



The Gods and Heroes of Ancient Greece

by Michael Siebler

The most celebrated Greek and Roman myths are still very much with us. We encounter the epic plots and their protagonists everywhere, often without being aware of this – in spoken language, our everyday lives, and the cultures that have formed us.

Take the Trojan Horse, whose ominous function designates malware on computers, or the travails of Odysseus, whose name has become synonymous with protracted wanderings marked by considerable upheavals. Then there is the Achilles heel: a crucial physical weakness or fatal character flaw. A “herculean task” can only be accomplished by hard physical or mental labor. The “Oedipus complex” is a term Sigmund Freud introduced to psychoanalysis. The very constellations of the night sky such as Cassiopeia and Perseus, and the 1968 Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey* keep the names of ancient mythological characters and events alive.

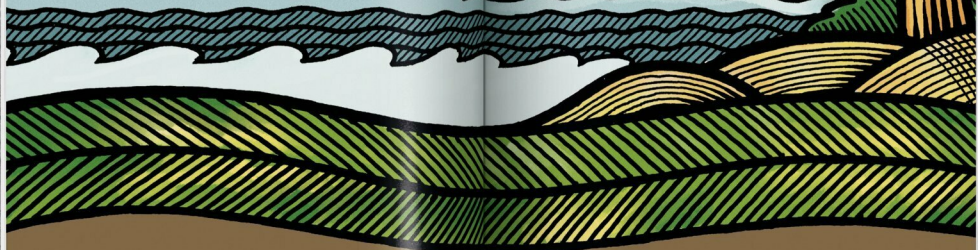
What is so special about these tales from long ago? Why do they still give wings to the creative imaginations of writers, artists, composers, stage and film directors, cartoonists, and the inventors of computer games? What continues to drive interest in them in an era dominated by rationality and technology, with no place for fairy tales and myths? There’s a simple answer to that: The classical myths deal with nothing less than all that being human implies – human existence, society, and culture – usually projected onto the gods, who, as we are well aware, knew all there was to know about human affairs.

These myths provide us with the entire panoply of human feelings and characteristics, all facets of the human condition: all variants of conflict resolution,



THE MYTHS

by Gustav Schwab



He began by constructing a gigantic shield, whose five layers made it remarkably strong, with a silver strap and a sparkling triple rim.

occurred to me as I attempted to comfort the old hero Menoetius at his palace. I promised I would bring his son back home to Opus, rich in fame and plunder after the destruction of Troy! Now both of us are destined to color the same alien earth with the red of our blood. It seems that I too shall never return to the palace of my gray-haired father Peleus and my mother Thetis, but shall lie beneath Trojan soil. But since I am destined to sink into the ground before you, I shall not hold your funeral until I have brought you the weapons and the head of Hector, your murderer. I shall also offer up twelve of Troy's most noble sons at your funeral pyre. Until this has come to pass, rest here by my ships, beloved friend!" Then Achilles

WHEN HE FINISHED THE SHIELD, HEPHAESTUS FORGED A CUIRASS THAT GLOWED BRIGHTER THAN A BLAZING FIRE.

ordered a great cauldron of water to be placed on the fire and washed and anointed the body of the fallen hero. He was then laid on a bier spread with fine linen from head to foot and finally covered with a glistening white robe.

Thetis, meanwhile, had arrived at the beautiful palace, built to last for all eternity and shining like stars, which the lame blacksmith, Hephaestus had constructed for himself from bronze. She found the god working hard and sweating at the bellows. He had completed twenty tripods. At the base of each he had attached golden wheels which, without the touch of a human hand, could be made to roll into the great hall of Mount Olympus. After this he went straight back to his workshop. The technical marvels here were wonderful to behold, complete but for the handles, which he was in the process of adding, hammering them into their appropriate place. His comely wife, Charis, one of the Graces, took Thetis by the hand and led her to a silver chair, placed a footstool at her feet, then went to fetch her husband. On seeing the goddess of the sea, Hephaestus called out jubilantly, "How happy it makes me to welcome the noblest of the immortals to my house, for it was she who saved me, a newborn, from destruction. Because I was

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ODYSSEUS

THE REALM OF SHADES



The voyage continues:

Odysseus meets the soul of Tiresias, the blind soothsayer, who prophesies his return home and the rest of his life. Odysseus also meets the shades of others, including his mother, Agamemnon, Achilles, and Patroclus. Achilles laments to him that he would rather be a beggar on earth than king of the underworld.

Illustrations by Newell Convers Wyeth and John Flaxman

