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THE AGE of FABLE

BULFINCH'S
MYTHOLOGY

Introduction by Earle Toppings



COMPLETE



THE
AGE of FABLE

THOMAS BULFINCH

(1796 - 1867)



AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
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THE SPECIAL CONTENTS OF THIS EDITION

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TO

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

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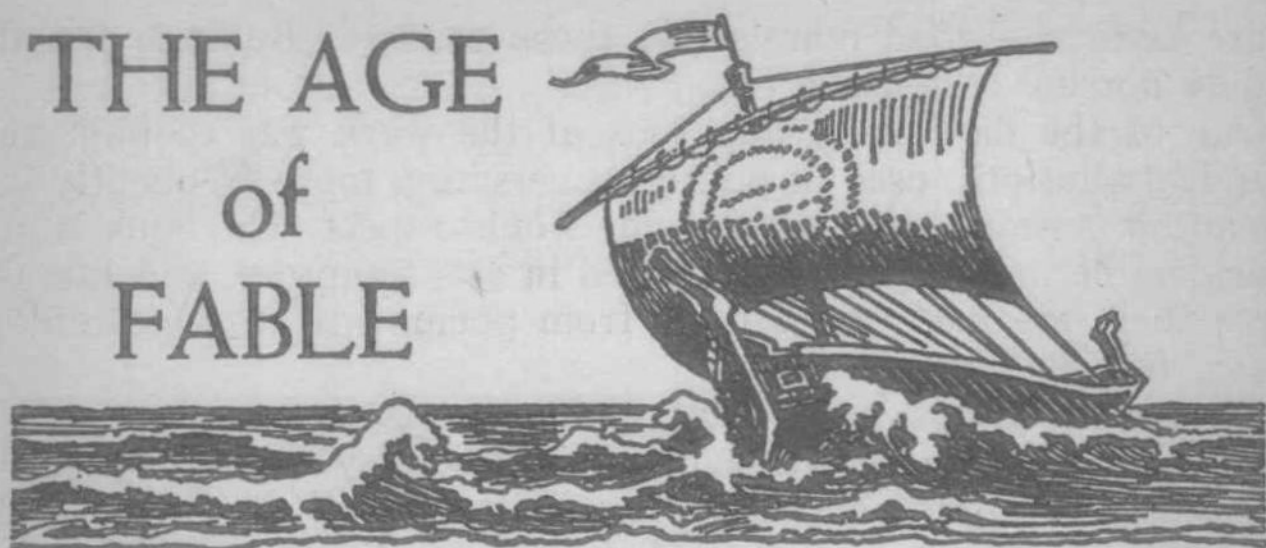
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THE AGE of FABLE



THOMAS BULFINCH

Introduction

Thomas Bulfinch (1796-1867) spent much of his working life as a bank clerk, yet had "a passion for elegant literature."

He was born, one of eleven children, in Newton, Massachusetts. His father, Charles, was architect of the Capitol in Washington, completed in 1830. Thomas was educated at Harvard College, then taught for a year at Boston Latin School, which he had attended as a boy. He lived with his parents and remained a bachelor.

Bulfinch wrote *The Age of Fable*, as noted in his original dedication, to popularize and extend the enjoyment of mythology. He told the classic tales of Greek, Roman, Norse, and Eastern mythology in his own free narrative, a graceful, concise, compelling style well matched with the fabulous material. This handbook was first published in 1855. It can be used as a dictionary but is considerably more than a reference tool; as the author intended, it is a book to be enjoyed. The early myths were essentially tales and the Greek word *mythos* implies that story line or plot was dominant.

The author wished to increase the understanding of mid-nineteenth century readers who were unable to handle the classical languages, yet his approach is in no way irritating to the modern reader. His writing wears well, largely because his first love was the material and his chief desire to communicate it directly and simply. Also, he does not instruct but presents mythology "not as a study, but as a relaxation from study; to give our work the charm of a story-book, yet by means of it to impart a knowledge of an important branch of education." A Victorian safeguard, however, is the bit of censoring done to the tales on the basis of

"pure taste and good morals," in those passages Bulfinch found unduly horrific or sensual.

One of the dictionary functions of the work was to indicate mythical allusions, used in polite conversation more frequently in the author's time than our own, one would expect. The book is of considerable help to those interested in art, sculpture, and literature; there are many quotations from poems with mythic references, for instance.

The great myths are intuitive. They contain poetic truths, whether told to amuse and delight or to convey the best science man knew in a pre-scientific age, as witness the Creation story in the Book of Genesis. In a mysterious universe, says Arnold Toynbee, man tries to express what he can of the ineffable. Human ideas and values have been shared by many cultures: the intangibles of beauty, hope, vision, and aspiration.

Myths helped explain the natural world, the seasons, the weather, the heavens. They were often grounded in physical reality, though their imagination reached far beyond the boundaries of empirical experience. Religious myths were concerned with the meaning of life, the ways of men and the ways of the gods. Man sought to explain himself to himself. Mythology was used to inspire the young and teach them while they were being entertained.

