An Overview of Classical Greek Myth

• The First Six Olympian Deities
• The Second Eight Olympian Deities
• Lesser Deities
• The Chronology of Myth
The Principal Olympian Deities
The First Six

- Zeus
- Hera
- Poseidon
- Hestia
- Hades
- Demeter
The Principal Olympian Deities
The First Six

Zeus

• Zeus’ father is the Titan Cronus
• Zeus usurps the throne of heaven from Cronus
• Zeus becomes the “tyrant” of Olympus
The Principal Olympian Deities
The First Six

Zeus

• his name translates as “day(-father)"
• he is not omniscient or omnipotent, e.g. he cannot control the Fates
• his attributes are the lightning bolt, the eagle, a shield called the aegis (“protection”)
The Principal Olympian Deities
The First Six

Hera

- Hera became Zeus’ wife after a long courtship in which she resisted his advances
- finally he tricked her in marrying him by turning into a pitiful sparrow
- their marriage is rocky, to say the least
The Principal Olympian Deities
The First Six

Hera

- Hera is a suspicious wife, especially vengeful against Zeus’ extramarital consorts (e.g. Io) and their offspring (e.g. Heracles)
- Zeus and Hera have only a few children together: Ares, Hebe, Hephaestus
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The First Six

Poseidon

- the god of the sea
- the father of many lesser sea deities, e.g. Oceanids (sea-nymphs)
- also the father of several mortals, e.g. Theseus
The Principal Olympian Deities
The First Six

Poseidon

- he carries a trident with which he stirs up tidal waves and causes earthquakes
- his name means “the consort of Da”
- Da means “earth” in archaic Greek
- evidence of an early matriarchal religion?
Hestia

- the least important of the six principal Olympians
- the goddess of hearth
- she stays at home on Olympus and is involved in very few myths
The Principal Olympian Deities
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Hades

• the god of the dead, the collector and keeper of souls
• he is not a god of death like the Grim Reaper
• he is not a demon like the Devil
The Principal Olympian Deities
The First Six

Hades

- he does not appear in many myths because he is too potent a force
- his most important myth: the Rape of Persephone (daughter of Demeter) which explains why there are seasons
The Principal Olympian Deities
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Hades

• Hades is a dark and gloomy place
• in one part of Hades is Tartarus, much like the Christian Hell (i.e. a place of punishment)
• Hades’ name means the “Unseen One”
• he is also called Pluto (“Rich”)
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Demeter

• the goddess of agriculture
• her name means “earth-mother,” not a traditional Indo-European deity
• it is possible she was originally a Pelasgian goddess adopted by the invading Indo-European Greeks
Demeter

- many primitive myths are associated with Demeter
- the most important rites of Demeter in antiquity are the **Eleusinian Mysteries**
- highly influential but a “mystery cult” with secret rites, thus unattested in histories
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

- Aphrodite
- Hephaestus
- Ares
- Athena
- Apollo
- Artemis
- Hermes
- Dionysus
The Principal Olympian Deities

The Second Eight

Aphroditē

• goddess of beauty and sexual love
• her name means “born (-dite) from foam” (aphro-)
• i.e., the foam around Uranus’ disembodied testicles after his son Cronus (Zeus’ father) castrates him
Aphrodite

- she is wed to the blacksmith god Hephaestus
- but she cheats on him often
- even has affairs with mortal men, e.g. Anchises with whom she has a son Aeneas
Aphrodite

- originally imported into Greece from the Near East, cf. Ishtar
- though she is a goddess, Greek authors often treat her with contempt, as a comic figure
- an exception is Euripides in *Hippolytus*
Hephaestus

- the god of the fire and the forge
- son of Zeus and Hera, one of his few legitimate offspring
- at birth, he was so ugly that his mother Hera flung him off Mount Olympus
- because of the fall, he became lame
Hephaestus

- associated with volcanos
- the creator of several (metallic) inventions, e.g. golden robots, the Shield of Achilles (*Iliad*, Book 18)
- in *Odyssey* (Book 8): Hephaestus catches Aphrodite and Ares in bed together
Ares

• the god of war
• unpleasant and unpopular figure in Greek myth, because the ancient Greeks generally disliked war
• Ares is not successful in war, defeated by Athena, Heracles, Diomedes (Iliad 5)
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Athena

• a war deity more popular with the ancient Greeks than Ares
• virginal protectress of civilization
• born from Zeus’ head
• goddess of Athens, wisdom, arts & crafts
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Athena

• credited with several cunning inventions:
  the Trojan Horse
  the double flute
  the Argo
  Pegasus’ bridle
  the mirror shield Perseus uses to kill
  the Medusa
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Athena

- Athena’s principal attributes are the owl and the helmet and spear
- her childhood friend was a girl named Pallas but Pallas died young
- Athena adds Pallas’ name to her own, creating the double name Pallas Athena
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Apollo

• Zeus is his father; Leto is his mother
• because of Hera’s jealousy, Leto was forced to bear twins (Artemis and Apollo) on the island of Delos
• the god of many things: the sun, wisdom, prophesy, music, flocks, wolves, mice, entrances, plagues, medicine
Apollo

