another story involves Pandora, but blames her curiosity instead. The gods gave her a box into which each had put some misfortune or evil, and they told her never to open it. Pandora opened the box, releasing all the troubles of the world. The only good thing the box held was Hope, which now is humanity's only comfort in their misfortunes.

Like with the story of Eve in the Bible, the Greeks blamed a woman's curiosity for all the troubles of the world. Pandora's mistake is in a way a kind of hubris, the sin most frequently punished by the gods, as she desires knowledge of something the gods have withheld. Many myths will involve someone failing because of disobeying a single, simple command.

Zeus then punishes Prometheus for helping humans (even though Prometheus had earlier helped Zeus conquer the Titans). Zeus has Prometheus chained to a rock for eternity. This is a punishment, but also because Zeus learned that he, like Cronus, is fated to one day give birth to a son who would dethrone him. Only Prometheus knows the name of the son's mother, so Zeus tries to get Prometheus to reveal the name as he is chained in agony.

Like his own father, Zeus tries to avoid his inevitable fate by performing cruel actions, in his case torturing Prometheus, implying that these cruelties will in fact seal his fate. Even the early Greeks were clearly intrigued by the idea of fate, and struggled with the fact that bad things could still happen regardless of attempts to avert them.

Prometheus never gives away his secret, so Zeus punishes him further by sending an eagle to tear out Prometheus' liver every day. Because of this, Prometheus stands as a symbol of rebellion against unjust power. Prometheus is later freed, either by Chiron the Centaur dying for him or by Hercules slaying his tormenting eagle and breaking his chains.

Prometheus is one of the few truly heroic figures of these early myths. His noble love for humanity seems to reflect the pure Love that gave birth to the universe, a light in the darkness of violence and random cruelty.

Hamilton then tells the third creation story, where humans are created out of stone. They are so wicked that Zeus decides to destroy them, and he send a great flood that covers all but the tallest mountain. Only two mortals survive, Prometheus' son Deucalion and Pandora's daughter Pyrrha. Prometheus saves them by warning them to stay afloat in a wooden chest.

The flood myth reflects those of many other ancient cultures, including the story of Noah and the Ark. It also resonates with the idea that all humans are inherently sinful, and cannot escape being destroyed by the gods.

Zeus pities these two, especially because they are faithful worshippers, and he ends the flood. Deucalion and Pyrrha find an old temple and a voice commands them to throw stones behind them. They do so, and the stones become people, the ancestors of today's humans.

Again humans are associated with a kind of element being brought to life, and the present mortals are a "lowly" element like stone. In this story piety and humility are the virtues worth saving.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

Prometheus and Io. Hamilton takes this story from the Greek poet Aeschylus and the Roman poet Ovid. She returns to Prometheus, who is still chained to the rock in the Caucasus. A white heifer approaches him, talking wildly with a girl's voice, and Prometheus recognizes her as a maiden named Io. Zeus had seduced her, but then transformed her into a cow to hide her from an angry Hera. Hera was not deceived, and she asked for the cow and then imprisoned Io under the watch of the hundred-eyed Argus.

This is one of Zeus's many philandering adventures, though it also features the hero Prometheus. Hera is always pursuing Zeus's lovers and punishing them, and Zeus then uses different tricks to protect the women or hide his infidelity. This is the more "comic" side of the chief of the gods.

Zeus sends Hermes to free Io and he lulls Argus to sleep with a story about Pan. Hermes kills Argus, but later Hera takes his eyes and sets them in the tail of a peacock. Hermes frees Io, but Hera punishes her again by sending a gadfly to endlessly sting her, forcing her to wander the earth. Prometheus tries to comfort Io by telling her how Zeus was also the source of his own troubles, and he says that Io will soon return to human form and bear Zeus a son named Epaphus. Prometheus also tells Io that one of her descendants will be Hercules, the greatest of heroes, who will someday free Prometheus himself.

Embedded in the story is an explanation for the peacock's beautiful tail. Prometheus is able to comfort Io with the fact that a good fate inevitably awaits her, and Prometheus himself knows he will eventually be freed as well. Zeus seems a little less malicious in his infidelities by the fact that he seems to genuinely love his mistresses, if only briefly, and love was the most sacred thing of all to the Greeks.

Europa. Hamilton takes this story from the Alexandrian poet Moschus. Europa is another girl who Zeus falls in love with. She has a strange dream about continents and then goes out to a meadow with some friends. Zeus watches her, and then Cupid shoots him in the heart and he falls madly in love with Europa.

Zeus's lovers rarely have any agency in their position, as they are usually kidnapped and then seduced, or else raped. This makes Hera's punishments seem all the more unjust, and makes Zeus's "love" often more of a curse than a blessing.

Wary of Hera, Zeus transforms himself into a beautiful, docile bull and approaches Europa. She and her friends gather round him, enchanted, and Europa can't help climbing onto his back. Suddenly the bull rushes away and leaps over the sea, accompanied by Poseidon and the other sea-gods. Europa is frightened, but Zeus comforts her by revealing his identity.

This is a very fantastical, beautiful image, and though the tale culminates in an explanation of a continent's name, the story is clearly intended mostly as entertainment. Zeus frequently turns into an animal as part of his tricks to escape Hera.

Zeus takes Europa to Crete, where he returns to his true shape and seduces her. Europa's descendants include Minos and Rhadamanthus, who become judges of the dead in Hades, and the continent of Europe is named for Europa herself.

Europa is one of Zeus's most fortunate lovers, though the tales rarely discuss how the women themselves felt – they are simply assumed to be lucky because they will have great descendants.

The Cyclops Polyphemus. This story comes from three sources which span a thousand years: Homer's *Odyssey*, the Alexandrian poet Theocritus, and the satirist Lucian. Polyphemus is one of the Cyclopes, the only of the original monstrous children of Earth not banished by the gods. The Cyclopes become the forgers of Zeus's thunderbolts, and Zeus gives them a good country with herds of sheep and goats.

Mostly because of Homer's Odyssey, *Cyclopes are one of the ancient Greek monsters still very familiar to modern culture. They are more ambiguous than they seem at first, sometimes evil and sometimes neutral or comic, but always monsters because of their ugliness.*

Polyphemus is most famous for his encounter with Odysseus. He traps Odysseus and his men in his cave, and promises to eat some of them every day. After several of Polyphemus' gruesome meals, Odysseus cuts a huge piece of wood into a stake, and with his men drives the stake into Polyphemus' eye while he is sleeping. Polyphemus is blind then, but still alive. Odysseus and his men escape the cave by covering themselves with ram skins, so that Polyphemus thinks they are part of his herd.

Hamilton tells this story of Odysseus here, though she will relate the rest of his adventures later in the book. Odysseus is a famously clever hero, and this is one of the many great escapes on his "hero's quest," which was his difficult journey home from the Trojan War.

Another story involves Polyphemus, but in it he is less terrifying and more ridiculous. He falls madly in love with Galatea, a sea nymph, but she only mocks him and never returns his love. There is an even later story where Galatea at least speaks kindly of Polyphemus, but then she falls in love with a prince named Acis, whom the jealous Polyphemus kills.

In this story Polyphemus is a negative character only because of his ugliness, and in that he becomes almost tragic. He still has his fearsome temper and strength, however, as he kills the prince out of jealousy.

Flower-Myths: Narcissus, *Hyacinth*, *Adonis*. Hamilton takes these stories from a variety of sources including Ovid, Apollodorus, and Euripides. She describes how the many wildflowers of Greece seem so miraculous considering the country's stony, dry climate, and how the ancient people created myths to encapsulate the loveliness and strangeness of these flowers.

These myths are foremost explanations of natural phenomena, but they also have a darker underside that Hamilton will explain later. The many flower myths and their associations with lovely youths show the Greek fascination with beauty.

There are two stories about the narcissus flower. In one, Zeus creates it to help lure Persephone away from her friends so that Zeus's brother Hades could kidnap her. The second, better-known story involves a beautiful young man called Narcissus. Every girl that sees him falls in love with him, but Narcissus ignores them all, including the nymph Echo – whom Hera had earlier cursed to repeat only what she heard. Echo follows Narcissus and repeats his words sadly, but Narcissus scorns her.

Narcissus's beauty is his greatest resource and gives him his fame, but his proud lack of love is his greatest sin. Great beauty is always desired and fought over in the myths, and often it causes more sorrow than happiness. The story of the nymph Echo explains the modern meaning of the word.

The gods punish Narcissus for rejecting love, and Nemesis curses him to love no one but himself. Narcissus goes to a pool to drink and then falls in love with his reflection. He cannot look away, and he dies still staring into the water. Even when he crosses the river into Hades Narcissus looks for his reflection in the water. A new flower blooms where he died, and the nymphs Narcissus had scorned name it after him.

This myth again emphasizes the importance of love, as Narcissus is punished for his lack of love. It is associated with a kind of pride, as he considers no one good enough for him, and the gods always punish mortals who are too proud. Yet Narcissus' beauty is important enough to make his famous.

The hyacinth is created when Apollo accidentally kills his close young friend Hyacinthus in a discus contest. There is another version where Zephyr, the West Wind, is jealous of Apollo and blows the discus to strike Hyacinthus. Either way, Apollo is distraught, and he creates a red flower in remembrance of his friend and his own sorrow.

These flower myths are usually tragic stories that celebrate beauty and youth above all else. What is interesting is that they also associate the death of someone beautiful with the birth of a beautiful plant.

Hamilton interrupts to analyze these flower myths. She feels that they probably have dark origins, and may be "modernized" versions of stories of human sacrifice. At the very least they connect the idea of the sacrifice of a beautiful youth with a bountiful new harvest. The myths may have been invented to make these sacrifices seem less cruel.

Hamilton analyzes this connection between the death of youths and the birth of plants. This ties into her theory that the Greek myths have their origins in the "primitive," "barbaric" practices of other cultures, but the Greeks have civilized and beautified their ancient savagery.

Hamilton then tells the story of Adonis, who was a youth so beautiful that even Aphrodite herself fell in love with him. She gives him to Persephone to be taken care of, but then Persephone falls in love with him too. Zeus has to judge their quarrel, and he decides that Adonis will spend half the year with Persephone and half with Aphrodite. Then one day (when he is not in Hades) Adonis is gored by a wild boar during a hunt. Aphrodite kisses him as he dies, and a red anemone springs up where his blood stains the ground.

Adonis is another youth immortalized for his beauty. None of the gods seem immune to great mortal beauty, and the infidelities are not limited to Zeus. Again there is a connection and a kind of "justice" in beautiful blood giving birth to a beautiful flower. In this way Aphrodite also immortalizes her love, which makes the story seem less sinister.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

Hamilton takes this story from the Latin writer Apuleius, who, like Ovid, wrote myths as entertaining stories rather than statements of belief and importance. The protagonist of the story is Psyche, who is one of three princesses and is so beautiful that people stop worshipping Venus (Aphrodite) and instead start worshipping Psyche.

Many Roman writers were not as concerned with the nature of fate and morality as the Greeks, but more interested in creating entertaining tales of love and beauty. A mortal being worshipped as a god is always a recipe for trouble, as the often inconsistent gods are consistently jealous.

Venus is understandably insulted, and she sends her son Cupid (Eros) to punish Psyche by making her fall in love with the most disgusting creature he can find. But when Cupid sees Psyche, he himself falls in love with her, and Venus's plan fails. Psyche falls in love with no one. Though she is beloved and worshipped by all, no nobleman proposes to marry her, even though both her less-beautiful sisters have been married already.

Beauty overcomes everything else once more, and the poet exploits the interesting irony of Cupid himself being struck with sudden passion. Though Venus is the goddess of Love and Beauty, nothing can save a mortal (even a beautiful, loving one) who makes a goddess jealous.

Psyche's father, the king, goes to Apollo's oracle to ask how he can find a good marriage for his daughter. Cupid has already spoken with Apollo about his desperate love for Psyche, so Apollo tells the king that he must leave Psyche at the top of a hill, where she will be wed by a powerful winged serpent.

This is another example of a poeticized human sacrifice. Woman were clearly seen as valuable mostly as marriageable objects, as Psyche is seen as a failure because she is unmarried, though she is beloved by all.

The king and all the people grieve at this news, but they have no choice but to obey the oracle. Psyche sits on the hill, terrified, but then Zephyr, the West Wind, carries her away to an opulent palace. Voices speak to her and tell her to enter the mansion and bathe and feast. That night, she feels someone beside her in bed and he says that he is her husband, but she is forbidden to see him.

The oracle of Apollo will play an important role in many myths, often acting as a vehicle for unavoidable truths and inevitable, tragic fates. Many of the myths hinge on simple, seemingly random commands from a gods to a mortal, like Cupid forbidding Psyche from looking at him.

Time passes, with Psyche spending the day alone in the palace and the night with the husband she never sees, but she is happy and comes to love him. One night her husband warns her that her sisters will be passing nearby, and Psyche begs him to let her see them. He agrees, but says that this will end in tragedy. The next day the sisters greet each other joyfully, and then Psyche shows them her palace and tells them about her husband. The sisters are jealous of Psyche's good fortune and they form a plot to ruin her.

The power of love is at the center of this story, and for a myth (and culture) that focuses so much on beauty, it is interesting that the godly Cupid wins Psyche's love without using his physical beauty. The characters in the myths are often warned that their actions will inevitably lead to tragedy, but they usually act anyway.

The sisters manage to convince Psyche that her husband is probably a horrible monster, as she has never been allowed to see his face. They force her to agree to their plan – she must light a lamp and look at her husband while he is sleeping, and if he is a monster, she must stab him.

Disobedience is emphasized here as it is in many myths. Despite the occasional randomness and cruelty of the gods' justice, the Greeks and Romans found some moral security in simply clinging obediently to their commands.

Psyche is wracked with doubt, but she carries out her sisters' plan. The lamplight reveals that her husband is the impossibly beautiful Cupid, and Psyche is so overcome with wonder that her hand shakes and a drop of hot oil from the lamp falls onto his shoulder. Cupid wakes up and flees the house, acting betrayed, and he goes to Venus's chamber to heal his wound.

The power of love depends on obedience and trust in this story, and Psyche is punished for her lack of both, although it seems totally understandable that she would want to see her own husband. Like with Pandora, a woman is punished for her curiosity.

Psyche is crushed with shame and sadness, and she determines to wander the earth seeking after Cupid. She eventually goes to Venus's house. Venus is delighted to torment Psyche, and sets her an impossible task to "help her find a husband." First Psyche must sort a huge amount of seeds in one evening, but some ants pity her and help her succeed.

The impossible tasks that Venus sets for Psyche become recurring motifs, like the "Labors of Hercules." Being given difficult tasks is an important part of the Greek idea of heroism, and the "Hero's Quest" motif.

Venus is angry as Psyche's success, and sets her more tasks. The next is that she must fetch golden wool from a flock of fierce wild sheep. Psyche despairs, but a river reed speaks to her, comforting her, and tells her where she can find the sheep's wool snagged on thorny branches. Next Psyche must fill a flask with water from a dangerous waterfall at the source of the Styx, but an eagle appears and fills the flask for her.

Psyche here becomes a hero with more agency and drama than many of the mortal women in the myths about love. The strength of her love overcomes all obstacles, and she receives last-minute help from the natural world, as many heroes do.

For her last task Psyche must go to Hades and convince Proserpine (Persephone) to put some of her beauty in a box. On her way a tower speaks to her and tells her how to get to Hades, and to appease Cerberus with a piece of cake. On the way back, Psyche is overcome by curiosity and she looks into the box she carries, as she wants more beauty to win back Cupid. The box seems empty, but then Psyche falls into a deep sleep.

Psyche becomes one of the many mortals to enter Hades and return. Again like Pandora, she is punished for opening a forbidden box. Psyche's main "flaws" seem to be a totally reasonable amount of curiosity and disobedience, but she is punished for these nonetheless.

Cupid, who is finally healed of his shoulder wound, appears at last and wakes Psyche. Then he goes straight to Jupiter (Zeus) and convinces him to make Psyche an immortal. Immediately Venus approves of their marriage, and the story ends happily with Love (Cupid) and the Soul (Psyche) united forever.

Psyche's story ends happily despite her trials, and love overcomes hardship again. The story also becomes an explanation story for abstract concepts like Love and the Soul.

PART 2, CHAPTER 2

Pyramus and Thisbe. The next tale, which is much more tragic, comes from Ovid. There were two young lovers named Pyramus and Thisbe who lived in Babylon, in houses that shared a common wall. They wanted to get married but their parents forbade it. Pyramus and Thisbe discover a crack in the wall between them, and they whisper loving words back and forth to each other.

Many of these stories, like that of Psyche and Cupid, come from Roman writers who sought tales of love – even tragic love – that were less existentially depressing than the stories of the Greek tragedians. The wall becomes another famous obstacle to love.

Eventually they decide to elope, and they plan to meet outside the city beneath a mulberry tree (whose berries are, in this story, still white). Thisbe gets there first, but while she waits a lioness appears with bloody jaws. Thisbe flees and drops her cloak, and the lion tears it apart. Then Pyramus arrives, sees the bloody cloak and the lion's tracks, and thinks that Thisbe has been killed.

This story is a precursor to Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," and an archetypal tale of tragic young lovers killing themselves over a misunderstanding.

Despairing, Pyramus kills himself with his sword, and his blood covers the berries of the mulberry tree and stains them red. Then Thisbe returns and sees Pyramus's body, and she plunges the same sword into her own body. The gods take pity on the dead lovers, and they keep the red fruit of the mulberry as a reminder of their tragic story.

Even in this tragic story, love is rewarded with a famous myth and a memorial in the red mulberries. This is another example of the deaths of beautiful youths being associated with plants.

Orpheus and Eurydice. This story comes from Virgil and Ovid, and introduces Orpheus, the son of one of the nine Muses and the greatest musician among mortals. Orpheus grows up in Thrace, and the music of his lyre deeply moves anyone – whether mortal, god, animal, or inanimate object – who hears it. Once he even overpowers the deadly song of the Sirens and saves the Argonauts.

Orpheus is a prime example of the Greek value of beauty, though in his case it is beauty in music and art. Like the great physical beauty of Narcissus or Psyche, his musical talent is a powerful resource that can be used for sorrow or happiness. The gentle artist is another kind of hero as well.

Orpheus marries a woman named Eurydice, but immediately after the wedding she is bitten by a snake and dies. Orpheus's grief is unbearable, and he uses the power of his music to pass by Cerberus and enter the gates of Hades to try and bring Eurydice back. Orpheus even draws tears from Pluto's eyes, and he convinces him to release Eurydice, but on one condition – Eurydice must walk behind Orpheus on the journey back to earth, and Orpheus cannot turn to look at her.

Love is stronger than death, as other myths have shown, but here music and beauty can be stronger than death as well. Orpheus being forbidden to look back is another arbitrary command from a god to a mortal. Whenever these rules are mentioned in the myths, it always means that they will be broken, and then the mortal punished for their disobedience.

Orpheus and Eurydice make the journey out of Hades, but just before they reach the earth Orpheus is overcome by doubt, and he looks back at Eurydice. Eurydice slips away and returns to the underworld forever. Desolate, Orpheus avoids other people and wanders the earth aimlessly, playing his music for the rocks and trees. Then one day a band of Maenads comes upon him and rips him to pieces.

Orpheus is a hero for his musical talent and his journey into Hades, but like most of the heroes he has a tragic flaw, which is often disobeying a simple, arbitrary command. The wild madness of Dionysus suddenly returns to end Orpheus's story tragically.

Ceyx and Alcyone. Hamilton takes this story from Ovid. Ceyx is a king in Thessaly, and his wife is Alcyone, daughter of Aeolus. They love each other deeply, but one day Ceyx decides he must depart to visit the oracle. Alcyone has a premonition of disaster, and she prays to Juno to protect her husband.

These are more lovers who will be rewarded for their passion and piety, though Ceyx and Alcyone are different in that they are older and already married.

Ceyx does indeed meet disaster on his journey, as his ship is destroyed by a hurricane and Ceyx is killed. Juno is touched by Alcyone's prayers, however, and she asks Somnus, the God of Sleep, to send Alcyone a dream explaining what happened to her husband. Alcyone wakes up grieving, and goes to a ledge overlooking the ocean.

Prophetic dreams usually come true, and Ceyx cannot escape his disastrous fate. The gods can then try to make amends as a reward for Alcyone's love. They can never change fate, but only try to amend it after the fact.

Alcyone looks out over the water and then sees the tide bringing in her husband's floating body. Alcyone leaps into the water, but the gods take pity on her and transform her into a bird, and they do the same for Ceyx. Since then the two fly together at all times, and the phrase "Halcyon days" comes from Alcyone's name, and refers to one week out of the year when the seas are calm and Alcyone can lay her eggs on the smooth waters.

Another example of lovers being rewarded by being transformed into something that allows them to stay together forever. This also becomes an "explanation myth" for both seabirds and the patterns of winds and currents in the ocean.

Pygmalion and Galatea. This story comes from Ovid. Pygmalion is a young sculptor who hates women and finds fulfillment only in his art. He decides to prove the deficiencies of mortal women by making a perfect statue, and he does indeed make a beautiful statue – so beautiful that Pygmalion himself falls hopelessly in love with it.

