

Other writers identified the Sirens with the voices of flatterers, for they are the sweetest but also the most degrading type of infection that can poison the minds of leaders and other ambitious men. The Sirens hypnotize leaders until they are in a really deep sleep, because most of those leaders might as well be sleeping if they can't tell the difference between a friend and a flatterer. Because the slick rhetoric of the flatterer sounds much sweeter in the ear than the earnest speech of a friend, they're perfectly willing to take the more comfortable route. Naturally, however, once the flatterers figure out what type of person their prince is, they just make up speeches that they think he'll like. And they'll get excited about anything he does, whether it's congratulating himself on the importance of his achievements, or accumulating wealth, or propositioning prostitutes, or anything else like that.¹⁴⁸ And since this is the kind of speech that people like to hear, the ancients said that the Sirens were among the Muses' daughters.

In the end, the Sirens dragged their hearers off to destroy them. For as long as flattery has a place in our lives, there'll be no place for friendship, or honesty, or justice. This happens more often than not if someone lets others decide who he is supposed to be, instead of deciding for himself. He doesn't recognize the flowery rhetoric for what it is, and his gullibility inevitably threatens the safety and happiness of his family and his own person. Of course he ends up neglecting the essential business of his life.

This is the precise reason why the Italians are constantly changing around their political leaders, and why one man was never left in charge of a district for very long. For nothing could be more solid or substantial than a realm that was governed by a wise man. For how can we expect someone who's never offended either God or his fellow man to have a really bad time of it, when leaders who are real criminals can hardly be ousted from their posts? And what else can a leader be who turns his back on flatterers except a good, prudent, and wise man?¹⁴⁹ But that's enough about the Sirens; now let's talk about Orpheus.

Chapter 14: On Orpheus

We learn from Asclepiades of Myrlea that Orpheus was the son of Apollo and Calliope, one of the Muses.¹⁵⁰ And while different writers expressed different opinions about the identity of Orpheus's parents, Vergil certainly went along with Asclepiades' view, as we can see in these verses from his eclogue to Pollio: "Not Thracian Orpheus, not Linus shall vanquish me in song, though his mother

¹⁴⁸ See Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chap. 23, "How flatterers should be shunned," 81–82.

¹⁴⁹ Conti's Italy was overrun from without by Spanish and French invaders, and corrupted from within by preferment. He naturally hungers for stability and the kind of moral prince whom Machiavelli had banished from politics.

¹⁵⁰ *FGH* 1A 12 fr. 6C.

be helpful to the one, and his father to the other, Calliope to Orpheus, and fair Apollo to Linus" (*Ecl.* 4.55–57).

Menaechmus also agreed that Apollo was his father, although, as we learn from these verses, he never mentioned his mother: "Pierians, surely, then, you will pay the harsh penalty; for Orpheus, Apollo's son, was slain by you" (*A.P.* 7. 167).

But Apollonius [of Rhodes] disagreed, for he says, in the first book of his *Argonautica*, that Orpheus was the son of Oeagrus and Calliope, as these verses make clear: "First then let us name Orpheus whom, it is said, Calliope once bore; wedded to Thracian Oeagrus, near the Pimpleian height" (23–25). Some writers claim that he was the son of Oeagrus and Polymnia, others of Menippe, and still others of Thamyris. But our sources at least agree that his brothers were Ialemus and Hymenaeus.

The ancients said that Orpheus had such superb skill in playing music that rivers would stop flowing when he began to sing; the birds above would fly toward him; ferocious beasts would gallop in the direction of his song; and woods, stones, winds, and every insensible thing would rush to hear him, as Horace says in the first book of his *Odes*:

... on the sandy slopes of Helicon or on Pindus' top or on cool Haemus, whence in confusion the trees followed after tuneful Orpheus, who by the skill his mother had imparted stayed the swift courses of the streams and rushing winds; persuasive, too, with his melodious lyre to draw the listening oaks in his train. (12.5–12)

Here's what Apollonius [of Rhodes] has to say about Orpheus in the first book of his *Argonautica*:

Men say that he by the music of his songs charmed the stubborn rocks upon the mountains, and the course of rivers. And the wild oak-trees to this day, tokens of that magic strain, that grow at Zone on the Thracian shore, stand in ordered ranks close together, the same which under the charm of his lyre he led down from Pieria. (26–31)

Suidas says that there were a lot of men with the name of Orpheus,¹⁵¹ but Tzetzes points out (*Chiliad* 12, History 399)¹⁵² that everything they did was referred to the oldest of them all, the Thracian whose father was Oeagrus. This Orpheus lived at the same time as Hercules, and flourished a hundred years before the Trojan war.

