EXPLORING GREEK MYTHOLOGY

Don Nardo

Printed in the United States

For more information, contact:
ReferencePoint Press, Inc.
PO Box 27779
San Diego, CA 92198
www.ReferencePointPress.com

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Nardo, Don, 1947- author.
Title: Exploring Greek mythology / by Don Nardo.
Description: San Diego, CA : ReferencePoint Press, Inc., [2025] | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023047236 (print) | LCCN 2023047237 (ebook) | ISBN 9781678207809 (library binding) | ISBN 9781678207816 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Mythology, Greek--Juvenile literature.
Classification: LCC BL783 .N3445 2025 (print) | LCC BL783 (ebook) | DDC 292.1/3--dc23/eng/20240125
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023047236
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023047237

CONTENTS


Ancient Greece (Circa 500 BCE)
BLACK SEA
Thrace
Macedonia
Troy
Mt. Olympus
AEGEAN SEA
Thessaly
Persian Empire
Lesbos
Thermopylae
Delphi
Thebes
Chios
Attica
Corinth
Marathon
Olympia
Mycenae
Athens
Ithaca
Argos
Peloponnesus
Delos
Naxos
Megara
Sparta
N
Rhodes
Crete
MEDITERRANEAN SEA

CHAPTER THREE

Villainous Tales

Zeus, leader of the Greek gods, had many love affairs, some with goddesses, others with human women. Out of all these relationships, the one he regretted the most was a romance with a lovely ocean nymph named Plouto. For Zeus, the problem was not Plouto herself; rather, it was the mortal son he had sired by her—Tantalus. The latter was destined to become the human most hated by all the gods for eternity.

The saddest part of Tantalus's story, those deities agreed, was that it could well have ended on a happy rather than horrific note. Indeed, when Plouto's son was a youth, the gods absolutely adored him. They frequently invited him to dine with them in their palaces atop lofty Mount Olympus, and sometimes he threw dinner parties for them at his own, humbler abode in southern Greece.

What Zeus and the other divinities did not realize was that Tantalus's friendly demeanor toward them was only an act. For reasons unknown, he secretly envied and despised his father and the other Olympians. So intense was his hatred for them that eventually all he could think about was finding some way to humiliate them. He knew that killing them was out of the question because they were immortal.

Finally, the young man hit upon a plan he believed would thoroughly embarrass the deities. He plotted to secretly transform them into bestial, savage cannibals. To that end, Tantalus murdered his own son, the innocent and kindly Pelops.

TANTALUS

A son of Zeus, he was initially loved and respected by the gods, but he secretly harbored a hatred for them. When he turned on the gods, they punished him severely.

Slicing up the boy's corpse, he put the pieces in a big pot of stew, which was slated to be the main course at a supper he had invited the gods to attend.

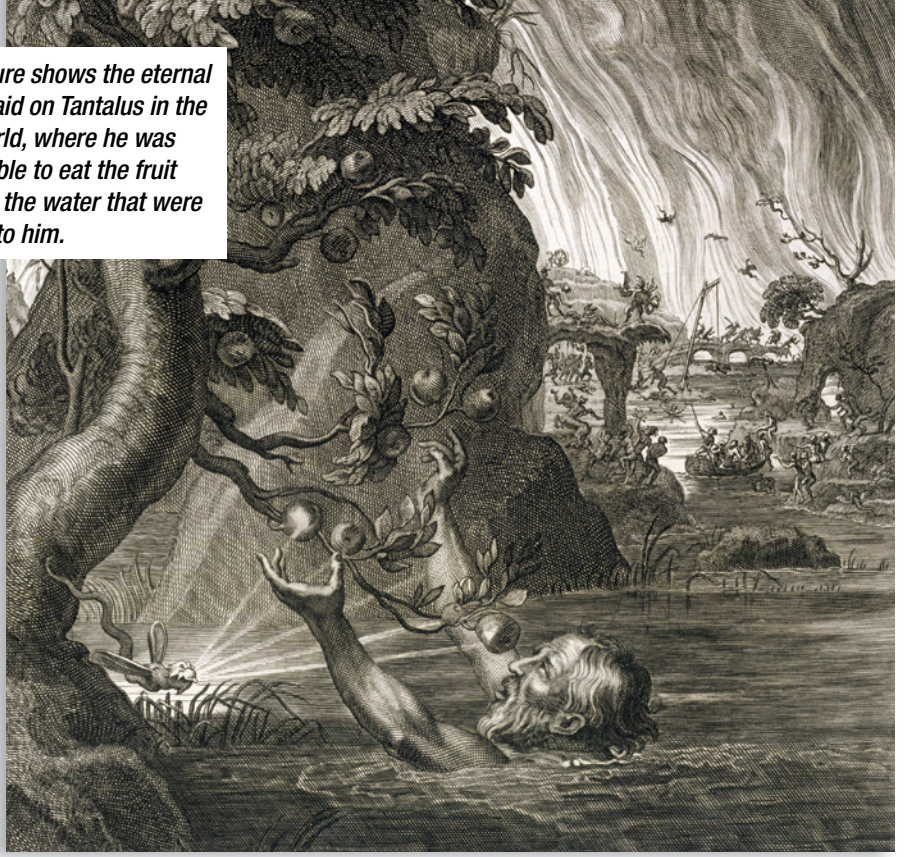
Tantalus's dastardly scheme largely failed, however, because he did not anticipate just how sensitive the gods' sense of smell was. When a servant placed the bowls of stew before those divine guests, they instantly detected the hideous contents of the food and refrained from eating it. One exception was the goddess of plants, Demeter, who by accident swallowed a small piece of one of Pelops's shoulders.