Pygmalion, like Narcissus, is punished for rejecting love out of pride and vanity. Pygmalion, though, is rewarded in the end simply because his kind of love is more unique than most. This is another example of the sometimes arbitrary judgments of the gods.

Venus is intrigued by this new, unique kind of love, and she decides to help Pygmalion by giving his statue life. Pygmalion is overjoyed, and he names the woman Galatea. Venus herself attends their wedding, and Pygmalion and Galatea's son Paphos later gives his name to Venus's favorite city.

This is another story about the value of beauty and the power of beauty in art. Pygmalion suffers because of his pride, but is ultimately rewarded because he was able to create something so beautiful.

Baucis and Philemon. The next tale is also from Ovid. One day Jupiter and Mercury (Hermes) disguise themselves as mortals and descend to earth, looking for adventure. They decide to test the hospitality of the people of Phrygia. No one lets them in except for a poor old couple, Baucis and Philemon. They treat the gods like honored guests with what little they have, and offer to cook their only goose for them.

This tale emphasizes the importance of hospitality to the Greeks and their gods. The bond between guest and host is one of the sacred moral rules that many poets and playwrights will use to tragic and ironic effect in other stories.

Jupiter and Mercury then reveal themselves as gods, and they drown the rest of the people of Phrygia with a flood, sparing only Baucis and Philemon, and transforming their shack into a magnificent temple. Then they offer to grant any wish for the old couple, and Baucis and Philemon ask only that they should never have to live apart, but might die together.

This part of the story is an example of the gods justly punishing the wicked and rewarding the righteous, and it also emphasizes the importance of hospitality. The love of Baucis and Philemon is also rewarded.

The gods grant this wish, and Baucis and Philemon live to an old age as priests in their temple-house. When they die, the gods transform them into two trees, an oak and a linden, growing together out of one trunk.

Most of these lover myths become explanation stories for the nature of Greece. The story also emphasizes the couple's piety as one of their greatest virtues.

Endymion. The story of Endymion comes from the Greek poet Theocritus. Endymion is a beautiful young shepherd who Selene, the Moon, falls in love with. She kisses him one night and puts him in a magical sleep so that she can visit him whenever she wants. He remains sleeping forever, and Selene is always tormented by longing for him.

This is a rare case of the male "lover" being the powerless one and the female taking advantage of him. It is tragic because the situation does not work for either the Moon or Endymion, but it creates a sad, beautiful image.

Daphne. Ovid tells this story. Daphne is an independent young nymph who scorns marriage and loves hunting. Apollo falls in love with her and she runs away from him. Apollo pursues her relentlessly, and the panicked Daphne calls out for help to her father, the river god Pentheus, as she approaches his river. Pentheus transforms Daphne into a laurel tree before Apollo can catch her. Apollo then declares that the laurel will be his sacred tree from now on, and it now symbolizes music and victory.

This myth shows Apollo's crueler side as he pursues Daphne against her will. Even after she is transformed she never really escapes him, as Apollo makes the laurel his sacred tree. This was seen as a reward for Daphne, as she is immortalized in legend, but in reality she is punished for refusing to be raped by a god.

Alpheus and Arethusa. This story comes from Ovid and the Alexandrian poet Moschus. Arethusa is another nymph who loves hunting and scorns love, a follower of Artemis. Like Daphne, Arethusa is also pursued by an impassioned god, but in her case it is the river god Alpheus. Just as Alpheus is about to catch her, Arethusa appeals to Artemis, and Artemis transforms her into a spring of water plunging deep into the earth.

This story is similar to Daphne's. Both women love their independence but then have it stolen by a deity. The lesson of these many similar myths seems to be that it is unfortunate to be loved by a god, and it is even worse if you reject that love. Many of the women of these stories have no agency, and are seen as mere objects of love.

Arethusa still cannot escape Alpheus, however. He changes back into a river and follows Arethusa through her tunnel so that their waters mingle together. Because of this, there is a connection between the Alpheus river in Greece and Arethusa's well in Sicily.

Again Arethusa is "rewarded" by becoming a famous spring, but she still cannot escape her divine pursuer, so the ending of the story feels more like a punishment and less like a "lovers' tale."

PART 2, CHAPTER 3

Hamilton tells this famous story using material from Apollonius of Rhodes, Pindar, and Euripides. The first great hero to take a quest was Jason – like Odysseus later, the Quest of the Golden Fleece involved traveling by water and battling many monsters and hardships.

This story is the first real epic tale of the book, and the first "hero's quest." It contains many elements that will be repeated in the stories of Odysseus, Aeneas, and Hercules, although each are unique in the way they portray their culture's idea of heroism.

The story begins with a Greek king named Athamas who grew tired of his wife, Nephele, and so married a second woman, Ino. Ino wants to kill Nephele's son, Phrixus, so her own son can inherit the throne. She manages to cause a drought in the country, and then persuades the oracle to tell King Athamas that he must sacrifice Phrixus to make the corn grow.

There is usually a complicated backstory of betrayal and murder, and a wicked king usurping the throne. This sets the stage for the hero, who must reclaim the throne after going on his quest. Human sacrifice returns again in this early myth.

Hamilton says that the later Greeks found this idea of human sacrifice repulsive, so they would often change that part of the story. In the original tale, Hermes sends a flying golden ram to save Phrixus (and Helle, his sister) just as he is about to be sacrificed. The ram flies them over the ocean, where Helle slips off and drowns. The ram then lands in Colchis and Phrixus sacrifices the ram to Zeus in thanks. He then gives its Golden Fleece to Æetes, the king of Colchis.

The object of the hero's quest appears with the golden ram. This is an example of Hamilton's theory that as the Greeks grew more civilized, they rejected older ideas of human sacrifice, and even changed the myths themselves to avoid mentioning them in connection with the "blessed gods."

Meanwhile, a man named Pelias usurps the throne of Phrixus's uncle, but the deposed king's son, Jason, is sent away in secret to be kept safe. When Jason grows up, he returns to reclaim his rightful kingdom. Pelias had been told by the oracle that he would be killed by a stranger with only one sandal, and on his journey Jason loses one of his sandals.

The oracle at Delphi enters again to offer foreshadowing to the tale. Again a mortal tries to avoid his prophesied fate through his own actions – as Pelias will try to have Jason killed because he entered the city with only one sandal.

Jason arrives in the town and Pelias is frightened of his godlike appearance and single sandal. Jason demands that Pelias give up his throne and leave in peace. Pelias pretends to agree, but first he lies and says that the oracle has told him that someone must bring back the Golden Fleece so that Phrixus's spirit can return home, and he asks Jason to go. In reality Pelias hopes Jason will die on such a dangerous quest.

Many characters try to maneuver their way around sacred rules – like the laws of hospitality, in which a host cannot kill a guest – by sending their enemies on quests they are sure will be deadly. These usually end up as "hero's quests," however, and go badly for the attempted murderers.

Jason is delighted by the prospect of the adventure, and he assembles an extraordinary group of Greek heroes to accompany him on his quest – among them Hercules, Theseus, Castor and Pollux, Peleus (Achilles' father), and Orpheus. They set out in a ship called the *Argo*, so the heroes are called the Argonauts.

The Greeks seemingly took great pleasure in assembling many heroes together for great adventures, like with the Caledonian Boar Hunt and the Trojan War. Jason's bravery in the face of danger seems like his only heroic trait, however, as the tale will show.

Hamilton describes some of the many challenges the Argonauts face on their journey. They put in at Lemnos, which is ruled by fierce women, but the inhabitants there are surprisingly kind to them. Soon afterward Hercules leaves the crew, as he is blinded by grief when his friend and armor-bearer Hylas is lured into drowning by a nymph.

There are always many dangers and obstacles in the hero's quest, though the interesting part about Jason's tale is that he rarely does any heroic fighting himself. Most of the stories involve other Argonauts, or else Jason being helped by someone.

Next the group encounters the Harpies, who are horrible flying beasts, and an old oracle (prophet) named Phineus. Zeus had punished Phineus for always telling the direct truth instead of wrapping his prophecies in mystery. Whenever Phineus was about to eat, the Harpies would swoop down and defile his food with their odor. Because of this he was starving.

This is an almost self-referential side story that shows that the Greek poets recognized their own motifs. Prophecies had to be couched in mysterious language, or else they would not make good material for stories. Phineus is punished for being too straightforward and prosaic.


Among the Argonauts are the sons of Boreas, the North Wind, and they drive away the Harpies, who never trouble Phineus again. He then feasts with the heroes and warns them about their next obstacle – the Symplegades, the Clashing Rocks that smash constantly against each other so that nothing can pass through.

This is an example of the monsters that must be fought on a hero's quest, but also shows how Jason rarely does anything we would consider "heroic." The sons of Boreas defeat the Harpies, and Phineus helps Jason through the Clashing Rocks.

The Argonauts follow Phineus's advice – they first send a dove through the Clashing Rocks – and then they are able to pass through, though the very back end of their ship is shorn off by the rocks. After that they manage to avoid the island of the Amazons, who are violent women warriors, and they pass by Prometheus chained high overhead, and then come at last to Colchis.

Many mythological characters show up in these quests. The Amazons usually appear only briefly, but they have become familiar figures. The Greek bias against foreign cultures usually becomes evident in these quests as well, as the many other countries they pass through are usually enemies.

More challenges await, but the Olympians – notably Hera and Aphrodite – decide to help Jason. They send Cupid to make Medea, the daughter of the Colchian King Æetes and a powerful magician, fall in love with Jason.

Medea appears as an interesting, ambiguous character, and one of the most powerful mortals. Yet she will be seen as a villain because she is a woman and foreigner.

Meanwhile the Argonauts reach the city and are welcomed by the king. Medea sees Jason and Cupid shoots her, causing her to fall in love. After the Argonauts have feasted and bathed, King Æetes asks why they have come. He is enraged by Jason's request for the Golden Fleece, but he knows it is forbidden to kill guests. Instead Æetes (like Pelias) assigns Jason an impossible task, hoping he will die – he must yoke two magical, fire-breathing bulls and plow a field with them, and then sow the field with dragon's teeth, from which will spring armed men that Jason must defeat.

The importance of hospitality appears again. This might seem foreign to the modern reader, but it becomes an important plot point in many of the myths. The villains try to get around sacred rules by assigning impossible tasks or leaving their dangerous children to die, but they can never escape their fate no matter their precautions.

That night Jason's men suggest that he plead to Medea, as she is the only one who could help with such an impossible task. Medea, meanwhile, almost kills herself because of her love for a stranger – a love that means she must betray her own father. But Medea decides to live, and she and Jason meet. She gives him an ointment that makes him invincible for a day, and tells him how to defeat the dragon-men: he must throw a rock among them, so they attack each other.

Jason does succeed in his hero's trials, as heroes must, but it seems like the real hero is Medea. Jason does little on his own except never shrink from danger – the great deeds are done by Medea, or the sons of Boreas earlier. This motif of a woman choosing to betray her father for the sake of a strange lover will reappear in several myths.

Jason succeeds in his task, and then King Æetes plots another way to kill the Argonauts, but again Medea saves Jason, though she is tormented by her own treachery. She warns Jason to get the Fleece at once and flee or he will be killed. The Fleece is guarded by a huge serpent, but Medea lulls it to sleep. Then the Argonauts leave Colchis with Medea and the Fleece.

Medea turns against her father outright for Jason's sake. This could be a justification for her villainy, as filial piety is a sacred rule, but the Greeks also elevated love above all else, and Medea does all her terrible deeds for the sake of love only.

As they are sailing away, King Æetes sends his son in pursuit, Medea's brother Apsyrtus, along with a huge army. Medea saves Jason again by making the ultimate sacrifice for him, and killing her brother. This scatters the pursuers and lets Jason escape.

The actual retrieving of the Fleece and escape are again mostly performed by Medea, not Jason, yet Jason is the "hero" of the story.

On the journey home the Argonauts face more challenges, but they pass through them with success. A nymph leads them safely between the rock-monster of Scylla and the whirlpool of Charybdis, and when they pass Talus, the last of the ancient bronze race, Medea prays to Hades and has him destroyed.

The Argonauts face more challenges that characters other than Jason actually overcome. Scylla and Charybdis will reappear in several hero's quests, and have become symbols of obstacles.

When they reach Greece the Argonauts disband. Jason takes Medea and the Fleece to Pelias, only to find that Pelias has killed Jason's father, and Jason's mother has died of grief. Medea helps Jason again by contriving a terrible death for Pelias. She convinces Pelias's daughters that they will make their father young again if they chop him up and put his pieces into a magical pot. They do so, thinking they are helping their father.

This is another important part of the hero's quest, when the hero returns and reclaims his rightful throne. But yet again it is actually Medea who kills Pelias, the usurper. Her many terrible deeds are all done out of love for Jason, which makes her an ambiguous, interesting character to the modern reader, though she was a villain to the Greeks.

There is another story that Medea returned Jason's father to life, and that she gave Jason himself perpetual youth. She later bears him two sons, and they live for a while in Corinth. Jason then betrays Medea's great loyalty by betrothing himself to the daughter of Corinth's king – thinking only of his own ambition. Medea is distraught and then enraged by Jason, who acts cold and unsympathetic, and she lists the many great and terrible deeds she has done on Jason's behalf.

At the end of the story Jason acts totally unheroic, so that Hamilton and the reader can't help wondering what made him such a famous "hero." It is clear that the Greeks of the time valued great deeds that made for epic tales over faithful love, and bravery over gratitude. They also show their bias against women and foreigners, as Medea is both.

Medea then leaves Jason angrily, and plots a terrible revenge for him. She sends her two sons with a beautiful robe for Jason's new bride, but when the girl puts on the robe it bursts into flame and kills her. Medea then kills her own two sons, fearing they will live as slaves. Jason finds and curses her just as she flies away on a chariot pulled by dragons.

The tale ends tragically, but Medea is not punished. In the bizarre justice that is typical in the myths, sons are punished for the sins of their parents, as Medea kills her children to hurt Jason but also because Jason's new wife would probably enslave or kill them.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4

Phaëthon. Hamilton takes this story from Ovid, and she calls it one of his best. Phaëthon is a mortal boy who learns that his father is the Sun, so he goes to his radiant, beautiful palace to find him. The Sun is overjoyed to meet his son, and he swears by the river Styx to grant Phaëthon anything he should wish.

This will become a story about the importance of humility, but also how bravery, even arrogant bravery, can be rewarded. The Sun has trysts with mortals just like Zeus and the other gods.

Phaëthon immediately asks to take the Sun's place for one day and ride his golden chariot across the sky. The Sun tries to persuade Phaëthon to choose a different wish, as he foresees that this will end in tragedy, but the bold, ambitious Phaëthon will not be dissuaded.

Phaëthon tries to equal the gods with his request, and he is warned of the inevitable tragedy that will result. But such characters never listen to the warnings in the myths.

Dawn approaches and Phaëthon enters the chariot, which is pulled wild, powerful horses. The chariot starts to rise, but then everything goes wrong. Phaëthon cannot control the horses, and they rush about, setting the world on fire. Mount Olympus itself is set aflame, and Jove hurls a thunderbolt at the chariot to stop the destruction. Phaëthon is killed instantly, and the mysterious river Eridanus cools his burning body. The naiads inscribe his bravery on his tomb and Phaëthon's sisters, the Heliades, mourn for him, and are turned into poplar trees.

Phaëthon is punished for his hubris with death and destruction, but he is also rewarded for his bravery. Because his attempt was so bold and daring, the naiads write a monument to his bravery, and he is immortalized within the myth itself. In this way he serves as both a hero and a bad example. The myth ends with another transformation into a tree.

Pegasus and Bellerophon. The story of Bellerophon, a beautiful, strong youth whose father is Poseidon, comes from Hesiod, Homer, and Pindar. Bellerophon's greatest desire is to the possess Pegasus, the winged horse, though this seems an impossible wish. Polyidus, a seer, advises Bellerophon to sleep in Athena's temple. Athena then comes to Bellerophon in a dream and leaves him a golden bridle to charm Pegasus.

Bellerophon is another hero whose first task involves doing little that is heroic. Athena helps him tame Pegasus, so it is hardly any work at all. Pegasus has become a mythical creature much more famous than its master, an example of a beautiful, sacred "monster."

Bellerophon finds Pegasus and becomes his rider with the aid of the golden bridle. He is then the lord of the air, but hard trials await him. He rejects the infatuated Anteia, the wife of King Proetus, and she accuses him evil and plots his death. Proetus will not kill Bellerophon, as he has eaten at his table, but he sends him on a deadly quest: to kill the Chimaera.

This is another example of a king fearing to kill a guest because of the sacred rules of hospitality, and instead sending the guest on a deadly quest. Bellerophon's hero's quest repeats many of the motifs of Jason and the Argonauts.

The Chimaera is a terrible, fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. Bellerophon flies over her and shoots her with arrows. Then Proetus sends him to battle the mighty Solymi warriors, and then the Amazons, but Bellerophon defeats both. Finally Proetus accepts Bellerophon and gives him his daughter to marry.

The Chimaera is just a combination of animals, like Pegasus, yet the Chimaera is evil because of its ugliness. More aspects of Bellerophon's heroism involve defeating fierce foreigners and winning the hand of a princess.

Bellerophon's ambition becomes too great then, and leads to his downfall. He wants to become immortal, and he tries to fly Pegasus up to Mount Olympus. Pegasus wisely bucks his rider, and after that Bellerophon wanders the earth, alone and miserable. Pegasus leaves him and becomes the wonder of Zeus's stables.

Like Phaëthon, Bellerophon's story is also a cautionary tale. This is a classic example of the gods punishing hubris in a mortal. Any time someone claims equality with the gods, it never ends well for the mortal.

Otus and Ephialtes. This story comes from Apollodorus. Otus and Ephialtes were twin Giant brothers, sons of Poseidon. They were huge and ambitious, and wanted to prove themselves superior to the gods. They managed to kidnap and imprison Ares, though Hermes later freed him by stealth.

This is another cautionary tale about pride and hubris, although with Otus and Ephialtes it seems they have some reason to compare themselves to the gods, as they can capture Ares.

The brothers then decide to kidnap Artemis, as Ephialtes is in love her (though Hamilton comments that they really only loved each other). They pursue Artemis a long way, but then she outwits them. She transforms into a beautiful white deer, and the brothers (who are standing on either side of it) hurl their javelins at it. Then the deer disappears and the brothers' javelins each strike the other, killing him.

This is a strange tale in that the Giants seem to be as physically strong as the gods, so the gods have to defeat them through trickery. Their punishment is especially tragic, as the brothers loved only each other, and are then made to kill each other.

Daedalus. Hamilton takes this story from Apollodorus. Daedalus is the architect and inventor who built the Labyrinth in Crete and then showed Ariadne how she could help Theseus escape it. King Minos suspects that Daedalus helped Theseus, and he imprisons Daedalus with his son, Icarus, in the Labyrinth itself.

The story of the Labyrinth and the Minotaur will be told in more detail later, as it connects with Theseus's story. Daedalus represents the great value of artistic and inventive beauty. His clever mind, like Orpheus's lyre, is as valuable as many strong warriors.

Daedalus builds wings for himself and his son, and they escape by flying away. Daedalus warns Icarus not to fly too high or the sun will melt the glue and his wings will fall apart. Icarus does not listen, though; he flies joyously towards the sun, and then falls into the sea and drowns.

Icarus becomes a famous example of the danger of pride, the classic image of flying too high. But like Phaëthon, Icarus is also immortalized in this story because of his boldness.

The grieving Daedalus flies to Sicily, where he is welcomed. Minos is enraged at Daedalus's escape, and tries to trap him by arranging a contest rewarding whoever can pass a thread through a spiraling shell. Minos knows that only Daedalus could solve the riddle, and when he does, Minos comes to Sicily to find him, but in the end Minos himself is slain.

Hamilton ends the story here, but there are other tales about Daedalus as well, including how he killed his nephew, Perdix, when he invented the saw and the compass. Daedalus was jealous and let him fall to his death, but Athena turned Perdix into a partridge.

PART 3, CHAPTER 1

Hamilton compares this story, which was very popular in Greece, with a fairy tale. She takes the complete tale mostly from Apollodorus, though many poets allude to it. King Acrisius of Argos learns from the Oracle at Delphi that his daughter, Danaë, will give birth to a son that will kill him. Acrisius fears that the gods will punish him if he kills his daughter, so he imprisons Danaë to keep her from getting pregnant.

This story returns to the idea of fate and the use of a prophecy as a plot point. This is also another example of someone being afraid to break a sacred rule (like a father killing his daughter) and so going about their goal in a roundabout way, which always fails.

Danaë lives as a prisoner underground, but one day Zeus comes to her as a golden rain falling through her air chute, and he magically impregnates her. Danaë gives birth to Perseus. When Acrisius discovers the child and who its father was, he puts Danaë and Perseus in a wooden chest and throws it out to sea.

This is a typical example of a mortal trying to avoid his fate and failing, but it is less ironic and poignant than most, as Acrisius appears only briefly in the tale much later. His hubris in trying to avoid the prophecy simply sets the stage for Perseus.

