**Background: Myth**

Many years have passed since the Greeks and Romans worshiped the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus – centuries, in fact. The ancient characters you may have heard of before originate from myth dating back to 900 B.C. So why study mythology today? In short, classical mythology has impacted history, literature, culture, and life across the Western world and beyond; truly, mythology has shaped the ancient world *and* the modern world, and continues to impact contemporary life today.

For example, the langue we speak has been impacted by classical mythology: Conceited people are “narcissists”; your enemy’s weakness is his or her “Achilles heel”; you may have experienced a dreamlike state of “hypnosis”; and you’ve used an “atlas” to gaze at the world. The months of the year trace their names to Roman mythology; the constellations have their origins in myth, too. Some of the world’s most famous writers and philosophers detailed the quarrels of the gods and the lives of men and women, including Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, and Ovid. This list may be impressive, but it merely scratches the surface of what classical mythology has to offer.

So what is a myth? Scholars of mythology have struggled to pinpoint an exact definition that encompasses all of the attributes contained within a myth. Myths may deal with questions of origins – who we are and where we came from. They may teach values or attempt to explain natural phenomena. Myths are often intertwined with religion, and some look ahead to the end of time.

Although each various myth may be wildly different from the next, every myth shares certain characteristics that set it apart from other kinds of stories. One characteristic is how a myth is created. Unlike most works of fiction, myths are not the creation of a single author. A myth evolves as it’s told, over and over again. Scholars explain that the mythology of a culture is created through the oral renderings of its people. Someone tells a story, and then the audience tells it again, and their listeners tell it again – and on it goes. Because myths are told and retold, passed from one person to the next, there is often more than one version of the same story.

A myth is a religious story that involves a higher power or entity. The gods, goddesses, and other supernatural beings who appear in myths are worshiped or revered. Within the culture that created it, the myth is considered sacred and believed to be true.

A myth may attempt to explain the unknown, such as how the universe or Earth was created. It also attempts to answer the broad, fundamental questions all people ask themselves about the meaning and purpose of human existence.

Any individual myth is part of a large mythology, a group of stories that belong to one culture. The myths that make up a mythology may be tied together by shared characters (such as the gods and goddesses involved), historical events (such as the Trojan War), or common themes (such as love and sex). A culture’s mythology contains socially accepted truths that provide a sense of identity, shared values, and purpose.

The ancients, just like us, hungered for knowledge. Most wanted explanations for what they considered to be phenomena they encountered in their daily lives. Others went beyond that and wanted reasons fro the structure of the universe. Regardless of the importance or size of the question, a curiosity drove them to begin asking questions. And myths were formed to provide explanation for these otherwise unanswerable questions.

The ancient Greeks and Romans used myths to explain the wonders of the world, including the rise of humanity, the causes of natural phenomena, and the origin of the Earth and the universe. Myths not only shared stories of creation – they wove narratives of love, betrayal, war, lust, jealousy, loyalty, and tragedy across many centuries, told through tales of mighty gods, noble heroes, and terrifying monsters.

And the myths aren’t limited to the tales of gods of men and women alone. We’ll discover some of the most creative beings ever recorded in history, including the aggressive Centaurs, half man and half horse; the irresistible Sirens, luring wayward sailors to their deaths; and the *original* monsters, like the Minotaur, the Sphinx, the Chimera, and the Cyclopes.

We will also discover the stories behind some of history’s most famous adventures and battles, including the Trojan War, Odysseus’s epic journey, and Oedipus’s tragic life story. Plus, we’ll meet the most famous gods and goddesses in Greek mythology (and their Roman counterparts), including war-loving Ares (Mars), wise Athena (Minerva), jealous Hera (Juno), elusive Hades (Pluto), furious Poseidon (Neptune), and their heroic mortal counterparts, like Jason, Perseus, Hercules, and Phaethon.

No matter what type of story you enjoy most – romance, adventure, mystery, horror – these ancient legends will have something for all your interests. Whether you’re new to the gods and want to learn more about their stories, or brushing up on what you have already learned elsewhere, our exploration into mythology will prove fun, educational, and valuable from literary, historical, and philosophical frames of reference. With such a wide variety of tales to choose from, classical mythology is guaranteed to have something for everyone.

**Why Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*?**

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is the single most important collected source for classical mythology. As the anthology for over 200 classical legends that survived to the 21st Century, many of the most familiar classical myths come directly from Ovid’s masterpiece. The *Metamorphoses* is a 12,000 line epic poem, written and arranged loosely in chronological order from the beginning of the universe’s creation to the Augustan Rome of Ovid’s own time. The major theme of the *Metamorphoses*, as the title suggests, is metamorphosis, or change.

