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**THE MYTHOLOGY  
OF GREECE  
AND ROME**

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# INTRODUCTORY

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THE study of Greek mythology has long been subject to two serious disabilities. First, until about the turn of the present century, Greek mythology was always studied through a Roman or Alexandrine medium. Until quite recently it was usual to call Greek gods by their Latin names: Zeus was Jove, Hera was Juno, Poseidon Neptune. We will not spend time in slaying dead lions: the practice is now at an end. Jupiter, we now know, though akin to, is not the same as Zeus: Minerva is no wise Athena. But a more dangerous because subtler error remains. We have dropped the Latin names, but we are still inclined to invest Greek gods with Latin or Alexandrine natures, and to make of them toy-gods of a late, artificial, and highly decorative literature. The Greek god of love we no longer call Cupid, but we have not wholly rid our minds of the fat, mischievous urchin, with his bow and arrows--a conception that would have much astonished the primitive worshippers of the love-god in his own city of Thespiæ, where the most ancient image of Eros was an "unwrought stone."

The second disability is that until quite lately the study of Greek mythology has always been regarded as strictly subordinate to the study of Greek literature. Some knowledge of mythology has always been found necessary to the intelligent reading of Greek authors-- poets, dramatists, even philosophers. The scholar, even after the most vigorous application of grammatical rules, was still

occasionally driven to "look up his mythological allusions." Hence we had, not histories of mythology, not inquiries into how mythology came to be, but dictionaries of mythology for reference. In a word, mythology was regarded not as a subject in itself worthy of study, not as part of the history of the human mind, but as *ancillary*, as the handmaid of literature. Nothing so effectually starves a subject as to make it occupy this "ancillary" position. To read a paragraph of Lemprière is to wonder how a subject apparently so imbecile could still keep its hold on the human mind.

From these two disabilities the study of mythology has slowly, but only very slowly, been released by the influence of modern scientific method. The study of religion as a whole is a modern growth. So long as religions were divided into one true and the rest false, progress was naturally impossible. The slow pressure of science introduced first the historical, then the comparative method. The facts of ancient and savage religions being once collected and laid side by side, it became immediately evident that there were resemblances as well as differences, and some sort of classification became possible. With the historical impulse came the desire to see if in religion also there existed a law of development, and if the facts of religion succeeded each other in any ascertainable order.

From this intrusion of the comparative and historical methods, two religions long held themselves aloof: Christianity, as too sacred; classical religion, as forming part of an exclusive stronghold, which was supposed to stand in some strange antagonism to science. Greek and Latin religions, as different, perhaps, as any two religions could

be, declared themselves one. Dying of this unnatural partnership, and of their self-imposed isolation, they at last consented to join hands with the rest of humanity and come to life again. Greek religion is now studied as a whole, not merely as mythology; as part of the spiritual history of the human race, not as the means of interpreting a particular literature; as contrasted, not as identical with the religion of the Romans.

The study of Greek religion owes much not only to reform in method, but to a very large recent accession of material, material which has again and again acted as a corrective to mistaken views, and as a means of modifying mistaken emphasis. To take a single example: the discovery and study of Greek vase-paintings alone has forced us to see the Greek gods not as the Romans and Alexandrines, but as the early Greeks saw them. We realize, for example, that Dionysus is not only the beautiful young wine-god, but also an ancient tree-god, worshipped as a great post; that the Sirens were not to the Greeks lovely, baleful mermaidens, but strange bird-demons with women's heads. Moreover, excavation, that used to concern itself with works of art only, now seeks for and preserves every scrap of monumental evidence, however humble. This has focussed our attention upon ritual. We discover and study not only the Hermes of Praxiteles, but masses of terra-cottas and bronzes, shewing the local type under which the god or goddess was worshipped; we read inscriptions relating to local rites disregarded by Homer and the tragedians.

Specially important in their influence on the study of Greek religion have been excavations on *prehistoric* sites.

The poems of Homer were, as will presently be seen, the great medium through which the popular religion of Greece was fixed. Excavations, begun by Dr. Schliemann on the site of Troy and culminating now in the excavations of Sir Arthur Evans at Cnossus, have taught us much as to the religion of that great civilization which preceded Homer. Homer, therefore, is no longer the starting-point in the history of Greek religion.

Before we proceed to examine Greek mythology, it is essential that we should be quite clear on two points: (1) What exactly we mean by mythology; (2) what is the relation of mythology to religion?

Religion, everywhere and always, is compounded of two factors; of ritual--that is, what a man does; of mythology, what a man thinks and imagines. These two elements are both informed and vitalized by a third, by what a man feels, desires, wishes. To quote Professor Leuba, the unit of conscious life is neither thought nor will nor action in separation, but "all three in movement towards an action." Now, religion is only one particular form of conscious life, and, again to quote Professor Leuba, "conscious life is always orientated towards something to be secured or avoided immediately or ultimately." The religious impulse is directed to one end and one only, to the conservation and promotion of life.

While a man is doing a religious act, performing some ritual, he is also necessarily busy thinking, imagining; some *imago*, however vague, of whatever he is doing or feeling rises up in his mind. Why and how? Here we must turn for help to psychology.

Man is, it would seem, the only animal who is the maker of clear images; it is his human prerogative. In most animals, which act from what we call instinct, action follows immediately and, as it were, mechanically on conception, follows with an almost chemical certainty and swiftness. But in the human animal, because of the greater complication of the nervous system, perception is not transformed instantly into action; there is an interval, longer or shorter, for choice. It is in this interval that our *ideas*, our images arise. We do not instantly get what we want, so we figure to ourselves our need, and out of these images so created, which are, as it were, the empty shadows of desire, our whole mental life is built up. If reaction were instantaneous, we should have no image, no representation, practically no mental life. Religion might have had ritual, but it would have been barren of mythology.

All men, in virtue of their humanity, are image-makers, but in some the image is clear and vivid, in others dull, lifeless, wavering. The Greeks were the supreme *ikonists*, the greatest image-makers the world has ever seen, and, therefore, their mythology lives on to-day. The genius of Rome was not for *ikonism*; their mythology, save when they borrow from the Greeks, is negligible. They worshipped not gods, not *dei*, but powers, *numina*. These *numina* were only dim images of activities; they never attained to personality, they had no attributes, no life histories; in a word, no mythology.

We must always remember that mythology, the making of images, is only one and, perhaps, not the greatest factor in religion. Because the Romans were not *ikonists*, it does