We of the twentieth century who profess to be civilized also need mythology, as the pantheon of show-business gods and goddesses reveals. In a mass culture we have comic strips, pop art, theatre of the absurd: rock-and-roll singers, movie magazines, the organization man, conspicuous consumption, and constant motion. In their mythology the Greeks rose above brutal aspects of their lives; our modern myths also bring dreams of a life that is glorious and fair, but in advertisements that worship youth, that tell us hard work has been abolished, that make us think we *can* take it with us.

The Greeks made their gods in their own image and so do we, but ours are less heroic. They level us down to Mr. Average, and when someone speaks of a great society we are not sure what the term now means. Our gods are products of press-agentry; one is sadly let down when he meets an idol to find that the star is a marionette set in motion, even trained in conversation, by a company of managers. A central doctrine of Greek religion was: remember that you are mortal. Socrates' maxim, Know thyself, grew out of the same need for humility and honesty before oneself, and thus before all the world.

Edith Hamilton says that mythologists transform a world of fear into a world of beauty. Perhaps it is in these ancient and not in our modern myths that we can contemplate how the human might become, in her words, supreme over the unhuman.

EARL TOPPINGS
Trade Editor,
The Ryerson Press

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PREFACE

If no other knowledge deserves to be called useful but that which helps to enlarge our possessions or to raise our station in society, then mythology has no claim to the appellation. But if that which tends to make us happier and better can be called useful, then we claim that epithet for our subject. For mythology is the handmaid of literature; and literature is one of the best allies of virtue and promoters of happiness.

Without a knowledge of mythology much of the elegant literature of our own language cannot be understood and appreciated. When Byron calls Rome "the Niobe of nations," or says of Venice, "She looks a Sea-Cybele fresh from ocean," he calls up to the mind of one familiar with our subject illustrations more vivid and striking than the pencil could furnish, but which are lost to the reader ignorant of mythology. Milton abounds in similar allusions. The short poem *Comus* contains more than thirty such, and the ode *On the Morning of the Nativity* half as many. Through *Paradise Lost* they are scattered profusely. This is one reason why we often hear persons by no means illiterate say that they cannot enjoy Milton. But were these persons to add to their more solid acquirements the easy learning of this little volume, much of the poetry of Milton which has appeared to them "harsh and crabbed" would be found "musical as is Apollo's lute." Our citations, taken from more than twenty-five poets, from Spenser to Longfellow, will show how general has been the practice of borrowing illustrations from mythology.

The prose writers also avail themselves of the same source of elegant and suggestive illustration. One can hardly take up a number of the *Edinburgh* or *Quarterly Review* without meeting with instances. In Macaulay's article on Milton there are twenty such.

But how is mythology to be taught to one who does not learn it through the medium of the languages of Greece and Rome? To devote study to a species of learning which relates wholly to false marvels and obsolete faiths is not to be expected of the general reader in a practical age like this. The time even of the young is claimed by so many sciences of facts and things that little can be spared for set treatises on a science of mere fancy.

But may not the requisite knowledge of the subject be acquired by reading the ancient poets in translations? We reply, the field is too extensive for a preparatory course; and these very translations require some previous knowledge of the subject to make them intelligible. Let any one who doubts it read

the first page of the *Æneid*, and see what he can make of "the hatred of Juno," the "decree of the Parcæ," the "judgment of Paris," and the "honors of Ganymede," without this knowledge.

Shall we be told that answers to such queries may be found in notes, or by a reference to the Classical Dictionary? We reply, the interruption of one's reading by either process is so annoying that most readers prefer to let an allusion pass unapprehended rather than submit to it. Moreover, such sources give us only the dry facts without any of the charm of the original narrative; and what is a poetical myth when stripped of its poetry? The story of Ceyx and Halcyone, which fills a chapter in our book, occupies but eight lines in the best (Smith's) Classical Dictionary; and so of others.

Our book is an attempt to solve this problem by telling the stories of mythology in such a manner as to make them a source of amusement. We have endeavored to tell them correctly, according to the ancient authorities, so that when the reader finds them referred to, he may not be at a loss to recognize the reference. Thus we hope to teach mythology not as a study, but as a relaxation from study; to give our work the charm of a story-book, yet by means of it to impart a knowledge of an important branch of education. The index at the end will adapt it to the purposes of reference and make it a Classical Dictionary for the parlor.

Most of the classical legends in this book are derived from Ovid and Virgil. They are not literally translated, for, in the author's opinion, poetry translated into literal prose is very unattractive reading. Neither are they in verse, as well for other reasons as from a conviction that to translate faithfully under all the embarrassments of rhyme and measure is impossible. The attempt has been made to tell the stories in prose, preserving so much of the poetry as resides in the thoughts and is separable from the language itself, and omitting those amplifications which are not suited to the altered form.

The northern mythological stories are copied with some abridgment from Mallet's *Northern Antiquities*. These chapters, with those on Oriental and Egyptian mythology, seemed necessary to complete the subject, though it is believed these topics have not usually been presented in the same volume with the classical fables.

The poetical citations so freely introduced are expected to answer several valuable purposes. They will tend to fix in memory the leading fact of each story, they will help to the attainment of a correct pronunciation of the proper names, and they will enrich the memory with many gems of poetry, some of them such as are most frequently quoted or alluded to in reading and conversation.

Having chosen *mythology as connected with literature* for our province, we have endeavored to omit nothing which the reader of elegant literature is likely to find occasion for. Such stories