It can be argued with a great deal of justification that the *Metamorphoses* is Western literature and art’s most influential work. Ovid was hugely popular during his lifetime, and the influence of his work continued to grow immediately after his death. Writers as diverse as Dante, Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and Ted Hughes have drawn on the *Metamorphoses* for inspiration. Artists throughout the centuries have depicted scenes from Ovid’s work in their own paintings. The list of writers, poets, artists, musicians, and performers who have been directly influenced by the *Metamorphoses* is extensive and covers virtually every era since Ovid’s death in 17 A.D. Many English translations (from the original Latin) of the work, in both prose and verse, exist, giving further evidence of the poem’s lasting significance.

Critics have deemed the *Metamorphoses* a “literary gold mine” because it gathers together in one book the greatest and most interesting myths from around the world as fine literature rather than as long summaries. The wide varieties of myths from various world cultures represented in the *Metamorphoses* reveal human principal values and concerns through time and across space. As we read, we will investigate how the values expressed in each myth represent the individual (Roman) culture and how each myth also unites with myths from other cultures (Greek, Egyptian, Turkish, etc) and today to reveal universal, common values.

Another benefit of reading the *Metamorphoses* is that it introduces a variety of archetypal stories that will supply us with a foundational knowledge of the most well know, most available, and most popularly referenced (alluded to) myths (in literature, art, drama, etc.) in our (Western) culture today. The *Metamorphoses* allows us to read many small gems (otherwise hidden among hundreds of the greatest stories in the world) within the context of one work that has preserved the literary appeal of the stories so they can be taught on a serious intellectual level within a single work of literature.

Ordinarily, students have no access to the world’s greatest epics until they enter college. Even there, unfortunately, the elaborate language and style, the complexity of the plot, and the press of time often lead even the best students to rely upon the “summaries” of these masterpieces provided in Spark Notes (or the like) rather than to experience the authentic, unabridged translations. The *Metamorphoses*, however, combines various aspects from hundreds of different ancient myths into one authentic work, which no summary can convey. After having read the *Metamorphoses*, you may even be motivated to read some of the longer, individual epics (the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, etc.) in which these stories come from, and with greater understanding and enthusiasm.

Furthermore, besides providing a stimulating literature program, the myths in the *Metamorphoses* coordinate well cross-curricular, with the study of ancient and medieval history, archaeology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religion. The *Metamorphoses* also may supplement programs in art and in music, which often include mythological subjects and allusions. The oral traditions encapsulated in the *Metamorphoses* make good listening as well as good reading. These stories emphasize action and vigorous conversation, with literary style conveyed through modern, vivid, vocabulary as a basis for independent and creative thinking. However, the exciting plots will help us with our reading comprehension skills as well.

Alas, the need to study mythology contained in one volume, but of manageable length, has necessitated our abridgement of the *Metamorphoses* as a whole (approximately 200 myths stretching over 400 pages). We will study a quarter of the most essential myths from the collected *Metamorphoses*, with the goal to preserve as much of the literary quality of the original as possible, without interruption and distortion, to make the most essential stories in the mythology flow as a coherent whole. The material selected for our investigation included the more familiar myths and those which have had a profound influence on Western culture. In every instance, each major section of the *Metamorphoses* will be presented in its entirety. Those stories omitted from our study of the text involve incidents of secondary importance: such as the adventures of subsidiary heroes, secondary battles, and peripheral myths.

A final notable feature to address in our abridgement of Ovid’s narrative is the variety of his transitions from one story to another. Each story within the text loosely flows from one to the next, thus when the stories are separated (in the manner in which we will go about reading them), this variety among transitions may cause the beginning of some of the selections we encounter to seem somewhat difficult to understand. Thus, it is important to reiterate that in covering the most essential of the myths supplied within the *Metamorphoses*, we will make every effort to link the selections we read as best as we can. Accordingly, we should not pay too much attention to any introductory, transitional “subplots” presented that may appear confusing, yet ultimately, bear no impact on the primary myths of our study.

**Background: History of Ancient Rome**

The Greeks weren’t the only ones to have great poets of mythology within their culture. During the Augustan Age of Rome, two poets stood out amongst the mythmakers: Virgil and Ovid. These two Roman poets are held in the highest esteem for bringing immortality to Roman mythology.

