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## THE NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GODS IN CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

ABSTRACT. Bär Silvio, *The Nature and Characteristics of the Gods in Classical Mythology* (Natura i charakterystyka bogów w mitologii)

This article is intended for students and teachers of classical mythology. It gives an overview of the nature and the characteristics of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology, explaining what the Greek and Roman gods are and what they are not. Furthermore, the relationship between gods and humans in classical mythology is discussed.

Keywords: classical mythology; Greek mythology; Roman mythology; gods; divine; Abrahamic God; humans; overview; teaching of mythology

Thales, one of the earliest Greek philosophers (first half of the sixth century B.C.), famously said that “everything [was] full of gods” (πάντα πλήρη θεῶν, DK 11 A 22). This dictum can be understood as a reference to the polytheistic system of Graeco-Roman religion but can also be understood metaphysically, that is, as an expression of the idea of a ubiquitous divine presence.<sup>2</sup> In either case, it is clear that the gods were omnipresent in all areas of Greek and Roman culture: not only in religious practice (i.e. cults, rituals, oracles, etc.), but also in folk tales, poetry, iconography, architecture, politics and in almost all aspects of daily life. Mythology, in turn – representing the collective body of stories that

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<sup>1</sup>This article is of a pedagogical nature, intended for students and teachers of classical mythology. References to secondary literature are, as far as possible, restricted to non-specialized pieces of reading which are written in English or are available in an English translation. Translations from Greek and Latin are my own unless otherwise specified. For mythological characters, I use the Greek name forms unless reference to a specifically Roman context is made (e.g. it is ‘Aphrodite’ by default, but ‘Venus’ with reference to the *Aeneid*). For Greek names, I normally use the Greek rather than the Latinized form (e.g. Kronos, not Cronus; Ouranos, not Uranos) unless the Latinized form is so familiar that the Greek form would appear obscure (e.g. Oedipus, not Oidipous). See March (2009: 7) for further details on this spelling practice.

<sup>2</sup>On different ways of how Thales’ dictum can be understood, see Henrichs (2010: 22–23).

relate to a specific religious tradition – was part of many aspects of life, culture and tradition for which a divine presence was thought to be relevant.<sup>3</sup> Today, we live in a completely different world, but classical mythology and, along with it, the deities whom the Greeks and the Romans worshipped are still eminently culturally important in our times, albeit in wholly different contexts.<sup>4</sup> Even the most embittered cultural pessimist must acknowledge that there is a steady, if not growing interest in classical mythology around the globe – particularly among younger generations. This increased interest has an impact on the presence of classical mythology in (popular) culture and the entertainment industry, as well as in the educational sector.

The current generation of young adults grew up exposed to pieces of popular reception of ancient mythology such as the animated Disney cartoon *Hercules* (1997) and the *Percy Jackson* novels by Rick Jordan (published between 2005 and 2009). As a result, university courses on classical mythology are normally packed with students from all disciplines, and there is a plethora of introductory books on classical mythology. Most of these introductions are student-friendly renarrations of the most important ancient myths, arranged in (more or less) chronological and/or thematic order, typically also including comprehensive descriptions of the gods and goddesses, their purviews and their attributes.<sup>5</sup> However, despite their pedagogical nature, most books of this sort lack a systematic presentation and discussion of overarching aspects that concern the underlying mythical system. As William Hansen rightly states, “classical

<sup>3</sup> On the definition of ‘myth(ology)’, see § 1.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. the comprehensive *Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology* by Zajko and Hoyle (2017).

<sup>5</sup> On ancient mythography, see Bremmer and Horsfall 1987; Cameron 2004; Fowler 2000, 2013. The modern prototype of systematic renarrations of classical myths is Gustav Schwab’s *Die schönsten Sagen des klassischen Alterthums*, first published in German in three volumes between 1838 and 1840, translated into English in 1946 (Schwab 1946 [1838–1840]). Later books in this tradition include (I make no claim to be complete): Rose <sup>6</sup>1958; Graves <sup>2</sup>1960; Kerényi 1966; Barthell 1971; Gantz 1993; Grant <sup>2</sup>1995; Osborn and Burgess 1998; Morford and Lenardon <sup>7</sup>2003; Buxton 2004; Hard 2004; Wiseman 2004; March 2009; Fry 2017 (Graves <sup>2</sup>1960 and Gantz 1993 are more scholarly, as they discuss mythical variants and their sources in depth; Fry 2017, in turn, is primarily for entertainment purposes). The prototype of a mythological lexicon is Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher’s *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* in six volumes (Roscher 1884–1937). Further mythological lexica and handbooks include: Howe and Harter 1929; Hunger <sup>6</sup>1974; Tripp 1974; Grimal 1990 [1951]; Bell 1991; Room 1997; Dixon-Kennedy 1998; March 1998; Price and Kearns 2003; Hansen 2004 (with a useful annotated bibliography at 337–354); Jamme and Matuschek 2014 (also covers mythologies from non-Western cultures). Further mention should be made of the books by David Stuttard that follow a geographic (rather than chronological and/or thematic) arrangement of the mythical material (Stuttard 2016; Stuttard 2019), and of two source books that present the primary sources of the myths in translation instead of renarrating them: López-Ruiz 2014; Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet <sup>2</sup>2016. Finally, see also the introductions and companions to ancient mythology by Segal 2004; Morales 2007; Woodard 2007; Dowden and Livingstone 2011.

mythology consists not only of a corpus of stories but also of a world, one with a geography and a history as well as relationships and rules and narrative conventions,” and “most works on classical mythology focus their attention on the stories, neglecting the world in which they are situated.”<sup>6</sup>

This article discusses what is probably the most important aspect of the world of classical mythology: the gods. However, I will not be concerned with the individual deities and their features and domains (this point is covered more than sufficiently in most introductory books). Rather, the centre of interest here are questions relating to the general nature and characteristics of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology (the main focus being on the Twelve Olympians). After some preliminary remarks on the nature of classical mythology in general, I first raise the simple, but decisive question of what the Greek and Roman gods are – and what they are not. In this context, an occasional comparison to the concept of ‘God’ in the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism (Yahweh), Christianity (God) and Islam (Allah), is necessary because we as modern readers tend to transfer our (implicit) assumptions about the nature of the Abrahamic God onto the deities of ancient mythology. This approach is problematic, as the Greek and Roman gods fundamentally differ from ‘our’ idea of God. In a second step, then, some main aspects concerning the relations between the ancient gods and humans are discussed.<sup>7</sup>

## 1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE DEFINITION AND NATURE OF ‘MYTH’ AND ‘MYTHOLOGY’

Before we can make a qualified statement on the nature and the characteristics of the gods in classical mythology, we need to give a brief account of what we mean when we speak of ‘myth’ and ‘mythology’. Frustratingly, there is no universal scholarly consensus as to how these two terms should be defined, at least not when one takes into consideration all potential intricacies that such a definition might entail.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as early as 1974, Geoffrey S. Kirk aptly stated that “the nature of myth is still, in spite of the millions of printed words devoted to it, a confused topic.”<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, most people are able to identify a myth when they read one, and it is, therefore, safe to give a general, overarching definition with which most scholars can probably agree. The Ancient Greek noun *μῦθος* (*mýthos*) means “tale,” “story,” “narrative,” “fiction,” or “plot (of a drama)”;

<sup>6</sup>Hansen 2004: xiii.

<sup>7</sup>Hansen (2004: 27–46, 92–94) discusses several of these aspects too. My focus is different, but reference is made to Hansen where appropriate.

<sup>8</sup>See Gentile (2011) for an overview of some definitions by Classics scholars and historians of religion.

<sup>9</sup>Kirk 1974: 17.

hence, etymologically, the term simply implies the idea of what we would call ‘narrative fiction’ today.<sup>10</sup> However, our understanding of ‘myth’ is not as broad as that; the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘myth’ as a “traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.” Accordingly, ‘mythology’ is defined as a “body or collection of myths, esp[ecially] those relating to a particular person or thing, or belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, most definitions of ‘myth(ology)’ include the notion that a myth is a traditional tale that involves gods and/or other divine beings. The inclusion of the divine sphere, along with the idea of myth as some sort of prehistory, separates myth from other related narrative forms such as the fairy tale, the fable and the legend.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, it makes clear that there is an inherent connection between mythology and religion. Probably the most famous definition of ‘myth(ology)’ along those lines is that by Joseph Campbell, who called myth “other people’s religion” and, correspondingly, religion “misunderstood mythology,” whereby “the misunderstanding consist[s] in the interpretation of mythic metaphors as references to hard fact.”<sup>13</sup> Generalizing as this definition may be, it catches the essence. Mythology is the narrative side of religion, and consequently, mythology has the potential of developing into a Holy Scripture – which is what happened in the cases of the three Abrahamic religions, but not in the religious systems of the Graeco-Roman world. The narrative nature of mythology also lies at the heart of the archetypal approach promoted by Northrop Frye in his famous essay collection *Anatomy of Criticism*. According to Frye, myth is the origin and source of all sorts of literature in the widest sense of the word, irrespective of its medium (i.e. textual, visual, or auditory).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, ritualistic practices can be viewed as the performative side of mythology. In Jan N. Bremmer’s words, “myths existed without rituals and rituals without myths,” yet “the two symbolic systems were often interrelated,” and there are three ways to look at this relation: “myth is the scenario for ritual; ritual generates

<sup>10</sup> See LSJ s.v. μῦθος. See also Moors 1982: 35: “The term μῦθος and related terms meaning myth-telling, myth-teller, myth-like, and so on, can stand either for a story – be it a story addressing the distant past or one which in some way addresses matters which cannot be verified sensually or are fantastic – or stand for little more than narration, saying, use of speech, word, or verbal expression [...]”

<sup>11</sup> *OED* s.v. “myth” and “mythology.”

<sup>12</sup> On the difference between myth and fairy tale, see the entries on “Mythologie,” “Mythologische Schule” and “Mythos” in volume 9 of the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (Bies 1999; Pöge-Alder 1999; Burkhart 1999). On the relation between myth and history in antiquity, see Griffiths 2011. Further, see also Veyne 1988 [1983].

<sup>13</sup> Campbell 2002 [1986]: 27.

<sup>14</sup> Frye 1957: 131–239.

myth; and ritual and myth arise at the same time, *pari passu*.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the aetiological aspect is relevant: myths explain the world as it is on the basis of what happened in the past. Often (but not exclusively), this concerns the presence and the function of a ritual, a cult, an oracle, etc. Through aetiology, myth acquires meaning, and the present of a society is connected to its past.

## 2. THE NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GODS

### 2.1. ANTHROPOMORPHISM, PARTLY ENHANCED

The Greek and Roman gods look and behave like humans. Two famous quotes by the Greek philosopher Xenophanes (c. 570–467 B.C.) have been transmitted that ironically address the anthropomorphic nature of the ancient gods, suggesting that it was man who shaped them according to his image:<sup>16</sup>

εἰ <δὲ> τοὶ ἵπποι ἔχον χέρας ἢ βόες ἢ λέοντες  
ἢ γράψαι χεῖρεςσσι καὶ ἔργα τελεῖν ἄπερ ἄνδρες,  
ἵπποι μὲν θ' ἵπποισι, βόες δὲ τε βουσὶν ὁμοίαις  
καὶ <κε> θεῶν ἰδέας ἔγραφον καὶ σώματ' ἐποιοῦν  
τοιαῦθ' οἷόνπερ καὶ τοὶ δέμας εἶχον ἕκαστοι.

But if horses or oxen or lions had hands  
or could draw with their hands and accomplish such works as men,  
horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses, and the oxen as similar to oxen,  
and they would make the bodies of the sort  
which each of them had themselves according to their shape.