Danaë and Perseus drift around and eventually are found by Dictys, a kind fisherman, who takes them in. Dictys's brother Polydectes is the wicked ruler of the island where they live, and Polydectes falls in love with Danaë. Polydectes wants to get rid of Perseus and marry Danaë, so he manages to convince Perseus to kill Medusa, the Gorgon, and bring her head as a wedding gift.

Like many other kings in the myths, Polydectes fears to kill Perseus outright, as Perseus has been his guest, so instead he sends him on a deadly quest. Like with Jason, the first sign of Perseus's "hero" status (besides being raised without a father) is that he gladly accepts impossible, dangerous tasks.

Medusa is a woman with impenetrable scales and snakes for hair, and anyone who looks at her turns to stone – killing her should be an impossible feat. But the gods help Perseus, and Hermes appears to him and gives him a magical sword, and Athena gives him a mirrored shield. Perseus then travels to the Graiae (the three Gray sisters who share only one eye), and he steals their eye until they tell him how to find the Hyperborean nymphs.

Similarly to Jason, Perseus's "heroism" mostly involves being helped by others, in this case Hermes and Athena. Hamilton points out that the story becomes like a "fairy tale" with its collection of magical objects that help the hero. Perseus's cleverness in dealing with the Graiae is his only original idea in the story.

Perseus travels to the Hyperboreans with Hermes, and the nymphs give him winged sandals so he can fly, a magical wallet that can hold anything, and a cap that makes him invisible. Fully equipped now, Perseus flies to the island of the Gorgons.

Perseus's success as a hero depends mostly on the magical objects given to him and the exact instructions he receives.

The Gorgons are asleep, and Perseus creeps up on them, looking at them only in the reflection of Athena's mirrored shield so he is not turned to stone. Athena and Hermes accompany him, and they point out which one is Medusa – this is important, as her two sisters are immortal. Perseus chops off the sleeping Medusa's head, puts it in his magic wallet, and flies away.

The actual great deed – the killing of Medusa – seems almost unfair when it is actually described. Medusa is sleeping and Perseus is invisible, so she stands no chance against him.

On his way home, Perseus comes upon Andromeda, a beautiful princess who has been chained to a rock and is about to be eaten by a sea serpent – all as a punishment for her mother, Cassiopeia, who had offended the gods by boasting of her own beauty.

This is yet another example of the gods punishing a mortal for hubris, but their justice not falling on the actual sinner herself, but on her daughter. It is also another implication of human sacrifice.

When the sea serpent appears, Perseus cuts off its head. He frees Andromeda, takes her to her home, and marries her. Perseus then returns to his own island to find that Polydectes, enraged at Danaë's refusal to marry him, has driven Danaë and Dictys to hide in a temple.

Perseus fulfills another motif of the hero's quest, as he marries a princess after successfully slaying a monster. His "heroism" is very simplistic and straightforward, and not as interesting to modern readers.

Perseus goes to Polydectes' palace, where the King is having a banquet with all his followers. Perseus enters the banquet hall and holds up Medusa's head, turning everyone (except himself) to stone. He then makes Dictys king of the island, and he, Andromeda, and Danaë return to Greece. Perseus unwittingly fulfills the oracle's prophecy there, as he accidentally kills his grandfather Acrisius (who is disguised as a spectator) in a discus-throwing contest. Perseus and Andromeda then live happily ever after.

This is the final motif of the hero's quest – returning home, killing the usurpers, and reclaiming his rightful position. The fulfillment of Acrisius's fate is almost an afterthought of the story, and is not exploited to its full drama and irony like it will be in later, more complex tales. Like Hyacinthus, Acrisius is another victim of a discus accident.

PART 3, CHAPTER 2

Theseus is the favorite hero of the Athenians. Hamilton takes his story from a variety of sources, but mostly from Apollodorus. Theseus is the son of the king of Athens, Aegeus, but he grows up with his mother in southern Greece. Before he left for Athens, Aegeus placed a sword and a pair of shoes under a giant rock and tells his wife that when their son is strong enough, he should roll away the rock, claim the objects, and go to Athens.

Theseus will show how Athens had a different idea of heroism from the rest of Greece, and later Hamilton's retelling of Aeneas's story will illustrate the Roman idea of heroism. Something of the culture of each place and time period can be divined through the heroes they celebrated. Theseus seems much more heroic to the modern reader than most.

Theseus grows up very strong, and he moves the rock without any trouble. He leaves for Athens, but thinks it would be too easy to go by ship, so he travels by land. There are many bandits on the road, notably Sciron, Sinis, and Procrustes, each of whom kills their victims in a different horrible way. Theseus defeats them all and turns their own torturous methods on the bandits themselves.

Even as a youth Theseus shows a more advanced kind of heroism than Perseus. Theseus does his great deeds on his own, without help, and uses his strength and bravery to make the road safer for the common people. Perseus, on the other hand, acted mostly out of self-interest.

Because of this, Theseus is already a hero when he reaches Athens. Aegeus (who does not know Theseus is his son) throws him a banquet, planning to poison him there, as Medea (who now lives in Athens) convinces him that Theseus will overthrow him. Just as Medea hands Theseus the poisoned cup, Aegeus recognizes his sword, and realizes that Theseus is his son and heir. Medea escapes to Asia.

Medea returns to the story, again acting as an ambiguous villain and again escaping. Like many heroes, Theseus is raised without a father, but they are reunited here. Theseus is already beloved in Athens because of his altruistic deeds on his travels.

Years before, Aegeus had killed a son of Minos, king of Crete, and Minos had then defeated Athens in battle. Since then, every nine years the Athenians have to send seven girls and seven boys to be thrown into the Labyrinth as food for the Minotaur. The Minotaur is half man, half bull, the child of Minos's wife Pasiphaë and a bull, and he lives inside Daedalus's Labyrinth.

Even the Minotaur is not a clear-cut villain in this story, as the sacrifice of Athenian youths is a punishment for Aegeus's sin of killing a guest. This complex situation is similar to the later Greek tragedies, where characters are caught in situations older and more complicated than their own stories.

Theseus offers himself as one of the fourteen young victims, hoping to kill the Minotaur himself. He promises his father that if he survives, he will change his returning ship's black sail to a white one, so Aegeus will know from afar if his son has succeeded.

Theseus has just arrived in Athens, but he already feels a kinship with its people, and his own heroic nature inspires him to volunteer – both to help others and to win glory by slaying a monster.

When Theseus arrives in Crete, Minos's daughter Ariadne immediately falls in love with him. She asks Daedalus how she can help Theseus (defying her own father), and she promises Theseus she will save him if her will marry her and take her back to Athens with him. Ariadne then gives Theseus a ball of golden thread to unwind as he walks through the Labyrinth, so he can find his way back out.

Like Medea, Ariadne betrays her father for the sake of the stranger she falls in love with. Unlike Medea, Ariadne does not commit murder, but only helps save Theseus's life. Hamilton's earlier tales of Daedalus and Dionysus (who will later love Ariadne) intersect with the story here.

Theseus enters the Labyrinth, finds the Minotaur asleep, and beats him to death his fists. Then he follows the thread out of the Labyrinth and flees Crete with Ariadne and the other young victims. On the way home, Theseus abandons Ariadne (one story says purposefully, one accidentally) on the island of Naxos. Theseus then forgets to hoist the white sail on his ship. Aegeus, watching from a rocky cliff, sees the black sails, thinks his son is dead, and throws himself into the sea. The sea is then named the Aegean.

Again Theseus seems to surpass Perseus in heroism, as he kills the Minotaur with his bare hands, without the help of the gods or magical objects. Theseus then acts very unheroically in abandoning Ariadne. This is a similar sin to Jason rejecting Medea after she had saved him. Ungratefulness is the greatest flaw of these heroes – similar to Zeus punishing Prometheus after Prometheus helped him defeat the Titans.

Theseus then becomes king of Athens and makes the city into a democracy, and a time of prosperity and happiness begins. He has a few more adventures as king, like helping the Seven against Thebes, when the Thebans went against the gods' laws and would not let a defeated army bury its dead. Theseus receives the aged Oedipus when no one else will, and keeps Hercules from killing himself after he goes mad.

This is the part of Theseus's heroism that makes him the most "civilized" hero of the myths. Instead of taking up his throne, he institutes the world's first democracy. He also fights for the virtuous cause in Thebes, even in a quarrel that does not have to affect Athens.

Theseus attacks the Amazons and marries their queen, who bears him a son called Hippolytus. Then he defends Athens from an Amazon invasion, and no other enemies attack the city while Theseus rules. He is one of the Argonauts that sail with Jason, and he participates in the Calydonian Hunt, which Hamilton will describe later.

Many of the stories overlap again, and a timeline starts to become clearer. Many of the heroes come together in adventures like the Quest of the Golden Fleece, the Calydonian Hunt, and the Trojan War.

One of Theseus's best friends is Pirithoüs, who is also brave but not as successful as Theseus. Theseus defeats the Centaurs after they try to kidnap the women at Pirithoüs' wedding. Theseus helps his friend again when Pirithoüs stupidly decides to take Persephone as his next wife (this is after Theseus kidnaps the baby Helen, who is then rescued by Castor and Pollux, her brothers).

Pirithoüs offers a counterpoint to Theseus, and illustrates more about the Greek idea of heroism. Pirithoüs is just as bold and daring as Theseus, but he lacks something, whether skill at fighting, luck, or fate, that keeps him from becoming a great hero. Otherwise he seems no different in terms of his morals and goals.

Hades is amused by Pirithoüs' intentions, and he ends up putting Pirithoüs and Theseus in his Chair of Forgetfulness, where their minds go blank and they cannot move. Pirithoüs sits there forever, but Hercules comes to the underworld and rescues Theseus.

This last adventure shows Theseus overstepping his bounds slightly and failing in a quest. It is a kind of arrogance to attempt to kidnap the most well-guarded woman in the universe, and he is punished for it.

Later in his life Theseus's story grows tragic. He marries Phaedra, Ariadne's sister, and she falls madly in love with Theseus's son Hippolytus. When Hippolytus rejects her (as he rejects all love), Phaedra kills herself and leaves a suicide note that accuses Hippolytus of raping her.

Many of the heroes have tragic endings to their lives after they have succeeded in their quests and adventures. Hippolytus is punished, as many characters are, for rejecting love.

Theseus finds the note and condemns Hippolytus, though his son tries to protest. He exiles Hippolytus from Athens, and the youth is mortally wounded by a monster soon afterward. Artemis then reveals the truth about Phaedra to Theseus, and brings him the dying Hippolytus. Theseus is crushed, and he goes to visit his friend, King Lycomedes, who kills him for unknown reasons.

Artemis, the protector of chastity and independence, punishes Theseus with the guilt of his son's death. There is another legend that the great healer Aesculapius, whom Hamilton will describe later, then brought Hippolytus back from the dead.

PART 3, CHAPTER 3

Hamilton takes her story of Hercules from Greek tragedians and later Roman writers. Hercules is the greatest hero of Greece. Athens had Theseus, as he embodied the things they admired most, but for the rest of Greece Hercules is their ultimate hero. He is the strongest man on earth, supremely self-assured, and the equal of the gods in many ways.

Hamilton analyzes the different ideas about heroism in the myths. Hercules is the most famous hero, but his brand of heroism is very different from someone like Theseus or Odysseus. His is also the rare case where his pride is not punished by the gods, as it is well-deserved.

Hercules can never be defeated except by trickery or magic, so his natural reaction to trouble is to battle it. He even challenges the gods, and would have wrestled Apollo if Zeus hadn't intervened. Hercules is hot-tempered, passionate, and rather unintelligent, but his boundless strength and moral goodness make up for these flaws. He could never be a king like Theseus, as he has no mind for anything but defeating the next monster, but he has true greatness of character.

Hercules is a relatively simple character who is strong, brave, and well-intentioned, but he is also constantly getting himself into trouble and accidentally doing harm to those he loves. In this case many of his struggles are struggles against himself, as the non-intellectual Hercules tries to make amends for his accidents using only his bravery and immense strength.

Hercules is born in Thebes, the son of Alcmena and Zeus (who fathers him by disguising himself as Alcmena's husband, the general Amphitryon). Even as an infant Hercules has superhuman strength. One night as Hercules and his mortal brother Iphicles are sleeping in their cribs, two giant snakes enter the nursery, but Hercules catches the snakes and strangles them both at once, laughing.

As Hamilton described in the story of Prometheus and Io, Hercules has long been fated to be a great hero, and he shows it early with this tale. The Greeks clearly delighted in stories of Hercules' pure strength, as there are so many. Much of his brand of heroism is just straightforward battles against monsters.

As a young student Hercules first demonstrates his tragic nature when he accidentally kills his music teacher, not realizing his own strength. At age eighteen Hercules is full-grown and kills a legendary lion, and after that he wears its skin as a cloak. He then conquers the fierce Minyans, and wins the hand of the Princess Megara. He has three children with her.

This is the tragic nature of Hercules' story, and what makes his myth so intriguing even to the most intellectual Greeks. He is simple-minded, but his emotional struggle with himself is complex, as even his well-intentioned actions can lead to evil results. This brand of tragedy and irony will be best illustrated in the tales of Orestes and Oedipus.

Hera, who never forgot Zeus's infidelity with Hercules' mother, punishes Hercules by driving him temporarily insane and making him kill his own wife and children. Hercules then recovers his sanity and is crushed by what he has done. He prepares to kill himself, but his friend Theseus persuades him to live and takes him to Athens.

This is Hercules' greatest struggle, as the murders are not even his fault, but Hera's, who once again jealously punishes innocent mortals for Zeus's infidelity. Hercules' heroism is that he is then led to perform great deeds to atone for his sins – he imposes punishment upon himself.

Hercules soon rejects the idea of his own innocence and leaves Athens to purify himself of his crimes. He goes to the Oracle at Delphi, and she sends him to his cousin Eurystheus, King of Mycenae, to receive hard penance and atone for his sins. Eurystheus is encouraged by Hera, and he comes up with twelve impossible tasks, now known as the Labors of Hercules.

The intellectual Theseus could understand that Hercules' sins were not his fault, but the emotional Hercules cannot accept that he might be innocent. His labors are not as straightforward as other hero's quests, like Perseus killing Medusa, as Hercules has basically imposed the labors on himself.

The first task is to kill the lion of Nemea. It cannot be wounded by weapons, so Hercules chokes it to death. Next he goes to Lerna to kill the Hydra, a monster with nine heads. One of the heads is immortal, and when any of the others are chopped off two more sprout up in its place. Hercules gets his cousin to burn the stumps of each head as he chops them off, and he imprisons the immortal head under a giant rock.

The twelve labors themselves are less philosophically interesting than Hercules' inner struggle, but they are all entertaining and show another important Greek aspect of heroism – the hero must slay deadly monsters in creative, interesting ways.

For the third labor, Hercules captures alive a golden-horned stag, which is sacred to Artemis. For the fourth labor he captures a great boar on Mount Erymanthus. The fifth task is to clean the Augean stables in one day – and King Augeas has thousands of cattle, whose stalls haven't been cleaned in years. Hercules diverts the course of two rivers so they flow through the stables, washing all the filth away.

Many of these labors involve capturing things that are impossible to catch. They can also be divided into tasks associated with beauty and ugliness – capturing rare and beautiful things, or capturing or defeating ugly and monstrous things.

For his sixth task, Athena helps Hercules kill a flock of birds that had been plaguing the people of Stymphalus. For his next labors, Hercules captures the beautiful wild bull of Minos, kills King Diomedes of Thrace and takes his flesh-eating horses, kills Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons (though she had been kind to Hercules earlier) and takes her girdle, and captures the cattle of Geryon, a three-bodied monster that lives on the island of Erythia. It is on the way to this last monster that Hercules sets up two great stones called the Pillars of Hercules, which are now Gibraltar and Ceuta.

Hippolyta has been a peripheral character in several myths (she was briefly married to Theseus), but Hercules again shows his tragic nature when he kills her over a misunderstanding. Many accidental deaths take place wherever Hercules goes, both because of his great strength and his troubled fate. As was the case with Pegasus and the Chimaera, beauty is often the difference between holy creatures and monsters.

Hercules' eleventh labor is to steal the Golden Apples of the Hesperides. He goes to Atlas, the father of the Hesperides (on the way freeing Prometheus from his chains), to ask for information. Atlas offers to go get the apples himself if Hercules will take Atlas's job – holding up the earth – while he is gone. Hercules agrees and takes the earth on his shoulders.

This encounter between Hercules and Atlas is almost amusing, as both are incredibly strong and rather stupid, and each is trying to trick the other one. As he had predicted to Io, Prometheus is freed by Hercules.

Atlas brings back the apples, but in the meantime he enjoys his freedom and decides to make Hercules do his job from now on. Hercules is able to trick Atlas into taking the earth back, by saying that he needs a pad for his shoulders, and asks Atlas to hold the earth for just a moment. Then Hercules takes the apples and leaves.

Hercules shows a rare moment of cleverness here, though it is mostly Atlas's stupidity that is to blame. The Hesperides remain as mysterious figures, and their beautiful apples will return in the story of Atalanta.

For the twelfth and last labor, Hercules must bring Cerberus, the three-headed dog of Hades, up to the earth's surface. It is there that Hercules frees his friend Theseus from the Chair of Forgetfulness. Hades agrees that Hercules can take Cerberus if he can overcome the dog without weapons. Hercules succeeds, and then Eurystheus (sensibly) makes Hercules bring Cerberus back to Hades.

Hercules becomes another hero to enter Hades and return, and he does it through his own strength, as usual. There is seemingly nothing that Hercules cannot do, but for all his strength and success he cannot find peace and happiness.

Even after all his labors, Hercules is rarely at peace. He defeats Antaeus, a wrestler who is invincible as long as he can touch the ground, by lifting him in the air and strangling him. Hercules defeats the river-god Achelous (who first tries to reason with him) because he wants to marry Deianira, Achelous' daughter. At Troy Hercules rescues King Laomedon's daughter, who is about to be sacrificed to a sea serpent.

Like Perseus with Andromeda, Hercules saves a princess about to be eaten by a sea monster. Hercules has acted out his self-imposed penance, but he still cannot accept his own atonement. He must continually defeat monsters and perform great deeds to feel satisfied.

Hercules did other deeds that were less than glorious, however. He carelessly kills a boy who spills water on him at a feast. He kills his own good friend to punish the friend's father, King Eurytus, who had insulted Hercules. Zeus punishes Hercules for this by making him act as a slave to Queen Omphale for three (or one) years, where she makes him dress and work like a woman.

Hercules' murder of his friend seems to be the one sin for which he must be externally punished. Usually he is so remorseful and eager to make amends that he imposes penance upon himself. The Greek idea of heroism clearly allows for the occasional accidental death, or even murder.

Hamilton goes into the details of one story that gives a clear picture of Hercules' character. On his way to get the flesh-eating horses of Diomedes, Hercules stops at the house of his friend Admetus. Admetus' wife had just died (as a sacrifice for Admetus himself, whom the Fates had decreed must die unless someone would die for him), but Admetus doesn't tell Hercules why the household is mourning.

Admetus chooses to be hospitable rather than tell his friend about his wife's death, and Hercules is incapable of discovering the truth himself. The Fates appear to the side of this story in a strange case where they require a death, but not necessarily Admetus's.

Hercules feasts and gets drunk in Admetus' house, and when he learns about Admetus' wife, he feels so bad for his disrespectful behavior that he decides to make amends by traveling to Hades and bringing Admetus's wife back to life. Hamilton points out how this story shows Hercules' characteristics: his tactlessness, his swift penitence and desire to make things right, and his confidence that he can solve any problem – even Death – with his strength.

Hamilton delves so deeply into Hercules' character because he is the most famous of Greek heroes (except Odysseus), but also because he shows what they valued in a hero at the time – in their stories and entertainment at least, the Greeks prized great deeds over good deeds, and spectacular strength over moral complexity.

When Hercules finishes his enslavement to Omphale he is still angry at King Eurytus. He gathers an army, captures Eurytus' city, and kills the king. One of the captives Hercules sends home is the beautiful Iole, the king's daughter. Deianira, Hercules' wife, is threatened by Iole's beauty, and so she uses a spell she has been saving to secure Hercules' love.

It is Hercules' murder of Eurytus and his son that leads to his ultimate downfall, as this is the one sin that he does not choose to atone for. There is no evidence that Hercules has been unfaithful – Iole's beauty alone is grounds for jealousy and the need for magic.

Years earlier, a Centaur named Nessus had insulted Deianira, and Hercules shot him. As Nessus died, he told Deianira to take some of his blood as a charm if Hercules ever fell in love with another woman. When she learns of Iole, Deianira anoints a robe with Nessus' blood and sends it to Hercules.

Nessus has his revenge from beyond the grave, and Hercules can only be defeated by magic and trickery. He is punished for his sins in a very roundabout way – if he hadn't killed Eurytus and kidnapped his daughter, the jealous Deianira never would have sent the robe.

