**Greek Mythology and a Better Society**

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**Non Fiction Article: Greek Mythology and A Better Society**

Instructions: **COMPLETE ALL QUESTIONS AND MARGIN NOTES using the CLOSE reading listed below. This requires reading of the article three times.**

**Step 1: Skim** the article using these symbols as you read:

**(+)** agree, **(-)** disagree, **(\*)** important, **(!)** surprising, **(?)** wondering

**Step 2: Number** the paragraphs. **Read** the article **carefully** and **make notes in the margin**.

Notes should include:

* Comments that show that you **understand** the article. (A summary or statement of the main idea of important sections may serve this purpose.)
* Questions you have that show what you are **wondering** about as you read.
* Notes that differentiate between **fact** and **opinion**.
* Observations about how the **writer’s strategies** (organization, word choice, perspective, support) and choices affect the article.

**Step 3:** A **final quick read** noting anything you may have missed during the first two reads.

Your **margin notes** are part of your score for this assessment. Answer the questions carefully in **complete sentences** unless otherwise instructed.

The Greeks thought of mythology no different than early history. A myth, after all, was a story told and passed on by word of mouth. It was speech, tale, conversation and narrative. Oral tradition fuelled mythology for a very long time, almost throughout the history of the Greeks. But the invention of the Greek alphabet and writing more than three thousand years ago enriched the stories Greeks said about themselves, their gods, heroes, and others.

Reading Homer and Hesiod, both epic poets who flourished in the eighth century BCE, is reading mythology at its incomparable best.

Homer’s Trojan War was no fiction. The “Iliad” and the “Odyssey” educated Greeks for millennia. The stories of the epics became the substance from which the poets of classical Greece built their masterpieces of tragedy and comedy.

Hesiod, a shepherd of sheep in the valley of Mount Helikon in Boeotia, even wrote “Theogony,” myths, stories of how the gods and the cosmos came into being.

Hesiod said the Muses of Mount Helikon taught him their “beautiful song.” The Muses were daughters of Zeus, father of the gods, and Mnemosyne (Memory). They were goddesses of learning.

Hesiod opens his “Theogony” with the Muses singing of Zeus and the other gods.

Hesiod also speaks of the origins of the cosmos. He gives primacy to chaos, Earth, dark Tartaros (underworld), and Eros in the creation of the universe. Chaos, void and disorder, brought forth darkness in the form of Erebos and black Night. These dark forces coupled, giving birth to Aether, upper atmosphere, and Day.

Earth meanwhile became the planet we know: graced with mountains, rivers, valleys, and seas. In addition, the Earth gave birth to the Sky and the stars. Then the Earth bedded with the Sky and brought into being the Titan gods and Okeanos. Finally, Eros’ powerful attraction - modern-day gravitation — kept the cosmos together. Hesiod says Eros was also the most beautiful of the immortal gods: relaxing the limbs of both gods and men, muddling their senses and reason.

The gods, natural world, and the cosmos are inseparable in Greek mythology and thought. They are natural forces that give the natural world and the cosmos harmony, order, and beauty. Zeus was a weather god responsible for the climate and rain in particular. His sister, Demetra, was agriculture. Hephaistos was fire. Sun-Helios ripens the crops and brings life and light to humans and the universe. Athena was intelligence and reason.

But the heroes are the heart of Greek mythology. The case of Herakles explains why.

Herakles was born in Thebes. His father was Zeus and his mother Alkmene, wife of Amphitryon. Hera, wife of Zeus, discovered the infidelity of her husband and sought revenge against Herakles, whose name, ironically, meant Kleos (glory) of Hera. Herakles suffered enormously from the vindictiveness of Hera.

Hera’s cruelty started immediately after the birth of Herakles. She sent two snakes to kill baby Herakles. But baby Herakles struggled the snakes.

Herakles received good education and athletic training, especially in driving chariots, wrestling, shooting with bows and fencing. He chose the hard but virtuous way of making a living. He fought injustice and killed several monsters that threatened humans.

Herakles defeated a neighboring state oppressing Thebes. The grateful king of Thebes gave Herakles his daughter, Megara, in marriage. Megara and Herakles had several children. Hera inflicted Herakles with madness. He killed both his wife and children. When Herakles recovered his sanity, he went to Delphi and the Oracle told him in order to expiate his crime he had to serve the king of Tiryns Eurystheus for twelve years. Completing those labors would earn him immortality.

Herakles set for Tiryns and for his arduous tasks. Gods rushed to his assistance. Apollo gave him a bow and arrows; Hermes brought him a sword; Hephaistos constructed a golden breastplate; Poseidon gave Herakles horses; and Athena handed him a robe. Herakles also made his own distinct weapon, a wooden club.

His first labor was choking to death the lion of Nemea that had terrorized people in the region of Argos. He skinned the lion and wore its pelt. The second labor was to kill the many-headed Hydra of Lerna. Herakles brought his nephew Iolaos for help. When Herakles cut off a head of Hydra, Iolaos cauterized the stump, thus preventing the growing of two new heads. Herakles cut the Hydra open and took its poisonous blood. He would apply the venom to the tips of his arrows. But he, too, sometime in the future fell victim to this poison.

Herakles performed successfully another ten dangerous tasks that led him all over Greece and the world. He captured a sacred golden-horn deer belonging to Artemis and killed the eagle that ate the liver of Prometheus, the Titan god who brought fire and knowledge to humanity. He fought the Amazons. He even went to the underworld and fetched the giant and ferocious dog Kerberos.

Though Herakles was sometimes violent, his courage and virtue were prodigious. Titan Atlas instructed him how the cosmos works and Herakles brought that cosmological knowledge to Greece. He founded the Olympics. And when his second wife’s tragic mistake led Herakles to his death, Zeus immortalized him in a constellation.

The story of Herakles, like other Greek myths, highlights the early values of Greek civilization: the anthropomorphic gods and heroes serve the public good. The gods, with all the assets and some defects of humans, provide the unity and purpose of Greek society and the natural world. In trying to understand the gods, the Greeks invented science. And in an effort to diminish the friction and war among hundreds of Greek states, the Greeks rushed to the Olympics, which were dedicated to Zeus: the purpose of the games being more than athletic excellence. The Olympics reminded the Greeks they were one people. In fact, during the games all warfare ceased.

In an age of no heroes and hazardous politics, Greek mythology provides models for heroes and better society.