πάντα θεοῖς ἀνέθηκαν Ὅμηρός θ' Ἡσίοδος τε,  
ὅσσα παρ' ἀνθρώποισιν ὄνειδα καὶ ψόγος ἐστίν,  
κλέπτειν μοιχεύειν τε καὶ ἀλλήλους ἀπατεῦειν.

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all sorts of things  
which are matters of reproach and censure among men:  
theft, adultery, and mutual deceit.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Bremmer 1999: 61. – The first scholar to describe in detail the complex relations between myth and ritual was Sir James G. Frazer (1854–1941), the founder of the so-called ‘Cambridge School’, his famous life work being *The Golden Bough* (Frazer [ed. Frazer] 1994). An important milestone of the myth-and-ritual theory in the twentieth century was Walter Burkert’s epoch-making monograph *Homo Necans* (Burkert 1983 [1972]). More recent publications in this vein include Doty <sup>2</sup>2000; Rüpke 2012; Woodard 2013. Further, see also the overviews provided by Graf 1993 [1987]: 39–43, 50–53; Segal 2004: 46–78; Calame 2007.

<sup>16</sup>The tendency to criticize a literal understanding of the gods begins with Xenophanes and gains ground from the Hellenistic period onwards. The principal methods of interpreting myths in antiquity were allegorization and rationalization (see e.g. Tate 1934; Small 1949; Graf 1993 [1987]: 176–198; Hawes 2014). On atheism in antiquity, see Whitmarsh 2015.

<sup>17</sup>DK 21 B 15 and DK 21 B 11; translations by Leshner 1992, modified.

The idea of anthropomorphic gods is fully developed already in the earliest written sources in Ancient Greek – that is, in archaic epic, beginning with Homer and Hesiod.<sup>18</sup> These texts give us an accurate idea of the type of anthropomorphism that was ascribed to the gods in mythology (and not everyone was as critical of it as Xenophanes was). In essence, it can be said that the gods – and, in particular, the Twelve Olympians – were conceived as human-like, but with enhanced features.<sup>19</sup> Let us look at some examples.

In a (slightly humorous) scene in Book 5 of the *Iliad*, the heavy weight of Athene is mentioned when she jumps onto a chariot together with the hero Diomedes (*Il.* 5.837–839):

ἦ δ' ἐς δίφρον ἔβαινε παρὰ Διομήδεα δῖον  
 ἐμμεμανῖα θεά· μέγα δ' ἔβραχε φήγινος ἄξων  
 βριθοσύνη· δεινὴν γὰρ ἄγεν θεὸν ἄνδρα τ' ἄριστον.

And she stepped into the chariot next to god-like Diomedes,  
 the goddess in her eagerness; and the oak-made axle made much noise  
 under the weight, for it carried a mighty goddess and a distinguished man.

Elsewhere, Achilles recognizes Athene because “her mighty pair of eyes was shining” (δεινὴ δέ οἱ ὄσσε φάανθεν, *Il.* 1.199); the body of Ares “extended over seven plethra,” that is, approximately 2.15 m (ἑπτὰ δ' ἐπέσχε πέλεθρα, *Il.* 21.407); and Aphrodite, who approaches Helen in the disguise of an old woman, is recognized (despite her disguise) because of “her exceedingly beautiful neck / and her breasts that excite desire and her shining eyes” (περικαλλέα δειρὴν / στήθεά θ' ἱμερόεντα καὶ ὄμματα μαρμαίροντα, *Il.* 3.396–397). In all four examples, the enhancement works in favour of the main purview of the deities: heaviness and a terrifying look fit well with the warrior-goddess (and goddess of intelligence) Athene, as does an impressive body size with the warrior-god (and god of bloodshed) Ares. In turn, a beautiful neck, beautiful breasts and sparkling eyes emphasize Aphrodite’s main function as the goddess of love and beauty.

In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, Aphrodite shows herself in her full height and beauty after she has made love to her mortal lover Anchises and after he has fallen asleep (lines 172–175):

<sup>18</sup>An overview of the special character of divine anthropomorphism in Greek religion and mythology is offered by Burkert 1985 [1977]: 182–189 ≈ Burkert 2011: 280–289. On the gods in Homer’s epics, see e.g. Griffin 1980: 144–204; Burkert 1985 [1977]: 119–125 ≈ Burkert 2011: 189–197; Kearns 2004. On the gods in archaic Greek epic more broadly, see chapters 1–8 in the volume by Clauss, Cuypers and Kahane 2016 (and especially Faulkner 2016 on the gods in the *Homeric Hymns*).

<sup>19</sup>See Figure 1 in the appendix (§ 4) for one of the rare depictions of all Twelve Olympians together.

έσσαμένη δ' εὖ πάντα περι χροῖ δῖα θεάων  
 ἔστη ἄρα κλισίῃ· εὐποιήτου <δὲ> μελάθρου  
 κῦρε κάρη, κάλλος δὲ παρειάων ἀπέλαμπεν  
 ἄμβροτον, οἶόν τ' ἔστιν ἰοστεφάνου Κυθρείης.

And after she had clothed herself well all around her body, the most divine of the goddesses, she positioned herself in the hut; and her head touched the well-wrought cross-beam [of the ceiling], and her beauty was shining from her cheeks, immortal, as is typical of the violet-crowned daughter from Kythera.

When Anchises saw Aphrodite for the first time as she was in human ‘disguise’, not knowing who she really was, he had already been “astonished at / her appearance and her height and her shining clothes” (θαύμαινέν τε / εἶδος τε μέγεθος τε καὶ εἴματα σιγαλόεντα, lines 84–85). Now, after having returned to her full glory, she wakes him up; he is frightened and averts his eyes because he cannot bear her divine beauty (lines 182–186):

τάρβησέν τε καὶ ὄσσε παρακλιδὸν ἔτραπεν ἄλλη.  
 ἄψ δ' αὐτίς χλαίνη ἐκαλύψατο καλὰ πρόσωπα  
 καὶ μιν λισσόμενος ἔπεα πτερόεντα προσηύδα·  
 “αὐτίκα σ' ὡς τὰ πρῶτα, θεά, ἴδον ὀφθαλμοῖσιν,  
 ἔγνων ὡς θεὸς ἦσθα· συ δ' οὐ νημερτὲς ἔειπες.”

He startled and turned his eyes to the side, in the other direction.  
 And he veiled his beautiful face again with his cloak,  
 and beseeching he spoke to her the winged words:  
 “As soon as I saw you for the first time, goddess, with my eyes,  
 I realized that you were a divinity; but you did not speak the truth to me.”

Similar phenomena can also be found in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*: grief-struck because her daughter Persephone was abducted by Hades, Demeter withdraws from Olympus and travels to Eleusis, “disguising her appearance for a long time” (εἶδος ἀμαλδύνουσα πολὺν χρόνον, line 94).<sup>20</sup> She finds shelter in the house of the mortals Keleos and Metaneira, where she secretly tries to make their baby boy Demophon immortal by holding him in the fire, but she is caught in the act by Metaneira who mistakes her actions for attempted murder. Demeter thus becomes angry and transforms herself back into her real self (lines 275–280):

[...] θεὰ μέγεθος καὶ εἶδος ἄμειψε  
 γῆρας ἀπωσαμένη, περὶ τ' ἀμφὶ τε κάλλος ἤητο·

<sup>20</sup>The Greek verb ἀμαλδύνειν is decisive here: literally, it means “to soften,” and hence “to efface,” but also “to disguise” (see LSJ s.v. ἀμαλδύνω; Richardson <sup>2</sup>1978: 177). Demeter disguises herself by making herself ugly (see also Foley 1994: 41, who aptly remarks that Demeter “disguises herself as a postmenopausal old woman”).



ὄδμη δ' ἱμερόεσσα θνηέντων ἀπὸ πέπλων  
 σκίδνατο, τῆλε δὲ φέγγος ἀπὸ χροῶς ἀθανάτοιο  
 λάμπε θεᾶς, ξανθαὶ δὲ κόμαι κατενήνοθεν ὤμους,  
 ἀγῆς δ' ἐπλήσθη πυκινὸς δόμος ἀστεροπῆς ὤς.

[...] The goddess changed her size and her appearance,  
 shaking off her old age, and beauty was breathing around and about her;  
 and a scent that excites desire spread from her fragrant robes,  
 and a light shone far afield from the immortal body  
 of the goddess, and her blond hair was flowing about her shoulders,  
 and the well-built house was filled with a bright light like that of lightning.

Based on the above-quoted passages, we can summarize the concept of 'enhanced' divine anthropomorphism as follows: when they wish to interact with human beings, gods and goddesses typically transform themselves into human beings, and by doing so they 'dampen' the effect of their divine appearance. Nevertheless, sometimes humans are still able to detect their divine nature through their 'disguises'. When they shake off their human forms and reveal their real selves, the gods are taller, heavier and more beautiful than humans; their gaze is penetrating, and there is a divine radiance emanating from them that is hardly tolerable for the human eye.<sup>21</sup> Occasionally, a divine scent heralds their epiphany.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the gods do not eat human food, but despite their immortality and agelessness, they need nourishment: they consume nectar (a beverage) and ambrosia (solid food) – as we can see, for example, in Book 5 of the *Odyssey*, when Kalypso entertains Hermes: “she placed a table [in front of him], / filled with ambrosia, and she mixed red nectar” (παρέθηκε τράπεζαν / ἀμβροσίης πλήσασα, κέρασσε δὲ νέκταρ ἐρυθρόν, *Od.* 5.92–93). The dissimilar diet is also the reason why divine blood is different from human blood; it is even suggested that divine immortality is the result of the gods' diet (*Il.* 5.339–342):

[...] ῥέε δ' ἄμβροτον αἶμα θεοῖο,  
 ἰχώρ, οἷός περ τε ῥέει μακάρεσσι θεοῖσιν·  
 οὐ γὰρ σῖτον ἔδουσ', οὐ πίνουσ' αἶθοπα οἶνον,  
 τοὔνεκ' ἀναίμονές εἰσι καὶ ἀθάνατοι καλέονται.

<sup>21</sup> Hera says this in the *Iliad* about her own kind: “gods are dangerous when they manifest themselves clearly” (χαλεποὶ δὲ θεοὶ φαίνεσθαι ἐναργεῖς, *Il.* 20.131). The adjective *χαλεποὶ* is ambiguous, as it means “difficult” and “dangerous” (see Henrichs 2010: 19, n. 2; see also *Hom. Hym. Dem.* 111: *χαλεποὶ δὲ θεοὶ θνητοῖσιν ὀρᾶσθαι*, “gods are difficult/dangerous for mortals to see”). The idea is also Biblical; see *Exodus* 33.20 (translation: King James Bible): “Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live” (οὐ δυνήσῃ ἰδεῖν τὸ πρόσωπόν μου· οὐ γὰρ μὴ ἴδῃ ἄνθρωπος τὸ πρόσωπόν μου καὶ ζήσεται).

<sup>22</sup> On epiphany (the sudden revelation of a deity before a human) see e.g. Burkert 1997; Marinatos and Shanzer 2004; Turkeltaub 2007; Platt 2011; Petridou 2015. See also Richardson (1978: 252) on the above-quoted passage from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.



[...] And the immortal blood was flowing from the goddess [= Aphrodite],  
the ichor, such as flows in the blessed gods;  
for they do not eat grain and they do not drink sparkling wine,  
and therefore they are bloodless and are called the immortals.