Orpheus was the first Greek to write about astrology, as Lucian says in his dialogue *About Astrology*: "As for the Greeks, they learned not a whit of astrology either from the Aethiopians or from the Aegyptians. It was Orpheus, the son

¹⁵¹ Suid., s.v. Ὀρφεύς #654 ff., ed. Adler, 3: 564–65.

¹⁵² 12.399.140; 1.12.308; 4.133.282.

of Oeagrus and Calliope, that first declared these matters unto them, . . ." (*Astr.* 10). He was the first one to make the Bacchic sacrifices available to everyone in Greece; and he was also the first one to introduce (on a Boeotian mountain at Thebes where Father Liber was born) the so-called Orphic rites. In fact these are the very same sacrifices that were used when Orpheus himself was later cut to pieces, as Lactantius confirms in his work *On False Religion* (*Inst.* 1.22).

As Pausanias confirms in his description of Boeotia, Orpheus invented a lot of things that were useful to both the government and the people (9.30.5). He was the first one to explain the sacred mysteries of the gods and everything else there was to know about theology. He showed men how they could atone for their evil deeds, and set down which rites would convince the gods to forgive us when we did something to make them angry. He also invented a lot of medicines to help the sick, as he tells us himself in his *Argonautica*: "My heart bids me to say what I have never said before, in times gone by, for I am driven by Bacchus, by king Apollo, goaded to tell about terrible shafts, and about pacts with immortals for mortals, and remedies" (8-11).

Orpheus also wrote about the following subjects: how the four elements generate one another; the way Love's power works in nature; the Giants' battle with Jupiter; Proserpine's rape and the sorrow she experienced; the wanderings of Ceres; the labors of Hercules; the sacrificial rites practiced on Mount Ida; the Corybantes; precious stones; the secret responses of oracles; the sacrifices of Minerva and Venus; how the Egyptians grieved for Osiris; purifications; prophecies; auguries made by studying the flight of birds and the position of their entrails; the interpretation of dreams; signs and prodigies, and how to neutralize them; rites of atonement for the dead; the order and motion of the stars; and how to appease the angry gods. In fact he is his own witness, for he mentions, in the introduction to his *Argonautica* (28ff.), that he had written about all of these subjects.

This student of Linus was obviously a very wise man, and even in his own time he was famous for his vast knowledge of divinity. You can tell just how wise Orpheus was, just by reading these verses from his book *On Precious Stones*:

"If a man attends to the careful guidance of his own heart," (I'm skipping a lot of the verses here because there's so many of them, and just quoting the most important ones) "he can find out (if he happens to be interested) what thoughts men conceal deep within their hearts; he'll also be able to identify what meaning there is in the shrill sounds birds use to communicate with each other as they sail high above heaven's roof, what their loud croaks mean that are so offensive to human ears. They show us Jupiter's mind, and deliver Fate's own message. He'll know how to track snakes by listening for their hissing sounds as they crawl along the ground, and he'll also know how to make the antidotes for their poisons." (*L.* 17-18; 43-49)

In fact some writers (including Pausanias, in the second book of his description of Elis) claimed that Orpheus and Amphion were Egyptian magicians (6.20.18).

There's another story about Orpheus's wife Eurydice. Aristaeus was so hot with love for Eurydice that he ran after her, hoping to rape the woman when he caught up with her. But as Eurydice was trying to escape from him, she ran through some remote areas and died after she was bitten by a snake lurking in the grass.