Seething with fury, the deities decided that death was too lenient a punishment for Tantalus. In the *Odyssey*, Homer recounted the eternal penalty they laid upon him in the underworld:

> [He] was standing in a pool of water which nearly reached his chin, and his thirst drove him to unceasing efforts. But he could never get a drop to drink. For whenever he stooped in his eagerness to lap the water, it disappeared. . . . [Also, luscious fruits dangled] above his head, [but] whenever [he] tried to grasp them . . . the wind would toss them up towards the shadowy clouds.[17]

For Every Hero a Villain

Tantalus is one of several characters in the Greek myths who is either wicked or the pawn of a greater evil. By virtue of their bigger-than-life exploits, such villains are certainly among the most colorful aspects of those old tales. However, to the ancient Greeks such scoundrels were not simply entertaining, they were also instructional. In Greek eyes, they demonstrated the perils of ignoring or discarding cherished social, political, and moral values.



This picture shows the eternal penalty laid on Tantalus in the underworld, where he was neither able to eat the fruit nor drink the water that were so close to him.

Moral behavior was extremely important to the Greeks. The villains and their exploits exemplified and reinforced moral themes that ran through the entire corpus of myths. Almost every legendary tale made some sort of statement about good versus evil, and it was expected that good would triumph in the end. Greek thinkers suggested that if villains succeeded in these tales, then the narratives would threaten the cosmic order and perhaps render the gods, who usually stood for justice, purposeless.

Therefore, for every mythical character who did good or heroic deeds, there tended to be a villain who would be defeated and often punished in the end. These evildoers took many forms. Some, like Tantalus, were ordinary people who for one reason or another did dishonest or destructive acts. Other common villains included tyrannical rulers and terrifying monsters. As Edith Hamilton put it, the villains are "present in any number of shapes, [but] they are there only to give the hero his reward of glory. What could a hero do in a world without them?"[18]

Zeus Versus Hideous Typhon

In fact, many Greek mythical heroes received their "rewards of glory" by slaying villains who took the form of frightening monsters. Sometimes these monster slayers were human, and other times they were divine beings. The chief god, Zeus, for example, though sometimes an ethically flawed individual, bravely slew more than his share of monsters.

One of the most hideous and heinous of those evil beasts was Typhon, one of the early monstrous offspring of the earth goddess Gaia. One ancient writer described the creature as "a mixture of man and beast, the largest and strongest of all [Gaia's] children." Typhon was huge and deformed; it had a "hundred heads of serpents . . . [and] all of his body was winged, and the hair that flowed in the wind from his head and cheeks was matted and dirty." In addition, "a great storm of fire boiled forth from his mouth."[19]

TYPHON

A giant monster spawned by the earth goddess Gaia, whom she enlisted to attack Zeus. The chief of the gods, however, fought and defeated the creature.

Gaia, who seriously disliked Zeus for defeating her other progeny—the Titans—convinced Typhon to battle and hopefully capture and imprison the leading Olympian. But although the monster was physically formidable, the scheme had a major flaw. Namely, like many of the monsters from the Greek myths, Typhon was not very bright. He should have approached Zeus as quietly as possible to effectively ambush him. Instead, the creature noisily lumbered along, and the god felt the vibrations that passed through the ground. That gave Zeus time to prepare several of his emblematic thunderbolts, which could fry the flesh of any living thing.

It was Zeus, then, who ended up ambushing Typhon, and the encounter shook all of Europe to its foundations. One after another, the deity hurled his bolts of lightning, which burned many of the monster's body parts to a crisp. Finally, Typhon became so weakened that Zeus easily tossed him into the deepest pits of the underworld.

A Monster with a Grim Duty

One of the best-known monsters in the corpus of Greek myths is Cerberus, a huge, three-headed, vicious doglike creature. He guarded the borders of the underworld to make sure no human souls who entered that dark realm ever escaped. Cerberus was "a dreaded hound," the Greek epic poet Hesiod said, "who has no pity." For any soul who tried to leave that subterranean kingdom, the great beast "lies in wait for them and eats them up." It was common knowledge that no one was allowed to kill Cerberus. This was because Hades, god of the underworld, had, with the approval of his brother Zeus, given the monster the grim duty it performed. However, Cerberus could be captured, as proved by the famous strongman Heracles (today better known as Hercules). At the request of a curious Greek king, the muscular hero managed to subdue the beast, place it in a cage, and display it to that monarch and his subjects. Heracles was careful, however, to return Cerberus to the underworld right afterward.