Hesiod's *Theogony* describes what happens when a divinity is deprived of nectar and ambrosia (which is the punishment for committing perjury, lines 793–798): he/she “lies there without breath and speechless” (κεῖται ἀνάπνευστος καὶ ἄναυδος, line 797). This state is explicitly identified as an “illness” (νοῦσον, line 799). Moreover, nectar and ambrosia can be used to make a human immortal, which is what Venus does in order to deify her son Aeneas according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: “with ambrosia, mixed with sweet nectar, / she touched his mouth and made him a god” (*ambrosia cum dulci nectare mixta / contigit os fecitque deum*, *Met.* 14.606–607).<sup>23</sup>

The gods also have their own language, or at least their own idiolect. In the Homeric epics, we can find a few passages that mention a handful of nouns and proper names for which the gods have their own word or designation.<sup>24</sup> Otherwise, in Greek and Roman literature, normally everybody simply speaks Greek and Latin, including gods and foreigners (as all extra-terrestrials miraculously speak English in the science-fiction series *Star Trek*).<sup>25</sup> However, the fact that the gods are attributed their own language (or idiolect) is important insofar as this contributes to their anthropomorphic nature: they communicate through language like humans do (and not, e.g., through telepathy).

In contrast to their enhanced physical features, divine behaviour is, as a rule, in no way superior to human behaviour – as Xenophanes shrewdly observed. Indeed, the Greek (as well as the Roman) pantheon consists of “anthropomorphic gods who speak and interact with one another in a human way, who love, feel anger, and suffer, and who are mutually related as husbands and wives, parents and children.”<sup>26</sup> We need only think of the extramarital affair between Ares and Aphrodite as it is recounted in *Odyssey* Book 8 (*Od.* 8.266–366), for which

<sup>23</sup> On nectar, ambrosia and ichor, see Strauss Clay 1983: 143–148 (with further references); Sissa and Detienne 2000 [1989]: 29–33. On ichor, see also Quirini 1983. The fact that the gods receive offerings from the humans in the form of burnt sacrifices does not mean that they feed on these offerings; rather, humans make sacrifices to the gods in order to commend their honour and respect to them (see e.g. Stocking 2017). The idea of the gods depending on burnt sacrifices as nourishment comes up a few times in Old Comedy as a joke (Aristophanes, *Birds* 186, 1519–1520; *Ploutos* 1112–1132); these passages may (or may not) reflect “a naïve popular belief [...] that gods actually need sacrifices to keep them healthy” (Dunbar 1998: 146).

<sup>24</sup> See Watkins 1970; Sissa and Detienne 2000 [1989]: 41–42.

<sup>25</sup> See Hansen 2004: 34: “When ancient narrators represent the gods speaking with one another or with anyone else, they always have the gods speak in the language of the narration, Greek or Latin, so that the curious fact that the gods possess a special language plays no role in mythological narrative.”

<sup>26</sup> Burkert 1985 [1977]: 182.

cuckolded Hephaistos takes revenge by exposing his wife and her lover in front of the other gods. Another example is the erotic encounter between Hera and Zeus in *Iliad* Book 14, which Hera stages in order to divert Zeus' attention from the battlefield (*Il.* 14.153–223). And, when it comes to Zeus, his numerous sexual encounters are of course legion and bespeak the earthly desires of the divines as well as their ethical dubiousness more than anything else.<sup>27</sup>

## 2.2. TRANSFORMATIVE ABILITIES

Gods typically transform themselves into humans when they want to interact with humans, as seen above (§ 2.1). In addition, they also possess the ability to take the shape of an animal or another element of nature. For example, Apollo transforms himself into a dolphin in order to divert a ship sailing to the isle of Pylos to Delphi (a story recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, lines 388–501). Another example is Athene in the *Odyssey*; she first accompanies Telemachos in the shape of a man (Mentor), but eventually turns into a vulture and flies away (*Od.* 3.371–372). The sea-god Proteus attempts to escape Menelaos' grip by sequentially transforming himself into a lion, a serpent, a leopard and a boar, eventually even into water and into a tree (*Od.* 4.454–459). Similarly, according to the mythographer Apollodoros, Thetis tries to resist her suitor, the mortal Peleus, by shifting her shape into fire, water and a beast (*Library* 3.13.5).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Zeus/Jupiter uses this scheme regularly for the sake of seduction (or simply violation); several of these stories are told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, such as those of Leda and the swan (*Met.* 6.109), Europa and the bull (*Met.* 2.833–875) and Danae and the golden shower (*Met.* 4.610–611).

Further, the gods can change not only their own forms, but also those of humans. Athene temporarily 'enhances' Odysseus at the court of the Phaeacians before he is to meet king Alkinoos (*Od.* 6.229–231):

τὸν μὲν Ἀθηναίη θῆκεν, Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα,  
μείζονά τ' εἰσιδέειν καὶ πάσσονα, καὶ δὲ κάρητος  
οὔλας ἦκε κόμας, ὑακινθίνῳ ἄνθει ὁμοίας.

And Athene, Zeus' daughter, made him  
taller to look at and stouter, and from his head  
she made his curly hair flow down, resembling the blossom of a hyacinth.

<sup>27</sup> On the promiscuity of Zeus, see also §§ 2.2 and especially 3.3.

<sup>28</sup> The underlying pattern is that if the human manages to cling to the deity, the deity is 'conquered' and must comply with the human's wish: Proteus must provide Odysseus with information, and Thetis must marry Peleus.

On the other hand, she makes him look like a beggar upon his arrival on the isle of Ithaca because he must, for the time being, not be recognized by anyone for reasons of security (*Od.* 13.397–403):

ἀλλ' ἄγε σ' ἄγνωστον τεύξω πάντεσσι βροτοῖσι  
 κάρψω μὲν χροῖα καλὸν ἐνὶ γναμποῖσι μέλεσσι,  
 ξανθὰς δ' ἐκ κεφαλῆς ὀλέσω τρίχας, ἀμφὶ δὲ λαῖφος  
 ἔσσω, ὃ κεν στυγέησιν ἰδὼν ἄνθρωπος ἔχοντα.

But come now, I will make you unrecognizable to all mortals;  
 I'll make your beautiful skin on your flexible limbs withered,  
 and I'll ruin the blond hair [that flows] from your head, and I'll enwrap you  
 in a piece of cloth which any man will despise when he sees you wearing it.

This course of action resembles that of Demeter who, according to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, made herself ugly because she did not want to be recognized (see above at § 2.1).

These transformations are temporary, but the gods can also implement permanent changes. Again, many of these stories are told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: gods can metamorphose humans for their own benefit (like Daphne, who is made into a laurel tree by her father, a river god, in order to be saved from Apollo, *Met.* 1.543–553), as punishment (like Lycaon, who is turned into a wolf by Jupiter because of his outrageous deeds, *Met.* 1.230–239)<sup>29</sup> or to serve a god's interest (as when Jupiter changes Io into a heifer in order to hide her from Juno, *Met.* 1.610–614).

### 2.3. IMMORTALITY AND ETERNAL YOUTH – PROCREATION AND BIRTH

The key difference between gods and humans is the fact that the gods are immortal and eternally young; in a sense, we could regard immortality and eternal youth as the principal divine enhancement. In archaic Greek epic, “immortals” (ἀθάνατοι [*athánatoi*]) is a default term for the gods; often, they are also called “the blessed ones” (μάκαρες [*mákares*]) because they do not need to carry the burden of old age. Homeric phrases such as ἀθάνατος καὶ ἀγήραος ἡματα πάντα (“immortal and free of old age for all days”)<sup>30</sup> show that immortality and eternal youth belong together. However, they are not identical, as the myth of Tithonos illustrates: Eos, the goddess of dawn, falls in love with the mortal Tithonos and asks Zeus to make him immortal. She is granted her wish – but stupidly, she forgets also to ask for eternal youth for Tithonos, and as a result, he keeps aging,

<sup>29</sup> On the gods punishing human hubris, see § 3.2.

<sup>30</sup> This specific phrase can be found at *Il.* 8.539; *Od.* 5.136; 7.257; 23.336. Similar phrases at *Il.* 12.323; 17.444; *Od.* 5.218; 7.94.

but never dies (according to a well-known version of the myth, he is eventually transformed into a cicada).<sup>31</sup>

Unconditional immortality and eternal youth are the sole privilege of the gods, whereas everything that lives on Earth (humans, animals, and nature) is subject to the circle of birth and death. This is stated by Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Kolonos* (lines 607–609):

[...] μόνοις οὐ γίγνεται  
θεοῖσι γῆρας οὐδὲ κατθανεῖν ποτε,  
τὰ δ' ἄλλα συγχεῖ πάνθ' ὁ παγκρατῆς χρόνος.

[...] For the gods alone there is  
no old age and they never die,  
but for all other things, all-powerful time ruins them.

This does, however, not apply to all minor divinities (i.e. to those who live on Earth and not on Mount Olympus). The nymphs, in particular, occupy some sort of 'in between' stage. In the Homeric epics, they are often classified as immortal, even as goddesses proper,<sup>32</sup> but simultaneously we can find the notion of them being mortal (albeit god-like and long-lived). Aphrodite states in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (lines 259–261) that

αἶ ρ' οὔτε θνητοῖς οὔτ' ἀθανάτοισιν ἔπονται·  
δηρὸν μὲν ζῶουσι καὶ ἄμβροτον εἶδαρ ἔδουσιν,  
καὶ τε μετ' ἀθανάτοισιν καλὸν χορὸν ἐρρώσαντο.

They belong neither to the mortals nor to the immortals;  
they live a long time and eat the food of immortals,  
and they nimbly dance their beautiful dance among the immortals.<sup>33</sup>

This aligns with a statement made by Pausanias in his *Description of Greece*: following Pausanias, the poets say that “the nymphs have a great number of years to live, but nevertheless they are not altogether exempt from death” (τὰς νύμφας δὲ εἶναι πολὺν μὲν τινα ἀριθμὸν βιούσας ἐτῶν, οὐ μέντοι παράπαν γε ἀπηλλαγμένας θανάτου, 10.31.10). The fact that the nymphs are mortal may also explain the genealogy of the Amazons, the famous mythical warrior women: according to a widespread tradition, they were the daughters of Ares

<sup>31</sup>The story is narrated by Aphrodite in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (lines 218–238) as a parallel to her own destiny. For further sources, see Graves <sup>2</sup>1960: 150; Gantz 1993: 36–37. On sexual relationships between immortals and humans, see § 3.3.

<sup>32</sup>On the nymphs in the Homeric epics, see Faulkner 2008: 286. On the nymphs in general, see Larson 2001; Hansen 2004: 239–244; Hard 2004: 209–212.

<sup>33</sup>On the passage, see Faulkner 2008: 285–287; Olson 2012: 262–264 (with references to further parallels).

and the nymph Harmonia.<sup>34</sup> Since all Amazons are mortal, they cannot have two immortal parents; therefore, the mortality of the Amazons presupposes the mortality of their mother Harmonia.

The idea of divine immortality is in line with ‘our’ general idea of God. However, in complete contrast to the Abrahamic God, who is imagined always to have existed, the gods in Graeco-Roman religion and mythology were not the initiators of creation, but an element of the process.<sup>35</sup> To put it simply, the gods were all born – but once born, they live forever. They can, and normally do, procreate in a human fashion.<sup>36</sup> Some gods, in turn, are born in a more ‘unorthodox’ manner – Athene jumps fully grown and fully armoured from the head of her father Zeus, and Dionysos grows in Zeus’ thigh.<sup>37</sup> And, as often in mythology, sometimes there is more than one version: Aphrodite, for example, is the daughter of Zeus and Dione according to Homer (*Il.* 5.370–430), but following Hesiod, she was born from the foam of the sea that originated from the genitals of Ouranos, whom his son Kronos had castrated (*Theog.* 188–200).<sup>38</sup> Once born, the gods normally grow and develop at a very high speed (a characteristic that can also be regarded as an element of divine enhancement), and then they remain forever young.<sup>39</sup> The best example is perhaps the trickster-god Hermes, who grows up in the course of one day (*Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, lines 17–19):

ἦϕος γεγρονὼς μέσῳ ἡματι ἐγκιθάριζεν,  
ἔσπεριος βοῦς κλέψεν ἐκηβόλου Ἀπόλλωνος,  
τετράδι τῆ προτέρῃ τῆ μιν τέκε πότνια Μαῖα.