That's when Orpheus picked up his cithara and descended into the underworld. And he played such a wonderful elegiac song that even the dead burst into tears. Marcus Manilius describes the scene in the fifth book of his *Astronomica*:

Next, with the rising of the Lyre, there floats forth from Ocean the shape of the tortoise-shell, which under the fingers of its heir gave forth sound only after death; once with it did Orpheus, Oeagrus' son, impart sleep to waves, feeling to rocks, hearing to trees, tears to Pluto, and finally a limit to death. (324-28)

After his sweet song appeased Pluto and Proserpine, those very forbidding monarchs of the dead, Orpheus was not only allowed to return to the world of light after seeing his wife, but he even got permission to bring her along with him. But there was a condition: he must not look back at the nether world as he made his way to the world above. Ovid mentions this in his tenth book (*Met.* 10.5ff.), and Vergil in the fourth book of his *Georgics* (487). But Orpheus couldn't contain his great love for Eurydice; so he defied the laws of the underworld by looking back in her direction, and lost her before he ever returned to the world of light.

Orpheus himself, the man who had descended into the lower world through Taenarus, wrote, in these verses from his own *Argonautica*, an account of his journey and the things he had seen there: "I told about the other things I saw, when I came to Taenarus, and from there to the shadowy houses of Dis¹⁵³ and the sorrowful kingdom, where I, driven by love of my wife, placed all hope in my cithara" (39-41).

The ancient accounts tell us that after Orpheus descended into the underworld, he sang the praises of all the nether gods, with the exception of Father Liber, whom he simply forgot about. Dionysus¹⁵⁴ became so angry that he caused his Bacchic followers to go mad. Then they tore Orpheus apart near the river Hebrus, and scattered his members through the fields, leaving them to be eaten by dogs. But since Orpheus had really adored the god Apollo and showered him with magnificent praises, the Muses were supposed to have collected all of his limbs and buried them in a place called Dium, which is located in Macedonia.

Other writers suggest that Jupiter flattened Orpheus with a thunderbolt when the man was in Thrace. That's just what Leonidas [*sic*] says in these verses: "Here the Muses buried Thracian Orpheus of the golden lyre, whom Zeus, who reigneth on high, slew with his smoking bolt" (*A.P.* 7.617 [anon.]).

¹⁵³ The underworld.

¹⁵⁴ Father Liber and Dionysus are names for the same god.

Orpheus's head was tossed into the Hebrus river; then the current swept it along (and his lyre as well) until it reached Lesbos, where they buried it. His lyre was placed among the stars, whose praises he had sung so beautifully, right next to those nine luminous stars, the Muses.

Other writers suggested that after Eurydice died, Orpheus rejected the idea of marrying another woman; in fact he went around trying to convince other men that every woman is an evil monster, whether she's good or bad. And when a lot of men followed his advice and refused to get married, some women used the ruse of sacrificing to Father Liber to tear Orpheus to pieces. Apollodorus of Cyrene tells the story in his book *On the Gods*.¹⁵⁵

Some writers suggested a more disgraceful reason for his behavior, including Ovid, who touches on the problem in these verses: "He set the example for the peoples of Thrace of giving his love to tender boys . . ." (*Met.* 10.83–84). Pausanias, in his description of Boeotia, claims that the Thracian women were really annoyed because Orpheus used his sweet music to lure men into his company (9.30.5). And after they had drunk more than their share of straight wine, these women tore Orpheus to pieces.

Apollodorus of Gela adds another Orphic tale in his *Philadelphoi* ["Love Brothers"]. He says that Jupiter chose Calliope to settle an argument between Venus and Proserpine over who should have Adonis.¹⁵⁶ But when Calliope decided that they should both share him, Venus got so angry that she provoked those women to attack Calliope's son Orpheus. But other writers claim that after Venus got the women to fall in love with Orpheus, they all jumped on him at once, and while they were fighting about who should have him, the man was torn to pieces.

We learn from the twenty-second book of Agatharchides the Cnidian's work *On Asia* that after Eurydice died, Orpheus came into Thesprotian territory, to Aorthus, where he consulted a very old oracle who specialized in calling back the spirits of the dead.¹⁵⁷ And he got the impression that Eurydice had actually joined him there, but when the illusion wore off, he killed himself. Pausanias adds that the nightingales that flocked around his tomb sang the sweetest song that anyone ever heard before (9.30.6). Other writers thought that Orpheus was killed by a bolt of lightning for revealing the secrets of the sacred rites to unbelieving and ignorant people.

Methon, who was supposed to be Orpheus's son, lived in Thrace and founded a city there that took his own name, as Plutarch confirms in his *Problems*.¹⁵⁸ Others say that he grew weary of his life after Eurydice died, and was so grief-stricken that he killed himself. The writers who claim that the women tore Orpheus to pieces add this story about the stream of Helicon (which the Diatae called Baphyra):

¹⁵⁵ See Bk. 3, chap. 17 n. 87. Cf. Bk. 5, chap. 13, n. 86.

