

Where God and Man Collide

The Downfall of the Myth from the Spirit of Music

ESSAY

Because they have torn apart and eaten Zagreus, his most beloved, Zeus hurls his lightning bolts at a group of Titans, burning them to ashes. These ashes, which contain Titanic and Zagreic elements, are mixed with clay and saliva by Prometheus, forming human beings. He trains his sons and daughters to be adaptable, since they will not be able to exist from nature's gifts alone. They will have to trust in their spirit and imagination. For they will be alone. And – this is the core of all the lessons taught by Prometheus – interaction with the gods is to be avoided.

He counsels us to stay out of their way. Neither should we curry favor with them nor measure ourselves against them. We should not let them enchant us, and we should not desire them. Those who follow this advice have good chances of being happy. – We know nothing of them, and that is an indication that they have succeeded.

Where god and man collide, tragedy ensues. And moreover: a human being's tragedy – thus the myth will have it – is only rarely the consequence of his own actions; mostly, it is the end of a long story which began long before the life of the person in question. After all, the cruelty of tragedy is that it does not punish the one who caused it, not even the one who prolonged it, but mostly an innocent person who then breaks down under the weight of his ancestors – as if he were nothing but the final proof.

Ariadne, for Example

Ariadne lives under the curse of her mother Pasiphaë; and Pasiphaë lives under the curse of her husband Minos.

Minos, a mortal son of Zeus and Europa, rules over the island of Crete. He despises the sea, stands on the beach with spread legs and ridicules Poseidon. He does this not in the form of words, but by an almost ritual omission: he refuses to sacrifice to the god of the sea. Any inhabitant of an island does well to respect the blue-haired ruler. Poseidon may not be the smartest of gods, but he is powerful. He is able to tear whole islands from the sea-bed, as he did in the case of Delos. The storms obey him; when Artemis asked him to stop the winds, so that the Greeks could not sail for Troy before Agamemnon had not sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia, Poseidon gave the order, and not a leaf stirred anymore. Minos is to sacrifice a bull to him, his best bull. The proud king of Crete, however, would not dream of it. Poseidon complains to Zeus. This is unusual. It might have been expected that the short-tempered god might simply send a flood to wipe away his challenger. But

Minos is one of Zeus' sons, and Poseidon does not want to fight this brother. Zeus counsels him to provide an appropriate sacrificial animal to the island himself. Poseidon fails to recognize the humiliation inherent in such a suggestion. Thus, one day a white bull emerges from the sea in Crete. His eyes shine like the midday sky, the tips of his horns sparkle like diamonds. Too beautiful to be sacrificed, Minos decides. He keeps the bull for himself, burning a worn-out old ox instead. Poseidon's revenge is unprecedented in mythology. He is not allowed to harm Minos. Therefore, he takes it out on his wife Pasiphaë. He sows lust in her heart. She lusts after this very bull. She wants the bull to take her. She is unable to resist. That is the curse Pasiphaë must live with from this moment on.

Daedalus, the greatest of all inventors, constructs a wooden cow for the queen. Pasiphaë crawls inside, waiting for the great animal. Her daughter Ariadne is a witness. From this day, she has only one wish: to leave Crete. Pasiphaë becomes pregnant and gives birth to the Minotaur, a creature with the body of a human and the head of a bull. It lives on human flesh. Minos wants to keep him. He wants Pasiphaë to be reminded of her madness constantly. Daedalus is not interested in the meaning and purpose of his commission, but only in the conditions of its implementation; thus, he acts the same way again: Minos commands him to design a secure holding place for the monster. Daedalus constructs and builds the labyrinth. The Minotaur grows up in this midst of it. The Cretan army conquers the city of Athens in one of its campaigns. An armistice is negotiated. Each year, Athens must surrender seven young men and seven virgins to Crete. These are driven into the labyrinth, where they starve because they cannot find the exit. The Minotaur gets their bodies. When Theseus, Prince of Athens, is the right age, he volunteers; he wishes to go to Crete and confront the Minotaur.

The victims are displayed in cages before being driven into the labyrinth. Princess Ariadne sees Theseus and falls in love with him. Secretly, she gives him a sword. Again, the engineer has further advice. Daedalus recommends fastening a thread of wool to the gate of the labyrinth and to unravel it as Theseus enters, thus he will also find his way out again. Ariadne provides the ball of wool; in return, the hero promises to take her to Athens. Theseus is successful, kills the monster and escapes with his friends and with Ariadne.

