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Tiresias, son of the nymph Chariclo, was a remarkably long-lived prophet of Thebes. Inseparable from the mythology of his storied city, he played a central role in the lives of everyone from Cadmus to the Seven against Thebes.Tiresias was blessed with experiences and abilities that went beyond his famous clairvoyance and longevity. Though born a man, he was transformed into a woman after he killed a copulating female snake; eventually, after marrying and giving birth to children, (s)he was transformed back into a man. In the end, Tiresias was struck blind by the gods—in some versions because he had offended Athena, in others because he had offended Hera.Tiresias was an important prophet even in death. For example, the Greek hero Odysseus visited the Underworld during his decade-long journey home from the Trojan War, seeking advice from the long-dead Tiresias.The name “Tiresias” (Greek Τειρεσίας, translit. Teiresias), also spelled Teiresias, seems to have been derived from the Greek word teras, or its variant teirea. Though this word has several meanings—“sign,” “omen,” “wonder,” “monster”—it was broadly used to signify something divine. It is likely related to the Indo-European *kwer-, meaning “magical sign” or “omen.”[1]Tiresias (or Teiresias)Τειρεσίας (translit. Teiresias)[tahy-REE-see-uhs]/taɪˈri si əs/Tiresias boasted several famous attributes—most notably, the gift of divination, which he received from the gods. He was a prolific diviner, obtaining his information about the future through prophetic visions as well as augury (the interpretation of the songs and flights of birds). According to ancient sources, he was awarded these abilities as compensation for his blindness (which also came from the gods). Tiresias also carried a special staff, made of either cornel wood or gold (there are different versions), which he used to guide his steps.Finally, Tiresias is remembered for his highly unusual life: he was born a man, lived for several years as a woman, then was transformed back into a man. He also lived much longer than other mortals—for as many as seven generations.In ancient art, Tiresias was represented as a bearded prophet, often with a staff and other religious accoutrements. As far as we know, he was never depicted in his female form.[2]Tiresias’ mother was Chariclo, a nymph devoted to the goddess Athena. His father was a Theban named Everes who may have been descended from one of the Spartoi, or “sown men,” the race of warriors who sprang from the earth when Cadmus first founded Thebes and sowed the dragon’s teeth given to him by the gods.[3] This meant that Tiresias belonged to the oldest and most respected family in mythical Thebes.[4]There are different versions of how Tiresias became the famous blind prophet of Thebes, at least two of which were well known in antiquity.[5] The Bath of AthenaIn one myth, Tiresias happened upon Athena one day while she was bathing. When Athena realized that Tiresias had seen her naked, she immediately struck him blind. The so-called "Athena Varvakeion," a small Roman replica of the famous statue of "Athena Parthenos" by Phidias (first half of the 3rd century CE). National Archaeological Museum in Athens, Athens, Greece. MarsyasCC BY-SA 3.0Chariclo, Tiresias’ mother and one of Athena’s attendants, begged the goddess to restore the boy’s sight. Athena explained that she could not do so; however, she did give Tiresias several valuable gifts as compensation for his lost eyesight. Callimachus imagines Athena’s words to Chariclo in his fifth Hymn:I will make him a seer to be sung of men hereafter, yea, more excellent than any other. He shall know the birds – which is of good omen among all the countless birds that fly and what birds are of ill-omened flight. Many oracles shall he utter to the Boeotians and many unto Cadmus, and to the mighty sons of Labdacus in later days. Also will I give him a great staff which shall guide his feet as he hath need, and I will give him a long term of life. And he only, when he dies, shall walk among the dead having understanding, honoured of the great Leader of Peoples.[6]Thus, Tiresias’ powers of divination, magical staff, longevity, and even his ability to continue prophesying after death were all gifts from Athena. Between these, Tiresias was able to navigate life just as well as, if not better than, an ordinary sighted mortal.[7]Snakes, Spontaneous Sex Changes, and the Wrath of HeraThe alternative myth of how Tiresias gained his powers is much stranger. This version also begins with Tiresias coming across an unusual sight in the woods: two copulating snakes. Tiresias killed the female snake (or, in some versions, both snakes); as a consequence, he was instantly transformed into a woman.Tiresias went on to live as a woman for some time (seven or eight years in most sources). One day, however, he again happened upon two copulating snakes. According to some sources, Tiresias was able to cancel out his earlier misstep by killing the male snake; in others, he simply killed both. Either way, Tiresias was transformed back into a man.This remarkable experience left Tiresias uniquely well placed to resolve a dispute between Zeus and Hera. The king and queen of the gods apparently could not agree on whether the male or the female derived more pleasure from sex. So they asked Tiresias—who had lived as both a man and a woman—to resolve the matter once and for all. Tiresias’ response was widely circulated in the ancient world:Of ten parts [of sex] a man enjoys one only;But a woman enjoys the full ten parts in her heart.