Born in the dawn, by midday he played the lyre,  
and in the evening he stole the cattle of Apollo the Far-Darter,  
on that fourth day of the month when Lady Maia bore him.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup>As it is stated, e.g., in a scholion to *Il.* 3.189 (schol. vet. T 95–96): “they are the daughters of Ares and the naiad-nymph Harmonia” (Ἄρεος καὶ Ἀρμονίας νύμφης Ναΐδος θυγατέρες εἰσίν).

<sup>35</sup>On creation, see § 2.5 for more details.

<sup>36</sup>Even the beginning of all procreation, the union between Gaia (Earth) and Ouranos (Heaven), is a sexual act; see Campbell 2006: 3–4. On creation, see § 2.5.

<sup>37</sup>For the latter, see Figure 2 in the appendix (§ 4): an Apulian red-figure volute-krater that displays the birth of Dionysos from the thigh of his father Zeus.

<sup>38</sup>This story is based on folk etymology: Ancient Greek ἀφρός (*aphrós*) means “foam.”

<sup>39</sup>See Hansen 2004: 35: “Unlike human beings, who experience a life cycle that moves inevitably from infancy to maturity to senescence and death, individual gods reach a particular developmental stage and remain there, immortal and unaging. Once deities reach their ideal age, which they do very quickly, their development freezes [...].”

<sup>40</sup>Translation by Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet <sup>2</sup>2016, modified. On the passage, see Vergados (2013: 236–239), with references to further passages where the motif of the precocious divine child can be found.

After their fight against the Titans, the so-called Titanomachy (as it is described in great detail in Hesiod's *Theogony*, lines 617–885), the Olympians are consolidated as the ruling generation (with Zeus as their chief). From that moment on, they enjoy stable power over the world. This has repercussions on how they perceive time as compared to the humans, who constantly pass through a circle of birth, childhood, youth, adulthood, old age and death.<sup>41</sup> Initially, the gods and the humans were more similar; humans “lived like gods, having a mind free from sorrows” (ὥστε θεοὶ δ’ ἔζωον ἀκηδέα θυμὸν ἔχοντες, line 112), and “they died as if they were just overcome by sleep” (θνῆσκον δ’ ὥσθ’ ὕπνω δεδμημένοι, line 116). This idyllic, prehistorical period was stereotypically known as the ‘Golden Age’ in antiquity. However, following Hesiod (*Works and Days*, lines 109–201) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 1.89–162), mankind underwent a steady decline which led to a separation of the divine and the human worlds and to a human life full of hard toil, dependent on the cycles of the seasons and of life and death.<sup>42</sup> Hence, gods and humans have different perceptions of time. Divine time can be described as linear, whereas human time can be regarded as cyclic. The divine horizon is, obviously, wider than that of the humans; in Hansen’s words, “[f]or immortals, with their greater knowledge of the past and the future, time is more permeable and flowing, whereas mortals are relatively more confined to the present moment.”<sup>43</sup>

#### 2.4. LACK OF OMNISCIENCE, OMNIPRESENCE AND OMNIPOTENCE – VULNERABILITY

As seen, the Greek and Roman gods can, essentially, be described as ‘enhanced’ anthropomorphic beings; they are immortal and eternally young; and they can transform themselves into humans and animals. In contrast to this notion stands the fact that they neither possess absolute knowledge nor absolute power, that they are not ubiquitous, and that they even are vulnerable. This, in turn, stands in opposition to ‘our’ common notion of the Abrahamic God, who is imagined to be all-knowing, all-powerful and ever-present.

The Greek and Roman gods do have superior knowledge because of their enhanced vision, their elevated place of residence (i.e. on Mount Olympos), their long life experience, etc., but their knowledge and their horizon are clearly limited, as numerous examples show. I mentioned the story of Jupiter who changes Io into a heifer above (§ 2.2; Ovid, *Met.* 1.610–614). Jupiter transforms

<sup>41</sup> On divine vs human (perception of) time, see Vidal-Naquet 1986 [1981]: 39–60; Hansen 2004: 61–63. On Hesiod’s concept of time, see Purves 2004.

<sup>42</sup> The idea of regress (rather than progress) was dominant in mythical thinking; see Guthrie 1957: 80–94; Blundell 1986: 135–202; Campbell 2006: 39–60. On the five races of men in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, see also § 2.5.

<sup>43</sup> Hansen 2004: 63.

Io because he wants to hide the girl from his jealous wife Juno; if Juno were all-knowing, this scheme would be pointless (she does, of course, have suspicions because her husband is notorious for his unfaithfulness). The conception of Dionysos happens under similar conditions according to the *Homeric Hymn to Dionysos*: “the father of men and of the gods begot you / far away from humans, hiding from white-armed Hera” (σὲ δ’ ἔτικτε πατήρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε / πολλὸν ἀπ’ ἀνθρώπων, κρύπτων λευκώλενον Ἥρην, lines 6–7). Another famous example is the absence of Poseidon during the divine council on Mount Olympus at the beginning of the *Odyssey*: Athene has been wishing to send Odysseus home for a long time but has not been able to do so because of Poseidon’s veto. Now that Poseidon “has left for a visit to the Aethiopians who live far away” (ὁ μὲν Αἰθίοπας μετεκίαθε τηλόθ’ ἐόντας, *Od.* 1.22), he does not notice what is happening on Mount Olympus, and thus Athene can finally put her plan into action. From this example we can clearly see that the lack of omniscience goes hand in hand with a limited visual field (i.e. the gods can see a lot, but not everything). The same applies even to Zeus: Book 1 of the *Metamorphoses* mentions that he witnesses the wrongdoings of mankind “from his lofty citadel” (*summa [...] arce*, *Met.* 1.162), but later, when Phaethon has almost set Earth on fire because he was unable to handle his father’s solar chariot, Jupiter “takes a tour around the enormous walls of heaven / and checks whether it is threatened by collapse, weakened by the forces of the fire” (*ingentia moenia caeli / circuit et, ne quid labefactum viribus ignis / corruat, explorat*, *Met.* 2.401–403).

The problem of power is more difficult to address. Jupiter is called “almighty father” by the narrator in the passage from the *Metamorphoses* just quoted (*pater omnipotens*, *Met.* 2.401). The question, therefore, arises as to whether such a designation is a mere rhetorical hyperbole or whether Zeus/Jupiter really is all-powerful, at least in theory.<sup>44</sup> A passage at the beginning of Book 8 of the *Iliad* may give us a potential answer: Zeus instructs the gods not to interfere in the battle between the Achaeans and the Trojans, and he threatens them with severe consequences if his order is not followed. He then continues to illustrate the scope of his power as follows (*Il.* 8.19–27):

σειρήν χρυσεῖην ἐξ οὐρανόθεν κρεμάσαντες  
 πάντες τ’ ἐξάπτεσθε θεοὶ πᾶσαι τε θέαιναι·  
 ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἂν ἐρύσαιτ’ ἐξ οὐρανόθεν πεδίονδε  
 Ζῆν’ ὕπατον μῆστωρ’, οὐδ’ εἰ μάλα πολλὰ κάμοιτε.  
 ἀλλ’ ὅτε δῆ καὶ ἐγὼ πρόφρων ἐθέλοιμι ἐρύσσαι,  
 αὐτῇ κεν γαίῃ ἐρύσαιμι· αὐτῇ τε θαλάσση.  
 σειρήν μὲν κεν ἔπειτα περὶ ρίον Οὐλύμπιο  
 δησαίμην, τὰ δέ κ’ αὐτε μετήορα πάντα γένοιτο.  
 τόσσον ἐγὼ περὶ τ’ εἰμὶ θεῶν περὶ τ’ εἴμι· ἀνθρώπων.

<sup>44</sup>On Zeus, see e.g. Cook 1914, 1925, 1940; Lloyd-Jones 1971; Marks 2008; Yasumura 2011.



Let a golden rope hang down from the sky  
 and cling to it, all you gods and all you goddesses –  
 but you wouldn't be able to drag him down from the sky to the ground:  
 Zeus, the highest counsellor, not even if you greatly struggled.  
 However, if I should seriously want to drag [you up],  
 I could drag [you up] together with the earth and with the sea.  
 And then I would fasten the rope round the peak of Olympos,  
 and the whole thing would then be hanging in the air.  
 By so high a degree I am above the gods and above the humans.

There has been scholarly disagreement as to how seriously Zeus' threat should be taken. Some argue that he speaks rhetorically,<sup>45</sup> but considering that his threat is effective (the gods do temporarily withdraw from the battlefield), we must conclude that he possesses corresponding authority among the Olympians. And indeed, it is reported elsewhere in the *Iliad* that once in the epic plupast,<sup>46</sup> Zeus created an example by suspending Hera from Mount Olympos as a punishment for her mistreatment of Herakles (*Il.* 15.18–25). It is therefore justified to say that “the Homeric Zeus [...] dominates by tremendous physical power.”<sup>47</sup>

Yet even Zeus' power has its limitations. In Book 16 of the *Iliad*, Hera discourages Zeus from saving his mortal son Sarpedon because this might have severe repercussions, as all the other gods then would want to save their favourite mortals as well (*Il.* 16.431–449). Here the (dodgy) aspect of destiny comes in: it appears that Zeus would, in theory, have the power to save his son, but that some sort of supra-divine authority prevents him from doing so.<sup>48</sup> However, when no such destiny is in the way, gods can even make individual mortals immortal. The most illustrious example is, of course, Herakles, who is deified at the end of his life as a reward for his accomplishments. Further examples include Tithonos, who is immortalized by Zeus upon Eos' request, and Kalypso's offer of immortality to Odysseus, though he declines because he wishes to return to his wife Penelope (*Od.* 5.201–224). In the latter case, it is astonishing that a non-Olympian goddess should have so much power.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. Willcock 1978: 260: “Zeus has difficulty controlling his family. [...] This often makes him angry, and he blusters and threatens to use physical force. [...] The scene is simple-minded, primitive and comic.”

<sup>46</sup> The term ‘epic plupast’ is borrowed from Grethlein (2012: 15). It designates what was already history at the moment of the narrated time of the Homeric epics, i.e. “the embedded past of the heroes [that] figures as a mirror to the heroic past presented in epic poetry” (ibid.).

<sup>47</sup> March 2009: 54.

<sup>48</sup> On this passage and the limitations of Zeus' power in the face of destiny, see in more detail my remarks at § 2.6.

<sup>49</sup> On Tithonos, see also § 2.3. An overview of gods making mortals immortal is provided by Hansen 2004: 270–273.

In a polytheistic religious system, clear role allocations are necessary, as is discipline among individual gods when it comes to following the rules and abiding by their purviews. In Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytos*, Artemis spells this rule out and even elevates it to a "law" (νόμος [*nómos*]): Artemis is sad about the impending death of her protégé Hippolytos, but Aphrodite has decided to kill him because he denies her his worship – and since Aphrodite is the goddess of love, Artemis must not interfere with her decision (lines 1329–1335):

[...] θεοῖσι δ' ὧδ' ἔχει νόμος·  
 οὐδεὶς ἀπαντᾶν βούλεται προθυμία  
 τῆ τοῦ θέλοντος, ἀλλ' ἀφιστάμεσθ' αἰεί.  
 ἐπεὶ, σάφ' ἴσθι, Ζῆνα μὴ φοβουμένη  
 οὐκ ἂν ποτ' ἦλθον ἐς τόδ' αἰσχύνης ἐγὼ  
 ὥστ' ἄνδρα πάντων φίλατον βροτῶν ἐμοὶ  
 θανεῖν ἔᾶσαι. [...]

