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# **Bulfinch's Mythology: the Age of Fable**

Thomas Bulfinch

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# **BULFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY THE AGE OF FABLE**

Revised by Rev. E. E. Hale



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Stories of Gods and Heroes.



# Chapter I

## Introduction

The literature of our time, as of all the centuries of Christendom, is full of allusions to the gods and goddesses of the Greeks and Romans. Occasionally, and, in modern days, more often, it contains allusions to the worship and the superstitions of the northern nations of Europe. The object of this book is to teach readers who are not yet familiar with the writers of Greece and Rome, or the ballads or legends of the Scandinavians, enough of the stories which form what is called their mythology, to make those allusions intelligible which one meets every day, even in the authors of our own time.

The Greeks and Romans both belong to the same race or stock. It is generally known in our time as the Aryan family of mankind; and so far as we know its history, the Greeks and Romans descended from the tribes which emigrated from the high table-lands of Northern India. Other tribes emigrated in different directions from the same centre, so that traces of the Aryan language are found in the islands of the Pacific ocean.

The people of this race, who moved westward, seem to have had a special fondness for open air nature, and a willingness to personify the powers of nature. They were glad to live in the open air, and they specially encouraged the virtues which an open-air people prize. Thus no Roman was thought manly who could not swim, and every Greek exercised in the athletic sports of the palaestra.

The Romans and Grecian and German divisions of this great race are those with which we have most to do in history and in literature. Our own English language is made up of the dialects of different tribes, many of whom agreed in their use of words which they had derived from our Aryan ancestry. Thus our substantive verb I AM appears in the original Sanscrit of the Aryans as ESMI, and m for ME (MOI), or the first person singular, is found in all the verbal inflections. The Greek form of the same verb was ESMI, which became ASMI, and in Latin the first and last vowels have disappeared,

the verb is SUM. Similar relationships are traced in the numerals, and throughout all the languages of these nations.

The Romans, like the Etruscans who came before them, were neither poetical nor imaginative in temperament. Their activity ran in practical directions. They therefore invented few, if any stories, of the gods whom they worshipped with fixed rites. Mr. Macaulay speaks of these gods as "the sober abstractions of the Roman pantheon." We owe most of the stories of the ancient mythology to the wit and fancy of the Greeks, more playful and imaginative, who seized from Egypt and from the East such legends as pleased them, and adapted them in their own way. It often happens that such stories, resembling each other in their foundation, are found in the Greek and Roman authors in several different forms.

To understand these stories, we will here first acquaint ourselves with the ideas of the structure of the universe, which the poets and others held, and which will form the scenery, so to speak, of the narratives.

The Greek poets believed the earth to be flat and circular, their own country occupying the middle of it, the central point being either Mount Olympus, the abode of the gods, or Delphi, so famous for its oracle.

The circular disk of the earth was crossed from west to east, and divided into two equal parts by the SEA, as they called the Mediterranean, and its continuation the Euxine.

Around the earth flowed the RIVER OCEAN, its course being from south to north on the western side of the earth, and in a contrary direction on the eastern side. It flowed in a steady, equable current, unvexed by storm or tempest. The sea, and all the rivers on earth, received their waters from it.

The northern portion of the earth was supposed to be inhabited by a happy race named the Hyperboreans [this word means "who live beyond the north" from the word "hyper," beyond, and boreas, the north wind], dwelling in everlasting bliss and spring beyond the lofty mountains whose caverns were supposed to send forth the piercing blasts of the north wind, which chilled the people of Hellas (Greece). Their country was inaccessible by land or sea. They lived

exempt from disease or old age, from toils and warfare. Moore has given us the "Song of a Hyperborean," beginning

"I come from a land in the sun-bright deep,  
Where golden gardens glow,  
Where the winds of the north, becalmed in sleep,  
Their conch-shells never blow."

On the south side of the earth, close to the stream of Ocean, dwelt a people happy and virtuous as the Hyperboreans. They were named the AEthiopians. The gods favored them so highly that they were wont to leave at times their Olympian abodes, and go to share their sacrifices and banquets.

On the western margin of the earth, by the stream of Ocean, lay a happy place named the Elysian Plain, whither mortals favored by the gods were transported without tasting of death, to enjoy an immortality of bliss. This happy region was also called the "fortunate fields," and the "Isles of the Blessed."

We thus see that the Greeks of the early ages knew little of any real people except those to the east and south of their own country, or near the coast of the Mediterranean. Their imagination meantime peopled the western portion of this sea with giants, monsters, and enchantresses; while they placed around the disk of the earth, which they probably regarded as of no great width, nations enjoying the peculiar favor of the gods, and blessed with happiness and longevity.

The Dawn, the Sun, and the Moon were supposed to rise out of the Ocean, on the western side, and to drive through the air, giving light to gods and men. The stars also, except those forming Charles' Wain or Bear, and others near them, rose out of and sank into the stream of Ocean. There the sun-god embarked in a winged boat, which conveyed him round by the northern part of the earth, back to his place of rising in the east. Milton alludes to this in his "Commmus."

"Now the gilded car of day  
His golden axle doth allay  
In the steep Atlantic stream,

And the slope sun his upward beam  
Shoots against the dusky pole,  
Pacing towards the other goal  
Of his chamber in the east."