[8]Hera, apparently, found this response humiliating and punished Tiresias by striking him blind. But Zeus pitied Tiresias and compensated him by granting him the gift of divination—and, according to some sources, a life that spanned seven generations.[9]As a prophet, Tiresias was an ever-present (if often reluctant) figure in the mythology of Thebes, one of the most famous and storied cities of Greek mythology.CadmusTiresias’ association with Thebes can be traced back to the very origins of the city. In several sources, Tiresias gives prophecies to Cadmus, the founder of Thebes.[10] In Euripides’ Bacchae, Tiresias joins the aged Cadmus in unsuccessfully urging Pentheus, the young king of Thebes, to acknowledge the divinity of Dionysus.[11]OedipusTiresias’ presence in Theban myths continued unabated for several generations. He was thus alive and well to advise the Labdacid kings of Thebes, named after Cadmus’ grandson Labdacus.In one myth, for example, Tiresias was summoned to help Oedipus solve the murder of Labdacus’ son Laius, the previous king of Thebes. In literary representations of this exchange—most famously, in Sophocles’ Oedipus the King—Tiresias is initially reluctant to speak; but when Oedipus presses him, Tiresias becomes angry and insinuates that Oedipus himself unknowingly murdered Laius:I tell you: the man whom you have been seeking this long while, uttering threats and proclaiming a search into the murder of Laius, is here, ostensibly an alien sojourner, but soon to be found a native of Thebes; nor will he enjoy his fortune. A blind man, though now he sees, a beggar, though now rich, he will make his way to a foreign land, feeling the ground before him with his staff. And he will be discovered to be at once brother and father of the children with whom he consorts; son and husband of the woman who bore him; heir to his father's bed, shedder of his father’s blood.[12]Soon after, Oedipus realizes that not only did he kill Laius, but Laius was his father. Since he had married Laius’ wife Jocasta after the murder, Oedipus is left to conclude—to his horror—that he had killed his father and married his mother.[13]Oedipus and Antigone by Antoni Brodowski (1828). National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland. Wikimedia CommonsPublic DomainThe Seven against ThebesYears later, Oedipus’ sons Polyneices and Eteocles quarreled about which of them should rule Thebes. They eventually decided to take turns, ruling on alternate years. At the end of his year, however, Eteocles refused to turn power over to Polyneices. The enraged Polyneices assembled an army led by seven commanders, including himself, and attacked Thebes—an assault known as the war of the Seven against Thebes.During this war, Tiresias used his prophetic abilities to give aid to the Thebans. He revealed that Thebes would only be saved if Menoeceus, the son of the Theban nobleman Creon and a descendant of Cadmus’ Spartoi, sacrificed himself. Menoeceus thus threw himself to his death from the walls of the city. Polyneices and Eteocles then tried to settle the war in single combat, but they both ended up dead. A battle broke out, and in the end the Thebans managed to kill most of the so-called Seven against Thebes and rout their army.[14]Terracotta pediment from the Temple of Talamone in Etruria showing the fate of the Seven against Thebes (2nd century BCE). National Archaeological Museum, Florence, Italy. TetraktysCC BY-SA 3.0After the war was over, Creon decreed that the body of the traitor Polyneices was to be left in the open, for vultures and dogs to devour. But Polyneices’ sister Antigone defied the order and buried her brother. She was caught, and as punishment for her defiance, Creon ordered that she be buried alive. Once again, Tiresias appeared at the palace: he warned Creon that if he did not revoke the order, the gods would punish him for his impiety.[15] Sure enough, Creon’s son Haemon killed himself when Antigone (to whom he was betrothed) was executed.