Theseus too is a descendant of gods. His progenitor – this is a salient detail – was Poseidon. His mother, Aithra, was given to the god by her father. He thought – against Prometheus' advice – that it was a good idea to make deals with a god. Happiness is always the same; unhappiness comes in ever-new shapes and sizes. Happiness is rarely surprising; unhappiness always is. In this case, it takes a detour: it is not Theseus, the fruit of the liaison between gods and humans, who was made miserable – no, he was merely the messenger of misery; he brought unhappiness to everyone: his unwitting stepfather, who threw himself into the ocean because he believed his son to have been killed by the Minotaur; the Amazon queen Hippolyta and their son; his friend

Pirithous, who did not return from Hades after he had persuaded him to descend to that dark netherworld with him. And Theseus also makes Ariadne miserable. He does not want her. He abandons her on the island of Naxos.

There she is found by Dionysus, the most erratic of gods. He lands on a pirate ship by himself. The crew had taken him hostage, thinking that they would get a handsome ransom for a god. (One wonders from whom?) After a few days, they all went mad. That is the power of Dionysus: to make human beings mad. They all jumped into the ocean – in jubilation.

Poor Ariadne, who had fallen from her parents' curse into the curse of Theseus, now comes under the curse of Dionysus. Soon after her wedding with the god, she dies. She is the last link in the chain, the final proof. Her bride's wreath is lifted into heaven to form the constellation Corona Borealis. That is derision for you.

Electra and Orestes, for Example

These two form the end of a family saga from which humanity was to learn the meaning of horror. The story begins with Tantalus. He too is a son of Zeus; a loudmouth who likes to tell all and sundry that he is a beloved guest on Mount Olympus.

To ensure that his son does not lose face among the humans, Zeus does in fact invite him, against the other gods' will. In order to demean them, Tantalus asks the gods to visit him in his own house. However, he underestimates the Olympian appetite. He does not have enough food in his storage. So he kills his son Pelops and serves him to the gods. He is also trying to test their omniscience. They are indeed omniscient. They reconstruct Pelops and exile his cruel father to Tartarus, where he is to suffer hunger and thirst eternally. Moreover, they curse his progeny.

At first, Pelops serves Poseidon as a catamite. As a free man, he marries Hippodamia – after killing her father perfidiously during a chariot race. Hippodamia gives birth to twins, Atreus and Thyestes. Even in their mother's womb, they were said to have attacked each other. Atreus and Thyestes hate each other as if they had invented hatred. In fact, they did invent hatred. What was called hatred before them was mere annoyance in comparison. In unsurpassed atrocities, we hear a tale of power, betrayal, greed and perversion, reminiscent of Marquis de Sade in its monotone development, its fastidiousness and aggressiveness. Atreus kills the children of Thyestes and serves them to him as a meal. Thyestes rapes his own daughter because a fake fortune-teller told him that she would bear him a son who would kill his brother Atreus. This son was Aegisthus, and his tasks in this world do not end with killing his uncle. Atreus has two sons, Menelaus and Agamemnon. It is amazing that they bear each other no ill-will; however, it should not reassure us.

Agamemnon visits Tyndareus, the king of Lacedaemon, later to be known as Sparta. There he meets Clytemnestra, one of the king's daughters. He wants her. She is already married and has a little son. Agamemnon kills the husband and the son and rapes Clytemnestra in their blood. He takes her to Mycenae and drags her through the Lions' Gate by her hair. He has four children with her: Iphigenia, Chrysothemis, Electra and Orestes.

Menelaus, the second son of Atreus, asks for the hand of Helena, a daughter of Zeus foisted upon Tyndareus and his wife Leda. All the heroes of Greece apply for Helena's hand. In order to keep the men in check, Tyndareus has them swear to stand by the future groom in case anyone else takes the bride away from him. Menelaus, the richest of them and brother of the most powerful, wins the bid. He marries Helena, the most beautiful woman in the world.

Helena had already been awarded as a bribe and prize in another competition. The three goddesses Athena, Hera and Aphrodite were fighting about which of them might be the most beautiful. The judge was Paris, a Trojan prince. Aphrodite promised him the most beautiful woman in the world if he elected her. And so he did. Paris takes a ship to Lacedaemon, sees Helena and abducts her to Troy. Menelaus reminds the heroes of their oath. A war is prepared. Agamemnon is made commander of the army.

Then Agamemnon shoots a holy doe, and Artemis asks Poseidon to becalm the winds until Agamemnon is willing to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. He agrees immediately. Iphigenia is taken to Aulis and sacrificed (in another version of the tale, Artemis saves her).

Surely, this cannot have done anything to lessen Clytemnestra's hatred of Agamemnon. The battle for Troy stretches out for ten years. During this time, she takes a lover. We know him already. It is Aegisthus, son of Thyestes, who begot him upon his own daughter in order to raise him as a killing machine. Clytemnestra's daughter Electra suffers from her mother's infidelity. She considers her father a wonderful human being. She does not know him. She hates her mother. She takes her little brother Orestes to live with relatives so that he should not know the disgrace.