The history of ancient Rome lasted well over a thousand years, from its legendary foundation on April 21st 753 B.C. to the fall of the Roman Empire on September 4th, 476 A.D.

Around 200 B.C., the emergent civilization in Rome began a process of overseas conquest and expansion. With each new region the Romans entered, they came across the religions of diverse groups of people. As the Roman Empire continually expanded, Roman polytheists openly adopted the new gods they discovered – embracing the idea of “the more the better.”

By the 140’s B.C., the entire Greek empire had become a Roman province. The Romans, enamored with Greek culture and art, borrowed extensively from the mythology of the Greeks. The Romans applied the myths, attributes, and descriptions of the Greek gods and goddesses to their own deities by a process of identification, and many of the Roman gods and goddesses became counterparts of those of the Greeks (see chart).

Being open to new gods was also understood to benefit the Roman state. It was sometimes argued that the reason the Romans ruled the ancient world was because they alone worshiped all gods. This “openness” helped Rome to win over its rivals and to bring cohesion to a huge and diverse Empire.

After Julius Caesar’s murder in 44 B.C., Octavian Augustus assumed control and continued the expansion of Rome’s empire, which in its heyday covered much of Europe and parts of North Africa and the Middle East. Virgil and Ovid, the most famous Roman literary figures, wrote during this time, cementing the Roman legacy to this day.

As for the origins of Rome, according to Virgil’s epic poem, the *Aeneid*, after the Trojan War the Trojan prince Aeneas (son of the Trojan lord Anchises and the goddess Aphrodite/Venus) flees the ruins of Troy to eventually reach the future site of Rome (after journeying all around the Mediterranean) and found the Roman people.

While Rome’s legendary foundation can be called a “myth,” Roman historical imagination was happy to accommodate this myth alongside the earliest strands of Rome’s recorded history, identifying sacred places where various aspects of Aeneas’s journey were thought to have occurred and firmly embedding Roman identity with aspects of historical truth that can be supported by archaeological records.

Religiously, Christianity does not yet exist. The ancient Romans worshipped a wide variety of mythological gods. The Pantheon (still standing in Rome) is the most famous Roman temple, built during Augustus’s rule and intended to honor “all the gods.” “Pantheon” is a Greek word meaning “all the gods,” and is often understood to refer to the Greek deities known as the Olympian 12. The Roman pantheon may be thought of as a Roman “version” of these 12. These Roman gods are often depicted on shared couches split into male-female pairs, and include Jupiter (the Greek Zeus) and Juno (the Greek Hera), Neptune (the Greek Poseidon) and Minerva (the Greek Athena), Mars (the Greek Ares) and Venus (the Greek Aphrodite), Apollo (the Greek Apollo) and Diana (the Greek Artemis), Vulcan (the Greek Hephaestus) and Vesta (the Greek Hestia), Mercury (the Greek Hermes) and Ceres (the Greek Demeter).

The traditional history of Rome is, in so many ways, a history of men. Roman men ruled the roost, at home and away. In the public arena, it was men who went to war, who held office and priesthoods, who ruled as emperors – and who wrote history. At home, the male head held the power to make life and death choices for his household, as well as more pedestrian choices about family finances and worshipping ancestral gods. Women were never full citizens; they had no vote and could not stand for office. For most women, in all walks of life, opportunities remained defined by men.

Sex was widespread and well-represented in the Roman world: emperors had multiple partners (of both sexes), poets turned their mistresses into muses for their writing, house-owners decorated their walls with erotic images, artists addressed sex through visual interpretation, and even the streets were lined with sexual illustrations and graffiti. Roman sexualities don’t map exactly onto ours. Romans had no words to express the identities “hetero-“ or “homosexual,” and were more concerned with sexual conduct tied to power and status: the more power one possessed, the more sexual partners one acquired. While ancient Romans did participate in “traditional” marriage (and divorce) between one man and one woman, marriage was not necessarily tied to love, monogamy, or sexual identity. Marriage was often a “business” or “political” arrangement tied to money, rank, or influence.

In its approximately 12 centuries of existence, Roman civilization shifted from a monarchy to a classical republic to an increasingly autocratic empire. Through conquest and assimilation, it came to dominate Southern and Western Europe, Asia Minor, North Africa, and parts of Northern and Eastern Europe. Rome was predominant in influence throughout the Mediterranean region and was one of the most powerful entities of the ancient world. It is often grouped into “Classical Antiquity” together with ancient Greece, and their similar cultures and societies are known as the Greco-Roman.