Hercules puts on the robe and is immediately seized with mortal pain. He kills Deianira's innocent messenger, and though the pain is tortuous Hercules cannot seem to die. He must kill himself but building a huge funeral pyre and burning himself. Deianira hears how her spell went awry and kills herself. When he dies Hercules ascends to Olympus, where he marries Hera's daughter Hebe and becomes immortal.

Even death is not strong enough for Hercules, and he must choose to submit to it himself. His arrogance against the gods is in his case (and his alone) rewarded, as he is actually made an immortal himself. It was his wrongdoing against another mortal that led to his suffering and death.

PART 3, CHAPTER 4

The story of Atalanta is very old, but Hamilton mostly takes it from Apollodorus and Ovid. Atalanta is the greatest female hero of the Greeks. Her father, disappointed at not having a son, leaves the newborn Atalanta in the mountains to die. A bear then takes the baby in, and she is later raised by a group of hunters. She becomes swifter and more deadly than any of them, and once kills two Centaurs who pursued her.

Like the other heroes, Atalanta is also raised as an abandoned child. Her quests and deeds are not as extensive as Hercules or Theseus, but her existence complicates the Greek idea of women. In many myths they are sources of evil (like Pandora) or beautiful objects to be captured (like Persephone), but Atalanta is a hero with her own agency.

Atalanta is most famous for her role in the hunt of the Calydonian boar. Artemis had sent to boar to terrorize the land of King Oeneus because he had forgotten to make the proper sacrifice to the gods. Oeneus assembles a group of heroes to hunt the boar, among them Atalanta. Some of the heroes don't want her to come, but Meleager, who has fallen in love with Atalanta, convinces them.

The Calydonian Hunt is basically a mass hero's quest, as they all assemble to try and slay a dangerous beast. Like the Minotaur, the boar is a punishment for a king's sin, but the punishing monster then turns against innocents, and so must be killed.

The boar kills and wounds many men, but it is Atalanta who gives the beast its first wound. Then Meleager rushes in and finishes it off. Meleager gives the honors of the hunt and the boar's skin to Atalanta. Meleager's uncles are angry that Atalanta should have the boar's skin, and Meleager kills them in a quarrel. Then Meleager's mother Althea, enraged and wanting to avenge her brothers, kills Meleager by burning a magical log that is connected with the length of his life. Althea then hangs herself.

Like Athena and Artemis, Atalanta proves herself through her own great deeds and independence, rather than through beauty or winning the love of a man. Meleager's fate is its own tragic story, like a miniature of the later story of Orestes and Clytemnestra – Althea is caught between the sin of letting her brothers die unavenged, and the sin of killing her own son.

Atalanta has more adventures after the Hunt. Some stories say she sailed with the Argonauts, but Hamilton thinks this is unlikely. At a contest Atalanta beats Peleus, who will father Achilles, in a wrestling match. She then learns who her parents are and goes to live with them.

Atalanta is less famous and has fewer great adventures than the other three heroes of this section, but Hamilton includes her among the great heroes to show that the Greek idea of heroism also celebrated the female warrior and hunter.

Many men want to marry Atalanta, but she has no interest in them. To appease her suitors, she promises to marry any man who can beat her in a foot race. No one can do it, until a young man called Melanion distracts her during the race by rolling several golden apples (from the garden of the Hesperides) in front of Atalanta. The apples are magically intriguing and Atalanta can't help stopping to pick them up. She loses the race and agrees to marry Melanion. Later in their lives they both somehow offend Zeus or Aphrodite and are turned into lions.

The apples of the Hesperides return, and Atalanta's story then becomes less unique – as most of the myths about women mostly revolve around their marriage. This story is still different in that Melanion is not the hero winning the hand of the princess – Atalanta is still the protagonist and the one immortalized by fame. Like many of the heroes, her later life ends in decline and punishment of some kind.

PART 4, CHAPTER 1

Prologue: The Judgment of Paris. The long legend of the Trojan War is taken mostly from Homer's *Iliad*. Hamilton also borrows from Aeschylus, Euripides, and Apollodorus. The root of the war, which made Troy one of the most famous cities in history, began with three jealous goddesses. Eris, the goddess of Discord, is angry that she is not invited to the wedding of King Peleus and the sea-nymph Thetis. As revenge, she throws a golden apple into the banquet hall marked "For the Fairest."

The Trojan War is the most famous of ancient Greek battles, and Homer's Iliad *is one of the most famous epics in the world. The war is so deeply moving and enduring because it explores many of the major themes of the myths, and it also shows the troubling complexity of the Greek worldview, which is almost existentialist in its harshness and lack of immutable moral standards.*

All the vain goddesses want the apple, and eventually the decision is narrowed down to Aphrodite, Hera, and Pallas Athena. Zeus refuses to judge between them, and instead selects Paris, the son of King Priam of Troy. Paris has been doing shepherd's work, as Priam had learned that he would be the ruin of Troy, so he sent Paris away, and now he lives with a nymph called Oenone.

The War begins with the most famous conflict over beauty, as each of the three goddesses wishes to be "the Fairest." Eris cleverly exploits the jealousy of all the gods and their exaltation of great beauty. Priam sent Paris away in another failed attempt to foil fate.

The goddesses sweep Paris up and make him judge between them. All of them offer him bribes, and he must choose between the bribes rather than which goddess is fairest. Hera offers him rulership of Europe and Asia, Athena offers victory against the Greeks, and Aphrodite offers the love of the world's most beautiful woman. Paris, who is cowardly by nature, chooses Aphrodite's gift and gives her the golden apple.

This judgment shows the importance of beauty to the Greeks, and the almost childish jealousy and vanity of the gods, but it also offers a divine explanation for the Trojan War itself. It was fated to happen, and could not have been averted – Priam tried to send Paris away from Troy, but this was no match for angry goddesses.

The Trojan War. The most beautiful woman in the world is Helen, daughter of Zeus and Leda, who is already married to King Menelaus of Sparta. All the other kings and warriors who had asked for Helen's hand are sworn to help Menelaus if anyone should take her away.

These earlier oaths of the Greek chieftains set the stage for the inevitable war. Helen is the most famous example of great beauty as a powerful resource to be desired and fought over.

Aphrodite flies Paris straight to Sparta, where Menelaus and Helen treat him as a guest. Paris then breaks the sacred bond between guest and host, and flees with Helen while Menelaus is away. Menelaus returns, finds Helen gone, and calls upon all of Greece to help get her back and destroy Troy. All the oath-bound chieftains respond except for two: Odysseus of Ithaca and Achilles, son of Peleus and Thetis.

Paris is one of the few characters famous for his cowardliness. The importance of hospitality is again emphasized, as the Trojan War basically begins because Paris abuses his role as Menelaus's guest, although Menelaus's wounded pride is also to blame. Helen's actual decision seems to be of no importance – she is just a beautiful object to be possessed.

Odysseus, who is famously clever, pretends to have gone insane to avoid conscription. Achilles' mother knows he is fated to die at Troy, so she holds him back and disguises him as a woman. Both men are found out in the end, and they join the massive Greek fleet, which sails united against Troy.

It is interesting that the two greatest Greek heroes, Achilles and Odysseus, are the two who do not volunteer for the war. With Jason, for example, one of his only displays of heroism was immediately accepting any dangerous challenge.

For a while the wind blows against them, and then the Greeks learn that Artemis is angry because one of them slew one of her sacred hares. She demands a sacrifice of Iphigenia, the daughter of the Greek Commander in Chief, Agamemnon. Agamemnon is forced by his men to comply. He sends for Iphigenia, saying he has arranged for her to marry Achilles, but when she arrives he sacrifices her.

Artemis, who is usually one of the most virtuous gods, is shown at her cruelest here. This sacrifice will lead to great tragedy later. The universe of the Trojan War is immediately shown to be violent and unsafe, as even the gods are subject to the same bloodthirstiness and jealousy as mortals.

The Greek fleet reaches Troy and the war begins. Both sides are very strong, as the Greeks have great numbers and Troy has impenetrable walls. Achilles is the greatest warrior among the Greeks and Hector, King Priam's son and Paris's brother, is the Trojan champion. Both heroes know they will die in the war, but they keep fighting.

The heroism of Achilles and Hector has less to do with traditional quests and monsters and more to do with the fact that they know they are doomed to die and they keep fighting anyway. This is a more advanced kind of heroism, and will be illustrated in depth in the later Greek tragedies and the Norse heroes.

The war stretches on for nine years, with the advantage going back and forth. Then Apollo turns against the Greeks, as they have kidnapped Chryseis, the daughter of his priest, and given her to Agamemnon. Achilles and Calchas (a prophet) manage to convince Agamemnon to give up Chryseis, but in return Agamemnon demands Briseis, Achilles' prize maiden. He takes her without compromise, and Achilles vows revenge.

The gods offer no relief from the bloody conflict, as they act just as capriciously as the mortals. Apollo's anger at Chryseis' kidnapping reflects Menelaus's hawkish pursuit of Helen. Achilles shows himself moody and passionate, but he holds himself and others to a high moral code – he cannot forgive Agamemnon for abusing their alliance.

Achilles angrily withdraws his troops from the battle, and the Greeks seem doomed. In Olympus, the gods have been split taking sides in the war: Aphrodite, Ares, Apollo, and Artemis side with the Trojans, while Hera, Athena, and Poseidon support the Greeks. Then Thetis, Achilles' mother, persuades Zeus (who was trying to stay neutral) to help the Trojans achieve victory. He sends a false dream telling Agamemnon to attack the Trojan walls.

The conflict in Olympus shows the great drama of the Trojan War – there is no clear-cut good and evil, no villains and no totally pure heroes (except perhaps Hector). Even the gods themselves don't favor one side or another because of their virtue, but only out of spite and jealousy or the knowledge that one side's victory is fated and inevitable.

Achilles stays in his tent while the battle rages on. Then Helen appears, and the armies draw back from each other. They decide that the contest can be decided by the two men whose quarrel it originally was: Menelaus and Paris. Menelaus easily defeats Paris, but then Aphrodite rescues Paris and carries him away. The armies agree to a truce and are about to end the war when Hera (who wants to see Troy in ruins) makes a Trojan called Pandarus break the truce and shoot an arrow at Menelaus.

Despite all the bloodshed and violence, the soldiers cannot help but acknowledge that wars must be fought for beauty like Helen's. Her lovely face seems a much more noble cause to fight for than reasons of economics or power. Hera again ruins the possibility of peace and causes much suffering because of her jealousy, as she still hates Paris for not choosing her.

At that the war breaks out again, and Ares, with his companions Terror, Destruction, and Strife, return to the field. The greatest Greek champions after Achilles are Ajax and Diomedes. Diomedes almost kills Aeneas, the greatest Trojan warrior after Hector, and Aphrodite tries to save him (Aeneas is her son), but Diomedes wounds her as well and she flees. Then Apollo sweeps Aeneas away to be healed.

Aeneas, who will be the great Roman hero, is introduced here. Ares appears in his element – he is rarely present in the other myths – but he is hated, rather than revered, by the Greeks. As with Hercules and his monsters, the Greeks clearly relished these long lists of bloody battles when describing their heroes.

Diomedes reaches Hector and sees that Ares is fighting for the Trojans. Diomedes despairs then, but he manages to wound Ares himself, who flees the battlefield, as he is a coward at heart. The Trojans then begin to lose the battle, and Hector asks his mother make an offering to Athena, asking her to spare the women and children of Troy. But Athena denies her prayer.

This conflict is interesting because the gods and mortals mingle so closely. Diomedes wounds both Aphrodite and Ares, and Aeneas and Paris are only saved by Aphrodite sweeping them away. Athena shows her bloodthirsty side here, as she too is still angry at Paris for his judgment, and her anger leads to the death of innocent women and children.

Andromache, Hector's wife, asks him to stay with her and their son Astyanax, but Hector sadly returns to the battle. He knows he cannot be saved from his fate, but that until the fated hour no one will be able to kill him. As he begins to fight again, Zeus remembers his promise to Thetis and helps Hector and the Trojans. They drive the Greeks back to their ships.

This poignant moment makes Hector the most sympathetic hero of the war and emphasizes the tragedy of his story. It is inevitable that Troy should fall and Hector die, but the heroism and drama comes in what happens before then.

That night, the despairing Agamemnon agrees to give Briseis back to Achilles to try and appease him. Odysseus delivers the message to Achilles, who is with his dear friend Patroclus, but Achilles refuses to accept Agamemnon's apology.

Agamemnon clearly acts only out of self-interest, not repentance, and Achilles is more interested in nursing his grudge than in saving lives – neither seem very heroic here.

The Greeks still refuse to give up, though the next battle goes even worse for them. Hera then decides to seduce Zeus and distract him from the battlefield, and then the advantage returns to the Greeks, with Ajax almost killing Hector. When Zeus discovers that he has been tricked he is angry, but Hera diverts his anger onto Poseidon, who has been helping the Greeks. Poseidon reluctantly abandons them, and the Trojans press forward again.

Homer emphasizes the greatness of the heroes and the fighting, yet victory and defeat seem to depend almost entirely on which gods are helping whom, rather than on the actions of the specific heroes. This is another example of the Greek struggle with the role of fate and free will – why keep fighting when the battle is decided, and not even the gods can change fate?

The Greeks are almost defeated, and Achilles' friend Patroclus cannot stand sulking in the tent anymore. He convinces Achilles to let him use his armor, thinking that even if Achilles himself won't fight, the Trojans might be frightened by the sight of him. Patroclus then leads the Myrmidons, Achilles' men, into battle.

Patroclus's character offers a sort of foil to Achilles – he is not as great a warrior, but Patroclus is willing to set aside his pride and help his countrymen who are about to be defeated. Yet he is not the famous hero – his deeds are good, *but not* great.

Patroclus fights almost as well as Achilles, and for a while the Trojans hesitate at the sight of him. But then Patroclus meets Hector, and Hector kills him with his spear. Hector takes the armor of Achilles and puts it on. When Achilles learns of Patroclus' death, he grieves bitterly and vows to avenge him by killing Hector. Thetis realizes she can longer hold her son back from battle, so she brings him armor made by Hephaestus himself.

Thetis is a goddess, but she bows to her son's inevitable fate. Achilles' rage at Patroclus's death is directed at Hector, but really it is anger at his own shortcomings. Because of his wounded pride, he was sulking in his tent and allowed his friend to die. In this way many of the greatest struggles of the Trojan War are personal and complex as well as violent.

Achilles rejoins the Greek army and they go back to battle. Zeus weighs Hector's life against Achilles' life, and it is appointed that Hector should die. Even so, the battle rages on. God even fights against god on the field of Troy. Finally the Trojans retreat back through their huge Scaean gates. Only Hector stays outside the walls, waiting to face Achilles.

Fate declares that Achilles will be victorious, and again Zeus is shown to be weaker than fate, although the specific Fates are not mentioned. Hector displays his heroism again in that he refuses to retreat, but faces his doom boldly.

Achilles appears and the two great champions face each other. Athena stands with Achilles, but Apollo has now abandoned Hector, knowing his doom is sealed. When Hector sees this, he runs away from Achilles. Achilles chases him three times all the way around the walls until Athena disguises herself as Hector's brother, encouraging him to stop running.

Apollo also presents a weaker, more cowardly nature here, but it is also significant that the God of Truth cannot change fate either. He knows the tragic truth (as his oracle is often revealing) and nothing can avert it. Achilles' heroism seems cheapened by Athena's help.

Achilles then catches up with Hector, and Hector realizes it is not truly his brother beside him. He knows he will die, but he decides to at least die fighting. Achilles kills him with his spear, but is still so enraged over Patroclus's death that he strips Hector's body of its armor and drags it behind his chariot, mutilating it terribly. He then leaves it beside Patroclus's funeral pyre for the dogs to eat.

Though Achilles is the victorious hero chosen by the Fates, Hector appears more heroic in this final battle as he chooses to die fighting. The story avoids painting Achilles as a pure hero by having him so viciously mutilate Hector's body, which is a sacred sin against the gods.

The Olympians are displeased at this disrespecting of the dead, and Zeus convinces King Priam to go to Achilles and ask for Hector's body. Priam begs Achilles and appeals to his better nature, and Achilles repents for his actions. He promises to keep the Greeks from battle for nine days, so that the Trojans have time to mourn for Hector. The *Iliad* then ends with Hector's funeral.

Though the gods have shown themselves petty and bloodthirsty, they still uphold some of their moral rules like having respect for the dead. The poem does not portray the victory of a virtuous, fairy-tale protagonist, but only the violence, drama, and tragedy of war, in which there are no true victors.

PART 4, CHAPTER 2

The war itself is not over yet, though, and Virgil continues the tale. Prince Memnon of Ethiopia replaces Hector as the champion of Troy, and he kills many Greek warriors. Then Achilles, who knows his death is near, kills Memnon.

Achilles has his own heroic last battle, as he knows that he too will die soon. This is the kind of heroism emphasized in the Trojan War, but also among the Norse heroes, as Hamilton will explain.

Paris then kills Achilles by shooting an arrow which Apollo guides to Achilles' heel, his only vulnerable spot. When he was an infant, Thetis had dipped Achilles into the River Styx to try and make him invincible, but the water did not touch the heel where she was holding him. Ajax carries Achilles' body away, and later his ashes are placed with Patroclus's.

This is the explanation story for the "Achilles tendon," and the modern expression "Achilles' heel." Thetis shows that she took every precaution to avert her son's fate, but a single fatal flaw is all that destiny requires.

The Greeks decide that Achilles' armor must go to either Odysseus or Ajax, the two greatest remaining warriors, and eventually they choose Odysseus. Ajax is enraged at not being chosen and he plans to kill the Greek chieftains, but Athena makes him go mad so that he massacres some cattle instead. When Ajax comes to his senses, he is ashamed and kills himself.

Ajax is another great hero who ultimately finds his greatest antagonist within himself. His own jealousy and anger lead to his defeat, rather than the sword of a Trojan. He kills himself less out of remorse than embarrassment – his pride is still his downfall.

Calchas the prophet tells the Greeks that they should capture Helenus, a prophet of Troy, to learn the key to victory. Odysseus succeeds in doing so, and Helenus tells them that they can only defeat Troy with the bow and arrows of Hercules. These weapons had passed to Prince Philoctetes, who sailed with the Greeks but then was bitten by a serpent and abandoned on the way.

At this point the war becomes more like some of the other hero myths, in that the heroes must collect magical objects and learn secret information from prophets to achieve their victory. Prophets play an important role in the Trojan War, as so much of it seems decided by divine whims.

Odysseus goes to fetch the bow and arrows, and he brings back Philoctetes as well. Once he is healed of his snake bite, Philoctetes goes to battle and the first man he shoots with an arrow is Paris. Paris asks to be taken to Oenone, the nymph he had abandoned for Helen, as she had strong healing magic. But Oenone cannot forgive his desertion, and she watches him die.

Paris is fittingly punished for deserting Oenone and abusing the law of hospitality. Like in the story of Perseus, the magical objects (Hercules' bow and arrows) help the heroes achieve victory.

Paris's death has little effect on the war. The Greeks then learn that the Trojans have a sacred image of Athena, called the Palladium, that protects their city from being taken. Diomedes and Odysseus sneak into Troy and steal the Palladium. The Greeks then want to end the war quickly, as Troy still has its impenetrable walls.

There are still more obstacles to overcome for the Greeks, but they are less interesting now that Hector and Achilles are dead. The war is now more similar to other hero's quests, as there are objects to obtain rather than inner struggles to overcome.

The wily Odysseus comes up with a plan to get the Greeks inside Troy. They build a giant wooden horse and leave it by the Trojan gates, and then put their ships all out to sea as if they have given up and gone home. Most of the army is on the ships, but the Greek chieftains are hiding inside the hollow horse.

This is one of the great actions of the war that is not inspired or aided by the gods. In this Odysseus becomes a great hero, as he achieves victory through his cunning and entirely on his own.

Odysseus also leaves one man behind, Sinon, who tells the exultant Trojans a tale of how Athena was angered at the Greeks, so they surrendered the war, but they left the horse as an offering to Athena. He says (pretending to have turned traitor) that the Greeks hoped the Trojans would destroy the horse and bring down Athena's anger on themselves. Only the Trojan priest Laocoön doubts Sinon's story, but after he speaks two sea serpents appear and kill him. The Trojans decide to bring the horse into their city, thinking they will win Athena's favor.

Like Agamemnon's false prophetic dream, with the sea serpents the gods show that they can offer lying oracles and omens as well as true ones. This is disturbing, as there is so little that can be trusted in this universe. The Trojans act as they ought to, trying to please Athena and following what the omens seem to demand, but they are punished for their piety.

The Trojans celebrate their victory, but that night the Greek chieftains climb out of the horse, open the gates of Troy, and start burning the city. The rest of the Greek Army rushes in, and the massacre of Troy begins. All the men are killed except for Aeneas, who escapes with his old father and young son. Achilles' son kills King Priam in front of his family.

Aeneas will reappear as the founder of Rome. Again the myth does not try to portray one side as good and one as evil – it simply ends the war on a somber, tragic note. Even such great, immortal deeds as these end in sorrow, and war is always a tragedy.