[...] Among the gods the law is this:  
 None wants to oppose the will of [another one  
 who] wants [to do something], but we always step aside.  
 For, be well assured, if I did not fear Zeus,  
 I would never have gone to this degree of disgrace  
 to allow the man who is dearest to me of all mortals  
 to die. [...]

At the same time, here Zeus' supremacy comes to the fore again: Artemis clearly states that she would not respect the divine law of non-interference if it were not for her fear of Zeus.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, we come to vulnerability. It seems hard to imagine, but indeed it is possible to hurt or even injure a god from the Graeco-Roman pantheon. In a passage from Book 5 of the *Iliad* quoted above (§ 2.1), it is stated that "the immortal blood was flowing from the goddess [Aphrodite]" (*Il.* 5.339). The context of the passage is this (*Il.* 5.381–404): Aphrodite has been wounded by Diomedes in combat (this happens before Zeus forbids the gods to further participate in the battle). She has sought shelter with her mother Dione (as the goddess of beauty and love, Aphrodite is ironically portrayed as snivelling by the Homeric narrator), and Dione now consoles her by telling her two other stories about immortals who were physically disabled by humans: Ares was fettered and confined by Otos und Ephialtes, and Hera and Hades were shot by Herakles.<sup>51</sup> Another well-known

<sup>50</sup> On this passage, see the instructive commentary by Halleran 1995: 261: "The principle of divine non-intervention, sanctioned by Zeus, while nowhere else so baldly formulated, is implicit in the divine activities in Homer, where for all their fighting against each other, the gods ultimately respect Zeus' will and/or fate [...]."

<sup>51</sup> It has been suggested that these mythical examples were not part of traditional mythical tales but invented by Homer for narrative purposes (see Willcock 1964: 145–146; Alden 2000: 21–22).

example of a divine injury is the story of Ouranos being castrated by his son Kronos, narrated by Hesiod in the *Theogony* (lines 174–181). In the *Theogony*, we can also find an example of a ‘divine illness’: lines 793–798 (also discussed above at § 2.1) recount what happens to a deity who is refused divine nourishment (i.e. nectar and ambrosia): he/she “lies there without breath and speechless” (κεῖται ἀνάπνευστος καὶ ἄναυδος, line 797); the common Greek word for “illness” is used to describe this state (νοῦσον, line 799).

## 2.5. CREATION AND ANTHROPOGONY

There were several (sometimes contradictory) creation myths in Greek and Roman antiquity – not only in the realms of mythology, but also in philosophy and in Orphism (a religious movement ascribed to the mythical poet Orpheus); hence the topic “is complex and confusing regardless of how long the explanation.”<sup>52</sup> A canonical version is that given by Hesiod in the *Theogony*.<sup>53</sup> At the beginning, there was χάος (*cháos*), which means “void,” “gap” or “infinite space.”<sup>54</sup> Therefrom, Gaia (Earth), the Olympos, Tartaros (the Underworld) and Eros (Sexual Attraction, Love) came into being, and subsequently, all other elements, forces of nature and divinities arose one by one. In other words, the gods were not the initiators of the creation process, but a product of the process itself. Mankind, in turn, was not created by the gods; in fact, humans were not created at all – rather, in Gordon L. Campbell’s words,

As Hesiod’s genealogy of the gods in the *Theogony* continues it also includes humans. No explanation of human origins is given – we are simply assumed to exist – but by extending the divine genealogy all the way down to humans, the distinction between us and the gods is blurred. So Hesiod’s view of the creation of the world and the origins of the gods is closely bound up with the place of humans within the world.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast to the *Theogony*, the gods *are* the creators of mankind according to Hesiod’s *Works and Days*. There were five races of men, beginning with the

Nevertheless, they must have been in accordance with the horizon of expectation of a contemporary audience.

<sup>52</sup>Sailors 2007: 20. For an overview of creation myths in Greek and Roman antiquity, see Graves <sup>2</sup>1960: 27–35; Campbell 2006: 1–38; March 2009: 21–31. On different concepts of anthropogony in classical mythology, see Guthrie 1957: 11–28; Hansen 2004: 102–105. Further, see also the collection of creation myths from various mythologies from all over the world by Sproul (1991).

<sup>53</sup>On Hesiod’s cosmos, see West 1966: 1–39; Strauss Clay 2003.

<sup>54</sup>The English word “chaos” stems directly from Greek χάος, but the meaning has changed, and Greek χάος must therefore not be translated as “chaos.” Greek χάος is cognate with the Greek verb χαίρειν: “to yawn,” “to gape,” “to open wide” (see LSJ s.v. χαίρω and s.v. χάος).

<sup>55</sup>Campbell 2006: 2.

first race of almost god-like men who lived in a paradise-like ‘Golden Age’, down to the fifth and last generation, doomed to a life full of toils and hardship (lines 109–201). It is explicitly stated that each race was the product of divine intervention: the first two races were created by the Olympians collectively, while the next three were made by Zeus personally.<sup>56</sup> The humans “are made [...] by the gods or Zeus [...] for some purpose, a purpose that emanates from the gods,” and “in the case of the first three races, each attempt on the part of the gods to produce a race of men fails.”<sup>57</sup> The fact that the gods fail several times in their attempts can be seen as a confirmation of their general imperfection. And, despite the obvious anthropomorphic nature of the gods, it is nowhere explicitly stated that they created the human races as ‘copies’ of themselves, unlike the Biblical God who “created man in his own image.”<sup>58</sup>

The Olympians are also responsible for the creation of Pandora, the first woman. The story is narrated by Hesiod in two complementary versions in the *Theogony* (lines 570–591) and in the *Works and Days* (lines 59–105). Pandora is formed from earth and water by Hephaistos at Zeus’ order and equipped with different features and skills by the different deities. She is fashioned as a recompense for Prometheus’ fire theft (on which see below), and her purpose is to be the mother of “the noxious race and the tribes of women, / a big misfortune for the mortals” (ὄλοιοῖον [...] γένος καὶ φῦλα γυναικῶν, / πῆμα μέγα θνητοῖσι, *Theog.* 591–592). Thus, she is “the nearest thing the Greek tradition has to the Biblical Eve.”<sup>59</sup>

Aside from the Olympians, the Titan Prometheus also plays the role of a demiurge.<sup>60</sup> Hesiod recounts his story twice too (*Theogony*, lines 507–616; *Works and Days*, lines 47–105).<sup>61</sup> However, the Hesiodic Prometheus is not the creator of mankind as such; rather, he is presented as its helper and benefactor. At a convention at Mekone, where the further relations between the gods and the humans are negotiated,<sup>62</sup> he tricks Zeus into accepting a pile of bones instead

<sup>56</sup>The Greek verb ποιεῖν (“to make,” “to create”) is used as the default verb (lines 110 ποιήσαν, 128 ποιήσαν, 144 ποιήσ’, 158 ποιήσε). On the five races, see the extensive discussion by Strauss Clay 2003: 81–99, with further references.

<sup>57</sup>Strauss Clay 2003: 86.

<sup>58</sup>*Genesis* 1.27 (translation: King James Bible): “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him” (καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν ἄνθρωπον κατ’ εἰκόνα θεοῦ ἐποίησεν αὐτόν).

<sup>59</sup>March 2009: 129. On the Pandora myth in Hesiod’s poems, see von Fritz 1947; Lendle 1957; McLaughlin 1981; Strauss Clay 2003: 101–104, 119–128.

<sup>60</sup>The term “demiurge” (δημιουργός [*dēmiūrgós*], “craftsman”) as a designation for the creator of the universe goes back to Plato’s dialogue *Timaios*.

<sup>61</sup>The two accounts are very different in content and tone and thus complement each other; see the excellent analysis by Strauss Clay (2003: 100–128), with further references.

<sup>62</sup>It is not made explicit in the *Theogony* what the purpose of the gathering at Mekone actually was. However, a scholiast spells it out (scholion to *Theog.* 535): “it was decided what a god and what a human [should be] in Mekone” (ἐκρίνετο τί θεὸς καὶ τί ἄνθρωπος ἐν τῇ Μηκῶνῃ).

of good meat as the divine sacrificial share – the story is an obvious aetion that explains why the humans offer the inedible parts of the sacrificed animal to the gods and keep the good parts to themselves.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Prometheus steals the fire from the gods and gives it to the humans. For both trespasses, he is eventually punished by Zeus by being chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus, where he is tormented by Zeus' eagle. It is significant that it is not one of the ruling Olympians, but one of the Titans – and, hence, a member of the older generation and a personal enemy of Zeus – who fulfils this task. By acting as the benefactor of mankind, Prometheus fouls his own nest, becoming an outsider to the divine world.

Only in later sources do we find the explicit idea of Prometheus as the creator of mankind. Apollodoros' *Library* is one such source, where the notion of Prometheus as a demiurge is combined with the Hesiodic story of the fire theft: “after having shaped humans from water and earth, Prometheus gave them the fire, having hidden it in a reed without the knowledge of Zeus” (Προμηθεὺς δὲ ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ γῆς ἀνθρώπους πλάσας ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς καὶ πῦρ, λάθρα Διὸς ἐν νάρθηκι κρύψας, 1.7.1). Pausanias mentions the leftovers from the clay with which Prometheus formed the humans (*Description of Greece* 10.4.4). In iconography, we can find corresponding depictions from the Hellenistic period onwards, wherein Athene/Minerva often acts as a mentor and an observer.<sup>64</sup>

To conclude, we can now properly evaluate the meaning of the phrase “the father of men and of the gods” (πατὴρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε) – a standard designation of Zeus in epic. It must, obviously, not be taken too literally: Zeus is the father of some deities and of many demigods, and he is the creator of some of the races of men according to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, but he is not the father of all gods and all humans. The phrase first and foremost expresses the superior power of Zeus.

## 2.6. DESTINY AND SUPRA-DIVINE AUTHORITY

If the gods are not almighty, then the question arises as to whether they too answer to some authority. The long answer is complex and disputed, but the short answer is yes. A famous dialogue between Zeus and Hera in Book 16 of the *Iliad* gives us an idea of how things work: Zeus is saddened about the impending death of his mortal son Sarpedon and ponders whether he should

<sup>63</sup>The aetiological function of the story is clear, but many of its details are not. Inter alia, there has been ample discussion as to why Zeus chooses the bad heap although he clearly seems to understand what is going on. See most recently Baumbach and Rudolph 2014; Stocking 2017: 27–54.

<sup>64</sup>See Figure 3 in the appendix (§ 4) for a visual depiction of Prometheus as the demiurge on a Roman relief.

save him or not – and he receives an unequivocal answer from his wife Hera (Il. 16.431–449):

τοὺς δὲ ἰδὼν ἐλέησε Κρόνου παῖς ἀγκυλομήτεω,  
 Ἥρην δὲ προσέειπε κασιγνήτην ἄλοχόν τε·  
 “ὦ μοι ἐγών, ὅτε μοι Σαρπηδόνα φίλτατον ἀνδρῶν  
 μοῖρ’ ὑπὸ Πατρόκλοιῳ Μενoitιάδαο δαμῆναι.  
 διχθὰ δὲ μοι κραδίη μέμονε φρεσὶν ὀρμαίνοντι,  
 ἢ μιν ζῶν ἐόντα μάχης ἄπο δακρυόεσσης  
 θεῖω ἀναρπάξας Λυκίης ἐν πίοιῳ δῆμῳ,  
 ἢ ἤδη ὑπὸ χερσὶ Μενoitιάδαο δαμάσσω.”  
 τὸν δ’ ἠμείβετ’ ἔπειτα βοῶπις πότνια Ἥρη·  
 “αἰνότατε Κρονίδη, ποῖον τὸν μῦθον ἔειπες;  
 ἄνδρα θνητὸν ἐόντα, πάλαι πεπρωμένον αἴσῃ  
 ἄψ ἐθέλεις θανάτοιο δυσσέχους ἐξαναλῦσαι;  
 ἔρδ’· ἀτὰρ οὐ τοι πάντες ἐπαινέομεν θεοὶ ἄλλοι.  
 ἄλλο δὲ τοι ἐρέω, σὺ δ’ ἐνὶ φρεσὶ βάλλεο σῆσιν·  
 αἶ κε ζῶν πέμψῃς Σαρπηδόνα ὄνδε δόμονδέ,  
 φράζεο μή τις ἔπειτα θεῶν ἐθέλῃσι καὶ ἄλλος  
 πέμπειν ὄν φίλον υἱὸν ἀπὸ κρατερῆς ὑσμίνης.  
 πολλοὶ γὰρ περὶ ἄστῳ μέγα Πριάμοιο μάχονται  
 υἱέες ἀθανάτων· τοῖσιν κόνον αἰνὸν ἐνήσεις.