Quoted in H.G. Evelyn-White, trans., *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964, p. 135.

A Look That Turned People to Stone

Although Typhon is certainly one of the scariest and most destructive villains in the annals of Greek mythology, he is not the most famous. That distinction goes to Medusa, her name derived from a Greek word meaning "queen." With her sisters—Stheno, or "strong," and Euryale, meaning "far jumper"—she was one of the three vicious, evil beings known as the Gorgons.

Dwellers on a remote island, the three frightful sisters had—according to legend—large tusks, serpentine tongues dangling from their mouths, and poisonous snakes for hair. Even worse, when a person or animal gazed upon the meanest and most lethal of the three—Medusa—that individual swiftly turned to stone. This spelled doom for anyone who mistakenly landed on the island.

PERSEUS

Son of Zeus and a mortal woman, he gained eternal fame for tracking down and slaying the hideous monster Medusa.

Eventually, however, Medusa found herself threatened by Perseus, the son of the god Zeus and a mortal woman named Danae. The daring young warrior

made it his mission to end the chief Gorgon's reign of terror. From the start, however, Perseus was aware of the difficulties of defeating such a powerful creature as Medusa. He fully realized that he did not know the location of the far-off island where Medusa dwelled. Nor did he know a way to avoid being turned to stone as he approached the monster.

Unsure of how he would face Medusa, Perseus was surprised and felt fortunate when two of the Olympian deities suddenly came to his aid. First, Hermes, messenger of the gods, told him the location of the Gorgons' island; he also gave Perseus a pair of winged sandals that allowed him to fly and a magic hat that made the wearer invisible. The other divinity, Athena, presented Perseus with a polished metal shield in which he would be able to see Medusa's reflection, which did not have the petrifying power of looking directly at her.

Perseus was able to cut off Medusa's head, pictured here, by using Hermes's winged sandals, which allowed him to fly, and a magic hat that made the wearer invisible, enabling him to sneak up on her.

SOURCE NOTES

Introduction: Tales from the Mists of Time

1. Robert B. Kebric, *Greek People*. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2005, p. 8.
2. C.M. Bowra, *The Greek Experience*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1996, p. 32.

Chapter One: The Rise of the Olympian Gods

3. Quoted in Theoi Greek Mythology, "Callimachus Hymns 1–3." www.theoi.com.
4. Quoted in Benjamin Jowett, trans., *The Dialogues of Plato*. Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952, p. 447.
5. Quoted in C.M. Bowra, trans., *Pindar: The Odes*. New York: Penguin, 1969, p. 206.
6. Quoted in Philip Vellacott, trans., *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound, The Suppliants, Seven Against Thebes, The Persians*. Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1961, p. 27.
7. Quoted in H.G. Evelyn-White, trans., *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964, pp. 129, 131.
8. Quoted in Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*, p. 131.
9. Quoted in Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homerica*, pp. 46–47.
10. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. New York: Grand Central, 1999, p. 18.

Chapter Two: Myths of the Homeric Epics

11. W.H.D. Rouse, *Gods, Heroes and Men of Ancient Greece*. New York: New American Library, 2001, p. 134.
12. Quoted in Homer, *Iliad*, trans. E.V. Rieu. Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1989, p. 258.
13. Homer, *Iliad*, p. 405.
14. Homer, *Iliad*, pp. 405–6.

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

Kenny Curtis and Jillian Hughes, *Greeking Out: Epic Retellings of Classic Greek Myths*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2023.

Bernard Evslin, *Bernard Evslin's Greek Mythology*. Los Angeles: Graymalkin, 2023.

Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. 75th anniversary illustrated edition. New York: Black Dog and Leventhal, 2017.

Homer, *The Iliad and the Odyssey*, trans. Samuel Butler. Braga, Portugal: Kathartika, 2021.

Xander Liosis, *Greek Mythology: A Stunning Journey Through Ages and Timeless Stories*. London: Inkwell House, 2023.

Clara MacCarald, *Monsters and Creatures of World Mythology*. San Diego, CA: Brightpoint, 2023.

Lucas Russo, *Uncovering Greek Mythology: A Beginner's Guide into the World of Greek Gods and Goddesses*. Self-published, 2020.

Internet Sources

Mike Belmont, "Poseidon: Greek God of the Sea," Gods and Monsters. www.gods-and-monsters.com.

Celeste, "10 Stories from Greek Mythology That Kids Will Love," *Family Experiences* (blog), January 6, 2021. https://familyexperiencesblog.com.

Ducksters, "Apollo." www.ducksters.com.

Ducksters, "Monsters and Creatures of Greek Mythology." www.ducksters.com.

Alexander Gale, "5 Love Stories from Greek Mythology," Greek Reporter, February 14, 2023. https://greekreporter.com.

INDEX