

Those Whacky Greek and Roman Gods: A Quick Cheat-Sheet

Zeus (Roman **Jupiter**): Father and ruler of the gods on Mount Olympus, he is the god of the sky and lightning. He once led the young Olympian gods in a rebellion against the older Titans, and he married his sister, **Hera** (Roman Juno). Unfortunately, sexual fidelity has never been his strong point, and Zeus fathered many demigods by seducing a string of humans, nymphs, and other beings while wearing shape-changing disguises.

Hera (Roman **Juno**): Queen of the gods, Hera, is a goddess responsible for happy and loyal marriage. Ironically, her husband Zeus isn't a very good husband himself. She is a rather vengeful and spiteful deity in some ways, and she spends much of her time tormenting Zeus' many lovers and his illegitimate children. Nobody can hold a grudge like Hera.

The Nine Muses: Nine spirits responsible for creativity and inspiration. When someone has a sudden burst of insight or feels especially creative, that person might say, "A Muse has visited me." Traditionally, epic poems begin with a prayer to one of the muses.

Poseidon (Roman **Neptune**): The chaotic god of the sea, the oceans, and earthquakes, Poseidon is one of Zeus's younger brothers. He is very good at creating sea-monsters, but not very good at making land animals. (Camels and elephants, for instance, are attributed to his making; the only land animal he made that turned out okay was the horse.) He is also prone to dangerous mood swings and temper tantrums that manifested as sea storms. His children are shapeshifters and giants that plague sailors and coastlines.

Hades (Roman **Pluto** or **Dis Pater**): The gloomy god of death and the underworld, he runs around with a helmet that turns him invisible. (This makes a great deal of sense; nobody can ever see death coming....) The very name *Hades* is often used as a synonym for hell and death. Hades is married to a young goddess he abducted, **Persephone**. He is often equated with **Plutus**, the god of wealth, in later mythology.

Persephone (Roman **Proserpine**): She is the goddess of plant-life and fertility. Hades fell in love with her and abducted her, but her mother Demeter's grief caused all plant-life on earth to die. To save the world, Zeus worked out a deal with Hades. The deal is that Persephone spends six miserable months of the year (fall and winter) in the earth with her cold husband, Hades. The other six happy months of the year, Persephone is free to roam around the earth creating new life in the spring and summer.

Aphrodite (Roman **Venus**): Aphrodite is the goddess of sexuality and desire. Note that in Greek and Roman mythology, the goddess of sexual desire is a completely separate entity from **Hera**, the goddess of marriage. Aphrodite is married to **Hephaestus** (Roman Vulcan), the god of the forge and fire, but she has an ongoing affair with **Ares**, the god of war. (That makes perfect sense, since love and conflict are often intermixed!) Sometimes Aphrodite is referred to as the Cytherean, because she was born in the sea-foam off Cyprus when Zeus threw the severed testicles of the Titan Chronos into the ocean. These testicles spontaneously impregnated the sea, and Aphrodite sprang from the ocean full-grown and naked. In other versions, Aphrodite is one of Zeus's daughters.

Athena (Roman **Minerva**): Often we think of Athena as the goddess of wisdom, but more technically she is the goddess of intelligence and anything that requires skill or cleverness--including both military strategy and weaving cloth. Like Aphrodite, she had an unusual birth. She sprang full-grown and armored from Zeus' skull after he had a splitting headache. (After all, where else should wisdom originate if not in the head of a ruler?) She is described as having grey eyes, and her sacred bird is the owl. In Greek mythology, she rewards those she favors with good ideas.

Dionysus (Roman **Bacchus**): Dionysus is the god of wine, inebriation, and ecstatic loss of the self in wild frenzies. His preferred sacrifice is a libation of wine. Dionysus is not, however, a bright and happy deity. He is also the god of tragedy. The oldest Greek tragedies were originally performed as religious rituals in his honor, and the plays may have begun with the sacrifice of a goat on stage.

Hephaestus (Roman **Mulciber** or **Vulcan**): Hephaestus is the god of fire, craftsmanship, and the forge. He is a crippled being whose legs were broken after Zeus flung him from the heavens to the earth in a rage. Assisted by a trio of cyclopean assistants, he forges magical weapons and armor for the gods--including Zeus' javelins of lightning--and knick-knacks like walking chairs and animated mechanical servants.

Demeter (Roman **Ceres**): The goddess of grain harvests, she is a rather plain and nondescript deity with an important job economically speaking. Her daughter Persephone was kidnapped by Hades.

Ares (Roman **Mars**): The god of war, Ares is usually depicted as something of a coward and a braggart bully in Greek mythology. In Roman mythology, his equivalent Mars is something much more fierce, and along with Venus, Mars serves as one of the two great patrons of Rome.

Nike: Winged victory, she is a goddess presiding over military triumphs and accompanying Athena.

Hyperion / Helios (Roman **Apollo** or **Phoebus Apollo**): The god of the sun, of light, of sacred music, and healing. Apollo would send prophecies through Oracles at sacred shrines. He is very possessive, however, of his sacred golden cows, as Odysseus's crewmen learn to their detriment.

Cupid (Roman **Eros**): Cupid, or Desire, is the son of Aphrodite. He was a rather sadistic god who carried a bow of arrows--gold tipped ones that made people fall in love or lead-tipped ones that dulled passion. He also frequently carried a torch, which he would shove against people's hearts or genitals to burn them with arousal. All in all, he was something of a sadistic child. He later settles down and marries Psyche.

Aurora (The Dawn): Commonly called "rose-fingered," this colorful goddess lives on the Isle of Aeaea. Her hobby is to paint the morning sky beautiful colors, apparently, and the traces linger on her hands.

Artemis (Roman **Diana**): A tomboy goddess of the moon, the hunt, and virginity, she is Zeus's favorite daughter. She made Zeus swear never to make her marry and let her spend her nights in the forest hunting. She likes skinny-dipping, but if men spy her bathing, she tends to turn them into stags.

Hermes (Roman **Mercury**): Light-footed, slender, and clever, Hermes is the god of travelers, messengers, thieves, tricksters, and gamblers--basically the god of anybody who must move quickly or make fast getaways. He wears sandals with wings on the heel-straps that let him fly with arrow-like speed wherever he willed, and he carries a caduceus to identify himself to spirits of the dead, whom he guides into Hades' realm where **Charon** carries them across the river Styx. Hermes was quite the delinquent in his youth, stealing the sacred cows of Helios.

The Winds: The Winds were minor spirits that spent much of their time imprisoned by the gods. Occasionally, Hera or other deities would bribe their jailor to let the winds loose to cause disaster. These spirits included **Boreas** (south wind), **Notus**, (north wind), **Zephyr** (west wind), **Voltumnus** (southwest wind), **Eurus** (east wind), and **Aeolus** (northeast wind).

Circe: Technically a sorceress rather than a goddess, the distinction is insignificant given her great powers. She was eternally young and beautiful through her magic, and she had the power to turn men who displeased her into pigs.