All the Trojan women and children are enslaved, but Aphrodite saves Helen and returns her to Menelaus. As the final act of the war, the Greeks throw Hector's young son Astyanax from the walls of Troy, killing him. With that, Hector's legacy and the glorious city of Troy are destroyed forever.

This final tragedy undercuts any ideas of heroism and the glory of war that have been built up earlier. There is no victorious, righteous hero at the end of the Trojan War, but only the death of a child and a group of enslaved women.

PART 4, CHAPTER 3

This story comes entirely from Homer's *Odyssey*, except for a small detail from Euripides. Though Athena and Poseidon had been allies of the Greeks during the war, the Greeks committed atrocities during the sack of Troy and turned the gods against them. The worst crime was against Cassandra, one of Priam's daughters. Cassandra was blessed with the gift of prophecy, but cursed so that no one ever believes her. The Greeks dragged her out of Athena's temple, where she had sought sanctuary.

The gods who hated Troy, like Hera, Athena, and Poseidon, are now satisfied with its destruction and decide to start rewarding virtue and punishing wickedness again. The Greeks become drunk with victory and in their pride they desecrate Athena's temple, which is supposed to be a place of holy sanctuary, no matter the situation.

Poseidon agrees to help Athena against the Greeks, and he stirs up terrible storms around their ships. Agamemnon loses almost all his men, Menelaus is blown to Egypt, and Odysseus is driven far off course. This sets off a long series of adventures for the clever champion.

The story of Odysseus's hero's quest, which is the most famous of all, begins in a different manner than most. He is already middle-aged and married, and he is returning home instead of leaving it.

Odysseus is from the island of Ithaca, and the war and his adventures keep him away for twenty years. While he is gone his young son Telemachus grows into a man, and his beautiful wife Penelope is swarmed by suitors who think Odysseus is dead. Penelope stays faithful to her absent husband, but the suitors are rude and overbearing and they will not leave the house, constantly feasting on her food and drink.

This is the conflict of the story, that Odysseus must return home before Penelope and Telemachus are overcome by the rude and dangerous suitors. Odysseus owes his allegiance to his wife and son, but his long absence is in some ways his fault, as the story will show.

Penelope first holds off the suitors by making them wait until she has finished weaving a shroud for Odysseus's father Laertes. Every night she secretly unweaves the work she has done that day, so the job goes on indefinitely. Eventually the suitors discover her scheme, and they become even more insistent.

Often Penelope seems to have the harder lot than Odysseus. He faces many monsters, but also has long periods of luxury and peace with other women, while Penelope constantly struggles to keep their house together, which is its own kind of heroism.

After ten years of anger, Athena's old affection for Odysseus returns, and she decides to help the cunning hero. While Poseidon, who still hates Odysseus, is absent from Olympus, Athena convinces the other gods to help Odysseus, as he is currently a virtual prisoner of the nymph Calypso. The nymph loves Odysseus and treats him kindly, but she won't let him leave her island. The gods agree to send Hermes to make Calypso give up Odysseus.

The tale starts in the middle of the action, as epics must, with Odysseus a "prisoner" of Calypso. This story is more interesting to modern readers than the Iliad, *as it is a tale of one man's life and struggle rather than a chronicle of a war, and so closer to the modern genres of novels and movies.*

Athena is also fond of Telemachus, Odysseus's son, so she decides to help him as well. She disguises herself and goes to Ithaca, and there convinces the hospitable Telemachus to not give up hope for his father, and to ask Nestor and Menelaus for news of Odysseus. The suitors mock Telemachus for his quest, but Athena takes on the appearance of Mentor, Odysseus's old friend, and she sails with Telemachus.

Athena takes an active role in this tale, but what makes Odysseus such a special hero is that he lives by his wits alone, rather than constantly trusting to fate and the help of the gods. Athena shows her love of intellect by favoring Odysseus and Telemachus. The suitors are a constant villainous, arrogant presence.

First they travel to find Nestor, who is on the shore sacrificing to Poseidon. He knows nothing of Odysseus, and sends Telemachus to Menelaus in Sparta. Telemachus goes there with Nestor's son, and they are welcomed in Menelaus splendid palace. They see Helen there as well. Menelaus says that he had briefly captured Proteus, the shape-shifting seal god, and Proteus told him that Odysseus was the captive of the nymph Calypso. Then all the members of the hall think of Troy and weep for those lost there.

The characters of the Trojan War return, and it is interesting to see them at home in their halls. Telemachus has his own mini-Odyssey as he searches for his father and learns about the history of the Trojan War and his father's adventures.

Meanwhile, Hermes commands the reluctant Calypso to let Odysseus go home. Odysseus sets out on a makeshift raft, and Calypso gives him supplies. After seventeen days at sea, Poseidon sees Odysseus and sends a storm to wreck his raft. The kind goddess Ino saves him, however, by giving Odysseus her veil to protect him from harm in the water.

Hamilton will tell the tale of Ino later. Odysseus not only survives without the gods' help, he even survives when they – mostly Poseidon – attempt to kill him.

Odysseus swims for two days and comes to the land of the Phaeacians, where he makes a bed of dry leaves. The Phaeacian king, Alcinoüs, has an unmarried daughter named Nausicaä, who finds the naked, dirty Odysseus while she is out washing clothes. She leads him to the king (at a respectful distance), who receives him with great hospitality, and the next day Odysseus tells the tale of his previous wanderings.

Odysseus shows his resourcefulness in this situation. It is rare for a hero to be described in such shameful circumstances, or to have to find shelter in a pitiful situation without the help of any god or magical object. This is what makes Odysseus a much more relatable hero.

The narrative is now told by Odysseus, and picks up after he departed Troy and was struck by Poseidon's storm. He and his men first come to the island of the Lotus-Eaters, a people who eat constantly of a stupefying flower and live in lethargic bliss. Some of Odysseus's men try the lotus and then will not leave the island, as all memory of home fades from their minds, but Odysseus drags them away anyway.

The tale then jumps back to the beginning. Many of Odysseus's obstacles will involve the temptation to forget – to abandon his obligations to his wife and son, and stay in whatever luxurious situation he finds himself. The Lotus-Eaters symbolize this, and also offer an early representation of the addictive mindset.

Odysseus's next adventure is with the Cyclops Polyphemus, but Hamilton only mentions it briefly, as she already described it in Part I, Chapter IV. Polyphemus is Poseidon's son, so his defeat only makes Poseidon even more angry at Odysseus.

The defeat of Polyphemus is a traditional hero-overcomes-monster story, but with Odysseus it involves him using his cleverness as well as his strength.

Next Odysseus goes to King Aeolus, the keeper of the Winds. When Odysseus departs, Aeolus gives him a leather sack full of all the Storm Winds, so that Odysseus's journey will be smooth as long as he keeps the sack closed. His curious crew, thinking there is treasure inside, opens the sack and unleashes a storm that blows them to the land of the Laestrygons. These are **cannibals** of gigantic size, and they destroy all of Odysseus's ships except one.

Odysseus's crew often seems his greatest obstacle, as here they act like Pandora and open a forbidden bag. Cannibalism has not appeared much yet, but here among the Laestrygons it is symbolic of the most horrific kind of monster possible – a human monster. They also represent another dangerous, frightening foreign nation.

The remaining men then come to the island of Aeaea, which is home to the witch Circe. Several men scout ahead and encounter her, and she turns them all into pigs except for one who escapes. He warns Odysseus of the danger, and then Hermes gives Odysseus a magic herb that will protect him from Circe's spells. He then confronts Circe, and when her magic doesn't work on him she falls in love with Odysseus. She turns his men back into humans and treats them all with great hospitality for a whole year.

This challenge ends in another long dalliance. He is not held captive as he was by Calypso, but simply lingers with another woman who isn't his wife. Part of the complexity of Odysseus's character is his constant desire for new experiences. He faces many obstacles on his journey, but he seems to relish each one and find satisfaction in new experiences for their own sake.

When they are ready to leave, Circe uses her magical knowledge to tell them what to do next. They must cross the river Ocean and then Odysseus must descend to Hades and speak to the dead prophet Teiresias. Odysseus travels to Hades, digs a trench, and fill it with sheep's blood, which draws the spirits of the dead. Odysseus finds Teiresias among the crowd and questions him. Teiresias says that Odysseus will eventually return home, but that he must be careful not to harm the oxen of the Sun.

Like many heroes, Odysseus must travel to the underworld to gain knowledge for the next part of his journey. The warning against the oxen of the Sun is one of the simple commands found in many myths that are always disobeyed. There is only the question of what the divine punishment will be.

After Teiresias finishes speaking, Odysseus sees several other dead Greek heroes approaching to drink the sheep blood. He talks briefly with Achilles and Ajax, but then flees when the numbers of the dead grow too great.

The specter of the Trojan War still looms large in this tale, as with Telemachus meeting Menelaus and Helen. The dead grow more terrifying than in other myths.

Odysseus sets sail again and prepares to pass the island of the Sirens, magical singers who lure sailors to their deaths. Circe had warned him of them, so Odysseus makes his men stop up their ears with wax as they pass by, but Odysseus himself wants to hear their song, so he makes his men tie him to the mast with his ears left unplugged. The ship sails past, and the Sirens sing to Odysseus about the great knowledge they can give him.

This episode shows most clearly Odysseus's thirst for new experiences and wisdom. It is also telling that the Sirens sing to him about special knowledge, implying that this is the thing he desires above all else. The Sirens, like the Lotus-Eaters, also symbolize the temptation to forget Ithaca and linger forever.

Odysseus's ship then passes between Scylla and Charybdis, the famously deadly rock-monster and whirlpool, and six of his men die there. They then arrive at the Island of the Sun. While Odysseus is away praying, his men foolishly kill and eat the oxen of the Sun. As they sail away a lightning bolt destroys the ship, killing every except for Odysseus. He then drifts for days until he comes to Calypso's island.

Scylla and Charybdis appear as classic obstacles on most hero's quests. As Teiresias predicted, Odysseus's foolish crew disobeys the one rule they were given. This is a straightforward example of hubris or stupidity leading men to insult the gods, and the gods immediately punishing them.

Odysseus finishes his tale and the narrative returns to the present. The Phaeacians pity Odysseus for his hardships, and they prepare a ship to take him home. Odysseus falls asleep on the ship and wakes up on a beach in Ithaca. Athena comes to him and they greet each other. She tells him about the suitors, and then changes Odysseus into the form of an old beggar and sends him to Eumaeus, a faithful swineherd.

Athena and Odysseus greet each other like old friends – to Odysseus the gods seem more like allies or enemies rather than deities to be worshipped. Athena seems to act to purposefully make Odysseus's homecoming more dramatic.

Athena then goes to Telemachus, who is still with Menelaus, and urges him to return home, but to stop by the swineherd's shack for news first. When Odysseus and Telemachus are alone, Athena returns Odysseus to his true form and father and son greet each other joyfully. They then come up with a plan to dispose of the suitors, and Odysseus resumes his disguise before Eumaeus returns.

Odysseus has his hero's return, but he has not overthrown his usurpers yet. They come up with a plan to do this as surprisingly and dramatically as possible, keeping Odysseus's identity a secret even from the faithful Eumaeus.

The next day Odysseus returns to his palace for the first time in twenty years. No one recognizes him except for Argos, his old faithful dog. Argos is so weak that he can only lift his head and wag his tail at Odysseus's approach, and then he dies when Odysseus turns away from him.

This is a tragic detail that shows Homer's keen awareness of the deep humanity in the myths. Odysseus must keep up his disguise, so he does not greet the faithful dog.

When he enters, the suitors mock the beggar-Odysseus, and one of them even strikes him. This is a breach of hospitality, and Penelope hears of the outrage and enters the hall. She summons an old nurse, Eurycleia, to tend to the beggar. The old woman washes his feet, and then recognizes Odysseus from a scar on his foot. Odysseus immediately swears her to secrecy, even from Penelope.

The suitors prove themselves to be villainous beyond doubt when they strike a guest unprovoked. Homer builds the tension in these scenes – everyone knows the suitors will be punished for their presumption, and the question is only when and how.

The next day Penelope, who has almost given up hope, orders a banquet and contest for the suitors. If any of them can string Odysseus's enormous bow and then shoot an arrow through twelve rings, he can marry Penelope. All the suitors try, but none of them can even string the bow. Then Odysseus quietly reveals himself to Eumaeus and orders him to bar the doors of the banquet hall.

This is another sort of hero's task to prove the suitors unworthy of Odysseus's place. Part of Odysseus's heroism, or at least his interest as a character, is his ability to disguise himself and defeat his enemies with cunning and planning rather than simple brute strength.

The beggar-Odysseus asks for a chance to string the bow. The suitors mock him, but he quickly strings the bow and shoots an arrow through the twelve rings. He then reveals himself and begins shooting arrows at the suitors, who are unarmed and panicked, and the doors are all barred. Telemachus and Athena both join the slaughter, and soon all the suitors are killed. Only two remain – a priest and a bard, both begging for mercy. Odysseus spares the poet, but kills the priest.

The long-awaited vengeance falls swiftly and violently, and though it is gruesome it is less ambiguous than the Fall of Troy, as the suitors have proved themselves wicked and deserving of punishment. Hamilton emphasizes that Odysseus spares the poet, not the priest, which implies that creating beautiful art is more holy than even worship. This could also be Homer singing his own praises.

Penelope, who has been sleeping, hears the news and enters to see Odysseus in his hall. They greet each other with disbelieving joy, and then are reunited after twenty years apart. Everyone on Ithaca is glad at Odysseus's return, and they live happily ever after.

The Odyssey *is more complex and "modern" than the* Iliad*, but it ends more neatly and happily than the brutal Trojan War. Odysseus returns to fulfill his true role, and succeeds against all the temptations to forget his duty.*

PART 4, CHAPTER 4

Part 1: From Troy to Italy. This story comes from Virgil's *Aeneid*. It was written during the Pax Augusta, a hopeful and celebratory time for the Roman Empire. Because the story is Latin, Hamilton uses the Latin names of heroes and gods. The *Aeneid* focuses on Aeneas, the only Trojan hero to escape the Greeks, and the mythological founder of Rome.

This is the only story in the book to focus on a distinctly Roman (and not Greek) myth, and so it shows the differences and similarities between the Greek and Roman ideas about heroism, and the different values their cultures emphasized in their myths.

Many Trojans come with Aeneas when he escapes Troy, and they look for a new place to settle. Eventually Aeneas is told in a dream that he should settle in Italy, which was then called Hesperia, the Western Country. On the way, the Trojans encounter the same Harpies that the Argonauts had fought, but the Harpies defeat the Trojans and drive them away.

As with the gods, the epic style generally transferred easily from Greece to Rome, as Aeneas's tale is structured as a "hero's quest" similar to that of Jason or Odysseus. With Aeneas, however, his heroism mostly hinges on his destiny to found the Roman people, rather than his own great deeds.

At the next place they land Aeneas is surprised to see Andromache, Hector's wife. She had been given as a slave to Achilles' son after the war, but he left her and died soon after. Since then she had married the Trojan prophet Helenus. The two now rule the country and welcome Aeneas and his men.

Like the Odyssey*, the* Aeneid *also returns to some of the characters of the Trojan War. Fate plays a much larger role in this epic than most, as the driving force is Aeneas's dream to go to Italy and his fate to found Rome.*

Helenus gives Aeneas directions for his journey and tells him how to avoid Scylla and Charybdis. He is seemingly unaware of the other dangers of the route, however. The Trojans sail confidently on to Sicily, which is now occupied by Cyclopes. Luckily for them, they are warned of their danger by a starving sailor, who is one of Ulysses' (Odysseus) men, left behind in Polyphemus's cave. The Trojans escape just as Polyphemus rushes towards their ship.

Aeneas faces many of the traditional challenges of the Greek heroes. The Romans clearly shared many of the Greek ideas about heroism, as they found the same obstacle just as terrifying and entertaining, and enjoyed pitting their hero against monsters on his journey.

Juno (Hera) still hates the Trojans because of Paris choosing Venus over her, but she especially hates Aeneas, as his descendants (the Romans) are destined to destroy Carthage, Juno's favorite city. Despite the decrees of the Fates, Juno tries to drown Aeneas with a huge storm. Neptune intervenes, calming the sea enough that the Trojans can land, though they have been blown all the way to northern Africa.

Juno's jealousy for not being chosen as most beautiful never seems to die. This is another example of the mysterious Fates being proven stronger even than the gods. Juno tries her best to kill Aeneas and save Carthage, but nothing can stop the fulfillment of Aeneas's destiny.

The Trojans come ashore near the city of Carthage, which is ruled by the beautiful widow Dido. Juno conspires that Dido and Aeneas should fall in love, hoping that this will divert Aeneas from going to Italy. Venus, however, goes to Jupiter and complains of the many hardships her son Aeneas is facing. Jupiter reiterates the promise of the Fates, that Aeneas will found the race that will one day rule the world.

The emphasis on fate in the Aeneid *reflects something about Roman culture as well – the epic was written during a period of great patriotism and celebration, and the Romans clearly enjoyed feeling that they were destined to rule the world, and they had a mythical forefather whom not even a goddess could stand against.*

Venus is comforted by this, but she still decides to foil Juno's plan. She sends Cupid to make sure that Dido falls in love with Aeneas, but also that Aeneas does not love her in return. Still, Dido is so hospitable to Aeneas and his men that he lingers there for a long time. Dido gives him as much power as if he were her king, and loves him and provides for him ceaselessly.

Like Odysseus, Aeneas is tempted to linger by a woman who loves and dotes on him. But Aeneas has no obligation to a wife and son – his only obligation is to fulfil his destiny. This myth is also complex in that Aeneas's obstacles are not all monsters – some are struggles within himself.

Eventually Jupiter grows weary of this interlude, and he sends Mercury to Aeneas to remind him of his great destiny. Aeneas is heartened and ready to go, but afraid of breaking Dido's heart. Nevertheless, he leaves with his men while Dido sobs and hides. As he sails away, Aeneas sees smoke rising from Carthage, but he does not know that it is Dido's funeral pyre, as she has killed herself.

This is a crucial turning point for Aeneas and shows a difference in the Roman idea of heroism. Aeneas chooses his duty over love when he abandons Dido. The Romans prized straightforward military courage and strength over the tragic flaws of the Greek heroes.

Part 2: The Descent into the Lower World. Aeneas's journey from Carthage to Italy is relatively easily. Helenus had also him to find the cave of the Sybil of Cumae (a prophetic woman) when he reached Italy, as she would advise him on what to do next. Aeneas finds the Sybil, but she says she must take him to Hades to talk with his father, Anchises, who had died on the journey before Carthage.

Like Odysseus, Hercules, and others, Aeneas must journey into the underworld. A common part of the hero's journey seems to be seeking out information on what to do next.

To enter Hades, Aeneas must first find a mystical golden bough growing in the forest. Venus sends two doves to lead Aeneas and his friend Achates to the bough. They pluck it, bring it to the Sybil, and then she and Aeneas begin their journey. Virgil's underworld is much more terrifying than the one faced by earlier heroes – even to enter Hades, the Sybil must slaughter four black cows to Hecate.

The underworld, like the heroes, evolves throughout the myths and across cultures. Virgil emphasizes its terrifying aspect, and associates its entrance with darkness and sacrifice. The golden bough is another beautiful object for the hero to obtain.

The hero and the seer pass by the horrible forms of Disease, Hunger, War, and Discord, and innumerable lost souls on the banks of the Cocytus and Acheron. Charon, the boatman, at first refuses passage to Aeneas, but when he sees the golden bough he agrees to carry them across. Cerberus is there on the other side of the river, but like Psyche, the Sybil appeases him with some cake.

Many of the aspects of the underworld remain from the Greek myths, like Charon and Cerberus (and his love of cake), but Virgil includes all sorts of other evil personifications of suffering among the dead.

They walk past the fields of mourning lovers, and Aeneas sees Dido there. He tries to apologize to her, but she refuses to even acknowledge him, and Aeneas weeps at the encounter. At last they find Anchises in the Elysian fields, the blissful home of the righteous dead.

Though Aeneas is the ultimate Roman hero, choosing duty of over love, he still weeps over how tragically fate has treated Dido. Her death was his fault, but more to blame were the gods whose design he was fulfilling.

Father and son greet each other, and Anchises shows Aeneas the Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness that dead souls drink of before they are born again. He then shows Aeneas the many great Romans who will be his descendants, and instructs him how to establish his home in Italy. Aeneas returns to the earth's surface and sails up the coast of Italy with the other Trojans.

This is important for Aeneas to see the import of his destiny, and the greatness that awaits him. It is also an example for Virgil to praise many Roman heroes. Virgil's concept of the Lethe and dead souls is very interesting, and similar to Eastern ideas of reincarnation.

Part 3: The War in Italy. Juno causes new troubles for Aeneas in Italy. Things go well at first – Latinus, king of the Latins, receives Aeneas hospitably and hopes that he will marry his daughter, Lavinia, who is fated to marry a foreigner. Juno ruins this plan, however, by going to Alecto, one of the Furies, and sending her to cause trouble. Alecto causes Latinus's wife Amata to violently oppose the marriage.

