CONTENTS

HEROES

GODS, MORTALS AND THE MYTHS THEY INHABIT

Imagine for a moment that somehow you've managed to transport yourself back to an ancient Greek city. Look around: you're surrounded by myths. In the marketplace, you see gleaming statues of Athena holding a spear and Poseidon wielding his trident. Nearby, images of Theseus fighting the Amazons look down upon you from a temple. If you're invited to an aristocratic home, you'll be served wine from a bowl painted with a mythic scene and drink it from a cup decorated with another one: Zeus in the form of a bull, surging through the sea with Europa on his back, or the hero Peleus wrestling with the shape-shifting goddess Thetis. If you stay in the city long enough, you'll watch actors performing myths on stage during public festivals—if you're a man, that is. Greek women didn't go to the theater. Women did attend other festivals in honor of the gods, however, where poets recited myths: you might hear about Deianira murdering her husband, Heracles, or Penelope fooling her suitors by means of that most feminine of all contrivances, her loom. If you linger in the city long enough to get married, the song that's sung at your wedding may refer to a great mythic love story, such as that of the doomed warrior Hector and his wife, Andromache. You'll encounter myths in less formal ways, too—as a woman working wool alongside other women who tell myths to pass the time or as a man at a drinking party, where excerpts from the most admired works of the poets are recited.

Nothing in our own culture compares to this—nothing is embraced by all of us with the same fervor and fidelity with which the Greeks embraced their myths. Certainly, there are stories that all of us (or nearly all of us) have at least heard of, but even the

most popular of them have not suffused our cultural landscape as thoroughly as myths suffused that of ancient Greece. We wouldn't be surprised to encounter Harry Potter in a book or a movie or miniaturized as a LEGO action figure, but we'd be very surprised to spot his statue gracing a public building or hear a song about his courtship of Ginny Weasley at a wedding. And, leaving aside a few tenacious exceptions, such as the Bible, Shakespeare's plays and the novels of Jane Austen, even our best-loved stories seldom remain popular for more than two or three generations.

In part, this is because diction and manners tend to become stale and remote as time goes by. Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* was wildly popular for several decades after it was published in 1740. Now, the smaller group of readers who embark upon *Pamela*'s pages must be willing to decode some of its words (what exactly is a "sauce-box," anyway?) and accept a narrative premise that may seem bizarre (did children and parents really sit down and write lengthy letters to each other, once upon a time, as Pamela and her parents did?). To continue to thrive, even the most wonderful stories need to be updated. But another reason that stories don't remain popular very long anymore is that nowadays, if authors borrow plots or characters from other authors' works, they run the risk of being called derivative, unless they make their own contributions abundantly clear in some way—by completely changing the time, the setting and the names of the characters, for example, as Leonard Bernstein did for *Romeo and Juliet* when he composed *West Side Story*. In contrast, ancient Greek authors didn't hesitate to borrow plots, times, settings, characters and even details from both earlier authors and their own contemporaries. As long as they did this well, adding their own brilliant touches, there was no shame in it—there might even be acclaim. In the process, they continually refreshed the myths, ensuring that they remained exciting and relevant.

Indeed, in ancient Greece, anyone who wanted to narrate a myth had to think about earlier versions because they could be sure that most of the people in their audience knew at least the basics of the story they were about to tell. What we now call Greek myths, most Greeks considered to be part of their history, relayed by poets

since the time of Homer. When an author narrated one of them, he was doing something like what Cecil B. DeMille did when he retold the story of Moses in his 1956 film, *The Ten Commandments*. DeMille added intriguing new secondary characters (Queen Nefretiri, for instance) and some thrilling new subplots (Moses's romance with Nefretiri, for example), but no one doubted that he was telling the same story as the Bible had told. In fact, the film won awards from Jewish and Christian organizations for presenting the biblical story to a twentieth-century audience so successfully. Nor was DeMille's film disparaged as derivative: it was a huge box-office hit and is still admired for its accomplishments in filmic narration. Forty-two years later, DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* inspired DreamWorks to create *The Prince of Egypt,* an animated version of the biblical story that introduced its own changes and that also met with commercial and critical success.