The Romans are still remembered today, including names such as Julius Caesar, Marcus Tullius Cicero, and Augustus (Octavius). A civilization highly developed for its time, Rome professionalized and greatly expanded its military and created a system of government called “res publica,” the inspiration for modern republicssuch as the United States and France. It achieved impressive technological and architectural feats, such as the construction of an extensive system of aqueducts and roads, as well as large monuments, palaces, and public facilities.

It is said that “all roads lead to Rome,” as Roman influence can still be felt today through its vast contributions to government, law, politics, engineering, art, literature, architecture, technology, warfare, religion, language, society and more in the Western world.

**Background: Ovid**

Ovid was born in 43 B.C. at the beginning of the last of Ancient Rome’s civil wars (conflicts that had continued on and off for almost 100 years). During this time the government of Rome, which modern historians call the “Republic,” had its power vested chiefly in a Senate of elder statesmen and a variety of elected magistrates and consuls.

During this “century of revolution,” however, real power was often in the hands of generals, who used their armies first against Rome’s enemies but then against their own rivals. The last and most famous of these generals was Julius Caesar, who, shortly after he became dictator, was assassinated by a group of senators (including Brutus and Cassius) in 44 B.C., the year before Ovid was born. Caesar’s followers and enemies struggled until 31 B.C., when Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted son, Octavian, defeated his last rivals, Marc Antony and Cleopatra, and emerged as the new leader of the Roman state.

Octavian, or Augustus as he came to be known, ruled Rome for nearly 45 years (30 B.C. – A.D. 14). After so many decades of strife, he brought a thorough peace to Rome’s vast Empire (the lands encircling the Mediterranean, as well as southern Europe). He also restored it in other ways, such as by rebuilding temples and encouraging religious observances, and by passing laws designed to stabilize marriage and discourage childlessness. Most important, he restored constitutional government. Once again the Senate convened and deliberated, the assemblies met, and magistrates were elected. Nevertheless, we call this government that evolved under Augustus the Principate, not the Republic. Augustus, the “First Citizen” (princeps), maintained his authority by keeping control of the army and securing collective powers that had been distributed among several magistrates during the Republic.

When Ovid was about 17, his father sent him to Rome to study oratory, or public speaking, which was the ancient equivalent of law school and the usual preparation for a public or legal career. Ovid soon rejected this career, however, choosing instead to become a poet. His principal topics were love and storis from mythology, hjs manner of dealing with them lighthearted, amusing, and occasionally satirical. His major works are the *Amores,*three books of love poems; the *Heroides,* verse letters from legendary women to absent husbands or lovers; and the *Ars amatoria*, in which Ovid poses as a learned expert, giving rules on the “art” of lovemaking. By his mid-40’s Ovid was Rome’s most popular poet. In Ad.D. 8, however, just as he was finishing the *Metamorphoses*, Augustus exiled Ovid without warming to Tomi, a small town in the northeastern corner of the Empire (modern Romania) on the Black Sea. Ovid continued to write poetry for the last 10 years of his life, but his exile at Tomi, without wife, friends, or civilized comforts, was extremely lonely and unhappy.

No one knows for sure why Ovid was banished, and it is unlikely that adequate new evidence will ever surface to explain the mystery. There are rumors it was due to Ovid’s having an affair with Augustus’s daughter, though either way it is hard to believe that Augustus, with his concern to renew the “old values” of Rome – commitment to the gods, to the state, and to the family – would have appreciated the themes of Ovid’s poetry. The Princeps preferred Virgil, living at the same time as Ovid and who had almost the status of a “court poet.” Virgil wrote poems extolled the virtues of the new order, and his poetry is generally more seious and frequently more concerned with public issues such as piety and loyalty. Ovid’s poetry, with its lightness, its romance, its interest in human emotions as being important in themselves, and its eroticism, refers to a different kind of world.

The *Metamorphoses* is like Ovid’s earlier poetry in theme (love and mythology), but unlike it in meter and structure. The extent of the *Metamorphoses* (almost 12,000 lines) and the meter Ovid chose (dactylic hexameter) show that he was placing himself in the tradition of epic poetry. The earliest epics in the tradition were composed around 800 B.C., in Greek by Homer (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). And so, if Ovid wrote in the epic meter, we may assume that, however delightful, amusing, or sometimes even ludicrous his stories may seem, there is alos an underlying seriousness in his poem.