[16]The War of the Epigoni and the Death of TiresiasA generation after the Seven against Thebes, the sons of the original seven commanders—collectively known as the Epigoni (literally “offspring”)—sought to avenge their fathers by conquering Thebes. This time, the Theban army was roundly defeated.When the battle was over, Tiresias advised the Thebans on the best way to save themselves. He suggested that they send a herald to the Epigoni under the pretense of negotiating the city’s surrender. This would buy the Thebans time to make their escape.The Thebans did as Tiresias advised. Tiresias then joined the rest of the Thebans in fleeing the city. While passing by the Spring of Tilphossa, Tiresias stopped to drink. He died then and there, having lived through the entire mythical history of Thebes, from the foundation of the city to its destruction.[17]Other Theban MythsAs the ubiquitous prophet of Thebes, Tiresias made brief appearances in several other Theban myths.According to Ovid’s Metamorphoses, for example, the nymph Liriope (who lived near Thebes) consulted Tiresias to learn whether her son Narcissus would have a long life. Tiresias’ response was cryptic:If he but fail to recognize himself,a long life he may have, beneath the sun.[18]The Nymph Liriope Bringing her Son Narcissus to Tiresias by Giulio Carpioni (ca. 1671). Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Wikimedia CommonsPublic DomainOnly later did Tiresias’ meaning become clear: one day, the handsome Narcissus happened to see his reflection in the water. Stunned by his good looks, he could not tear himself away and remained rooted to the spot until he died and was transformed into the Narcissus flower.Tiresias was also sometimes said to have been present at the birth of Heracles, the great strongman, who had Theban roots. Tiresias predicted Heracles’ deeds, from his labors to his ultimate deification.[19]It is unusual for a Greek mortal’s mythology to continue after their death, but Tiresias was nothing if not unusual. While Odysseus was trying to find his way back home to Ithaca after fighting in the Trojan War, the witch Circe advised him to go to the Underworld to seek instructions from Tiresias:To him even in death Persephone has granted reason, that he alone should have understanding; but the others flit about as shadows.[20]Odysseus followed Circe’s advice. He found Tiresias in the Underworld among the shades of the dead and asked him what he needed to do to get back home. Tiresias warned Odysseus that he and his men would soon put in at the island of Thrinacia, and that they must avoid harming the cattle of the sun god Helios while they were there. Tiresias Appearing to Odysseus by Henry Fuseli (1780–1785). Albertina, Vienna, Austria. Wikimedia CommonsTiresias also told Odysseus that Poseidon was angry at him for blinding his son Polyphemus, and that after returning to Ithaca he would need to set out on another journey to atone for this sin: Odysseus would travel by land with an oar on his shoulder until he reached a place where nobody knew of the sea or seafaring. He would know he had gone far enough when a passerby mistook his oar for a winnowing fan. There, he would plant the oar in the earth and sacrifice to Poseidon. Only then could he finally return home.[21]Tiresias was honored with a few tombs or cenotaphs in the ancient Greek world. The most famous one was at Thebes, close to the Spring of Tilphossa (where Tiresias was said to have died).[22] Nearby was a sacred spot for birdwatching and augury.[23] Another of his tombs was located in Macedonia.[24]There was also an oracle near Thebes who was connected with Tiresias. But the oracle’s prophecies ended after a terrible plague ravaged the Boeotian city of Orchomenus; it was said that the gods stopped speaking through the oracle after that.[25]Tiresias has made a number of pop culture appearances over the years, inspiring modern poets such as Alfred Tennyson, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. He was also the subject of Frederick Ashton’s ballet Tiresias, which premiered in 1951. More recently, Tiresias has featured in cinematic adaptations of Greek mythology, including the 1997 television miniseries The Odyssey.Avi Kapach is a writer, scholar, and educator who received his PhD in Classics from Brown University Kapach, Avi. “Antigone.” Mythopedia, February 15, 2023. Avi. “Antigone.” Mythopedia, 15 Feb. 2023. . Accessed on 13 Feb. 2025.Kapach, A. (2023, February 15). Antigone. Mythopedia. Apollo was a powerful Greek god and one of the Twelve Olympians. He served as the divine patron of prophecy, healing, art, and culture, as well as the embodiment of masculine beauty.Apollo belonged to the second generation of Olympians, along with his twin sister Artemis, goddess of the wild and hunting. He was commonly represented as a kouros—that is, as a young, beardless male. In ancient art, he could be seen carrying a lyre or a bow and arrow.Key FactsApollo was the son of Zeus, the supreme god of the Greek pantheon, and Leto, a descendant of the Titans. In myth, he and his twin sister Artemis were born on the island of Delos, the only place on earth that would give Leto shelter when Hera, Zeus’ jealous wife, sought to prevent her from giving birth. Apollo rewarded the island by making it one of the centers of his worship.The Apollo Belvedere (ca. 120–140 CE)Vatican Museums / Dennis JarvisPublic DomainApollo was usually viewed as