

Greek Drama Course

The Twelve Olympians

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The corporate Olympian pantheon, defined for the Greeks by Home, is patterned on a spoiled aristocracy. Usually they had individual shrine and temples, each worshipped for his or her individual qualities. Sometimes, however, they were worshipped as a unit; Alexander set up a shrine to all twelve in India, his furthest eastern reach.

Zeus (Jupiter) —King of gods—god of the sky, thunder, lightning, gold. Purely Greek, not pre-Greek.

Homeric Zeus is the A-Male of a patriarchal aristocratic society. He could have been oriental, with many wives, but Greeks were monogamous, so better he have many affairs. *Noblesse Oblige*, rights to women.

But he grew more godlike, accumulated powers in all areas related to guardian, protector, bringer of justice. In Aeschylus, the universal moral agent.

Later, the earth cults incorporated him as more than god of sky, but in some ideas, the sky itself. His rain the semen that impregnates the earth for spring.

Hera (Juno) —sister and wife of Zeus—goddess of marriage, childbirth.

Poseidon (Neptune) —brother of Zeus—god of the sea and earthquakes. Must be honored prior to sailing (sailors, fishermen). If not, see Odysseus. At end of his working life, a fisherman would hang up his net on at shrine of P. Earthquakes (Homer: "earth-shaker"), and fresh water.

Demeter (Ceres) —sister of Zeus—goddess of growing things, harvest.

Hestia—sister of Zeus, goddess of the hearth, i.e. the home.

Apollo (Apollo) —son of Zeus and Leto—god of light and arts (esp. poetry, and music). Combines all the qualities the Greeks thought unique to them: art, beauty, poetry, sanity, moderation. Voice of the oracle at Delphi.

Athena (Minerva) —daughter of Zeus and Hera—goddess wisdom, war, handicrafts, Patroness of Athens. Sprung from the head of Zeus in full armor, she is the personification of the Warrior Goddess with the Medusa on her shield. She is the gray-eyed Goddess and the owl is her favorite.

Aphrodite (Venus) —1. daughter of Zeus and Dione (Homer) or 2. Hesiod tells of Uranus, or Heaven, refusing to allow his children to emerge into the light, so he perpetually embraced the Earth, his wife Gaia. To be free, his son Cronus castrated him with a sickle and threw his genitals into the sea.

"And so soon as he had cut off the members with flint and cast them from the land into the surging sea, they were swept away over the main a long time:

and a white foam spread around them from the immortal flesh, and in it there grew a maiden...and came forth an awful and lovely goddess, and grass grew up about her beneath her shapely feet. Her gods and men call Aphrodite...because she grew amid the foam." *Theogony*, 185 -200

Ares (Mars) —son of Zeus and Hera—god of war. Representing the blind use of force that is absent of thought or reason, he fathered Deimos (Fear) and Phobos (Terror). Ares seemed to be in a state of perpetual conflict against Athena and Hercules. Yet, though of a fiery temperament, he was not especially menacing. Athena knocked him senseless with a hurled stone on the plains of Troy. Hercules stripped him of his armor in Pylos, and wounded him in his thigh when Ares attempted to defend his son Cycnus. Zeus even struck him with a thunderbolt at Troy when he rushed to avenge his daughter Penthesilea.

Artemis (Diana) —daughter of Zeus and Leto—goddess of the hunt, protector of children, wild animals, hunters. Cold, pitiless (e.g. Acteon). Represents the masculine in female sexuality.

Hephaestus (Vulcan) —son of Zeus and Hera—god of the forge, ironworking craftsmanship, invention.

Hermes (Mercury) —son of Zeus and Maia—messenger of the gods. God of travel, guiding, boundaries. Staff, traveler's hat, winged sandals. Prometheus called him "God's lackey and errand boy". Quiet, polite, good-natured. When a room got quiet, the Greeks said that Hermes had entered it.

Dionysus (Bacchus) —son of Zeus and Semele—god of revels, intoxication, mysteries, theatre. Replaced Hestia as one of the 12.

important non-Olympian gods:

Hades (Dis) – god of the underworld. Hades and his brothers Zeus and Poseidon, divided all reality between them and were the most powerful gods.

Persephone (Proserpine) —daughter of Zeus and his sister, Demeter. Abducted by Hades to become Queen of the Underworld.

Heracles (Hercules) —son of Zeus and the mortal, Alcmene—a demigod, and hero, but also portrayed in later literature as a bungler and lout.

Aschlepius -- God of healing.

Helios. God of the Sun. Drives the chariot of the sun across the sky every day.

Dioscuri (Castor & Pollux, the "Gemini Twins") – half-divine sons of Zeus, brothers of Helen. The aided men in dire situations ranging from war to disaster at sea.

Pan – goat-footed and sexual son of Hermês.