Similarly, for example, in 458 BCE, when the tragedian Aeschylus retold the well-known story of Orestes in his trilogy of plays called the *Oresteia*, he innovated upon an old story, too. The final part of Aeschylus's version, which focuses on what happened to Orestes after he avenged his father's murder by killing his mother, alludes to the Areopagus, the place in Athens where the court that tried cases of intentional homicide was located. Aeschylus showed Athena establishing that court so that Orestes could be tried by a jury, which was also presented as a brand-new invention within the world of the play. Earlier versions of Orestes's story had resolved his problem in other ways, which has prompted scholars to suggest that Aeschylus revised the age-old tale in order to celebrate recent Athenian civic reforms—particularly those that cleaned up what had become a corrupt and overly powerful Areopagite court. That's not all that Aeschylus's version of Orestes's story is about, of course. If it's well-narrated, the tale of a young man who is forced to kill his mother in order to avenge his murdered father will always be compelling, and Aeschylus narrated it very well, indeed. He gives us foul-breathed Erinyes who pursue Orestes all the way to Delphi and then onwards to Athens; an Apollo who delivers a clever, protoscientific speech in defense of Orestes; and an Athena who deftly transforms the Erinyes, who are furious at having lost their

prey, into kindlier goddesses who promise to nurture Athens. All of these additions that Aeschylus made to the story, as expressed by his glorious language, revitalized a well-known myth. Aeschylus received first prize for his *Oresteia* at the Dionysia, the great Athenian festival that honored Dionysus, the god of drama, and his *Oresteia* continues to be presented on stage today.

It was in this spirit of both tradition and constant innovation that the Greeks told the same myths for more than a millennium, until the coming of Christianity began to mute their voices. Even then, Christianity couldn't silence the myths completely. In the fourteenth century, an anonymous Franciscan monk composed *The Moralized Ovid,* a renarration of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with allegorizing interpretations that he thought would make it safe reading for Christians. Chaucer redeveloped the myth of Theseus and the Amazons in his *Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare drew frequently on Greek myths and an army of Renaissance painters and sculptors busily represented them for wealthy men. In the seventeenth century, Monteverdi used the myths of Orpheus and Ariadne as librettos for the first operas and Racine revived tragedy with his own tellings of ancient myths. And the reason you're holding this book now is that we still tell them.

Why do we—and why did the Greeks—love these stories? Certainly, one reason is that they do important cultural and social work. Myths explain and endorse the origins of significant institutions, such as the Athenian jury system. Myths help to instill social codes, such as the expectation that hosts and guests will treat each other honorably. Lycaon didn't abide by that rule, and Zeus turned him into a wolf. They reflect feelings that lie deep within the human heart, such as the difficulty of losing a spouse and the dangers of refusing to come to terms with that loss. Orpheus tried twice to retrieve his wife from the land of the dead but failed and ended up dead himself. They warn against the dangers of character flaws such as arrogance: Odysseus boasted about outwitting the Cyclops Polyphemus, and Polyphemus's father, Poseidon, impeded Odysseus's homeward journey for many years.

Other messages are embedded in the myths, too, not all of which make as much immediate sense to their modern readers as those