¹⁵⁶ Apollod. *Gel.*, *FAC*, ed. Edmonds 3A: 198–9.

¹⁵⁷ Agatharchides the Cnidian (FGrH 2A 86) is not the source. Orpheus's visit to Aorthus to consult the oracle is mentioned in Paus. 9.30.6.

¹⁵⁸ *Greek Problems*, 11.

as soon as the women killed him, the stream went into hiding underground, to make sure that those women defiled by Orpheus's blood couldn't wash it off in the stream and cleanse themselves of guilt. And we learn from the first book of Apollodorus that Orpheus was buried at Pieria (3.2).

They say that the Muses took his death very hard, especially Mnemosyne and Calliope. Here's Antipater's account:

No more, Orpheus, shalt thou lead the charmed oaks and rocks and the shepherdless herds of wild beasts. No more shalt thou lull to sleep the howling winds and the hail, and the drifting snow, and the roaring sea. For dead thou art; and the daughters of Mnemos bewailed thee much, and before all thy mother Calliope. Why sigh we for our dead sons, when not even the gods have power to protect their children from death? (*A.P.* 7.8.)

These are the accounts that the ancients wanted us to remember about Orpheus. Now let's explain why they made them up.

The ancients said that Orpheus's parents were Apollo and either Calliope or Polymnia. For he was a really superb rhetorician, and even better as a poet. Another reason was that all good men were supposed to be sons of gods; in fact the ancients thought that their souls entered their bodies from one of the planets, usually the Sun.

Orpheus found himself living with boorish, lawless men who had no notion of how to behave, and who spent their time wandering through the fields like beasts, without a home or shelter that they could call their own. But these men responded so well to his smooth speech and convincing talk that he was able to turn around their whole way of life, in a gentler, more sophisticated direction. He convinced them to consolidate, to form states of their own, to obey the laws of the new governments, and to keep the marriage contracts that they made. This new way of life was supposed to be the gift of the ancient poets, and there's no doubt about it, as Horace confirms in these verses from his *Art of Poetry*:

While men still roamed the woods, Orpheus, the holy prophet of the gods, made them shrink from bloodshed and brutal living; hence the fable that he tamed tigers and ravening lions; hence too the fable that Amphion, builder of Thebes's citadel, moved stones by the sound of his lyre, and led them whither he would by his supplicating spell. In days of yore, this was wisdom, to draw a line between public and private rights, between things sacred and things common, to check vagrant union, to give rules for wedded life, to build towns, and grave laws on tables of wood; . . . (391–99).

Orpheus was the first person to play a musical instrument with seven strings. The number of the strings was supposed to mimic the length, tension, and size of the seven planets, as we've already established.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ See Bk. 4, chap. 10, pp. 287–88, where Conti talks about Apollo's discovery of the cithara.

The type of poet that wrote in ancient times was certainly known for his wisdom. And unlike the poets of our own times, the poets of old weren't willing to define poetic craftsmanship as merely the scansion of words and meter; nor were they a bunch of flatterers babbling to the power brokers in hopes of some reward.¹⁶⁰ In fact the songs of the ancient poets were of such quality that they were regarded as if they were very holy laws. And when political states were arguing over something they would often cite a poet's song as if they were invoking the opinion of some very sober judge.

Orpheus was supposed to be so incredibly eloquent that he could revive men's spirits even if they were quaking with terror, or falling into despair over some recent calamity. He could get them back to a normal state of mind, and even restore peacefulness to their lives. This is the kind of man who is really extraordinary — not the fellow who lives only for himself, taking private pleasure in his wealth and wisdom. And for all the use he is to anyone, he might as well have never been born.

Once Orpheus managed to appease the inhabitants of the underworld (who are of course our passions), he tried to bring Eurydice into the world of light. For her own name tells us that Eurydice can only refer to justice and decent treatment [Gr. δικη, "justice"]. She was sucked back into the underworld because Orpheus cared too much for her; this means that we don't have to go crazy looking for justice, because reason keeps our emotions under control. And if we become either too neglectful or too eager about seeking justice, we'll run into a blank wall and be bounced right back to where we started from.