the prototypical beautiful young man (kouros in Greek). He was distinguished by various symbols of his roles and powers, including the bow, lyre, and cithara, and was often depicted wearing a laurel wreath. Apollo’s sacred animals included the raven and the wolf.The "Terrace of the Lions" at Delos, a gift from the Naxians (ca. 620–600 BCE)ZdeCC BY-SA 4.0Apollo was widely worshipped with sanctuaries and festivals. His oracle at Delphi was one of the most influential in the Greek world. Apollo also had a major sanctuary on the tiny island of Delos, where he was said to have been born.Like the other Olympian gods, Apollo had a rich temple cult and was honored with regular festivals throughout the Greek world, including the Pythian Games at Delphi. He was also worshipped in connection with aspects of everyday life, such as health and medicine. Ritual invocations called paeans were sung to Apollo in various contexts.Apollo Killing the Python by Hendrik Goltzius (published 1589)Los Angeles County Museum of ArtPublic DomainAccording to one myth, while the young Apollo was establishing his oracle at Delphi, he encountered a monstrous serpent or dragon called Python. After a violent battle, Apollo won the upper hand and slew Python with his arrows. He then built his oracle over the corpse of his defeated enemy. Henceforth, the priestess of Apollo at Delphi was known as the “Pythia” to commemorate the god’s victory.[FIGURE FOUR]As with most Greek deities, the etymology of the name “Apollo” has mysterious origins. It does not appear in the Linear B tablets, the earliest surviving texts of Greek civilization, written in a syllabic script during the Greek Bronze Age (ca. 1600–1100 BCE). However, this does not necessarily mean that Apollo was a late addition to the Greek pantheon: the name Paean, one of Apollo’s most common alternate names, does show up in Linear B.Some scholars have posited that the name “Apollo” is a derivation from apella, a word in the Doric dialect of ancient Greek that means “public assembly.” Indeed, the Doric form of the god’s name is “Apellon.” In this interpretation, "Apollo" translates to “he who assembles” or “he of the assembly,” possibly referring to his reputation as the bringer of civilized order and the source of civil constitutions.[1]Gregory Nagy, on the other hand, has argued that “Apollo” was derived from the words apeilē, a noun meaning “promise, boast, or threat,” and apeilein, a verb meaning “to make a promise, boast, or threat.” Such an etymology would render Apollo “the god of authoritative speech, the one who presides over all manner of speech-acts, including the realms of songmaking in general and poetry in particular.”[2]Apollo was often called “Paean,” a name that emphasized his ritual function as a god of healing and protection. This was a very ancient name—perhaps even more ancient than the name Apollo.Another alternative name for Apollo was Phoebus, one of the god’s most popular epithets. Many ancient sources call the god “Phoebus Apollo” or even just “Phoebus.” The Romans, for example, referred to the god as “Phoebus” at least as often as they referred to him as “Apollo.”Other names commonly used to identify Apollo include “Loxias” (referring to the god’s ambiguous oracles, called loxia) and “Lyceus” (a word that simultaneously evokes light, wolves, and the region of Lycia). Apollo’s diverse functions were reflected in his many epithets. In addition to titles such as Paean, Phoebus, Loxias, and Lyceus, which sometimes served as alternative names for the god (see above), Apollo was also called hekēbolos (“far-shooter”), hekaergos (“far-worker”), epikourios (“assisting”), oulious (“healer”), loimios (“pestilential”), and alexikakos (“ill-deterring”). Other epithets, such as Dēlios (“Delian”), Pythios (“Pythian”), and Smintheus (“Sminthian”) refer to sites and places of worship considered sacred to Apollo.[6]As a god, Apollo was associated primarily with prophecy, music, and all things beautiful. But he was also regarded as the god of medicine and plague, livestock, colonization, and virtue. Apollo was viewed as the symbol of universal and aesthetic order, civilization, and reason. In this capacity, he would punish the wicked and overbearing. In the arts, Apollo stood for harmony and order, while Dionysus, the other divine patron of the arts, reveled in ecstasy and chaos. This led to the pairing of the “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” as the two opposing poles of artistic creation (an opposition made especially famous by the nineteenth-century German philosopher and philologist Friedrich Nietzsche).