I've just mentioned. Most strikingly, in myths the Greek gods are so frequently fickle and cruel in their treatment of mortals that the two groups seem to be eternally pitted against one another. The mortals constantly strive to rise above the limits that confine them and the gods repeatedly smack the mortals down. Why would the Greeks want to imagine that the very gods whom they worshipped would behave that way? Part of the answer lies in the fact that myth and worship expressed two extremes. Myths presented dreadful, worst-case scenarios and what one prayed for during worship presented the best that one could hope for. Together, these articulated the human condition—a persistent aspiration and struggle to become something better, which was often thwarted but could never be extinguished. Of course, the biggest difference between gods and mortals was that the former lived forever and the latter were fated to die. The many myths in which a mortal tries to evade that destiny and fails—not only the story of Orpheus, but also the stories of Sisyphus and Asclepius, for example—repeatedly drive home this point. The gods had infinite time, as well as infinite power, to accomplish almost anything they pleased, and mortals who wished to survive for even the small numbers of years that the Fates allotted them had to live according to the rules that the gods imposed and to tolerate their fickle temperaments. That is why this book is called *Gods and Mortals*; the myths that I tell here often express the crucial differences between the two parties. Yet any purpose that a myth serves is secondary to the telling of the myth itself. Unless an author or artist narrates a myth in a lively, engaging way, no one will bother with it—or at least, they won't bother with the version served up by that particular author or artist. "A man killed his mother because she killed his father" is simply a statement. It was what Aeschylus added to that statement that turned it into a myth. So, too, for the poets who came before and after Aeschylus, each of whom created his Orestes with his own twists: Stesichorus, Pindar, Sophocles, Euripides and so on.

I've tried to make the narratives that I'm offering in this book engaging, too, so that the myths will speak to my readers with at least some of the impact that they had in antiquity. To do this, I've not only chosen my words carefully, but also knit into my stories

details about the ancient world in which they're set. I've done this in the hope that if my readers have some sense of the harsher realities of such things as disease and hunger in antiquity, the wilder natural environment that Greek women and men confronted and the tighter social constraints under which they lived, then the myths will resonate more fully. My telling of Pandora's story, therefore, includes details about the household duties of ancient Greek women and the plethora of illnesses that continually lay in wait for human victims. My story of Erigone makes clear how dire a fate it was for a Greek woman to remain unmarried. I've also given some sense of what it was like to worship the gods: my descriptions of Oedipus's and Neoptolemus's visits to the Delphic Oracle express what Apollo's inquirers would have seen and heard at the god's great sanctuary high up in the mountains, and I recount the rituals that the Argonauts performed to appease the anger of the Mother of the Gods. I've woven what we know about the mechanics of ancient looms and the sources of ancient dyes into my story of Arachne and what we know about the ancient way of throwing a discus into my story of Hyacinthus. My stories unfold against the real physical landscapes of ancient Greece and their real fauna and flora.

But as much as I've striven to present my myths within their ancient contexts, I've also been determined not to allow the voices of the ancient authors themselves to dominate my tellings. Although I've drawn my plots and characters from ancient sources and sometimes borrowed their brilliant phrases and imagery, too, I haven't simply translated their narratives into English. Instead, I've created new narratives that have lives of their own. My Odysseus expresses a keener appreciation of his wife's intellect than Homer's did, for instance. And, although the events in my story of Apollo's attempted rape of Daphne closely follow those of Ovid's version, I cast a shadow over Apollo's final action and give Artemis a closing line that is meant to emphasize how little the gods, at least as we meet them in myths, cared about the suffering of their mortal companions.

Indeed, the tone of my stories often parts company with the ancient authors when I narrate rapes or, in the cases of Daphne and Syrinx, attempted rapes. In Greek myths, both gods and mor-