After the war, Agamemnon returns to Mycenae. He has brought Cassandra as part of his spoils of war. He parades her before his wife, grabbing her between the legs before his wife's eyes. In the bath, Clytemnestra kills him, helped by Aegisthus. And Electra is a witness. Electra dedicates her life to her hatred of her mother. She brings her brother Orestes back, takes him to Delphi, has the oracle confirm that his life's task is to avenge his father and to kill his mother.

A greater tragedy is hard to imagine. It is the consequence, the deadly logical consequence of a curse that the gods have hurled against a mortal. Prometheus knew what he said when he warned us of the gods. For the gods, we are nothing more than the final proof.

Hope? Yes. Namely, Art!

Namely, Orpheus. In his philosophy, he is a student of Dionysus, and thus he is in almost natural opposition against the classical array of gods. I mention the teacher before the father, philosophy before artistry. For in the end, Orpheus will have become a principle without a body; his name will stand for something that the classical gods find uncanny, something they cannot grasp; for something that we humans do not understand either, but that – unlike the Olympians – we find touching, consoling, uplifting, ennobling and cultivating: something that makes the world beautiful – makes it beautiful despite the fact that the myth claims that it was not made for us. Orpheus is the mystery of art. His father was supposed to have been Apollo. Who else, if not the inventor of music. But Apollo's music has little in common with the music of Orpheus. Apollo plays nice accompaniments, and his art is mainly artistry. (This he proved in the struggle against Marsyas, whom he vanquished and killed by skinning him alive.) The music of Orpheus springs from a different source. In Orpheus' art, human beings create a counter-model to the gods' universe. This art is subversive. Just like the religion of Dionysus, his teacher, is subversive from the very start. The Orphic, the Dionysian art undermines the Olympic order, which – and this only becomes clear now – was always an amoral one. Olympus was kept in balance through the dynamic equilibrium between the gods' whims and the gods' interests. Everything was constantly in flux, details were unpredictable, but the whole was predictable. Humans were condemned to react. Their luck consisted of not being noticed by the gods. As soon as they were noticed, that was their downfall. The program inherent in Dionysus is monotheism. He insists on the ego. Dionysus is the tyrannical ego. In the end, he will actually have marginalized all the other gods – and have given human beings the vision of a binding moral code, at least the vision. At the same time, he will have taken the liberty from them that consists of not being loved by the gods. It will take a long time, a very long time, until humans understand that the love of one single god means a maximum of bondage, that there can be no stronger shackles than the love of a god – especially if that love is fulfilled in an act of self-sacrifice. Nietzsche will find the courage to say this very clearly.

The fact that the theologians of the myth, first and foremost Hesiod, declared Apollo to be the father of Orpheus and the muse Calliope, a daughter of Zeus, his mother, was an attempt – failed, as it turned out – to integrate the egregious into the myth. Orpheus brought disorder to the old world of the gods. He enchanted animals, trees, flowers; stones moved towards him in order to listen to him; when the Argonauts traveled to Colchis, he made the winds their allies by his mellifluous voice alone.

He managed to bribe the incorruptible Charon with his music, so that he took him, a living soul, over the river Styx, allowing him access to Hades, the realm of the dead. Orpheus vanquished Cerberus, the hound of hell, with his voice. He managed to make Persephone, the goddess of the underworld, one of his allies. She liberated Eurydice. The condition Persephone attached to this liberation, namely that Orpheus should not be allowed to turn around and look at his beloved on their way out of the underworld, is the bitter invention of those theologians, who insisted that this counter-design to the gods' order must fail. Orpheus fails in the myth. He turns around, Eurydice sinks and is lost forever.

We do not blame him. From hundreds, thousands of stories, we have finally learned the lesson. Orpheus did what he could. He was betrayed. Just like everybody was betrayed by the gods, all those whose only role was to be merely a final proof. Orpheus builds his own religion. It is a mystical one. Its central tenet is the riddle. It does not strive to clarify nor to explain. Any explanation creates distance. The art of Orpheus, however, strives for unity, not division. It does not thrive under the sun, but in the shadow of the moon; it does not lead us to Apollonian clarity, but into Dionysian inebriation. At the center of the myth – this too we now recognize clearly – was the Titanian claim to solve the riddle, the optimistic conviction that all riddles could be solved. The song of Orpheus tells us that this is not so. His song is his religion, his philosophy. His art strips away all the protection the myth offered us, in spite of everything. But it makes us proud. Orpheus fails in the myth. In history, he remains the winner.

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Translated by Alexa Nieschlag