[7]From earliest antiquity, Apollo was represented in both art and literature as eternally youthful and handsome, with locks of radiant hair, a clean-shaven face, and an athletic but not overly muscular physique. The god was most commonly identified by either a bow or a musical instrument (usually a lyre, but sometimes a more specialized stringed instrument called a cithara).Apollo’s symbols were many. In addition to the bow, lyre, and cithara, Apollo was also represented by the tripod, a tall, three-footed structure (sometimes elaborately decorated) used for sacrifices and religious rituals. This object represented Apollo in his function as god of prophecy. The “Delphic tripod” was the famous tripod on which Apollo’s priestesses at Delphi sat and delivered the god’s prophecies.Apollo’s symbols also included sacred plants, such as the palm tree (the tree under which he was usually said to have been born), the laurel (whose leaves crowned those honored by Apollo), and the cypress.Finally, Apollo’s symbols included an array of sacred animals. Among the most important of these were swans and cicadas (symbolizing music and song); ravens, hawks, and crows (his messengers); snakes (connected with prophecy); and wolves, dolphins, deer, mice, and griffins.The mythology of Apollo began with his remarkable birth from the union of Zeus and Leto (the daughter of the Titans Coeus and Phoebe). Leto became pregnant by Zeus with twins while he was married to Hera. When Hera discovered this, she did everything in her power to try to prevent Leto from giving birth. According to the third-century BCE poet Callimachus, Hera even sent her son Ares to threaten any person or city that received Leto with utter destruction.[14]In the end, Leto arrived on Delos, a tiny, barren island in the Aegean Sea. According to some sources, it was Apollo himself, whispering to his mother from inside the womb, who told Leto to seek shelter on this island.[15] Desperate to find relief from her labor pains, Leto addressed the island, begging it to let her give birth there and promising that if she were granted this kindness, Apollo would someday build a great temple on the seemingly unimpressive island:for no other will touch you, as you will find: and I think you will never be rich in oxen and sheep, nor bear vintage nor yet produce plants abundantly. But if you have the temple of far-shooting Apollo, all men will bring you hecatombs and gather here, and incessant savour of rich sacrifice will always arise, and you will feed those who dwell in you from the hand of strangers; for truly your own soil is not rich.[16]Delos, knowing that it had no natural gifts to offer, joyfully agreed to Leto’s terms. Thus, Leto gave birth to the twins Apollo and Artemis on the island, and in return Delos became one of Apollo’s sacred sites. Latona and Her Children by William Henry Rinehart (1874). Metropolitan Museum of ArtPublic DomainAfter a long and painful labor (which Hera extended by preventing her daughter Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth, from attending Leto), Apollo and Artemis were finally born. The young Apollo was then wrapped in resplendent robes and fed nectar and ambrosia by Themis, the goddess of law and order. Apollo grew quickly; according to the third Homeric Hymn, he was no sooner born and fed than he announced for all to hear: “The lyre and the curved bow shall ever be dear to me, and I will declare to men the unfailing will of Zeus.”[17]According to many sources, Delos was a wandering island before Apollo and Artemis were born on it; like Leto, it roamed the world without a place to call its own. But after the twin gods were born, Delos became rooted to its spot. It would forever remain fixed in place as Apollo’s sacred island.[18]Seeking to make a name for himself, the young Apollo decided to hunt the beast known as Python. A son of the primordial earth goddess Gaia, Python was a giant, terrifying dragon. According to the most common tradition, Apollo tracked the beast to Delphi and killed it with his bow and arrows. He then took over the oracle of Delphi and used it as a center from which to dispense his prophecies.According to the Roman mythographer Hyginus, however, Apollo’s killing of Python was an act of revenge because Python had pursued his mother, Leto, while she was looking for a place to give birth.[19] Apollo Victorious over the Python by Pietro Francavilla (1591). Walters Art MuseumPublic DomainIn another story, Apollo, this time together with his sister Artemis, killed the monster Tityus when he attempted to rape their mother, Leto. In some versions of this story, however, Tityus was killed by Zeus,[20] while in others it was Leto herself who killed him.[21]Apollo was introduced to music shortly after his birth and soon became known as the greatest musician in the cosmos, a title he took seriously. In one story, told in detail in the Homeric Hymns, Hermes stole a number of cows that belonged to Apollo and hid them inside a cave. While there, Hermes killed a tortoise and fashioned the first lyre from its entrails and shell. Meanwhile, Apollo fumed about the theft and reported it to Zeus, who ordered Hermes to return the stolen cattle. As Hermes was preparing to do so, Apollo noticed him playing the instrument. The young god was so attracted to the object that he agreed to accept it in lieu of the cattle.