tal men force themselves upon females with alarming frequency, using physical strength, deception or both to satisfy their desires. Ancient narrators often ignored or minimized the damage that these encounters would have wreaked upon their victims. To take but one example, the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* tells us that Hades snatched Persephone away from her friends and dragged her into the Underworld, but leaves it largely up to us to imagine, if we choose, how this was experienced by the young goddess herself. There were some exceptions to the rule: Aeschylus sympathetically narrates the ghastly ordeals that Io suffered after Zeus decided to rape her, and Ovid evokes our pity for several victims, most notably Philomela. In every case of rape that I narrate, I, too, have tried to convey the shock or horror that the woman or goddess felt—and in the one instance where a goddess sexually violates a man (Salmacis and Hermaphroditus), I've tried to imagine how he felt, too. It's worth clarifying, in connection with this topic, that what we now consider to be two separate situations—rape and seduction—were scarcely distinguished in antiquity. At the root of their conflation lay the fact that women were meant to be controlled by men. A girl was under the guardianship of her father until she married, at which point she came under the guardianship of her husband. If she were widowed, either her father resumed his role or another male relative took it on. The guardian's responsibilities included ensuring that the woman did not have sex without his permission. In real life, this meant that she would have sex only with the husband to whom her guardian gave her in marriage. In myths, some fathers seize other, unusual opportunities to give their daughters to men, as well. For example, Thespius gives his fifty daughters to Heracles because he wants a crop of strong grandsons (chapter 65) and Pittheus gives his daughter Aethra to King Aegeus of Athens because he wants to forge a stronger link with that city (chapter 93). Of course, if your wife or daughter were impregnated by a god, you were expected to count it an honor and duly raise the child, as do several men in these stories. And of course, in both real life and myths there were women and men who, through choice or necessity, became prostitutes and there were slaves of both genders who, as their master's property, owed him their sexual favors.

The notes at the end of this book give information about which ancient narrations and artistic representations of each myth inspired my versions. For those who want to read them, I've recommended translations of those narrations in the essay "Ancient Sources for the Myths." Sometimes, I had to draw not only on what ancient authors tell us but also on my own imagination as well, in order to fill gaps in a plot—gaps where our knowledge of how a story proceeded is fragmentary because our ancient sources themselves are fragmentary. For example, we don't know exactly how it was that Zeus managed to swallow his wife Metis when she was pregnant with their child. After thinking about what little the ancient sources do tell us, I concluded that this myth probably sprang from a folk motif that is shared by many other tales around the world and then developed my version in that direction—you'll find it in chapter 4. Whenever I've filled a gap in that way, I've indicated it in the notes.

From start to finish, this book tells 140 myths. There's no magic in that number, other than the magic of compromise. On the one hand, I quickly realized that telling *every* Greek myth I've ever encountered would make for a book too large to lift. But on the other hand, I wanted to narrate not only all of the myths that one would expect to find in an anthology (the labors of Heracles, the story of how Demeter got her daughter back, and so on) but also some personal favorites that aren't told very often nowadays (the story of Icarius, Erigone and some fatal casks of wine; the tale of how Melampus cured the bovine daughters of Proetus; and a fuller reveal of what happened when Menelaus and Helen sailed home after the Trojan War, for instance). I assembled my choices in an order that makes chronological sense, more or less. That is, my narrative starts with the birth of the cosmos and the gods and it finishes with what happened to the Greek leaders as they returned from the Trojan War. In the eyes of the Greeks, that war was the last great event of the heroic age, before the world settled down into the far less glorious age in which they themselves existed. In between the beginning and the end, I tell stories that characterize the ongoing relationship between gods and mortals, those two tribes between which power was so unevenly divided; stories of the

heroes, who challenged the boundary between gods and mortals as they purged the earth of monsters, and of the daring, resourceful women who enabled the heroes to do what they did; and stories of the Trojan War itself, which Zeus brought about in order to quash the burgeoning human population.

Here and there, however, attentive readers will notice that I've had to infringe upon chronology: in chapter 10, for instance, Dionysus advises Hephaestus on how to win a bride, but Dionysus's own birth isn't narrated until chapter 12. It's impossible to arrange Greek myths without a few infelicities of this kind, so tightly entangled are its characters and its events. I say a little more about that entanglement, and the strength that it gave Greek myths, in the essay "The Characters of Greek Myths" at the end of this book. The Greeks themselves certainly knew how to look the other way when chronology threatened to ruin a good story. For instance, although it was events during the wedding of Peleus and Thetis that precipitated the Trojan War, somehow Peleus and Thetis managed to produce a son, Achilles, who was old enough to fight when the war began—and then Achilles himself managed to produce a son, Neoptolemus, who was old enough to join the Greek contingent only nine years later.