Juno surely knows that she cannot change fate, yet she tries her best to ruin things for Aeneas. The irony of this is that the many hardships she places in his way only make him a greater hero. The hero's quest becomes muddier at this point, and mostly becomes a war to rule Italy.

Alecto then flies to the Rutulians, the other powerful people of the area. Turnus, king of the Rutulians, had been the preferred choice to marry Lavinia before Aeneas came, and Alecto's news about the marriage enrages Turnus and inspires him to march with an army to Latium.

Turnus is the antagonist of the story now, the violent king whom Aeneas must defeat. But Virgil shares Homer's complex view of good and evil, and Turnus is justifiably angry at Aeneas.

Alecto's third act of discord involves a farmer's pet stag who is very popular with the Latins. Alecto guides the unwitting Ascanius, Aeneas's young son, to kill the stag. The Latins, along with the Rutulians, now turn against the Trojans. King Latinus gives up trying to help Aeneas and shuts himself away.

The actions of the Furies are useful to explain the seemingly random evil and suffering that occur in the world. Virgil shares the Greek love of tragic coincidences.

Juno herself smites open the gates of Janus's temple (this symbolizes the start of war), and a large army of Rutulians and Latins joyfully marches against the small group of Trojans. The advancing army is led by Turnus, along with Mezentius, a great warrior who was so cruel that his people, the Etruscans, had rebelled against him, and Camilla, a famous female warrior who scorns marriage.

Mezentius does provide an objective villain because of his cruelty. Aeneas, the Roman hero, is a leader of men at war, not just a quester. The warrior woman motif also returns in this Roman epic with Camilla.

Aeneas gets help from Father Tiber, the god of the now-famous Roman river, who tells Aeneas to go upstream and find Evander, a king of a little town that will one day become Rome itself. Evander and his son Pallas receive Aeneas gladly, but their kingdom is too small and poor to offer much help. Virgil emphasizes the lowly field that will become the Roman Forum, and the overgrown hill that will house the Capitol.

Destiny is on Aeneas's side, and gods help him. Virgil enjoys the ironic descriptions of the shabby town that will become the great Roman Capitol. This allows him to poeticize the origin of the Empire as well as praise Rome in its current state at the time of his writing.

Evander does advise Aeneas to ask the powerful Etruscans for help, as they are already eager to avenge themselves against the horribly cruel Mezentius, their former ruler. Evander sends the few men he can spare, Pallas among them, to help Aeneas.

Part of this war involves Aeneas making allies and conquering or uniting the peoples of Italy, which will be part of the ideal of the Roman Empire.

Meanwhile the Trojans are beset by Turnus's army. They are greatly outnumbered and will soon fall unless they can get word to Aeneas. Two Trojan friends, the older, more experienced Nisus and the young, courageous Euryalus, decide to slip through the enemy lines and find Aeneas. They kill many men in silence, but then Euryalus is captured. Nisus does not run away, but instead tries to save his friend, and both of them die fighting.

This small side story emphasizes the tragic fate of two common soldiers, but it still lacks the irony of many of the Greek tales. Nisus and Euryalus die heroically, fighting against great numbers, but their tale is otherwise not especially interesting or unique.

Aeneas returns with an army of Etruscans and the story then turns into a long list of battles, exaggerated violence, and slaughtered men. Camilla, Mezentius, and Pallas all die, and finally Turnus and Aeneas meet in single combat. By this time the character of Aeneas has changed from a normal human hero into something larger and more formidable – he is almost like a god now, and Turnus has no hope against him. The *Aeneid* ends with Turnus's death. Aeneas then marries Lavinia and founds the Roman race which, Virgil says, was destined to rule over all the earth and crush all pride and resistance.

The end of the myth diverges greatly from the Greek style. Rather that Aeneas declining tragically, he becomes like a god, the perfect, undefeatable warrior, like Hercules without the tragic flaws and inner struggle. Hamilton gives Virgil's quote to emphasize how the Romans idealized their own pure military strength and the grandiose destiny of the Roman Empire. At the time they were the largest empire in the world, and they used this myth to justify their wars of conquest – they were destined to rule.

PART 5, CHAPTER 1

Tantalus and Niobe. The story of the House of Atreus is mostly important because it led to the great tragic plays of Aeschylus. Hamilton takes these as a source along with Pindar, Homer, Ovid, and Apollodorus. The House of Atreus includes Agamemnon, his wife Clytemnestra, his children Iphigenia, Orestes, and Electra, and his brother Menelaus. The whole family is cursed because their ancestor, Tantalus, sinned horribly against the gods.

These stories begin with simpler tales of evil being punished and good being rewarded, but the universe they inhabit then grows crueler and darker, leading to Aeschylus's Oresteia, *one of the greatest tragedies of history. The stories also deal heavily with the concept of fate and punishment.*

Tantalus was a mortal son of Zeus who was greatly honored by the gods and often invited to feast with them on Olympus. One day Tantalus inexplicably kills his son Pelops, cooks him, and serves him to the gods. No one knows why Tantalus hated the gods so much that he wanted to punish them by making them **cannibals**. Hamilton suggests that in his arrogance he wanted to show that he could trick the gods.

This horrible deed ostensibly curses all of Tantalus's descendants. One of the themes explored in this section is why the gods punish children for the sins of their parents. The Greeks seemingly accepted this as an explanation for why bad things sometimes happened to good people.

The Olympians immediately recognize the horrible feast before them, however, and they send Tantalus to be eternally punished in Hades, where he stands in a pool of water with fruit hanging over him, but every time he reaches for water or fruit it moves just out of his reach. He is always hungry and thirsty, "tantalized" by the unobtainable plenty before him.

This is where the modern word "tantalized" comes from, and a classic example of great evil being punished justly by the gods. The injustice of their punishment comes when Tantalus's descendants are also condemned.

The gods restore Pelops to life, but they have to make him an ivory shoulder because one of the goddesses accidentally ate a bite of Tantalus's food. The later Greeks did not like this part of the story, and rejected that the "blessed gods" could ever take part in **cannibalism**. Pelops has a relatively successful life (for a descendant of Tantalus) and wins the hand of Princess Hippodamia by beating her father in a chariot race. But Pelops later kills Myrtilus, the charioteer who helped him win the race, and thus brings down more misfortune on his family.

Cannibalism still stands as the Greek standard for the ultimate crime and atrocity, and the idea of the gods eating human flesh was abhorrent to them. They clearly savored the sensationalism of Tantalus's crime, however, as it is repeated similarly in other myths. Hamilton does not describe Pelops's sin, but says that some believed that it was his murder of Myrtilus that caused the curse to continue.

Niobe, Tantalus's daughter, receives the full brunt of her father's curse. Her life is successful at first, as she marries Zeus's son Amphion, has seven brave sons and seven beautiful daughters, and lives in the fortified city of Thebes. But then her father's mad hubris seizes her and Niobe demands that the people worship her instead of Leto, and she takes the goddess's temple as her own.

Niobe is a prime example of hubris, the sin the gods hate most. It is always the danger of those who are too beautiful, too strong, or too successful, and the gods seem to delight in laying low the proud. If they are not falling in love with exceptional mortals, they are jealously punishing them.

To punish this arrogance, Apollo and Artemis immediately kill Niobe's fourteen children in front of her. They then turn Niobe into a stone that weeps forever in eternal grief, so that the rock is always wet.

Apollo and Artemis, the two gods of purity and archery, show their terrifying sides in this swift and merciless punishment.

Pelops has two sons, Atreus and Thyestes, who are also doomed. Thyestes seduces Atreus's wife, and as revenge Atreus kills Thyestes' two young children, cuts them up, and serves them to their father to eat. This crime is again passed onto their children, rather than being punished in the two men's lifetime.

The Greeks clearly found this act of serving one's children as food to be especially potent, perhaps as the most atrocious sort of vengeance possible against a person. Again the justice is delayed onto the children, and so seems unjust.

Agamemnon and His Children. Agamemnon, Atreus's son, is the next generation of sorrow. Homer first mentions Agamemnon's tragedy in the *Odyssey*, and in this first version Agamemnon is killed by his wife's lover Aegisthus. The story later changes subtly, and becomes a new incarnation of the twisted vengeance and justice of the House of Atreus.

Agamemnon was the chief commander of the Greek forces in the Trojan War, and is the King of Mycenae. In the early tale his murder is a simpler tale of lover's jealousy, as Aegisthus and Clytemnestra kill him so they can be together.

As Hamilton already described, Agamemnon sacrificed his oldest daughter, Iphigenia, to make the winds favor the Greek ships on their way to Troy. While he was away his wife Clytemnestra had taken a lover, Aegisthus, and had also been plotting revenge against her husband for their daughter's death. Agamemnon returns victorious, carrying with him Cassandra, the prophetess who is never believed.

The injustice of this story is that it was Artemis herself who began the cycle of bloodshed by demanding the sacrifice of Iphigenia. After that, the tale pits the different sacred rules of Greek society – notably vengeance and filial piety – against each other to tragic effect.

All the people of Mycenae have a foreboding of evil because of Agamemnon's cursed family, and Cassandra rambles about the past atrocities, bloodshed always causing more bloodshed, finally prophesying her own death and Agamemnon's, but she and Agamemnon still enter the palace. The doors shut behind them, and Clytemnestra and Aegisthus kill them.

Cassandra sees the bloody past and future of the family, but as usual she cannot change fate. Clytemnestra must choose between two crimes – letting her daughter die unavenged, and killing her husband – and she chooses to kill Agamemnon. The curse of this family is that they always choose vengeance.

Clytemnestra does not see this murder as a crime, but only as just retribution for the death of Iphigenia. Aegisthus, who is the son of Thyestes, had no quarrel with Agamemnon, but was punishing him for the sins of his father Atreus. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus then foolishly believe that they have ended the cycle of bloodshed with their actions.

Aegisthus is avenging his own father, who was forced to eat his children. This is a much more tragic motive for murder than simply that he loved Clytemnestra. They think they have ended the cycle of vengeance, but in this world bloodshed always begets more bloodshed.

Agamemnon had two other children: a son Orestes, who was taken away to be protected from Aegisthus, and a daughter Electra, who was forced to live under Clytemnestra and Aegisthus's rule, all the while longing to avenge her father. Orestes grows up and sees his own terrible dilemma – to let his father go unavenged is a terrible crime, but for a son to kill his mother is also a terrible crime.

Unlike Oedipus, Orestes has some agency in his fate, but all his choices are evil. Aeschylus pits the sacred rule of vengeance against the sacred rule of filial piety. Orestes cannot throw off the curse of his family without disobeying the will of the gods as well.

Orestes goes to Delphi and asks the oracle to help him, and Apollo clearly says that he must kill Clytemnestra. Orestes realizes that he will pay for enacting this justice with his own soul, but he has no other choice. He returns to Mycenae with his cousin Pylades and finds Electra there. She is overjoyed at Orestes' return, and the two plot their mother's death.

Orestes is a new kind of tragic hero, as he is willing to bring condemnation and suffering down upon himself to obey fate and the will of the gods. He is a hero precisely because he is not *free to do heroic deeds, but can only choose a path of suffering.*

Orestes and Pylades pretend to be a messengers relaying news of Orestes' death, and they are welcomed into the palace, where they begin to fight. Clytemnestra is warned of Orestes' coming moments before he encounters her. She begs him to spare her life, but Orestes reluctantly faces his fate and kills his mother and then Aegisthus.

There is no opportunity for adventure and overcoming evil in Aeschylus's universe, there is only evil all around and within. Orestes faces his fate heroically, though that fate is to murder his own mother and uncle.

When Orestes emerges from the palace he starts to see the Furies pursuing him, demanding vengeance for his mother's death. He flees the country and wanders in agony for years. Finally he is sent by Apollo to appeal to Athena. Orestes confesses his guilt and Athena accepts his plea. With her mercy the Furies themselves change, transforming into the Eumenides, "protectors of the suppliant." With Orestes' acquittal, the curse of the House of Atreus is finally broken.

Orestes becomes almost a Christ-like figure here as the myth ends on a more hopeful note. By choosing to sacrifice himself to condemnation and suffering, Orestes transforms the Furies for all mortals, ushering in a new age of possible atonement. His heroism is rewarded in this at least.

Iphigenia among the Taurians. Hamilton takes this story from Euripides, and points out the unnecessary "deus ex machina" at the end. As she stated before, the later Greeks did not like human sacrifice being associated with their gods, so they changed the part of Agamemnon's story where Artemis demands Iphigenia's life. In this later version, at the last second Artemis provides a deer as sacrifice instead, and whisks Iphigenia away to the land of the Taurians.

The later change to make Artemis less bloodthirsty creates this new myth, but it also complicates the other stories of Clytemnestra and Orestes. Because each poet was always changing the myths for his own purposes, this bending of logic is possible to keep Artemis more "blessed."

The Taurians have the terrible custom of sacrificing any Greek they capture to Artemis, but they spare Iphigenia. They make her a priestess of the temple, which means she must preside over the sacrifices of her countrymen, but she performs this role for years.

Ironically, Iphigenia is spared becoming a sacrifice to Artemis only so she can become a priestess sacrificing others to Artemis. The myth cannot seem to escape the idea of human sacrifice.

In this story, Orestes is not fully absolved of his guilt yet, and the oracle has told him to go to the Taurian country and take the image of Artemis from their temple. When he brings it to Athens, he will finally be at peace. Orestes and Pylades set out on this quest, but they are quickly captured by the Taurians and given to Iphigenia to sacrifice.

This story must also change Orestes' heroic redemption so that he has reason for another trial and can save his sister. This quest becomes similar to those of other heroes, as they seek to steal a holy object, though Orestes and Pylades immediately fail.

Iphigenia, who has been musing that Artemis surely would not demand such gruesome sacrifices as the Taurians make, does not recognize her brother, and she asks him about Agamemnon and Mycenae. Orestes reluctantly tells her about the many horrors of the family, and says that they all assume Iphigenia is dead.

Iphigenia seems to be musing on her own fate in this story, and reflecting Euripides' own ideas about the gods refusing human sacrifice. At this point in Greek culture, mortals generally held their gods to a higher moral standard.

Stirred by the news of home, Iphigenia promises to free Pylades if he will find her brother Orestes and tell him that she is alive and in need of rescue. At that Orestes reveals his identity, and the amazed siblings are reunited. They begin to plan their escape, though Iphigenia does not want to kill Thoas, the Taurian king, as he has treated her kindly.

The oracle's plan starts to come to fruition, and it is implied that part of Orestes' atonement will involve rescuing his sister. The story relishes the long reveal of the siblings' identities.

Iphigenia tells King Thoas that the prisoners are unclean, as they have killed their mother, and she must take the image of Artemis along with the prisoners to be cleansed by the sea before they can be sacrificed. The three then make their escape with the image, but then a heavy wind blows their ship back towards land. By then Thoas has discovered Iphigenia's plot and is ready to kill the three Greeks when they land.

It is Iphigenia who does the rescuing more than Orestes. She takes advantage of Artemis's image of purity – which contrasts with the human sacrifices Artemis supposedly demands. The story could have ended here if Euripides had left out the final wind, but he wanted a god to appear to declare that fate favored the Greeks.

Suddenly Athena appears, and she commands Thoas to let Orestes and Iphigenia go, as they are fated to escape. Thoas submits to Athena's wish, the wind shifts, and the Greeks sail away safely. Hamilton points out that this "deus ex machina" ending could have been avoided by leaving out the shifting wind, but that at the time Euripides was writing the Athenians were at war, and starved for miracles.

This kind of "deus ex machina" – "god from the machine" – is now a sign of a badly plotted story, but Euripides purposefully arranges his neatly-ordered tale to allow Athena to save everyone.

PART 5, CHAPTER 2

Cadmus and his Children. The House of Thebes is also famous because of a great tragedian: Sophocles and his plays about Oedipus. This first section comes from Apollodorus, however. Cadmus, the dynastic father of the House of Thebes, is the brother of Europa (who Zeus kidnapped in the form of a bull). He asks the oracle at Delphi about her whereabouts, and the oracle says to not worry about Europa, but for Cadmus to instead found his own city. He then follows a magical heifer to the place where Thebes will be built.

The story returns to the first myth of the book, as Europa's brother becomes the founder of Thebes. Like the house of Atreus, this chapter will center around a single family. It will also focus strongly on fate and punishment, and exists in just as dark a world as the Oresteia. *Oedipus is the most famous member of the house, and from his story come modern ideas like Freud's psychology.*

Before he can build the city, Cadmus has to slay the dragon that guards a nearby spring. When it is dead, Athena tells him to sow the earth with the dragon's teeth, and then armed men rise up from the soil. Five of them become Cadmus's helpers, and together they build the prosperous city of Thebes. Cadmus marries Harmonia, and Aphrodite gives the bride a necklace made by Hephaestus – which will later bring tragedy.

This motif of dragon's teeth giving birth to armed men is repeated in Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece. The family of Cadmus is not punished because Cadmus committed any sin – he has an extremely successful life – it is simply the random design of the Fates and the gods.

Cadmus's good fortune does not extend to his four daughters, however. Semele is killed by Zeus's glory before giving birth to Dioysus, and Ino becomes the cruel stepmother of Phrixus (from the Golden Fleece story) and tries to kill herself after her insane husband kills her son (though the gods later transform her into a sea-goddess). Agave is driven mad by Dionysus so that she kills her own son Pentheus with her bare hands.

Many of the earlier myths coincide with this generation of the House of Thebes. The earlier chapters on Dionysus, Jason, and even Odysseus (who is saved by Ino as a sea-goddess) all intersect here. The violent, tragic fates begin here, and for some reason continue on to the characters' descendants.

Cadmus's last daughter, Autonoe, has a son named Actaeon, who is a hunter. He unknowingly comes across Artemis's bathing pool and sees the goddess naked. The angry Artemis immediately transforms Actaeon into a stag, and then he is killed by his own faithful hunting dogs.

Here again is Artemis showing her angry, merciless side. Actaeon's sin was only accidental, but the gods cannot suffer any slight to their pride and divinity – and Actaeon was even a hunter, the profession beloved by Artemis herself.

Because of their daughters' tragedies, Cadmus and Harmonia suffer greatly in their old age. They eventually leave Thebes in their sorrow, and then the gods change them into serpents for no reason – not as punishment, but as proof that the innocent suffer as much as the guilty.

Hamilton leaves this last story ambiguous, but connects it to the overarching theme of this section. In these tragic worlds, horrible things happen for no good reason other than fate, even when characters are not evil themselves.

Oedipus. The greatest tragedy of the family, however, passes to Oedipus, Cadmus's great-great-grandson. The oracle at Delphi warns King Laius (Oedipus's father) that his son will kill him. Laius tries to avoid this fate by leaving his infant son tied up to die on a mountain. Laius then feels he has evaded Apollo's decree, but his hubris punishes him in the end. He is killed years later on a highway, by a man assumed to be a stranger.

This is the famous example of a character trying to escape his fate and unwittingly fulfilling it with his actions. Like Cronus or Acrisius trying to kill the children that will overthrow them, Laius's actions only mean that Oedipus doesn't recognize him when they quarrel on the road. Sophocles exploits these ironies of fate throughout the story.

Around this time Thebes is being besieged by the Sphinx, a monster like a winged lion with a woman's breast and face. The Sphinx kills any wayfarers who cannot answer her riddle, to the point that Thebes closes its seven gates and nears the point of famine.

Though intriguing, the Sphinx could be a monster from any hero's quest. Oedipus could potentially have been a traditional hero except for his horrible fate.

Meanwhile Oedipus, who has grown up in Corinth as the son of the King, Polybus, leaves his home to try and avoid another Delphic prophecy – the oracle had told Oedipus that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Because of this, Oedipus vows to flee Polybus forever. He then comes to Thebes, learns of the Sphinx, and determines to solve her riddle.

Oedipus, like Laius, seals his fate in the very act of trying to escape it. The tragedy of this play is that though Oedipus is a good man and even heroic – he altruistically decides to save the people of Thebes and slay the Sphinx – he still cannot escape the atrocities he is destined to commit.

The riddle the Sphinx asks Oedipus is: "What creature goes on four feet in the morning, two at noonday, and three in the evening?" Oedipus answers correctly – "Man" – who crawls as a baby, walks upright as an adult, and in old age uses a cane. The Sphinx, somehow defeated by this, kills herself. The grateful people of Thebes make Oedipus their King, and he marries Laius's widowed wife Jocasta.

Unlike Orestes, Oedipus does not realize it when he commits his great sins. He kills Laius, but it is implied that it was in self-defense. In marrying his mother, he is only doing the politically acceptable thing. The riddle of the Sphinx has lasted through the ages.

Oedipus and Jocasta have two sons, and when they are grown a terrible plague comes to Thebes. Nothing will grow, and disease kills many people. Oedipus sends Creon, Jocasta's brother, to Delphi to ask Apollo for help. The oracle tells Creon that the plague will be lifted when Laius's murderer is punished. Oedipus is relieved at such a simple solution, and he sends for the old blind prophet Teiresias for help.