Seeing them [= Sarpedon and Patroklos], the son of crooked-of-counsel Kronos took pity, and he spoke to Hera, his sister and wife:

“Oh, dear me! That it is destiny that my Sarpedon, dearest of [mortal] men, should be overcome by Patroklos, son of Menoitios!

In two ways longs my heart while it is pondering things in its mind, whether I should grab him while he’s still alive from the sorrow-inducing battle and put him down in the fat country of Lycia, or whether I should let him be overcome now by the hands of the son of Menoitios.”

And in turn, ox-eyed lady Hera answered him:

“Mightiest son of Kronos, what a word have you spoken?!

A man who is mortal, one who has long been doomed: you want to release him from ill-sounding death?!

Go ahead! But the other gods will not all approve of it.

But I tell you, and please consider it in your mind:

if you send Sarpedon back home alive,

take into account that any other of the gods might also want to send his own son home from the fierce battlefield.

For, around the big city of Priam, many sons of immortals are fighting; you will cause them massive grievance.<sup>65</sup>

It is Sarpedon’s destiny to be killed by Patroklos, and apparently, there is some sort of superordinate power that has previously determined his day of

<sup>65</sup> On this scene, see the commentary by Brügger 2018 [2016]: 203–217.

death.<sup>66</sup> However, it is not stated if this was a divine decision or if the decision was taken by some superordinate, supra-divine power. What becomes clear, however, is that Zeus does theoretically possess the power and the capacity to save Sarpedon, but he is strongly discouraged from doing so by Hera because this would set a precedent for the other gods, who would then also want to save their favourite mortals. This, in turn, implies that in theory, not only Zeus but also the other gods have the power to override destiny, but that they all must respect destiny for the sake of maintaining the world order.

One thing that a god must under no circumstances do is commit perjury. When gods swear an oath, they do so by the Underworld river Styx, and this oath is called “the big oath of the gods” (θεῶν μέγα ὄρκος) in archaic Greek epic.<sup>67</sup> If such an oath is broken, the consequences are severe. A passage from Hesiod’s *Theogony* (also discussed above at § 2.1) describes what happens (lines 793–804): first, the deity is deprived of nectar and ambrosia for an entire year, which puts him/her in some sort of stasis (“lies there without breath and speechless,” κεῖται ἀνάπνευστος καὶ ἀναυδος, line 797); and afterwards, he/she is excluded from the company of the other gods for another eight years.<sup>68</sup> A similar idea can be found in a fragment by the Greek philosopher Empedocles (c. 490–430 B.C.), stating that a god who commits perjury is banished from the company of the other gods for thirty thousand years (DK 31 B 115). Interestingly, this ‘cosmic law’ is called “an ancient decree by the gods” (θεῶν ψήφισμα παλαιόν, line 1); in other words, the gods have imposed this law upon themselves as some sort of checks and balances system.

### 3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GODS AND HUMANS

#### 3.1. LACK OF OMNIBENEVOLENCE – CONDITIONAL LOVE

So far, we have been concerned with the question as to what the gods in Greek and Roman mythology are and what they are not. Now, some aspects concerning the interactions between the gods and humans shall be discussed.

<sup>66</sup>The Greek word translated as “destiny” here is μοῖρα (*moira*, line 434), which literally means “part of a whole,” “portion,” “share” (see LSJ s.v. μοῖρα). In a metaphorical sense, it designates a person’s allotted ‘portion’ of lifetime. According to Hes. *Theog.* 901–906, the three Fates (Μοῖραι [*Moirai*]; commonly called *Parcae* in Latin) were daughters of Zeus and Themis (Themis being the personified goddess of Law and Order), whose task it was to “give / to mortal men to have [their share of] good and bad” (διδούσι / θνητοῖς ἀνθρώποισιν ἔχειν ἀγαθόν τε κακόν τε, lines 905–906). On μοῖρα in archaic Greek epic, see also Strauss Clay 1983: 154–157.

<sup>67</sup>For the set epic phrase θεῶν μέγα ὄρκος, see Hes. *Theog.* 784; *Hom. Hym. Apoll.* 83; *Hom. Hym. Herm.* 518; with Vergados’ (2013: 428–429) commentary on the latter passage for further discussion.

<sup>68</sup>See West’s (1966: 374–378) commentary on the passage.



What is the general nature of the relation between gods and humans in classical mythology, and what general attitude do the gods take towards humans? In the Abrahamic religions, the idea of the love of God is an essential pillar of faith, in the double sense that God loves all humans and that all humans should love God. Unconditional love of God (ἀγάπη [*agápē*], i.e. the idea that God loves everyone without distinction) is a cornerstone of New Testament Christianity.<sup>69</sup> By contrast, the idea of divine omnibenevolence is for the most part alien to the Graeco-Roman sphere.<sup>70</sup> The only exception is Prometheus, the prototypical benefactor of mankind who even cheats Zeus in order to help humans and improve their lives. However, as we know, Prometheus was severely punished by Zeus for his actions, and in recompense, the gods fashioned Pandora as “a big misfortune for the mortals” (πῆμα μέγα θνητοῖσι, Hes. *Theog.* 592) because they wanted to make sure that the distance between themselves and the humans remained sufficiently wide.<sup>71</sup> In other words, Prometheus is the exception that confirms the rule that the ancient gods are not omnibenevolent towards mankind.

That being said, individual gods do love individual (groups of) humans, but this love is normally connected to some condition. Typically, gods are fond of their mortal offspring, and every so often, some god or another develops a special relationship with a specific mortal for some concrete reason. Jenny Strauss Clay (1983: 181) summarizes the general nature of divine affection towards mortals as follows:

The gods favor their mortal children for reasons of familial solidarity and sometimes because of genuine affection. Frequently, too, close relations between gods and heroes are founded on elective affinities – similarity of character or talent. The division of spheres of influence among the Olympians leads naturally enough to such special links: Zeus and Athena support kings and warriors; Apollo favours singers and seers; and golden Aphrodite looks after those of great physical charm.<sup>72</sup>

A good example is Eos, the goddess of dawn. She fell in love with the mortal Tithonos and went so far as to ask Zeus to grant him immortality (but forgot

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<sup>69</sup>The idea of the unconditional love of God is best known from John 3.16 (translation: King James Bible): “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν Υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ’ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον).

<sup>70</sup>In the Abrahamic religions, the notion of divine omnibenevolence leads to the vexed theological problem of theodicy: how can God allow all the evil in the world if he only has good intentions (and the power to change things)? In the Graeco-Roman religious system, though, theodicy is not an issue because the idea of divine omnibenevolence does not exist, and hence the gods cannot be made responsible for the evil in the world.

<sup>71</sup>On Prometheus and Pandora, see § 2.5 in more detail.

<sup>72</sup>Strauss Clay 1983: 181.

also to ask for eternal youth, as discussed above at § 2.3). Their son Memnon, then, participates in the Trojan War as an ally of the Trojans and is killed by Achilles. Eos' mourning for her beloved son is one of the most famous mourning scenes from classical mythology, as we can see, for example, on a well-known Attic red-figure cup (the so-called "Memnon Pietà").<sup>73</sup> In Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica* (a Greek epic from the third century A.D.), Eos addresses her dead son and declares that "since you are dead, I will not / bear to shine for the immortals in heaven [any longer]" (ἐγὼ δ' οὐ σεῖο δαμέντος / τλήσομαι ἀθανάτοισιν ἐπουρανίοισι φαεῖναι, *PH* 2.610–611). It is only thanks to Zeus' personal intervention that she abandons her plan.

Further illustrious examples of divine affection towards, and guidance of, mortals include Venus helping Aeneas in Vergil's *Aeneid* and Athene assisting Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. In the former case, the affection is given through the familial bond (Aeneas is Venus' son); in the latter, Odysseus embodies what Athene stands for, that is, wit and intelligence, and hence a common bond exists. However, since there is a natural power imbalance between gods and humans, even a strong emotional connection can be fragile, or only temporary. The affection of a deity towards a mortal can easily become hatred if the deity does not feel sufficiently respected. An example from Book 3 of the *Iliad* demonstrates this: Aphrodite responds harshly to a repellent speech by her favourite Helen (*Il.* 3.399–412), threatening that (*Il.* 3.414–417):

μή μ' ἔρεθε, σχετλίη, μή χωσαμένη σε μεθείω,  
 τὼς δέ σ' ἀπεχθήρω ὡς νῦν ἔκπαγλ' ἐφίλησα,  
 μέσσω δ' ἀμφοτέρων μητίσομαι ἔχθεα λυγρὰ  
 Τρώων καὶ Δαναῶν, σὺ δέ κεν κακὸν οἶτον ὄληαι.

Do not put me off, you miserable [girl], lest I get angry and abandon you  
 and get to hate you as much as I now love you greatly,  
 lest I contrive fatal hatred [against you] in the middle of both sides,  
 Danaans and Trojans, and you die a bad death.<sup>74</sup>

Finally, divine benefaction can be highly ambivalent; it may be granted unrequested, yet a high price must be paid for it all the same. Such an example is the stereotype of the blind bard, which can be found as early as the *Odyssey*, where it is stated of the singer Demodokos that "the Muse loved him beyond [measure], and she gave him good as well as bad: / she deprived him of his eyesight, but gave him sweet song" (τὸν περὶ Μοῦσ' ἐφίλησε, δίδου δ' ἀγαθὸν τε κακὸν τε: / ὀφθαλμῶν μὲν ἄμερσε, δίδου δ' ἠδεῖαν ἀοιδῆν, *Od.* 8.63–64).

<sup>73</sup> See Figure 4 in the appendix (§ 4). On the cultural history of the Memnon Pietà, see Abrantes 2019.

<sup>74</sup> On this scene, see the commentary by Krieter-Spiro 2015 [2009]: 147–153.

Nowhere is it stated that Demodokos actually wished to become a bard, nor that he had agreed to the ‘trade’.<sup>75</sup>

In the following sections, I will further discuss two aspects that concern relations between the gods and humans: first, the fact that the gods punish those who oppose or challenge them, and, secondly, sexual violence committed by deities against humans. These two points can be regarded as consequences of the lack of unconditional divine omnibenevolence towards mankind.