A good man has to be very aware of everything that he does, because even the pleasures he's entitled to enjoy can cause him serious mental problems if he gets too involved with them. For if you let your passions run your life, you're sure to get into real trouble, and you'll be sure to suffer a horrible death. Thus the ancients made up these stories about Orpheus to help us to control our mental state, and to keep us from putting our hearts before our heads.

Other writers interpreted the Eurydice story in a different way. They look at her as the soul, who is married to Orpheus, or the body. Aristaeus, who is very much in love with her, obviously refers to the good. She flies from him, dashing through herbs and flowers, only to be destroyed by a serpent lurking among those desires. Then she descends into the underworld but is called out of there by the lyre's tune. This cautionary tale is obviously meant to warn us that the soul can easily be destroyed by the body, unless it obeys both reason and the law. But that's enough about Orpheus; now let's talk about the Muses.

¹⁶⁰ The superiority of the ancients to the moderns (especially in poetry) was a cliché of Renaissance humanism. The idea was later immortalized in Jonathan Swift's *A full and true account of the battle fought last Friday, between the antient and the modern books in St. James's Library* (London, 1704).

Chapter 15: On the Muses

The Muses were supposed to watch over poets and were also reputed to be the true authors of all the songs that we have. Musaeus and several of the other very ancient writers claim that Saturn and the Muses were Heaven's children.¹⁶¹ But writers of more recent vintage suggest that they were Jupiter's and Mnemosyne's daughters, as Orpheus does in these verses from his *Hymn* to the Muses: "I sing of the Pierides, the Muses, sprung from Mnemosyne's seed, and of Zeus as well, deities of splendid repute" (76.1–3). And Hesiod as well in his *Theogony*: "And again, beloved Mnemosyne with the beautiful hair: and of her the nine gold-crowned Muses were born who delight in feasts and the pleasures of song" (915–17).

Cicero, in the third book of his *On the Nature of the Gods*, wrote that the second Jupiter fathered four Muses: Thelxiope, Mneme, Aoede, and Melete. And a third Jupiter (paired with Mnemosyne) fathered the nine Muses. Here's what he says: "And in the same manner from Jupiter and from Antiopé the Pierians [i.e., the Muses] were born, equal in number to the previous" (21.54). And even though there were supposed to be three distinct groups of Muses, the ancients still said that they were all the daughters of Jupiter and Mnemosyne. And Tzetzes (in *Chiliad* 6, History 19 [335]) adds that the Muses were born on the Pierian mount.

We learn from Pausanias (in his description of Boeotia) that Aloeus's sons were the first ones to decide that three Muses merited worship in a religious rite. And their names were Melete, Mneme, and Aoede (9.29.1). But once Pierus the Macedonian came to Thespieae, he saw to it that *nine* Muses (with the same names we use today) received their proper worship. However Aristocles, in the third book of his work on *Dances*, says that Pierus named his nine daughters after the Muses.¹⁶² In fact the Greeks even referred to the children that these women bore as the Muses' children. Mimnermus insisted that the Muses were actually Heaven's daughters, and older than Jupiter himself,¹⁶³ although there were also some younger Muses who were Jupiter's own children.

Euphranor wrote in his *Flute Players* that Eupheme was the Muses' nurse,¹⁶⁴ although other writers claimed that his real nurses were Memnon's and Thespiea's daughters. In fact the Thespians used to hold Muse games, which they called *Musea*; and they offered prizes for the top contestants in singing and playing. These goddesses indeed watched over the sacred banquets that were held during purification rituals; they also presided over religious festivals and any kind of joyous celebration, as Orpheus tells us in these verses from his hymns: "You are the ones who have shown men, in the proper way, the consecrated banquets" (76.7). And as he says elsewhere: "... nor let men forsake the Muses who regulated

¹⁶¹ Cited in *Schol. in A. R.*, 3.1–5a, ed. Wendel, 214=DK 2 B15, 1: 25.

¹⁶² This account is in Paus. (9.29.4), not Aristocles.

¹⁶³ *FGrH* 3B 578 fr. 5.

¹⁶⁴ Euphranor the Pythagorean; his work *On Flute Players* is cited in Athen. 4.182C, E. See also DK 56, fr. 3 (444–45). Paus. 9.29.5 recalls Eupheme as the Muses' nurse.

we've already done for them. This seems to be the idea that Theocritus is after in this verse: "... nay rather, nurse a puppy-dog to be eaten for't" (5.38).