Oedipus also acts heroically, like Theseus, in being a wise ruler, and also in working hard to find the murderer of Laius to help his people. The oracle acts as an important plot device in this story, as the horrible pieces begin to come together.

At first Teiresias refuses to reveal Laius's murderer, though it is clear he knows the truth. Oedipus forces him, and Teiresias finally says that Oedipus himself is the guilty man. At first Oedipus and Jocasta dismiss the prophet's words, but then they piece together the past events: Oedipus had killed a man in an argument on the road, and now they see that this was Laius.

Teiresias's gift of prophecy is a curse here, as it was with Cassandra or Phineus. The terror of the truth is associated with the nature of Apollo – the God of Truth and Light, but also the Archer, and the oracle that tells Oedipus's fate.

At that moment a messenger arrives from Corinth, telling Oedipus of King Polybus's death. At first Oedipus and Jocasta are relieved, as they think the oracle was wrong about Oedipus's curse, but then the messenger reveals that Oedipus was not really Polybus's son – he was instead brought to the palace by a shepherd. The old shepherd then appears, and confesses that the child he brought to Polybus was Laius's son, condemned because of a prophecy.

All the pieces fall into place in one terrible scene. The tragedy is that the horrible deeds have already been done, and there is only the knowledge of them that still has to be dealt with. It was a series of unhappy coincidences that led to Oedipus's fate, not any sin of his own. The moral seems to be that Fate cannot be changed, no matter how one acts.

Oedipus realizes then that he has already fulfilled the horrible prophecy about himself – he has killed his father and married his mother – and that he, Jocasta, and their children are all cursed. He rushes to find Jocasta, but she has already killed herself. Oedipus then gouges out his own eyes in anguish.

This is another part of Oedipus's tragic heroism – like Orestes, he must face the incredibly hard fate he has been dealt and somehow find atonement. Like Hercules, he punishes himself harshly for his sins, which are in many ways just accidents.

Antigone. Oedipus gives up his kingship, but he remains in Thebes. He has two sons, Polyneices (who also abdicates the throne) and Eteocles, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. The rule of Thebes passes to Creon, Jocasta's brother. After many peaceful years the Thebans suddenly decide to exile Oedipus, and Antigone goes with him to guide him, while Ismene stays in Thebes.

Oedipus takes the more heroic path than Jocasta, as his punishment is living with his crimes and enduring the worst that the universe can offer, but still managing to survive and live a life of contemplation. His sons are not as monstrous as they would seem from their parentage, but they do inherit tragedy and sorrow.

After Oedipus is gone, his two sons begin to fight over the throne. Eteocles succeeds (though he is younger), and Polyneices flees to Argos where he tries to raise an army against his brother. Meanwhile Oedipus and Antigone come to Colonus, a place near Athens that is sacred to the Eumenides, the former Furies. Theseus welcomes Oedipus with honor, Ismene visits him, and the old man dies at peace.

Oedipus is finally rewarded for his heroism by dying peacefully and receiving a similar kind of atonement to Orestes, also involving the Euminides. Theseus returns to the story as a defender of virtue and a protector of the condemned.

Ismene and Antigone return to Thebes to find their brothers at war. Polyneices marches against Thebes with six chieftains and their armies. These seven attack the seven gates of Thebes, while seven champions also defend those gates.

These are the original "Seven Against Thebes." The war is based on a sibling tragedy like Atreus and Thyestes, but now Antigone and Ismene are caught in between.

Teiresias tells Creon that Thebes will only be saved if Menoeceus, Creon's son, is sacrificed. Creon refuses to do this, and asks Menoeceus to flee the city, but the brave youth, hearing Teiresias's prophecy, sneaks into battle and is immediately killed. Eteocles and Polyneices kill each other on the battlefield, and as he dies, Polyneices asks to be buried in Thebes, his homeland.

The brothers find a kind of reconciliation in their deaths, though the war has now grown larger than their personal quarrel. Polyneices' last request sets the stage for the next tragedy to come. Moneoceus becomes yet another sacrificial youth.

The battle continues even though the brothers are dead, but Thebes is ultimately victorious over its invaders. Only Adrastus of the seven attacking chieftains escapes, and he flees to Athens. Creon buries Eteocles with honor, but declares that anyone who tries to bury any of the enemy chieftains, including Polyneices, will be put to death.

Adrastus finds Theseus, the helper of the oppressed. Creon defies a sacred law of the gods with this new edict. In Greek tradition, if the dead lie unburied, their souls are unable to cross the Acheron and Cocytus into Hades.

Antigone and Ismene are horrified by this law, as it is a great sacrilege against their brother. Ismene does nothing, but Antigone buries Polyneices herself. Creon catches her and she proudly confesses what she has done. Creon upholds his law and executes Antigone.

Antigone becomes the next tragic figure, condemning herself to death to uphold the sacred laws of the gods. Her choice is not as tragic as Orestes', but it is similar in nature and involves great heroism.

The Seven Against Thebes. The rest of the tale is told by both Aeschylus and Euripides. Though Polyneices was buried at the price of Antigone's life, the other five chieftains still lie unburied, which means their souls will be unable to cross the river to Hades. Adrastus, the only surviving chieftain, appeals to Theseus for help, knowing he is a righteous ruler. Theseus refuses to decide but puts the question to a vote, and the Athenian democracy decides to help Adrastus bury the dead of Thebes.

Theseus and the Athenians, like Antigone, decide to defy the laws of mortals to uphold the laws of the gods. This might seem overly idealistic, as the gods can be crueler and more capricious than mortals, as the myths have shown, but these sacred rules are all the characters have to cling to in such a violent, tragic world.

Creon doesn't listen to Theseus's request, and so the Athenians march against Thebes and ultimately defeat them. But Theseus holds the army back from invading the city, as he only came to enact justice and bury the dead. They have an honorable funeral for the chieftains and then return to Athens.

Theseus is at his best and most heroic here, refusing the usual spoils of war and simply doing what he came for – fulfilling the wishes of the gods and letting the dead souls find rest and honor.

The sons of the dead chieftains are still not satisfied with this, however. When they are grown, these seven, called the Epigoni, "the After-Born," march against Thebes and level it to the ground. In the end, all that is left of the great city is Harmonia's old necklace, which Aphrodite had given to her at her wedding.

Thebes ends with more vengeance and bloodshed, as the characters in this world rarely choose forgiveness and atonement over revenge and punishment. Harmonia's necklace becomes a beautiful, tragic, final image of the once-glorious city.

PART 5, CHAPTER 3

Cecrops. These stories come mostly from Ovid, who uses an excess of sensational detail, but Hamilton also borrows from the Greek tragedians at the end of the age of mythology, when people began to question how "divine" some of the gods' actions were. The House of Athens in notable because of the number of strange things that happened to its members.

There are no epic, sweeping tragedies in this section, but rather a collection of various stories and a few more developed tales. Hamilton again refers to how the gods became objects of satire at the end of the age of mythology.

The first king of Attica is Cecrops, who is half man, half dragon. He is the one who chooses Athena over Poseidon to be the protector of Athens – Poseidon offered a deep well, but Athena offered an olive tree. This angered Poseidon, and he sent a flood to Athens.

This is the explanation myth for Athens' name, and for the importance of the olive tree to the Greeks. The Athenians also favored virtues like those of Athena – intellect, heroism, and independence.

In another version, the women of Athens used to have the right to vote along with the men. But in the choice between Athena and Poseidon, the women gave the vote Athena. After Poseidon's flood, the men keep Athena but take away the women's voting rights. In still other versions, Cecrops is not a half-dragon, but merely the distinguished son of King Erechtheus.

This is another origin myth to explain why the Athenian women did not have the vote. The implication that both genders originally had a voice means that Athens was even more ahead of its time than it seemed.

Procne and Philomela. Erechtheus, a great Athenian king in the time of Demeter's introduction of agriculture, has two sisters, Procne and Philomela. Procne, the elder, is married to Tereus of Thrace, who is the son of Ares and just as cruel. Procne asks Tereus to let her sister Philomela visit her, and he agrees to fetch her from Athens. Tereus falls in love with the beautiful Philomela, and he seduces her into a pretend marriage by telling her that Procne is dead.

This is another series of relatives who all have unfortunate lives. As will be revealed, this story takes place very early in history, so it might illustrate an early incarnation of the Greek consciousness. Otherwise it seems less familiar and resonant to modern readers.

Philomela soon learns the truth, however, and then Tereus cuts outs her tongue and imprisons her so she can never tell about his sins. Tereus returns to Procne and tells her that Philomela died on the journey. This is in the days before writing, so Philomela has no way of sending a message about her plight. But she weaves a beautiful tapestry portraying the tale of her misfortune, and sends it as a gift to Procne.

This is the beautiful, lasting image from the tale – the voiceless Philomela finding a way to express herself. This has become a classic analogy for oppressed and silenced minorities, and a metaphor for women's rights. T.S. Eliot references her plight in his famous poem The Waste Land.

When Procne receives the tapestry and learns what happened to Philomela, she rescues her sister and then devises a revenge for Tereus. She kills Itys, her young son with Tereus, cooks him, and serves him to Tereus. After he has eaten, Procne tells him that he is now a **cannibal**, and while he is frozen with horror the two sisters flee.

This same motif repeats itself from Tantalus and Atreus, with cannibalism as the ultimate vengeance and atrocity. After the lovely image of Philomela's self-expression, the tale suddenly becomes dark and alien.

Tereus then pursues the women and overtakes them. He is about to kill them when the gods turn them into birds: Procne becomes a nightingale and Philomela becomes a swallow, which cannot sing because of Philomela's tongue. Tereus is turned into a hawk or other cruel bird.

Like many of Ovid's tales, the story ends as an explanation myth for a kind of bird. This is a kind of "deus ex machina," in that the gods resolve the conflict by transforming the characters into animals.

Procris and Cephalus. Procris is the niece of Procne and Philomela, and she marries Cephalus, the grandson of Aeolus. Soon after their wedding, Cephalus is carried off by a lovestruck Aurora, Goddess of the Dawn. She had fallen in love with him as he hunted deer in the early morning. Cephalus resists Aurora's advances and stays true to Procris, and finally Aurora dismisses him, but first she spitefully implies that Procris might not have been as faithful to Cephalus as he was to her.

These myths return to many of the motifs of Hamilton's earlier retellings, focusing on gods falling in love with mortals and vice versa instead of complex, ironic tragedies. Aurora causes discord with a simple phrase just as Eris did with her golden apple "For the Fairest."

This suggestion torments Cephalus, and he decides to test Procris's faithfulness. He disguises himself as a stranger and tries to seduce Procris. She always refuses him, but one day she hesitates and Cephalus reveals himself, accusing her of betraying him. Procris, furious at her husband's deception, runs away without a word and goes to live in the mountains.

This is a similar situation to Odysseus's homecoming, except Cephalus clearly doesn't trust Procris, and he ends up punishing both her and himself with his distrustfulness. The mountains seem to the be natural refuge of women who scorn marriage.

Cephalus eventually finds Procris and wins her back after many apologies. They spend a few happy years together, but then tragedy strikes again. The couple is out hunting together and Cephalus, thinking she is an animal, accidentally kills Procris with his javelin.

This is a similar sort of accident to the death of the Giant brothers Otus and Ephialtes. Procris dies tragically, but it is not especially poignant or unique.

Orithyia and Boreas. Orithyia is one of Procris's sisters. Boreas, the North Wind, falls in love with her, but her father and the people of Athens oppose the marriage. Boreas carries her away nonetheless, and she bears him two sons that sail with Jason as Argonauts.

This story could have fit into the earlier chapter about "lovers," or be any one of Zeus's philandering adventures.

Hamilton then relates a story about the Greek philosopher Socrates and his friend Phaedrus. They are out walking and pass the spot where Boreas supposedly carried Orithyia away. Socrates says that he doubts the truth of the story, and Hamilton points out that by then (the fifth century B.C.) the myths were losing their importance.

The importance of the previous story was mostly to lead to this anecdote. Hamilton gives this scene as an example of how the myths lost their religious importance to the later Greeks. Socrates, the famous philosopher, considered doubt important.

Creüsa and Ion. Creüsa is the other sister of Procris and Orithyia. One day she is gathering flowers when Apollo kidnaps her and rapes her in a cave. Angry and ashamed, Creüsa hides her pregnancy and gives birth to a son in the same cave. She leaves him there to die, but then feels guilty and returns to find the baby has disappeared.

Related to the earlier scene, this story shows Apollo at his worst, and could be an example of the kind of myth that made the later Greeks lose faith in their gods. Many characters in the myths begin as abandoned children.

Later Erechtheus gives Creüsa as a bride to a foreigner named Xuthus. When they cannot conceive a child, they go to the oracle at Delphi for help. Creüsa first goes to the temple alone, and there she speaks to a handsome young priest named Ion. She laments her miserable life, and how Apollo is a source of suffering for her, not comfort. Creüsa then asks Ion what happened to the baby she abandoned. Ion is upset at her story, and cannot believe that Apollo would act as he did.

Ion seems to represent the earlier Greeks, or the mindset that took the myths as religious truth, while Creüsa speaks for the later, doubting Greeks or the modern readers who could not imagine a rapist being worthy of worship. The story is generally a simple case of mistaken identity, but the interesting part of it comes with Creüsa's justifiable bitterness against Apollo.

Just then Xuthus enters the temple, embraces Ion, and says that the oracle told him he is to adopt Ion as his son. Then an old priestess enters and explains everything: she is the one who found Ion as a baby, and she reveals the veil and cloak she found with him, which Creüsa recognizes them as her own. Creüsa realizes that Ion is the son she abandoned, and Athena suddenly appears and confirms this revelation, declaring that Ion will one day rule Athens. Hamilton interjects to wonder whether this late reparation was enough to make amends for Apollo's rape of Creüsa.

The story has a traditional "happy" ending, as Xuthus's purpose for Creüsa (as a woman) was to give him a son, so in this sense everything turns out well. Hamilton asks the obvious question about just how "happy" Creüsa must have been with the resolution though. Once again, most of the myths fail to take the woman or foreigner's point of view into consideration.

PART 6, CHAPTER 1

Midas, a king of Phrygia, once comes upon the drunken Silenus sleeping in his rose gardens. Midas treats Silenus hospitably, and then brings him back to Bacchus, who is so relieved to have him back that he grants Midas a wish. Midas wishes that whatever he touches would turn to gold.

Midas is one the most familiar names among these shorter myths. His actual myth is fairly simple and straightforward, but it has become an analogy for foolish greed and the love of material things.

Midas quickly discovers that he cannot eat or drink anymore, so he hurries back to Bacchus to undo his wish. Bacchus tells him to wash in the river Pactolus, and the spell will be broken. This is why gold is sometimes found in this river.

These "less-important" myths will be notably more simple and less interesting, and just a random sampling of the themes unified in the other myths. This one turns into another explanation for a river.

Later Midas acts as a judge in a music contest between Pan and Apollo. Pan plays the pipes well, but cannot compare with Apollo's silver lyre. Midas stupidly says that Pan is the better musician, and so the angry Apollo turns Midas's ears into donkey's ears. Midas hides them under a cap after that, but later his secret is magically spread throughout the land, revealing the truth about Midas's stupidity, but also the lesson to always side with the stronger god.

This little tale offers another example of the value the Greeks placed on artistic beauty. Apollo's jealousy and anger and not being considered the best musician is similar to Athena and Hera's anger at not being chosen to be "the Fairest" by Paris. This is also a morality tale about being obedient to the gods.

Aesculapius. Apollo falls in love with a maiden named Coronis, but Coronis is unfaithful to him with a mortal man. Apollo learns of the treachery from his white raven, which he then turns black in his anger. He kills Coronis but saves his unborn child, giving it to the Centaur Chiron to raise. The boy, whose name is Aesculapius, grows up and learns all Chiron's wisdom about the arts of medicine.

Most of these tales are much simpler in their justice than the complex stories of fate and tragedy Hamilton has described earlier. Evil is generally punished and good is rewarded, as Coronis is killed for her unfaithfulness but her child is spared.

Soon Aesculapius surpasses Chiron and becomes such a great healer that he raises a man, Theseus's son Hippolytus, from the dead. The gods are angry that a mortal should have this much power, and so Zeus kills Aesculapius with a thunderbolt. Apollo is angry at his son's death, so he attacks the Cyclopes who make Zeus's thunderbolts. Zeus then makes Apollo serve as a slave to King Admetus for several years.

As usual the gods punish any mortals who grow too lofty or proud, but in the case of Aesculapius they seem more unjust than usual. The whole end of this myth is one cycle of vengeance and punishment – Zeus killing Aesculapius for his power, Apollo killing Zeus's Cyclopes, and then Zeus making Apollo a slave.

Though Aesculapius displeased the gods, he was greatly honored by mortals. Temples are built to him where people come for healing. Snakes are his sacred servants, and thousands of sick people believe that Aesculapius is the one who cured them.

Like Prometheus, Aesculapius becomes a hero despite the gods' hatred. His healing power is also very human, and seems to be able to alter fate itself. Because of this he is honored like a god.

The Danaïds. Danaüs, one of Io's descendants, has fifty daughters. Their fifty male cousins pursue them, but the daughters (the Danaïds) are opposed to marrying them, and they flee with their father to Argos. Somehow (it is never explained) the male cousins catch them and marry them, and at the wedding feast Danaüs gives each of his daughters a dagger. That night, all of them kill their husbands except for one, Hypermnestra, who pities her young groom.

This story is again simple in its idea of evil and punishment, and it is interesting mostly in the mass repetition of the same crime. It is a traditional (for the myths) tale of a wife murdering her husband, but multiplied fifty-fold.

Danaüs throws Hypermnestra into prison for treachery, but her sisters receive a worse punishment in the afterlife. They are forced to endlessly fill jars with holes in the bottom, so the water runs out and their work never ends.

Hypermnestra becomes the hero of this story, suffering for her virtue and pity while her sisters are justly punished for their murders.

Glaucus and Scylla. Glaucus is a fisherman who eats some magic grass and then becomes a sea-god, half-man and half-fish. He falls in love with Scylla, a nymph, but she flees from him. Glaucus goes to Circe to ask for a love potion, but Circe falls in love with him instead. Glaucus rejects her, and Circe turns her rage against Scylla. She pours magic poison into the bay where Scylla bathes, and when Scylla enters the water she becomes a monster with many heads growing out of a rock. This is the creature who is later such a peril to Jason, Odysseus, and Aeneas.

This story seems more fantastical than most in the way that it meanders about and seems to have no clear notion of cause and effect or justice. It is mostly an explanation story for Scylla, the famous obstacle of so many hero's quests, but it is also another example of the wrong person being punished for another's crime. This is the same Circe from Homer's Odyssey.

Erysichthion. Erysichthion arrogantly cuts down an oak tree sacred to Ceres (Demeter), despite many warnings. To punish him, Ceres makes Erysichthion constantly starving, no matter how much food he eats. He sells everything he has to buy food, and then he even sells his daughter. She prays to Poseidon to save her from slavery, and the god transforms her into a fisherman so her master cannot recognize her.

This is one of the few stories where Demeter appears as a character who is anything but kindly, though she is simply punishing wickedness with a unique kind of torment. Poseidon becomes a kind of "magic lamp" in this story, less a character than a source of endless magic.

The daughter returns to Erysichthion, and together they begin a money-making scheme: Erysichthion sells his daughter over and over, and each time Poseidon transforms her into something new so she can escape. Erysichthion is still never satisfied, however, and he dies devouring his own body.

This tale is mostly interesting because Erysichthion's daughter gains a shape-shifting power like that of the god Proteus, but she uses it only as a scheme for making money. Erysichthion suffers the ultimate punishment for his gluttony.

Pomona and Vertumnus. Pomona is a Roman nymph, the only one who does not love the wild forest, but instead cares only for her fruit orchards. Vertumnus loves her, but she always rejects him. One day he comes to Pomona disguised as an old woman and surprises her with a kiss. He then explains that a man named Vertumnus loves her deeply, and would help her care for her gardens. He reminds her that Venus hates hard-hearted women who reject love. He then reveals himself as Vertumnus, and Pomona accepts his love. The two tend the orchard together ever after.

This is a story only from Rome, as Hamilton earlier mentioned these characters among the strictly Roman deities. Again there is an emphasis on love and a sense of disapproval for women who reject marriage. Pomona is also the only nymph who favors cultivation and agriculture instead of the wildness of the forest, which is perhaps representative of the Roman love of order.

PART 6, CHAPTER 2

These are less important myths, so Hamilton only describes each of them briefly. Amalthea is the goat whose milk fed the infant Zeus. Her horn is the Horn of Plenty, or "Cornucopia," and is always filled with fruit and flowers. The Amazons are a famous race of women warriors, though they rarely appear in mythology. Amymone is one of the Danaïds, who is pursued by a satyr and then saved by Poseidon.

A few of these myths contain names that are familiar to modern readers, but mostly they are small examples of the themes the longer myths explored in depth, or else backstories of characters that briefly appeared elsewhere. They are generally small morality or explanation tales.

Antiope is a princess of Thebes who bears two sons to Zeus: Zethus and Amphion. Later Antiope is treated cruelly by the ruler of Thebes, Lycus, and his wife Dirce. When Antiope's sons are grown, they kill Lycus and Dirce.