### 3.2. THE PUNISHMENT OF HUMAN BOASTING, CHALLENGE AND EXCELLENCE

For the Greek and Roman gods, it is very important to maintain the natural order between the divine and the human sphere. Although – or perhaps precisely because – there is constant interaction between the two spheres (not least because gods and humans can, and do, have children with each other), the gods must make sure that men know their place. If a human violates this rule, the consequences can be severe. The destiny of the warrior Kapaneus, a participant in the enterprise of the Seven Against Thebes, illustrates this drastically. His story is reported in Euripides’ tragedy *Phoenician Women* as part of the messenger speech (lines 1172–1186):

Καπανεὺς δὲ πῶς εἶποιμ’ ἄν ὡς ἐμαίνετο,  
μακραύχενος γὰρ κλίμακος προσαμβάσεις  
ἔχων ἐχώρει, καὶ τοσόνδ’ ἐκόμπασεν,  
μηδ’ ἄν τὸ σεμνὸν πῦρ νιν εἰργαθεῖν Διὸς  
τὸ μὴ οὐ κατ’ ἄκρων περγάμων ἐλεῖν πόλιν.  
καὶ ταῦθ’ ἄμ’ ἠγόρευε καὶ πετρούμενος  
ἀνεῖρφ’ ὑπ’ αὐτὴν ἀσπίδ’ εἰλιξας δέμας,  
κλίμακος ἀμείβων ξέστ’ ἐνηλάτων βάρθρα.  
ἤδη δ’ ὑπερβαίνοντα γείσα τειχέων  
βάλλει κερανῶ Ζεὺς νιν· ἐκτύπησε δὲ  
χθῶν, ὥστε δεῖσαι πάντας· ἐκ δὲ κλιμάκων  
{ἐσφενδονᾶτο χωρὶς ἀλλήλων μέλη,  
κόμαι μὲν εἰς Ὀλυμπον, αἶμα δ’ ἐς χθόνα,  
χεῖρες δὲ καὶ κῶλ’ ὡς κύκλωμ’ Ἴξιονος}  
εἰλίσσετ’· ἐς γῆν δ’ ἔμπυρος πίπτει νεκρός.

How should I describe how Kapaneus went mad?  
For, ascending with a long-necked ladder  
he came closer, and so much be boasted  
that not even the holy fire of Zeus would hinder him  
from taking the town down from their highest citadels.  
And as he said that, while being pelted with stones,

<sup>75</sup> On the topos of the blind bard, see Bowra 1952: 420–422; Buxton 1980: 27–30; Strauss Clay 1983: 11–12. For further examples of gods teaching humans certain skills, see Hansen 2004: 45.

he attempted to climb up, coiling his body under his shield,  
 shifting the smooth steps of the rounds of the ladder [from one to the other].  
 And at the very moment when he was climbing over the eaves of the walls,  
 Zeus struck him with his thunderbolt; and the earth  
 resounded so that everyone startled; and from the ladder  
 {his limbs were slung apart from each other,  
 his hair towards Olympos, his blood towards earth,  
 and his arms and members were spinning round like the wheel of Ixion;}  
 his corpse fell to the ground, enflamed.

Here and elsewhere in Greek tragedy (and also in later sources), Kapanus is referred to as a prototypical example of a human being who challenges a/the god(s) and who is punished for his behaviour at once – and publicly, so that he can serve as a negative example to others.<sup>76</sup>

The messenger aptly states at the beginning of the passage quoted that Kapanus “went mad” (ἐμαίνετο, line 1172); the verb used is a cognate of the noun μανία (*mania*), which means “madness,” “frenzy” or “fury.”<sup>77</sup> Another term that is often associated with haughty, presumptuous behaviour by a human towards a/the god(s) is ὕβρις (*hybris*).<sup>78</sup> There are many more mythical narratives that tell of such hubristic behaviour, many of which are recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and in Apollodoros’ *Library*.<sup>79</sup> A famous example is the story of Niobe, who elevates herself above the goddess Latona because she has fourteen children, whereas Latona only has two: Apollo and Diana. The divine revenge is cruel: Apollo and Diana kill all of Niobe’s children, whereas Niobe is kept alive until she finally is transformed into an ever-crying rock (Ovid, *Met.* 6.165–312). Another well-known story is that of the weaver Arachne, who challenges Minerva to a weaving contest. Because Arachne’s craftsmanship is flawless and therefore threatens Minerva’s authority, Minerva throws a tantrum and hits Arachne until the girl commits suicide and is changed into a spider (Greek ἀράχνη [*aráchnē*] means “spider”; Ovid, *Met.* 6.1–145).<sup>80</sup>

Arachne’s example illustrates two further types of behaviour (apart from boasting) that the gods do not tolerate: challenge and excellence. The latter is also emphasized, even more drastically, by the story of the healer Asklepios (a mortal son of Apollo), who became so skilled that he eventually developed the ability to recall the dead to life – “but Zeus, fearing that men were going to

<sup>76</sup> For the further sources, see Graves <sup>2</sup>1960: 377–383; Gantz 1993: 515–519.

<sup>77</sup> See LSJ s.v. μαίνομαι and s.v. μανία; hence English “mania” and “maniac.”

<sup>78</sup> Hence English “hubris” and “hubristic.” The Latin equivalent is *superbia*, which later becomes one of the capital vices in Christianity. As a matter of fact, ὕβρις designates any form of (physical or emotional) violence against others, no matter whether it concerns gods or mortals. The derivative noun ὕβρισμα (*hybrisma*) is a legal term standing for any form of wanton act or outrage committed against another person, ranging from insult to rape. See Kaufmann 1968: 64–68.

<sup>79</sup> An overview is offered by Hansen (2004: 204–207).

<sup>80</sup> On gods transforming humans into animals as a form of punishment, see § 2.2.

acquire the art of healing from him and so help each other, killed him with his thunderbolt” (Ζεὺς δὲ φοβηθεὶς μὴ λαβόντες ἄνθρωποι θεραπείαν παρ’ αὐτοῦ βοηθῶσιν ἀλλήλοις, ἐκεραύνωσεν αὐτόν, *Library* 3.10.4). The divine fear that humans might become too much like them (and eventually just like them) is very tangible here. The story is thus also reminiscent of Prometheus’ fire theft, which the gods repaid through the construction of Pandora, who brought evil to mankind (discussed above at § 2.5).

Occasionally, the gods even provoke human trespasses. Ovid tells us several stories about Jupiter who, executing one of his prime functions, visits humans in disguise in order to test their hospitality.<sup>81</sup> Those who violate the holy custom of hospitality are punished, while those who respect it are generously rewarded. The best-known example is that of Philemon and Baucis, who are the only ones in their city who offer accommodation to Jupiter and Mercury. Consequently, all other citizens are drowned in a swamp, whereas Philemon and Baucis are spared and become priests of Jupiter and Mercury; in addition, they are granted to the favour that neither will outlive the other when their time to die comes (*Met.* 8.620–724).

### 3.3. SEX AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

We already saw that the Greek and Roman gods for the most part procreate sexually, like humans (apart from special cases like Athene jumping from Zeus’ head or Aphrodite being born from the foam of the sea), and we encountered sexual and amorous relations, even marriages, between deities and mortals such as those of Eos and Tithonos, Aphrodite and Anchises, and Thetis and Peleus. But what is the actual, general nature of such interspecies relationships? When we ask this question, a complex net of aspects concerning power imbalance, violence and gender inequality comes into the picture.

When a male god develops an erotic desire for a female mortal, he normally rapes her. Mythical rape tales can be found in large numbers in Ovid’s poetry: in total, there are over fifty such narrations in the *Metamorphoses*, ten in the *Fasti* and two in the *Ars Amatoria*. Not all of them are committed by gods; in fact, the majority are committed by mortal men (e.g. Tereus who rapes his sister-in-law Philomela, *Met.* 6.424–674). One well-known divine rape story is that of Apollo’s attempt to violate Daphne, who is saved by her father, a river god, in the nick of time, by being changed into a laurel tree (*Met.* 1.452–567).

<sup>81</sup> This has a *Sitz im Leben* because hospitality was of eminent importance in antiquity; see e.g. Bolchazy 1978; Arterbury 2005: 15–54. The function of Zeus/Jupiter as the protector of guests and overseer of hospitality (Ζεὺς ξένιος [*Zeus xénios*] in Greek, *Jupiter hospitalis* in Latin) is as old as the Homeric epics.

Another, equally well-known story, following immediately after Daphne's in the Ovidian narrative, is that of Jupiter and Io, whom Jupiter changes into a heifer in order to hide her from Juno (*Met.* 1.568–688). Typically, the violation is phrased euphemistically, but unequivocally (*Met.* 1.597–600):

[...] *Iam pascua Lernae  
consitaque arboribus Lyrcea reliquerat arva,  
cum deus inducta latas caligine terras  
occuluit tenuitque fugam rapuitque pudorem*

She [= Io] had already left the pastures of Lerna  
and the acres of Lyrceum, planted with trees,  
when the god brought about a mist and covered the wide grounds  
[in it] and stopped the fugitive [girl] and robbed her of her honour.<sup>82</sup>

Ovid did not invent these stories; most of them were part of traditional mythology. In particular, Zeus/Jupiter was notorious for being what in the old days would euphemistically have been called a womanizer and what one might label a serial rapist today.<sup>83</sup> In a catalogue in Book 14 of the *Iliad*, Zeus enumerates several of his extramarital 'affairs' along with the offspring that resulted from them: five with mortal women and two with goddesses. The passage is highly ironic because Zeus mentions all these 'affairs' in front of his wife Hera right before going to bed with her, claiming that he desires her as he has desired no other female before, "for never before has desire for a goddess or a woman so much / overcome my heart, gushing forth and around in my breast" (οὐ γάρ πώ ποτέ μ' ὄδε θεᾶς ἔρος οὐδὲ γυναικὸς / θυμὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσι περιπροχυθεὶς ἐδάμασσεν, *Il.* 14.315–316).<sup>84</sup> Moreover, as early as the *Iliad*, Zeus was also known as a lover of young boys, as the famous story of Ganymedes shows. In mythology, Ganymedes was a beautiful Trojan prince who was abducted by Zeus to Mount Olympus, where he henceforth was supposed to serve as a cupbearer (*Il.* 5.265–267; 20.232–235). The Ganymedes myth was often used in classical Greece as a mythological model of (and justification for) the practice of pederasty, that is, the sexual relationship between an older man (ἐραστής [*erastēs*], "lover") and a male teenager (ἐρώμενος [*erōmenos*], "beloved").

<sup>82</sup> The Latin verb that designates the violation here is *rapere*, which actually means "to drag off into captivity," and hence, more generally, "to remove with violence," "to rob." Ovid uses *rapere* (or its derivative *raptare*) repeatedly in connection with a coerced sexual act (as does English "to rape," which is derived from Latin *rapere/raptare*). See Adams 1982: 175; Keith 2000: 106; Tinkler 2018: 77–79.

<sup>83</sup> On Zeus as a rapist, see Deacy 2018.

<sup>84</sup> See Krieter-Spiro's (2018 [2015]: 149–157) commentary on the passage. The commentator is right in characterizing Zeus' catalogue as "a burlesque insult directed at the spouse" but simultaneously also as "the self-depiction of a god in the grip of erotic desire" (150).

An interspecies relationship between an immortal goddess and a mortal man can be based on real affection, as in the case of Eos and Tithonos, but it can also be tied to sexual abuse, as the example of Endymion shows. Endymion is put into eternal sleep by Zeus (who, according to some sources, was his father), and Selene, the personified Moon-Goddess, henceforth enjoys the boy's beautiful body (and according to Pausanias, she has fifty daughters with him [*Description of Greece* 5.1.3–4]).<sup>85</sup> In other cases, such relationships are arranged by a male god. According to the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (lines 36–54), Zeus holds Aphrodite responsible for his desire for other women, and to take revenge, “Zeus threw sweet longing into her own heart / to have intercourse with a mortal man” (τῇ δὲ καὶ αὐτῇ Ζεὺς γλυκὺν ἴμερον ἔμβαλε θυμῷ / ἀνδρὶ καταθνητῷ μυχθήμεναι, line 45–46). In the case of Peleus and Thetis, there are several versions explaining their marriage. According to one widespread version, Zeus desired Thetis, but refrained from her when an oracle predicted that she would give birth to a son who was going to be greater than his father; instead, he arranged her marriage to a mortal man, Peleus.<sup>86</sup> Thetis is reluctant towards the relationship at first; Apollodoros offers a graphic description of how she is overcome by Peleus (*Library* 3.13.5):

Χείρωνος οὖν ὑποθεμένου Πηλεῖ συλλαβεῖν καὶ κατασχεῖν αὐτὴν μεταμορφουμένην, ἐπιτηρήσας συναρπάζει, γινομένην δὲ ὅτε μὲν πῦρ ὅτε δὲ ὕδωρ ὅτε δὲ θηρίον οὐ πρότερον ἀνῆκε πρὶν ἢ τὴν ἀρχαίαν μορφήν εἶδεν ἀπολαβοῦσαν.