Obviously, the best benefit of all is the one that goes to a good man who also remembers to be grateful for it. For you're just wasting it if you give a gift to someone who is both evil and ungrateful. A wicked man doesn't want to feel grateful for what he has received, or to return it in kind; that's why he always attributes jealous motives to the giver. He comes up with all kinds of excuses for losing his temper, just to give the impression that whatever he has received has been spoiled. That's why the ancients gave us an example of how to give gifts to people. This helps us to be more prudent in giving gifts to other people, and to avoid rewarding men who might treacherously endanger our honor, our personal resources, and even our lives. For when we help out a good man, it's almost as if we'd helped ourselves, and it's an intrinsically just thing to do, as we learn from reading accounts of how we should handle our responsibilities.

The ancients also used this story to keep us from getting too curious about things that are none of our business. In fact the private affairs of others can prove to be very damaging to a lot of people when they come out. I refer to the business of a country's chief citizens, her most important men, and particularly of the gods, who won't hesitate to destroy someone who knows their secrets, even when their suspicion is based on the slimmest of evidence.¹⁵⁸

To sum it up, although many stupid and ignorant people thought that these myths were just a bunch of silly tales, the ancients actually preserved these stories for us to keep us from becoming rash, cruel, arrogant, lustful, lawless, and sinful, and also to encourage us to be humane, prudent, generous, morally upright, and ultimately to make something better of our lives.

¹⁵⁸ Conti's reference to fear and repression in Renaissance politics is supported by Anthony Grafton's observation that "the example of republican Rome... seemed only dubiously relevant in the corrupt, sophisticated, monarchical world in which most sixteenth-century intellectuals worked": in *Commerce With the Classics*, 204.

Book VII

How Famous Men Sought Glory both Rightfully and Productively

Most celebrated Campeggio, our most sacred law (and distinguished practice) is the one that gives moral excellence the reward it deserves, and indecent criminality the punishments it has coming. It's only fair that we shouldn't just stop people from committing crimes: we should also encourage them to be virtuous and to do something really admirable. Otherwise they'll get lazy and sluggish, and just squeak their way through life without anyone really noticing them. This encouragement was what led Hercules and the other famous heroes to get their courage up to work incredibly hard and to face all kinds of dangers. In fact there was nothing so dangerous or so difficult that they couldn't overcome it with hard work and patience.

Virtue was the only reward those heroes needed to inspire them to kill bandits, to brave the underworld, to tame horrible monsters, and to crush and eliminate cruel tyrants. Glory is the most valued reward that virtue can give. It's really amazing how glory can incite the spirits of men to achieve countless honorable deeds. It makes the difficult task seem easy, the heavy burden light, the dangerous feat simple and obvious.

In the end, no state, power, or nation can keep its strength or tenure unless it offers established rewards for the good as well as punishments for the evil. There's no good future waiting for a nation that neglects to reward offices and honors to good men. And the more conscientiously a nation approaches this ideal, the happier and more perfect it will be, in comparison with other states.

The Roman state is an excellent example of what I'm recommending here, for they often rewarded good men with the highest command posts, even if they were foreigners. And the Athenians did the same; in fact they often elevated many qualified foreigners to the highest positions in their government. But if we turn this around and scrutinize a state that grants freedom only to its own citizens; that keeps its gates fast shut against the courage and bravery of foreigners; that ignores honesty as a principle for citizens holding office and even extends patronage to the wicked; that punishes the wicked (sometimes with very trivial

penalties) but fails to reward the virtuous: then we are looking at a state that can't help but govern by caprice and remain hopelessly bogged down in its own sloth. What else could it become but a tyrannical, unjust state run by stupid criminals? A state that neglects the service of its citizens and is actually ungrateful to its benefactors. A state that decays along with its prostitutes, and wastes away into a do-nothing government.

But a man's mind can't exist in a condition of stasis. If it's not doing something honest, it's certainly going to be seduced into doing all kinds of things that are shameless and immoral. For if we close the doors to virtue, you can bet they'll open up for vice and ugliness, unless the intelligent man protects himself by keeping his mind active and focused.

