

Introduction

The gods and goddesses of ancient Greece seem to us a peculiar lot. They established themselves after a long and terrible war which the brothers Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades waged against the race of older gods called the Titans. Once the Titans were finally overthrown, Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades drew lots to divide the earth among them. Zeus won the sky; Poseidon, the sea; and Hades, the underworld. From that time on, Zeus ruled the earth, along with his brothers, sisters, various spouses, and a few additional gods and goddesses, all of them making their home on Mount Olympus.

These Olympians were a quarrelsome family. They ruled the universe, but not peacefully. Though immortal, they nevertheless displayed the same range of emotions one finds among mortals—and often the same bad manners. Petty jealousies would often spring up between one god and goddess or another, and fights would follow. They played favorites among humans: to one they might give special powers, while they made life difficult for another. Since Olympians could influence events and determine mortals' fates, life on earth was largely unpredictable.

It was against this background that the Trojan War started—touched off by jealousy among the gods. Eris, the goddess of discord, was not invited to a feast. Angry at being snubbed, she threw into the banquet hall a golden apple on which were the words *For the Most Beautiful*. Three goddesses each immediately claimed the apple for her

own: Hera, wife of almighty Zeus; Athene, his daughter, goddess of both wisdom and battle; and Aphrodite, his daughter-in-law, goddess of love. The three appealed to Zeus to choose, but he knew better than to get involved in that argument. Instead, he advised them to go to the mountainside where young Prince Paris was tending his father's sheep. Paris, son of King Priam of Troy, was known for his fairness as a judge.

But the goddesses did not ask Paris to select the most beautiful among them; instead, they offered him bribes. From Hera came the offer to be ruler of Europe and Asia; from Athene, the chance to lead the Trojans to victory against the Greeks; from Aphrodite, the love of the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris gave Aphrodite the golden apple.

The woman who was most famous for her beauty was Helen, wife of King Menelaus of Sparta. Most of the kings and princes of Greece had wanted to marry her, in fact, and had come to Sparta bearing rich presents for King Tyndareus, Helen's father. Tyndareus was fearful of being accused of favoritism if he accepted the presents of any one suitor. If the rejected suitors took offense, they might wage war. Sensing the problem, King Ulysses of Ithaca offered Tyndareus a solution. Ulysses was well known for his cleverness, and so the king quickly accepted his advice. Tyndareus asked all the suitors solemnly to swear to defend and protect Helen and her chosen husband. Since each suitor hoped to be the

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one chosen, all of them swore to the oath. Then Tyndareus chose Menelaus to be Helen's groom, and appointed him king of Sparta as well. As reward for his advice, Ulysses asked to marry Penelope, Tyndareus's niece.

Guided by Aphrodite, Paris later arrived in Sparta. Menelaus treated him hospitably, as was the custom, but Menelaus was soon called away because of his father's death. Menelaus left Helen to rule in his absence.

Under Aphrodite's spell, Helen fell deeply in love with her visitor. She eloped with Paris, taking with her most of the palace treasures. Paris took her home with him to Troy, where his father, King Priam, found Helen so lovely he vowed to protect her and Paris and never to return her to Sparta.

Menelaus returned to find Helen gone. Hurt and angry, he called upon the kings and princes of all Greece to keep their vows and to help him. They responded, and eventually a thousand ships carrying troops sailed to Troy.

Troy, however, was a walled city, built for defense, and it was not easy to conquer. The war waged for ten years, with first one side, then the other, favored by the gods. Aphrodite, of course, sided with Paris and Troy; Hera—goddess of marriage—just as strongly opposed them. The rest of the gods and goddesses played their favorites as well, although Zeus remained neutral most of the time to avoid Hera's wrath.

After ten years the Greeks finally took Troy—through a trick. The clever Ulysses had built a huge wooden horse, the famous Trojan Horse, inside which warriors could hide. They left this horse outside the gates of Troy and sailed away—only to hide behind a nearby island. The Trojans assumed their foes had given up; nevertheless, they were puzzled by the enormous horse outside their

gates. A Greek soldier, who had volunteered to remain behind and be captured, was brought before King Priam. He played his part well. He declared that both he and the horse were intended to be offerings to Athene, but that he had escaped. The horse had been built so large, the soldier claimed, to discourage the Trojans from carting it into their city. The Trojans were supposed to destroy the wooden offering and thereby bring the wrath of Athene upon themselves.

The scheme worked. The Trojans dragged the horse through the gates and into their city, thinking to win Athene's favor away from the Greeks. Then that night, the Greeks who had hidden in the horse, Ulysses included, climbed out through a trap door and threw wide the city gates. The remaining Greek soldiers, returned from hiding, stormed through the gates of Troy, set fire to buildings, and killed those who rushed out into the streets in confusion. By morning the city was in ruins. Helen was taken to Menelaus, who gladly received her back, and together they sailed home to Sparta.

When Ulysses had joined the Greek forces ten years earlier, he had been forced to leave behind in Ithaca his attractive and devoted wife, Penelope, and his young son, Telemachus. Throughout the war he had fought with courage, coolness, and—whenever necessary—cunning. His plan to take Troy had worked and had brought an end to the war. But Ulysses was weary of battle. He had begun to long increasingly for home. Ten years away from his wife, his son, and his native land seemed like an eternity.

In the story that follows, Ulysses begins his homeward journey, unaware of what the gods might yet have in store for him. □□