This story is an example of justice being delayed for years while children grow into adults, as in the story of Orestes.

Arachne is a peasant girl who claims to be Minerva's equal at weaving. Minerva challenges her to a contest, and Arachne accepts. They both produce equally beautiful cloth, and the jealous Minerva turns Arachne into a spider.

This is a famous story, and another example of the gods punishing those too proud of their success. Arachne actually does produce cloth as beautiful as Minerva though, so her punishment is more like jealous vengeance.

Arion is a poet who wins a prize and is then attacked by sailors. Apollo warns him of his danger, and Arion plays his lyre and then jumps into the sea to avoid the sailors. Dolphins, who had approached at his song, carry Arion away to safety.

Like Orpheus, Arion is beloved by the gods and the natural world because of the beauty of his art. He can also use his music as a form of power, in this case to save himself.

Aristaeus is a beekeeper whose bees all die, so he catches the shape-shifter Proteus (in the same way Menelaus did, by clinging to him as he transformed), who tells him the proper sacrifice to make for new bees to appear. Tithonus is the husband of Aurora and the father of Memnon of Ethiopia. Aurora asks Zeus to make Tithonus immortal, but forgets to ask to keep him young, so Tithonus grows old and loses his mind but cannot die.

The figure of Proteus represents the constantly shifting sea. He has great knowledge and wisdom, but clearly only answers someone who can survive his many transformations. Memnon was the hero who replaced Hector in Troy. The story of Tithonus is a strange cautionary tale about the rewards and punishments of the gods.

Biton and Cleobis yoke themselves like oxen to take their mother, Clydippe, to see a statue of Hera. Everyone admires their filial piety, but the brothers die at the journey's end. Callisto is a girl whom Zeus falls in love with and impregnates. After Callisto has a son, the jealous Hera turns her into a bear, hoping her son will hunt and kill her, but Zeus rescues Callisto and places her among the stars. Her son, Arcas, later becomes the Lesser Bear constellation. Hera, still angry at Callisto, keeps the bear constellations from descending into the sea like the other stars.

The Bear constellations, which we know as the Big Dipper and Little Dipper, have their source in these lesser-known myths. This is a rare example of a tragic hunting fate being averted. Hera and Zeus each fulfil their usual roles in the story. This story gives an early explanation for why these two constellations never sink below the horizon.

Chiron is one of the Centaurs, but unlike the rest of his violent race he is wise and good. He trains many young heroes in his life, but Hercules accidentally kills him. Clytie is a maiden who falls in love with the Sun-god. She sits outside, watching the Sun all day, and then is changed into a sunflower. Dryope is a woman who accidentally picks flowers from a nymph disguised as a tree. Dryope is punished by being transformed into a tree herself.

Chiron appears in the stories of Aesculapius, Hercules, and Prometheus, among others. Clytie's story is a simple flower-myth that uniquely does not end tragically. Dryope, like Actaeon, is punished for an accidental sin against a goddess.

Epimenides is a man who sleeps for fifty-seven years, and later, unrelatedly, purifies Athens of a plague. Ericthonius is a half-man, half-serpent ruler of Athens who might be the same character as Erechtheus. Leander the youth and Hero the priestess are in love, and every night Leander swims across the bay between them. One night Leander drowns, and Hero kills herself.

Many of these myths have not survived in their specifics, but rather as archetypes, like Epimenides as a "Rip Van Winkle" type, or Hero and Leander as the traditional tragic, star-crossed lovers.

The Hyades are six daughters of Atlas. They take care of the baby Dionysus, and so Zeus rewards them by changing them into stars. Ibycus is a poet who is murdered and calls out to a passing flock of cranes to avenge him. Later the murderer reveals himself when the cranes appear again, and he is put to death.

Sometimes being transformed into an inanimate object is a punishment, but for the Hyades it is a reward. Ibycus is another poet rewarded for his holy art by gaining the support of the natural world.

Leto is one of Zeus's lovers. When she is pregnant she seeks a place to give birth, but no island will take her because they are all afraid of Hera. Only Delos, a tiny, floating island, accepts her, and she gives birth to Artemis and Apollo there. Delos then becomes the home of Apollo's temple. Linus is one of Apollo's sons. He is torn apart by dogs, and his name then becomes an expression similar to "alas!"

Leto's story is short and included in the less-important myths, though she is the mother of two of the most important gods: Artemis and Apollo. Delos also becomes Delphi, which features so prominently in many myths as the home of the Oracle.

Marpessa loves Ida, an Argonaut, but Apollo falls in love with her as well. Zeus lets her choose between them, and Marpessa chooses Ida, but she is not punished. Marsyas is a satyr who first plays the flute after Athena invents it and discards it. Melampus is a man who has two snakes as pets, and they teach him to understand the languages of all animals.

Marpessa's story is unique because she is beloved by a god without her life ending in either tragedy or glory. Beauty and skill in art is often tied to a close connection with the natural world, as with Orpheus or Arion.

Merope is a woman whose son helps her kill her second husband. The Myrmidons are a race of fierce warriors that Zeus creates from ants after Hera kills the people of the island of Aegina. Nisus is a king who has a magical purple lock of hair that protects his throne. His daughter Scylla falls in love with the invading King Minos, so she cuts off her father's lock to win Minos's love. Minos rejects her, and later both she and her father are turned into birds.

The Myrmidons were Achilles' men in the Trojan War, and now Hamilton explains their strange origin. Scylla becomes another princess to betray her father out of love for a stranger, and like most of the other women she is then rejected by the man she gave up everything for.

Orion is a famous hunter who is blinded, recovers his sight, and then becomes Artemis's huntsman. Artemis later kills him for unknown reasons, but he then becomes a constellation. The Pleiades are seven daughters of Atlas. Orion pursued them but could never catch them, and Zeus turns them into stars. One of them is the mother of Hermes, and another the mother of the first Trojan. Rhoecus is a man who saves a dryad and then ignores her grateful love, so she blinds him.

Orion is one of the most familiar names from these stories because of his constellation, and the same is true of the Pleiades. Rhoecus becomes yet another mortal punished for both rejecting love and wounding the pride of a god.

Salmoneus is a mortal who pretends he is Zeus, until the real Zeus kills him with a thunderbolt. Sisyphus is the king of Corinth. When Zeus (in the form of an eagle) carries off a maiden, Sisyphus sees and tells the girl's father. This enrages Zeus, and he punishes Sisyphus in Hades by making him eternally try to roll a rock uphill. Tyro is Salmoneus's daughter, and she bears two sons to Poseidon. Later they avenge her when she is treated cruelly.

Sisyphus is most famous for his horrible punishment, which the existentialist philosopher Sartre later used to illustrate his concept of the absurd. Salmoneus is possibly the most obvious example of hubris and its immediate punishment. Tyro's story is yet another tale of sons avenging their mother.

PART 7, INTRODUCTION TO NORSE MYTHOLOGY

Hamilton briefly covers Norse mythology, which is very different from that of the Greeks and Romans. Everything is bleaker and more solemn, and the Norse gods live with the threat of their own inevitable doom. The gods live in Asgard, a different plane from the earth, but gods, mortals, and even the blessed dead of Valhalla all wait for the Ragnarok, the final day of destruction when the good gods and mortals will die, the universe will be destroyed, and the forces of evil will be victorious.

This section on Norse mythology broadens the perspective of the book, but Hamilton's reason for including it again seems outdated. She implies that as (white, Eurocentric) Westerners Norse mythology is also part of the reader's heritage, so she feels obligated to include it. This seems archaic and racially prejudiced, but her perspective on the myths themselves is still very interesting.

Because of this pessimistic, fatalistic worldview, the Norse heroes (and the gods themselves) seem much bolder and braver than the Greek heroes – the Norse heroes cannot escape their inevitable defeat, so their only choice is whether or not to die heroically fighting. Heroism and fighting to the death for a doomed cause are the highest of ideals, the only light in the dark future.

Norse mythology is much more solemn in its worldview than the mythology of the Greeks or Romans. The idea of Ragnarok – the day of the inevitable death of the gods – is unique, and gives even more weight to their concept of heroism. It is similar to the heroism of Hector and Achilles, where they know they are doomed to die, but they keep fighting.

Hamilton compares this worldview to that of the early Christians, but the Christians at least had heaven to look forward to, while the Norsemen did not. But she says that until Christian missionaries came to Scandinavia, heroism was apparently enough inspiration for the Norsemen to live for.

Again Hamilton holds up Christianity as the natural peak of civilization and religion, but it does indeed seem strangely bleak that the Norsemen's only religious hope was in the concept of a heroic death.

Very little has survived of old Norse mythology, as most of it was destroyed by early Christian priests. The two most important texts come from Iceland. The *Elder Edda* was written around 1300 A.D., but its stories are all pre-Christian and very old, and the less-important *Younger Edda* was written by Snorri Sturluson at the end of the twelfth century A.D.

There are far fewer sources for Norse mythology than among the Greeks and Romans, and no epics or plays as famous as Homer, Virgil, or Sophocles. The texts come from Iceland, where the idea of Ragnarok and the bleakness of existence may have come from the long, harsh winters and frequent volcanoes.

Hamilton laments the lack of a Norse Homer, as Norse mythology is full of material for a great epic, but there was no "man of genius" to consolidate and make it into a beautiful, lasting story. The *Elder Edda* is written in a stark, often awkward way, but all its stories are tragic, and many of them are more powerful than those told by the Greek poets.

Hamilton rightly points out that Norse mythology has material of immense power and tragedy, but because of a lack of a unifying work or an accessible epic poem it is much less well-known globally than Greek and Roman mythology. History might have been different if this was had turned out otherwise.

PART 7, CHAPTER 1

Hamilton feels that these stories best encapsulate the Norse character and worldview, and Sigurd is the most famous Norse hero. Hamilton takes the stories from the *Elder Edda* and the *Volsungasaga*. Signy is the daughter of Volsung and the brother of Sigmund. She marries a man who kills her father, kidnaps her brothers, and feeds them to wolves one by one. She is only able to save her brother Sigmund, and together they vow to kill Signy's husband.

Hamilton will later compare the story of Signy to that of Clytemnestra, but she finds Signy's story even more powerful, if it only had been told well enough originally. This becomes another complex situation of vengeance and dooming one's self to enact the justice of the gods.

Signy decides that Sigmund should have a helper in his vengeance, so she disguises herself and spends three nights with him, later giving birth to a son named Sinfiotli. Sinfiotli lives with Sigmund until he is grown, and all the while Signy lives with her evil husband, still bearing him children and keeping her hatred secret.

Signy basically sacrifices her own soul – willingly bearing her brother a son, and bearing sons to the man she hates – in order to enact her vengeance. These myths are never frivolous, but always bleak, violent, and powerful.

When Sinfiotli grows up, he and Sigmund surprise Signy's husband, kill his children, lock him in his house and set it on fire. Signy thanks her brother and son and then walks into the burning house, killing herself along with her husband and children. Hamilton laments how Signy's story is more powerful than Clytemnestra's, but there was no "Norse Aeschylus" to write about her.

Like Clytemnestra, Signy feels no guilt for the murder of her husband, but unlike Clytemnestra she also accepts that she herself is damned, and willingly punishes herself like the great heroes of the Greek epics. Her devotion to vengeance and heroism cares nothing for her own death.

Brynhild is a Valkyrie, a warrior woman. She disobeys Odin (ruler of the gods) so he punishes her by putting her to sleep until a man wakes her. Brynhild only wants to be wakened by a brave man, so Odin surrounds her couch with flames. Sigurd, the son of Sigmund, braves the flames for her and they fall in love. Sigurd then leaves her in the flames to visit his friend King Gunnar, though he vows to return.

Even though Brynhild is being punished, she still only wants to be saved by a hero – no other man is worth waking up for. Sigurd is the most famous Norse hero, and became "Sigfried" in the mythology of ancient Germany, as well as the operas of Wagner. Sigurd is the ultimate hero – doomed to tragedy, but fearing nothing.

Griemhild, Gunnar's mother, wants Sigurd to marry her daughter Gudrun, so she gives Sigurd a magic potion to make him forget Brynhild. Gunnar then decides that he wants to marry Brynhild, but he is not brave enough to pass through the flames and get her. Instead Sigurd disguises himself as Gunnar, rides through the flames again, and wins Brynhild for his friend. Sigurd spends three nights with Brynhild sleeping with a sword between them.

Sigurd shows what the Norsemen valued in their heroes (other than dying tragic deaths) – he is willing sacrifice everything for his less-courageous friend, he can be defeated only by trickery and magic, and he is totally honest even in the face of temptation.

Brynhild then marries Gunnar, as she thinks Sigurd has abandoned her. When she learns that it was not really Gunnar who rode through the flames, she plots vengeance against both men. She convinces Gunnar that Sigurd lied when he said he slept chastely with her. Gunnar, enraged but unable to kill Sigurd because of their bond of brotherhood, convinces his younger brother to kill Sigurd in his sleep.

Like the many Greek kings afraid to kill their guests because of the law of hospitality, Gunnar must avoid breaking the law of brotherhood. As Signy did, Brynhild feels obligated to avenge the wrongs done against her, but in the process she knows she too is doomed.

Brynhild then confesses that she lied about Sigurd, and she kills herself, asking to burned on the same funeral pyre as Sigurd. Gudrun sits silently beside Sigurd's body, unable to speak. Hamilton says that most of the Norse stories are like this – no one can escape suffering and grief, so the only solution is to suffer with courage.

Brynhild kills herself just as Signy did, having accomplished her vengeance. Hamilton uses this story as a prime example of Norse myth, and draws her conclusions without giving other examples. Most of the myths end tragically like this, with no hope for redemption.

PART 7, CHAPTER 2

The Greek gods could not be heroic, as they were all immortal, invincible, and always assured of victory. It is the opposite with the Norse gods. The Aesir (the gods) know that in the end they will be defeated by the Giants, their evil enemies, at Ragnarok.

Hamilton reiterates the significance of Ragnarok and how important heroism was to the Norsemen. In the bleak, doomed universe of their myths it was all they had.

Odin, like Zeus, is the chief of the gods and the lord of the sky, but otherwise the two are almost opposite. Odin rules from his palace, Gladsheim, in Asgard, but even when he feasts there he never eats, instead giving his food to two wolves at his feet. He has two ravens, Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory), who constantly bring him news from the world. Odin ponders silently while the other gods feast.

Odin is a strange, somber god who fits with the character of the Norse myths. As the chief of the gods, Ragnarok mostly concerns him, and he seeks wisdom even at the price of suffering. This is a stark contrast to Zeus, who spends his time feasting and cheating on his wife.

Odin constantly seeks more wisdom, and even gave up one of his eyes to drink from the Well of Wisdom. To gain knowledge of the Runes (inscriptions of power), he hung himself from a tree for nine days – a mysterious offering to himself – and then passed his knowledge on to mortals. He risked his life again to obtain the skaldic mead for men, a liquor that makes its drinker a poet.

In the story of the Runes Odin becomes a Christlike figure, sacrificing himself to himself for humanity's sake. Like the Greeks, the Norsemen also greatly valued poetry and artistic beauty, as they had Odin risk his life to obtain the gift of poetry.

Odin is attended by maidens called Valkyries, who decide at his bidding who should survive and who should perish on the battlefield. They then bring fallen heroes to Valhalla, the heavenly hall. Wednesday is Odin's (Woden) day.

The days of the week are the most common legacy of these Norse myths. Valhalla is the home of the heroes and the hope of mortals, but even that hall is doomed to be destroyed at Ragnarok.

Balder is the most beloved god. He dreams that he is fated to die, and Odin learns from Hela, Goddess of the Dead, that Balder's death is inevitable. Balder's mother Frigga still tries to keep him safe by making every living and inanimate object on earth swear to never harm him. They all agree, but Frigga forgets to ask the mistletoe plant.

The Norsemen were intrigued and troubled by the idea of unavoidable fate, as Ragnarok shows, but Balder's death is also an example of a character trying his best to avoid fate, and by his actions sealing that same fate. The mistletoe also becomes a symbol of the small, fatal flaw.

The gods then make a game out of Balder's invincibility, throwing things at him as nothing will hurt him. Loki, the son of a Giant, is a trickster and often a villain. He learns about the mistletoe and convinces Hoder, Balder's blind brother, to throw a twig of mistletoe at Balder. Loki guides it to Balder's heart and kills him.

This story is less ironic than those of Oedipus and Orestes, as Loki is an active villain who takes advantage of Balder's fate, rather than circumstance itself causing the crime. It is still notable that one of the major Norse gods dies though.

Frigga still doesn't give up hope, and she asks Hela to return Balder to life. Hela agrees to release him from death if it can be proved that every living thing mourns for his passing. Everything does indeed mourn Balder, as he was so beloved, except for one Giantess, who dislikes him. Because of her refusal to mourn, Balder stays dead.

The story continues in a similar vein, as Frigga still tries to avert fate, and it still only takes one tiny mistake – among everything in the universe – for the inevitable to come to pass.

As punishment for this Loki is chained up inside a deep cave, and a serpent is placed above him so that it drips burning venom onto his face. Loki's wife, Sigyn, helps him by catching the poison in a cup, but whenever she has to empty the cup Loki's agony is so great that he causes earthquakes.

The Norsemen had their own horrible, eternal punishments just like the Greeks. This also becomes an explanation myth for the earthquakes that accompany the volcanic activity of Iceland.

There are three other important Norse gods: Thor is the strongest of the Aesir, and the God of Thunder, Heimdall guards the Bifröst, the rainbow bridge to Asgard, and Tyr is the God of War. No goddesses are as important as they are in Greek mythology. The two notable ones are Frigga, Odin's wife, and Freya, the Goddess of Love and Beauty who also claims half of those slain in battle. The only land ruled by a goddess is the Kingdom of Death, where Hela is supreme.

While the Norse mythology is as rich and complex as that of the Greeks, Hamilton only gives the deities a cursory glance here. The important goddesses are notably different, as the Aphrodite-figure is also associated with death in battle, and the only other important goddess rules the dead. Nothing is safe from sorrow and the tragedy of life.

The Creation. In the Norse creation story, the universe begins as a huge chasm bordered in the north by Niflheim, the cold land of death, and in the south by Muspelheim, the land of fire. Rivers of ice and fire from the two realms combine in the chasm, and from the mist are formed frost maidens and Ymir, the first Giant and Odin's grandfather.

The Greeks began with chaos, darkness, and death, and the Norse universe similarly begins with emptiness, death, and fire. But there is no golden-winged Love suddenly appearing in the Norse creation story.

Odin and his two brothers kill Ymir and make the sea from his blood, the earth from his body, and the heavens from his skull. Sparks from Muspelheim become the sun, moon, and stars. The walled-in world where mortals live is called Midgard, and here the first man and woman are created from trees. Dwarfs and Elves also live in Midgard – Dwarfs are ugly craftsmen who live underground, and Elves are lovely creatures who tend flowers and rivers.

Like Cronus, Ymir is also overthrown by his descendant Odin. The Dwarfs and Elves correspond to nymphs and other supernatural creatures of the earth. While the Greeks created mortals from metals, the Norsemen show them created from trees.

The magical ash tree Yggdrasil holds up the universe. One of its roots goes up to Asgard, and beside it is the holy Urda's Well, which is guarded by the three Norns. These are Urda (the Past), Verdandi (the Present), and Skuld (the Future), and like the Greek Fates they allot destinies to mortals. A serpent gnaws constantly at Yggdrasil's roots, and when it kills the tree the universe will come falling down.

The Norns are basically the Norse version of the three Fates of Greek mythology. The serpent gnawing at Yggdrasil is also a symbol of fate, as it is inevitable that it will bring down the tree eventually, and then everything will be destroyed.

The Frost Giants and the Mountain Giants of Jötunheim are the brutal powers of the earth, and the enemies of good. In the final contest they will be victorious over the powers of heaven, and all the gods will die. This hopelessness seems contrary to the human spirit, but the only hope the Norsemen (with their icy land and bleak winters) allow themselves is a legend that after the Ragnarok, a new universe will be created, ruled over by a single, all-powerful god who will vanquish evil.

This post-Ragnarok vision is similar to Hamilton's theory about Zeus – that he evolved into a more virtuous, powerful, and universal God. The tragedy inherent in the Norse universe is not just that the gods must all die as tragic heroes, but that it is evil and brute force that is victorious – just as the early humans were often defeated by the terrible winters of Scandinavia.

The Norse Wisdom. In odd contrast to the solemn heroism of its mythology, the *Elder Edda* also contains many proverbs and sayings about common sense. There is even a touch of humor in them, and the proverbs touch on all parts of human nature with wit and wisdom. Hamilton emphasizes how this sense of everyday wisdom combines with the terrible bravery of the Norsemen. She finishes by saying that Norse mythology, just like Greek mythology, had a profound influence on Western and American culture.

While the myths have no place for lightheartedness, the Norsemen were still human, and so had to live with common sense instead of a constant code of tragic heroism. The myths were for battle and philosophical ponderings, but these wisdom sayings were more useful for daily life.

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