

"Haud" Morituri Te Salutamus

Luncheon speech to high school Latin contest students
(date uncertain)

A young geology professor said to me one day, "Why would "anyone" study classical mythology?" He could not have dumbfounded me more if he had asked, "Why would anyone learn to read and write?" For I don't see very much point in learning to read unless you know the meaning of what you are reading; and without a knowledge of classical mythology, much of the world's literature, art, and music is wasted on you. And even where the basic meaning can be grasped without a knowledge of mythology, this knowledge can add color and life to what otherwise would be a simple drab word or statement.

Of course, my telling "you" this is like the preacher who tells his congregation that people ought to go to church. I do not need to convince "you" of the value of things classical. If you did not consider them worth your time and effort, you would not be here; you would be devoting your energies to some more valuable activity, like improving your skateboard technique.

But I wonder whether you have ever stopped to consider how all-inclusive the influence of these ancient cultures is. For the present discussion we shall limit ourselves strictly to only one small segment of this vast influence -- the mythological references. Anyone who says that he has no contact with classical mythology in his routine existence is just not telling the truth. Try to carry on a fifteen-minute conversation on any subject, avoiding all reference to mythology. It's harder than you think.

We might talk about cars -- unless you own a Mercury.

Well, let's try again. If we don't drive, we can go by train. There's the Denver Zephyr -- oh, oh! -- but the Zephyr is named from the West wind; and on the Nebraska Zephyr even the coaches are named Juno, Neptune, Vulcan, Mars, Venus, Pluto, and Jupiter.

How about astronomy? Oh, no! All of our sun's planets except the earth are named from figures in classical mythology, as are all the signs of the zodiac and all the known constellations in the Northern hemisphere.

Well, how about discussing the space program? Can you do so without mentioning a Titan or an Atlas or the Gemini program or the Apollo mission -- all terms straight out of the pages of your mythology book.

Perhaps we should stick to something very commonplace, like birthdays. Is yours in June or January, or maybe March? Whichever one it is a month named from a Roman god.

If you look up something in an atlas, or read the Rock Island newspaper called the Argus; if you visit a museum or see a play at the Palladium; if you travel to Europe or to Athens, you are simply bouncing between mythological terms.

The cereal you ate this morning is so called because Ceres was the goddess of grain, the basic ingredient of cereals. And it, instead of a conventional breakfast, you grabbed a sandwich at a fast food place on your way here and you now have a stomachache, you may feel better to know that the word "ache" comes from Acheron, the river of sorrow in the Underworld. Truly, to talk even casually without making any reference to mythology is well, -- it's a Herculean task!

Much of the literature written in the English language cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of classical mythology. Of course, Shakespeare and Milton are loaded with it. A student of mine once tried to write a term paper on mythological references in Milton. She then

decided to limit herself to the one work, *Paradise Lost*. Eventually she had to cut that to the first two of the twelve books of *Paradise Lost* -- and had a 25-page paper.

But we don't need to go back as far as these writers. Tennyson wrote a poem on Ulysses, and James Joyce later wrote a novel with the same title. O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is simply a story from classical mythology in a modern setting with modern costumes. And the Broadway musical, "My Fair Lady," is an adaptation of Shaw's adaptation of the story of Pygmalion and his statue. A play that was on Broadway in the early seventies, called "That Spring, That Fall," is a retelling of the Phaedra story.

As for operas, at least twenty six are based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. And there is, of course, "Black Orpheus," which did with this story what Carmen Jones did with the opera "Carmen." Also I understand that at least as many operas have been based on the Aeneas-Dido story as on the Orpheus-Eurydice theme. In fact, the most elaborate opera ever staged was based on the love of Dido for Aeneas. It was written by Berlioz and presented in 1973 by the Metropolitan Opera Company.

The art of Titian, Rubens, Cellini, Michelangelo, Botticelli -- all of these have many, many mythological subjects. Bernini made a famous statue of Aeneas with his father and son leaving Troy, when Bernini was only fifteen years old. And his Apollo-Daphne was created when he was seventeen, with his Pluto-Proserpina not being completed until he was an old man of twenty one. But again, you don't have to go that far from your own backyard to stumble on mythological figures in stone or metal. You will find Atlas and Prometheus at Rockefeller Center in New York, and a figure of Mercury is on top of the stop-go signs of Fifth Avenue in the same city. There is a Neptune fountain in the center of Kansas City, and an Argonaut Hotel in Denver. A statue of Europa and the Bull can be seen in Russellville, Arkansas, and a Ganymede's Cafe serves beer and pretzels in Oregon, Illinois. Nine street in the French quarter of New Orleans are named after the Muses. In Birmingham, Alabama, stands a statue of Vulcan so large that the thumb of one hand is three feet long. And rent is paid the city of New York for the air space occupied by a figure of Venus extending out over the sidewalk above the entrance to an art museum.