The abode of the gods was on the summit of Mount Olympus, in Thessaly. A gate of clouds, kept by the goddesses named the Seasons, opened to permit the passage of the Celestials to earth, and to receive them on their return. The gods had their separate dwellings; but all, when summoned, repaired to the palace of Jupiter [Or Zeus. The relation of these names to each other will be explained on the next page], as did also those deities whose usual abode was the earth, the waters, or the underworld. It was also in the great hall of the palace of the Olympian king that the gods feasted each day on ambrosia and nectar, their food and drink, the latter being handed round by the lovely goddess Hebe. Here they conversed of the affairs of heaven and earth; and as they quaffed their nectar, Apollo, the god of music, delighted them with the tones of his lyre, to which the muses sang in responsive strains. When the sun was set, the gods retired to sleep in their respective dwellings.

The following lines from the *Odyssey* will show how Homer conceived of Olympus:—

"So saying, Minerva, goddess azure-eyed,  
Rose to Olympus, the reputed seat  
Eternal of the gods, which never storms  
Disturb, rains drench, or snow invades, but calm  
The expanse and cloudless shines with purest day.  
T here the inhabitants divine rejoice  
Forever.:" Cowper

Such were the abodes of the gods as the Greeks conceived them. The Romans, before they knew the Greek poetry, seem to have had no definite imagination of such an assembly of gods. But the Roman and Etruscan races were by no means irreligious. They venerated their departed ancestors, and in each family the worship of these ancestors was an important duty. The images of the ancestors were kept in a sacred place, each family observed, at fixed times, memo-

rial rites in their honor, and for these and other religious observances the family hearth was consecrated. The earliest rites of Roman worship are supposed to be connected with such family devotions.

As the Greeks and Romans became acquainted with other nations, they imported their habits of worship, even in early times. It will be remembered that as late as St. Paul's time, he found an altar at Athens "to an unknown god." Greeks and Romans alike were willing to receive from other nations the legends regarding their gods, and to incorporate them as well as they could with their own. It is thus that in the poetical mythology of those nations, which we are now to study, we frequently find a Latin and a Greek name for one imagined divinity. Thus Zeus, of the Greeks, becomes in Latin with the addition of the word pater (a father) [The reader will observe that father is one of the words derived from an Aryan root. Let p and t become rough, as the grammarians say, let p become ph, and t th, and you have phather or father], Jupiter Kronos of the Greeks appears as "Vulcanus" of the Latins, "Ares" of the Greeks is "Mars" or Mavors of the Latins, "Poseidon" of the Greeks is "Neptunus" of the Latins, "Aphrodite" of the Greeks is "Venus" of the Latins. This variation is not to be confounded with a mere translation, as where "Paulos" of the Greek becomes "Paulus" in Latin, or "Odysseus" becomes "Ulysses," or as when "Pierre" of the French becomes "Peter" in English. What really happened was, that as the Romans, more cultivated than their fathers, found in Greek literature a god of fire and smithery, they transferred his name "Hephaistos" to their own old god "Vulcanus," who had the same duties, and in their after literature the Latin name was used for the stories of Greek and Latin origin.

As the English literature came into being largely on French and Latin models, and as French is but a degraded Latin and retains Latin roots largely, in our older English poets the Latin forms of these names are generally used. In our own generation, with the precision now so much courted, a fashion has come in, of designating Mars by his Greek name of "Ares," Venus by her name of "Aphrodite," and so on. But in this book, as our object is to make familiar the stores of general English literature which refer to such subjects, we shall retain, in general, the Latin names, only calling the atten-

tion of the reader to the Greek names, as they appear in Greek authors, and in many writers of the more recent English schools.

The real monarch of the heavens in the mythology of both Greece and Rome is Jupiter (Zeus-pater, father-Jove) [Jove appears to be a word derived from the same root as Zeus, and it appears in the root dev of the Sanscrit, where devas are gods of different forms. Our English word devil probably comes from the French diable, Italian diavolo, Latin diabolus, one who makes division,- - literally one who separates balls, or throws balls about,— instead of throwing them frankly and truly at the batsman. It is not to be traced to the Sanscrit deva.]

In the mythological system we are tracing Zeus is himself the father of many of the gods, and he is often spoken of as father of gods and men. He is the father of Vulcan [In Greek Hephaistos], of Venus [in Greek Aphrodite], of Minerva [in Greek Pallas Athene, or either name separately], of Apollo [of Phoebus], Diana [in Greek Artemis], and of Mercury [in Greek Hermes], who are ranked among the twelve superior gods, and of many inferior deities. But Jupiter himself is not the original deity in these systems. He is the son of Saturnus, as in the Greek Zeus is the son of Kronos. Still the inevitable question would occur where did Saturnus or Kronos come from. And, in forms and statements more and more vague, the answer was that he was born from Uranus or Ouranos, which is the name of the Heaven over all which seemed to embrace all things. The Greek name of Saturn was spelled Kronos. The Greek name of Time was spelled Chronos. A similarity between the two was imagined. And the whole statement, when reduced to rationalistic language, would be that from Uranus, the infinite, was born Chronos, Time,— that from Time, Zeus or Jupiter was born, and that he is the only child of Time who has complete sway over mortals and immortals.

"The will of Jove I own,  
Who mortals and immortals rules alone."  
Homer, II.xii

Jupiter was son of Saturn (Kronos) [The names included in parentheses are the Greek, the others being the Roman or Latin names]