Now, after Cheiron had advised him to grab her and hold fast to her while she was shifting shape, Peleus looked out for her and carried her off, and while she became fire, then water, then a beast, he did not let go of her before he saw that she had resumed her original shape.

The underlying pattern here is that if the human manages to hold fast to the deity, the deity is ‘conquered’ and must comply with the human’s wish.<sup>87</sup> It is interesting to see that Peleus’ violent behaviour towards Thetis is tolerated. The explanation may be that although Thetis is immortal, she is a nymph and herewith a minor divinity;<sup>88</sup> otherwise, violence (or other forms of trespass) committed by a human male against a major goddess are punished severely.<sup>89</sup>

Sexual violence in classical mythology is a controversial topic – especially these days, and especially when it comes to the pedagogical challenges connected

<sup>85</sup> On the different versions of the Endymion myth, see Graves (1960: 210–211).

<sup>86</sup> A discussion of the different versions and sources is offered by March (1987: 1–26).

<sup>87</sup> On this pattern, see also § 2.2 with n. 28.

<sup>88</sup> Nymphs are often described as long-lived, yet mortal; see § 2.3.

<sup>89</sup> See e.g. the story of Actaeon and Diana in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (3.138–252): Diana becomes enraged because Actaeon involuntarily catches sight of her bathing naked, and so she transforms him into a deer.



to it. The controversy has been particularly heated in relation to Ovid, who is still a popular school author at both the secondary and tertiary levels.<sup>90</sup> It should be noted in this context that scholars have assessed Ovid's rape narratives very differently. In an influential chapter with a decidedly feminist take, Amy Richlin maintains that "such texts are certainly pornographic," and she demands that "we must ask how we are to read texts, like those of Ovid, that take pleasure in violence – a question that challenges not only the canon of Western literature but all representations."<sup>91</sup> On the other hand, in a more recent reassessment of Ovid's rape narratives, Nikki Bloch claims that Ovid "provides a uniquely female perspective by outlining both the victim's suffering and the barbaric nature of the perpetrator"; "rape is never glorified, even when it is committed by the gods," and "[t]he metamorphoses of female victims of rape in Ovid's epic are representations of the victims' emotional trauma, even for those who are able to evade rape."<sup>92</sup> A female perspective is also shown on a recently discovered fresco in Pompeii that displays the violation of Leda by Zeus/Jupiter in the disguise of a swan: we can see Leda sitting on a chair, the swan in her lap, and Leda is staring directly at the onlooker, her head tilted. At first sight, her gaze appears to be an invitation to the viewer (perhaps meant to evoke sexual arousal) – but her gaze might also be interpreted as an expression of discomfort. In either case, the viewer is prompted to sympathize, perhaps even to identify with Leda.<sup>93</sup>

If we wish to understand the phenomenon of sexual violence as part of the mythical system, we must, first and foremost, note this: despite all sorts of interaction between the divine and the human sphere, there is a natural power imbalance between gods and humans in the mythical system, and this inherent power imbalance clearly suggests that amorous and/or sexual relationships between gods and humans (regardless of gender) can, almost by way of definition, not be based on equality. When we ask for the *Sitz im Leben* of mythical rape narratives, the answer probably consists of a complex combination of aspects such as the patriarchal structure of the ancient societies as such, the fact that the concept of sexual consent did not exist in antiquity<sup>94</sup> and the simple (but

<sup>90</sup> On Ovid's rape narratives, see e.g. Stirrup 1977; Curran 1978; Richlin 1992; Bloch 2011; Tinkler 2018. On the pedagogical challenges that arise when Ovid is taught in the classroom, see e.g. Gloy 2013. On the application of the term "rape culture" to classical mythology, see Rabinowitz 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Richlin 1992: 158.

<sup>92</sup> Bloch 2011: 2.

<sup>93</sup> See Figure 5 in the appendix (§ 4). Displays of erotic scenes (mythological as well as non-mythological) are legion in Pompeii; see e.g. Clarke 1998: 145–240. I would like to thank Astri Karine Lundgren for sharing her expertise on Pompeian wall paintings and ancient sexuality with me.

<sup>94</sup> See e.g. McClure 2020: 102: "[A]ncient authors had very different notions of a woman's ability to grant consent and were often more involved with questions of honor."

decisive) insight that violence in general (and sexual violence in particular) was more accepted, more ‘normal’ in antiquity than it is today.<sup>95</sup>

Finally, a different point is made by Peter Jones, who states that “the audience for myth may have considered insemination by a god, whether by force or not, a great honour for a mere mortal, since it brought with it the prospect of semi-divine offspring.”<sup>96</sup> Indeed, the existence of so-called ‘demigods’ (who by default are mortal) is a defining feature of classical mythology, and tracing one’s ancestry back to a prehistorical union of a deity and a mortal was a common means of ennobling one’s pedigree for many families in antiquity. Following Hesiod, the generation of demigods (ἥρωες [*hērōes*] in Greek) was the fourth of the five races of men who were created by Zeus in succession (*Works and Days*, lines 156–173).<sup>97</sup> Many of them participated in enterprises such as the quest for the Golden Fleece (the Argonauts), the Theban Wars and the Trojan War. The most famous of all demigods is undoubtedly Herakles, the offspring of Zeus and the mortal woman Alkmene, whom Zeus tricked into having sex with him by appearing before her in the disguise of her own husband Amphitryon.<sup>98</sup> Unlike most other demigods, Herakles is deified at the end of his life, and there is textual and archaeological evidence that suggests that he was indeed worshipped as a god proper in certain areas and periods of the Greek world.<sup>99</sup> The archaic Greek poet Pindar thus aptly calls him a “demigod-god” (ἥρωος θεός [*hērōs theós*], *Third Nemean Ode*, line 22). But that, as they say, is a different story.

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<sup>95</sup> On sexual violence in antiquity, see e.g. Omitowaju 2002; Deacy and Pierce 2002. It has been noted that the Ancient Greek language did not have a noun for “rape” (Robson 2013: 90–115). However, there is the noun ὕβρισμα (*hýbrisma*), a legal term that designates any form of wanton act or outrage, including a coerced sexual act (see n. 78 above). In Latin, the noun *stuprum* (“dishonour,” “shame”) is also used for illicit sexual intercourse, and the verb *rapere* sometimes comes close to what we would translate as “to rape” (see n. 82 above).

<sup>96</sup> Jones 2007: 9.

<sup>97</sup> The Greek word ἥρωος (*hērōs*) designates a man who is of semi-divine offspring; hence the translation “hero” is inaccurate (see LSJ s.v. ἥρωος). For a discussion of Hesiod’s race of the ἥρωες, see Strauss Clay (2003: 161–174), with further references.

<sup>98</sup> Literature on Herakles is immense; I only mention some standard works: Friedländer 1907; Galinsky 1972; Jourdain-Annequin 1989; Padilla 1998; Stafford 2012.

<sup>99</sup> See Stafford 2005; Stafford 2010.

## 4. APPENDIX: VISUAL DEPICTIONS



Figure 1. (anthropomorphism [§ 2.1]): Fragment of a Hellenistic relief (1st century B.C./ A.D.), now in the Walters Museum, Baltimore. The relief displays all Twelve Olympians with their attributes in procession (from left to right): Hestia, Hermes, Aphrodite, Ares, Demeter, Hephaistos, Hera, Poseidon, Athene, Zeus, Artemis, and Apollo. Depictions of single deities (as statues, on vases, etc.), testifying to their anthropomorphic nature, are legion in antiquity, but only few depictions of all Twelve Olympians together exist. (Photo from Wikipedia Commons, public domain.)

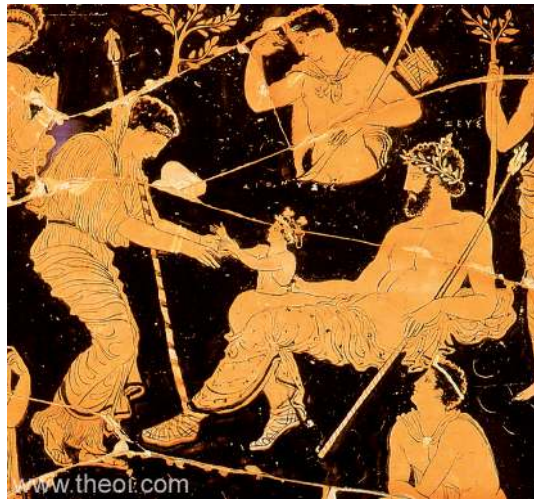


Figure 2. (divine radiance [§ 2.1] and procreation [§ 2.3]): Apulian red-figure volute-krater (c. 405–385 B.C.), now in the National Archaeological Museum of Taranto, Italy. The vase shows the birth of Dionysos from the thigh of his father Zeus; Hera is reaching for the baby, and several other gods are watching the scene. When Semele was pregnant with Dionysos, Hera lured her into asking Zeus to show himself in his full glory because she wanted to destroy her rival. As humans cannot tolerate divine radiance, Semele died, but Zeus snatched their unborn son from her womb and planted him in his thigh. (Photo from [www.theoi.com](http://www.theoi.com).)



Figure 3. (creation [§ 2.5]): Roman relief (3rd century A.D.), now in the Louvre, Paris. The relief displays Prometheus as a demiurge under the guidance and observation of Athene. According to the earliest sources, Prometheus is only a benefactor of mankind, but later, the idea of Prometheus as a demiurge develops. (Photo from Wikipedia Commons, public domain.)



Figure 4. (divine affection for mortal offspring [§ 3.1]): Attic red-figure cup w(c. 490–480 B.C.) found at Capua, now in the Louvre, Paris. The vase, known as the “Memnon Pietà,” shows Eos, the goddess of dawn, mourning for her dead son Memnon. (Photo from Wikipedia Commons, public domain.)





Figure 5. (divine transformation [§ 2.2] and sexual violence [§ 3.3]): Fresco from Pompeii (1st century A.D.) that displays the violation of Leda by Zeus/Jupiter in the disguise of a swan. The fresco was unearthed in Regio V of Pompeii in 2018. (Photo by Filippo Monteforte / AFP via Getty Images.)

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## THE NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GODS IN CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

### Summary

This article is intended for students and teachers of classical mythology. It gives an overview of the nature and the characteristics of the gods in Greek and Roman mythology and falls into two main sections. The first section demonstrates what the Greek and Roman gods are and what they are not. The gods are anthropomorphic, but with enhanced features: they possess transformative abilities (that is, they are able to transform themselves into humans and animals, and they are also able to transform humans into other beings); they are immortal and eternally young, but unlike God in the three Abrahamic religions, they have not always existed, but they are procreated and born like humans. Despite their divine nature, the Greek and Roman gods are neither omniscient nor omnipotent; they are not ubiquitous, and they are even vulnerable. They are not the creators of the universe, but according to some sources they are responsible for the creation of mankind (whereas other sources do not credit them with anthropogony either), and they too are bound by destiny, which functions as a supra-divine authority. In the second section, relations between gods and humans in classical mythology are discussed. Here it is shown that the Greek and Roman gods are not omnibenevolent towards mankind, but that their affection for humans is conditional. Furthermore, they punish humans who challenge them and who threaten their authority; they have sexual relations with humans (which leads to the procreation of semi-divine offspring, so-called demigods), but due to the lack of omnibenevolence, they do not refrain from committing sexual violence against humans.