Or you can go to Chicago and see a 31-foot modernistic statue of Ceres on top of the Board of Trade Building, or a figure of Diana on top of the Montgomery-Ward Building. Figures of Minerva and Jupiter stare down at you as you come as you come out of the Harvey House restaurant in the Union Station. And near Urbana, the Allerton State Park has a mythological figure behind almost every other tree.

And in what is called "the lesser arts" you will find some of the loveliest of mythological designs in cameos, Wedgwood china, and Steuben glass. Some of the most beautiful of the Steuben glass ornaments feature figures of Orpheus, of Jupiter, or of Narcissus.

Brand names based on classical mythology are countless. For speed, Mercury is the constant symbol; for strength and endurance, the names of Ajax, Atlas, and Hercules share top billing. I have a list of forty six products using the name of Hercules -- everything from gun powder to work clothes, from luggage to bell bars, from Herculite glass in Fords to a carpeting material called Herculon.

Most of the brand names have a logical reason for their use and are appropriate to the product, like Medusa cement (since Medusa's look turned people to stone), and Argus cameras (since Argus had a hundred eyes). A few even show a definite sense of humor -- like Circe animal calls (because Circe had a yen to turn people into animals). But I think that the most amusing of all is the Hades heater -- which needs no explanation.

Also the terms in the various sciences take on more significance when we look back to their mythological origins.

In chemistry, for instance, mercury is an element remarkable for its fluidity. It is only reasonable, therefore, that it be named after the god with the winged sandals. And tantalum cannot absorb acid, just as Tantalus could not drink the water that touched his lips. By the way, Tantalus had a daughter Niobe, so we have the chemical element niobium, which is found in connection with tantalum.

In psychology we meet such terms as the "Oedipus complex" and "narcissism" -- and if you want to check on who Oedipus and Narcissus were, the one place to look is a mythology reference book.

In geology a neptunian rock is produced one way -- by the action of water on a substance; and pluton is, naturally, a rock surface underground. Where else, since Pluto was the god of the Underworld? And in geography we have already mentioned Europe and Athens, but there are also bodies of water like the Icarian Sea, the Ionian Sea, or the Aegean Sea, all of which are named after mythological people whose adventures are associated with these bodies of water.

Some of the most vivid terms from myth are in biology. The vertebra which is found at the base of the skull, more or less supporting the head as a certain mythological figure is often represented as supporting the earth on his shoulders, is known as yes,-- the Atlas vertebra. And even if you did not know, where would you guess that the Achilles tendon is located? Right -- it is between the calf muscles and the heel bone.

Since Achilles was held by the heel and dipped into the River Styx to make him invulnerable, he could be wounded only in that heel. So -- if I refer to your Achilles heel, I obviously mean your weakest point, the place where you can be hurt most easily.

An aurora borealis is a combination of two mythological names not normally associated with each other. Aurora was the goddess of the dawn, and Boreas was the North wind. So what is the aurora borealis? It is a soft, dawn-like light in the North.

Another of the commonplace phrases that I find very interesting is the term "a Procrustean statistic." This refers to such a statement as: "The average family has 3.6 children." Obviously this figure does not fit any family exactly. And this fact is what makes it a "Procrustean" statistic. Remember that Procrustes was the character who made all people fit into his bed by either stretching them or cutting them down to size.

I think that we have looked at enough unavoidable references to mythology in everyday life to see quite easily that we simply can't get away from it, try as we might.

I want to point out just one more spot where it is met frequently. This is cartoons. Alley Oop ran a whole series a year or so ago, with Pegasus and the Minotaur and the whole works. I'll grant you that the stories, with Alley Oop as hero, were not taken from Bulfinch's mythology -- but the characters were. The same thing can be said of many modern dramatizations of mythological stories. The movie, "Helen of Troy," was way out in its interpretation. And the recent TV series on Hercules fascinated me because the new Hercules had absolutely nothing in common with his predecessor except his victorious strength. But to get back to the "intentional" comedy of cartoons -- perhaps the most popular mythological performers in cartoons are those half-man half-horse creatures called the centaurs, and the Trojan horse.

And now, having entirely omitted any mention of the hundreds of other places for such encounters with classical mythology in everyday modern life -- like on postage stamps worldwide, or on money like the dime -- I want to simply say: keep your eyes open and you will bump into your mythological friends on every street corner.

By the way, my friend the geology professor, having teased me sufficiently with his question, admitted that in college he had taken a course in mythology and had found it one of his most interesting subjects.

So, as Pan and Mercury and Hercules and Minerva and I, along with all our other mythological friends, bid you a fond farewell, we confidently say: "*Haud*" moritori te salutamus.