Chapter 1: On Hercules

Hercules, who subdued and destroyed monsters, bandits, and criminals, was justly famous and renowned for his great courage. His great and glorious reputation was worldwide, and so firmly entrenched that he'll always be remembered. In fact the ancients honored him with his own temples, altars, ceremonies, and priests. But it was his wisdom and great soul that earned those honors; noble blood, physical strength, and political power just aren't good enough.

Orpheus tells us, in these verses from his *Argonautica*, that Hercules' parents were Jupiter and Alcmena:

"Here I first saw Hercules' strength; this one was once borne by Alcmena, after she lay with celestial Jupiter, the heavenly dweller — when Phoebus lay hidden for three long nights in a row. The sun was deprived of daylight, the suns had no light" (118–21).

Alcmena was supposed to be the wife of a Theban named Amphitryon, who waged war against the Teleboae, residents of Aetolia. He led his army against them because when he married Alcmena, he made a promise to avenge her brother's death.

We learn from Plautus's *Amphitryo* that when Jupiter fell in love with Alcmena, he changed his shape to make himself look like Amphitryon. Then he stole into their house before dawn and instead of using force, he tricked her into having sex with him (115, 121, 500, *passim*).

These Teleboae, who once lived in Acarnania, were the inhabitants of Taphos, one of the Echinades islands. Since they were a very greedy people, and hostile to everyone, they went to Argos and stole cattle from Alcmena's father Electryon. This provoked a battle between the two sides, and both Electryon and his sons died during the skirmish. Herodorus, who wrote about that war, mentions that Electryon was one of four children born to Andromeda and Perseus, the other

three being Sthenelus, Mestor, and Alcaeus. And after Perseus died, the four children ruled the kingdom in common.¹ Hippothoë was Mestor's child, Pterelas the child of Hippothoë and Neptune, and Teleboas and Taphus the children of Pterelas. Some writers claimed that this war broke out because the Teleboae tried to force Electryon's descendants to restore their ancestral rights — since they couldn't obtain those rights through legal means.

Amphitryo had already impregnated Alcmena, but since Jupiter wanted to be responsible for the conception himself, he's supposed to have made three nights last as long as one. And all of that time was spent in delivering Hercules, for it just wasn't possible to plant a tree that large in a single night.

When Amphitryo returned home and got a cool reception from Alcmena, he tried to find out why, and she told him that someone who looked just like him had dropped by his house the night before. Then (as we learn from Apollodorus the Athenian's second book) Tiresias told him that Jupiter had slept with his wife (2.4.8). And that's how Hercules came to be born in Thebes with Jupiter for a father and Alcmena for a mother, as Homer tells us in these verses from his *Hymn to Hercules*: "I will sing of Heracles, the son of Zeus and much the mightiest of men on earth. Alcmena bore him in Thebes, the city of lovely dances, when the dark-clouded son of Cronos had lain with her" (*h. Herc.* 1–3).

However, the poets still claimed that Hercules was really Amphitryon's son, as Euripides insists in these verses from his play *The Madness of Hercules*: "Who knows not Zeus's couch-mate, who of men, / Argive Amphitryon, sprung from Perseus' son / Alcaeus, father of great Hercules?" (1–3).

Hercules was also supposed to have had a "younger" brother named Iphiclus, for they both came out of their mother's womb on the same night. He was also supposed to have had a sister named Laonome who, the story goes, was married to Polyphemus. Orpheus describes the wonderfully swift-moving feet of Iphiclus, and his light weight, in these songs from his *Sacred Speech*: "The man who acts disgracefully can never escape from the gods. It doesn't matter if he's swifter than Iphiclus himself, who could run right over the tallest ears of corn without ever crumbling the dry crops with the weight of his foot."²

Pausanias, in his description of Boeotia, puts it on the record that Juno was so enraged by the thought of Jupiter's mistress Alcmena that when she found out that the girl was about to give birth, she sent out her sorceresses to block the process (9.11.3). But while all of this was happening, Historia, one of Tiresias's daughters, had the presence of mind to play a trick on Juno's agents. For she went over to a place where they could hear what she was saying and cried out: "Alcmena gave birth." The sorceresses were distracted by the sound of her voice, took the bait, and left immediately. So Alcmena was able to give birth anyway.

¹ FGtH 1A 31 fr. 15.

² Orph. fr. 284 (18), ed. Kern.

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