Leaving these problems aside, readers who move sequentially from the first chapter, "Earth and Her Children," to the final chapter, "New Lives," will find that the myths I tell earliest sometimes lay the groundwork for those I tell later. However, even if the myths aren't read in the order that I've chosen—even if readers choose to dip into the book here and there, following their own particular interests at any given moment—themes and details will resonate among them. The Greeks, certainly, did not encounter their myths in any fixed sequence. One of the most important ways in which Greek myths were promulgated was through the voices of professional bards who memorized the works of the great poets and then were hired to perform at public festivals and the private parties of the wealthy. In addition, there were poets who could be commissioned to compose new poems to celebrate a glorious athletic victory or a splendid wedding. Those poets often took myths as their subject matter, too. In either case, an audience typically

didn't know what myth they would hear until a performance began. You might hear the story of Heracles and the Stymphalian Birds on one occasion and then, some days or months later, hear the story of Heracles's birth, or the story of how Perseus (Heracles's great-grandfather) tricked the Graeae, or the story of how the whole cosmos came to exist in the first place. The art that dotted the landscape continuously evoked a variety of stories that defied chronology, as well. As Greek children grew up, they gradually acquired familiarity with many myths and an understanding of how the characters and events of those myths were knit together into a huge, splendid web.

When I was about halfway done writing this book, I began to experiment with these ideas myself. Every few semesters, I teach a course on Greek myths in an auditorium that holds 740 people. Although it's seldom the case that every seat is filled on any given day, there are always at least 600 students present. The course is an elective; no one is required to enroll and I presume that the students are there because they're interested in the topic. And yet, year after year, here and there in the dim recesses of the auditorium, whispered conversations were always taking place while I delivered my lectures. My colleagues told me that I wasn't alone in this experience; it's hard to retain the attention of so many students, especially when you're standing on a stage, far away from most of them.

One semester, I tried something different. The syllabus that I posted at the beginning of the course included neither a day-by-day list of the myths we'd study nor any list of assigned readings to be done before each session. Instead, when the bell rang each day, my teaching assistant dimmed all the lights except for the spotlight over the stage and I walked in from the wings, wearing a cloak like that an ancient bard would wear. Standing front and center, I read aloud one of the myths that I was writing for this book, with as much drama and feeling as I could muster. I chose to read my own versions of myths, rather than ancient versions, because they were shorter, their diction was more familiar to the students, and in some cases they particularly emphasized certain aspects of the myths that I wanted to discuss.

After eight or nine minutes, when I was done reading, my assistant turned up the lights, I removed my cloak and I delivered a lecture in which I discussed the significance of the myth that the students had just heard—how it expressed ancient social and cultural values, how it articulated the Greeks' view of the relationship between gods and mortals, how it served to explain the existence of a certain animal species, rock formation or a ritual, how it fit together with other myths we'd studied that semester and so on. I showed the students ancient and modern works of art that represented the myth. I also showed them excerpts from ancient authors who had told the same myth. I discussed the differences among those ancient versions and between those versions and my own, explaining how the differences changed what the myth was saying. After each session, the students were assigned to read for themselves the myth they'd heard that day and the ancient versions I'd discussed.

I embarked on these performances in the hope that if the students initially experienced each myth as a *story* that someone was telling to entertain as well as educate them, they might engage more deeply with it. It seems to work; a hush falls over the auditorium as soon as the lights go down. More students visit me during office hours, wanting to talk about the myths.

In one version or another, expurgated or straight, Greek myths have been at the center of my world since I was old enough to choose which stories my mother would read aloud to me. Later, I shared them with my own children and grandchildren; one of my sons, who is now an illustrator, has added his own interpretations of some of them to this book. Over the years, these myths have cheered me, amused me and excited me. They've journeyed alongside me when I traveled and comforted me at times of loss. They've chided me when I did things—or was about to do things—that I knew I shouldn't be doing. The least that I can do in return is to tell them again. I hope that the myths, as I'm offering them now on the pages of this book, will engage, entertain and provoke you, my readers, as well.

INDEX OF CHARACTERS

Numbers refer to the chapter(s) in which each character is mentioned.