- the center of Apollo worship is Delphi (northern Greece)
- the Delphic oracle is famous for misleading oracles, e.g. Croesus
- hence, another of Apollo’s names: Loxias (“slanting”)
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Apollo

- Apollo has many love affairs with nymphs, mortal women and young men
- in spite of that and his being the god of many things, a central tenet of Apollo worship is “Nothing in excess”
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Artemis

• Apollo’s twin sister (and his antithesis): moon (sun), darkness (light), chastity (sexuality), black magic (wisdom), death (medicine)
• primarily, the goddess of hunting
• her major attribute is the bow and arrow
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Artemis

• not many myths involve her (too cold and remote!)
• Euripides’ *Hippolytus* is a major exception
• what myths exist are typically violent, e.g. Actaeon and Niobe
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Hermes

- the messenger of the gods
- Zeus’ illegitimate son
- sometimes denounced as his father’s “lackey” (groveling servant who does his master’s dirty work)
Hermes

- in general, the god of lower-class working people: merchants, athletes, gamblers, thieves
- comical birth story: baby Hermes invents cattle rustling and the lyre
Hermes

• his principal attributes are the traveler’s hat and the caduceus (staff with snakes around it)

• also serves as psychopompus ("soul-guide"), the god who escorts the souls of the newly dead to the Underworld
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Dionysus

• yet another illegitimate son of Zeus
• his mother is a mortal woman
• the youngest of the Olympian gods, and the latest to join the Greek pantheon
• his cult was imported from the East (Asia Minor)
Dionysus

- his birth story is an important part of his mythology
- his Greek mother dies before he is born
- he is born a second time from Zeus’ thigh
- as a child, he is raised in the East
The Principal Olympian Deities
The Second Eight

Dionysus

• brings Eastern things and ideas to Greece, e.g. cymbals, ecstatic worship
• in Greek art, he is depicted as an Easterner: long robes and hair, young and beautiful, effeminate
• but he is not weak!
• central rite in his worship is *sparagmos*
The Principal Olympian Deities
Lesser Deities

• Muses
• Fates
• Furies/Erinys
• Pan
• Nymphs
The Principal Olympian Deities
Lesser Deities

Muses

- the personifications of poetic and scientific inspiration
- their name means “the reminders”
- they were considered necessary to oral poets who recited verse from memory
- among later poets, invoking the Muses is just a convention
The Principal Olympian Deities
Lesser Deities

Fates

• depicted as three old women spinning thread:
  
  Clotho ("I spin")
  Lachesis ("allotment")
  Atropos ("inflexible")

• a metaphor for birth, destiny, death
• implacable deities
The Principal Olympian Deities
Lesser Deities

Furies/Erinyes

- torch-bearing female earth-demons
- depicted with blood dripping from their eyes and snakes instead of hair
- their principal function is to avenge murder, especially the murder of a parent by a child
The Principal Olympian Deities
Lesser Deities

Furies/Erinyes

• originally, part of a cult based on ghost worship?

• the Furies serve as the chorus in Aeschylus’ Eumenides
The Principal Olympian Deities
Lesser Deities

Pan

- a woodland god
- depicted with goat’s ears, horns, legs
- born in Arcadia (central southern Greece)
- causes terror during battle, hence “panic”
The Principal Olympian Deities
Lesser Deities

Nymphs

- a catch-all category of minor female divinities
- usually associated with ecological niches: trees, springs, rivers, seas
The Principal Olympian Deities
Lesser Deities

Nymphs

• often attend a more important deity, e.g. Artemis
• their name means “bride”
• in myth they are often the victims of sexually predatory male deities, e.g. Zeus, Pan
• e.g. Apollo and Daphne
The Chronology of Myth

- Creation and the Age of Chthonic Gods
- Age of Heroes and the Founding of Cities
- The Trojan War
- The *Nostoi* ("Returns")
The Chronology of Myth

• Creation and the Age of Chthonic Gods
  • monstrous early gods
  • chthonic means “subterranean”
  • chthonic myths tend to revolve around violent and perverse acts, e.g. incest, bestiality, castration
The Chronology of Myth

• Age of Heroes and the Founding of Cities
  • Heracles (Thebes): kills many chthonic beasts, e.g. the Hydra, the Nemean Lion
  • Theseus (Athens): kills the Minotaur in Crete
  • Perseus (Argos): kills the Medusa
  • Jason (Corinth): leads the Argonauts and recovers the golden fleece
The Chronology of Myth

- The Trojan War
  - **Oedipus** (Thebes): lives early in the “post-heroic” period
  - **Helen/Menelaus** (Sparta): the break-up of their marriage precipitates the Trojan War
The Chronology of Myth

• The *Nostoi* ("Return Journeys”)
  • **Odysseus**: returns to Ithaca after twenty years abroad (ten years of war at Troy and ten years of wandering)
  • **Clytemnestra** and **Agamemnon**: Agamemnon’s wife kills him when he returns home from the Trojan War
  • **Orestes**: Clytemnestra’s son kills his mother to avenge his father’s murder