[22]Occasionally, the unwise and hubristic would challenge Apollo to musical contests. One challenge occurred when Pan compared his own music to Apollo’s, sparking the god’s outrage. They selected Tmolus, the king of Lydia, to judge a contest. Pan blew a pleasant tune on the pipes, but Apollo played his lyre with such astonishing beauty that he was immediately selected as the victor. When King Midas voiced his disapproval with the outcome, Apollo cursed him with donkey ears.[23] Cupid and Apollo with a Lyre by Paolo Farinati (ca. 1568). Metropolitan Museum of ArtPublic DomainThe punishment for challenging Apollo could also be much more severe. This was the case for the satyr Marsyas, who one day found the aulos, a kind of flute that had been made and discarded by Athena. He learned the instrument well and eventually came to believe himself a better player than Apollo. Once again, Apollo readied to duel a challenger. Marsyas played well, but the combination of Apollo’s lyre and voice won the day. In some versions of the story, Apollo managed to conclusively prove his superiority by turning his lyre upside down and playing it no less beautifully than before; when Marsyas tried to play the pipes upside down, he was met with less success.[24] In all versions, however, the punishment for his hubris was death. Apollo hung Marsyas from a tree and flayed the skin from his body.Niobe, the wife of King Amphion of Thebes, offers another famous cautionary tale about the consequences of hubris. As the story goes, she had fourteen children: seven boys and seven girls (though the numbers vary in some traditions).[25] One day, Niobe loudly boasted that she was more blessed than even the divine Leto, for she had fourteen beautiful children, while Leto had only two.To punish Niobe, Leto sent Apollo and Artemis to kill Niobe’s children. Apollo shot down the sons with his bow, while Artemis shot down the daughters with hers. Niobe’s husband Amphion was killed too (though the details of how and why vary). Only Niobe was left. Devastated, she wasted away from grief; her tears became a river, and she herself became a stone. Ovid, the Roman poet who wrote the Metamorphoses, vividly describes the heartrending scene:Childless—she crouched beside her slaughtered sons, her lifeless daughters, and her husband's corpse. The breeze not even moved her fallen hair, a chill of marble spread upon her flesh, beneath her pale, set brows, her eyes moved not, her bitter tongue turned stiff in her hard jaws, her lovely veins congealed, and her stiff neck and rigid hands could neither bend nor move.—her limbs and body, all were changed to stone.[26]In some versions, however, at least one of Niobe’s children was spared. Apollodorus calls the survivor Meliboea and claims that Amphion also evaded death.[27] In other sources, however, two children survived, a boy and a girl called Amyclas and Chloris.[28] The Roman mythographer Hyginus even writes that Apollo granted Chloris’ son Nestor the years he had taken away from the Niobids. This was the reason for Nestor’s famous longevity.[29]In another story, Apollo’s son Asclepius had discovered and implemented a cure for death, but Zeus killed him for overstepping the bounds of medicine. When Apollo heard the news, he flew into a rage, slaughtering the Cyclopes who had fashioned the lightning bolt that Zeus used to kill Asclepius. To punish Apollo, Zeus sentenced him to a period of hard labor in service to a mortal man, King Admetus of Pherae.Apollo submitted to his punishment, caring for Admetus’ herds. But Admetus was a kind man and treated Apollo with respect. In return, Apollo ensured that Admetus prospered. In some traditions, Apollo and Admetus were also lovers.[30]After his period of service was over, Apollo continued to be a devoted friend and patron of Admetus. When he discovered that Admetus’ life was fated to end soon, he managed to reach a compromise with the Moirae, the three sisters who measured out the life of every mortal: if Admetus could find someone to willingly die for him, he could live. Apollo took this deal to Admetus, and Admetus’ wife, the lovely Alcestis, chose to die in his place. In the end, however, tragedy was averted and the couple reunited thanks to the brawn of Heracles, another of Admetus’ friends. Heracles happened to stop at Pherae during his travels, and upon learning the circumstances under which Alcestis had died, he conquered death itself to bring her back to her husband.In one myth, Apollo (together with Poseidon) helped Laomedon, king of Troy, erect the fortifications of his great city.[31] According to some traditions, this task was ordered by Zeus as a punishment for Apollo and Poseidon’s attempt to overthrow him as ruler of the Olympians.[32] In other traditions, however, the two gods went willingly, wishing to test the hubris of Laomedon.[#33]Apollo and Poseidon performed the work as instructed, though ancient sources disagree on the division of labor. According to some, it was Poseidon who built the fortifications, while Apollo tended Laomedon’s livestock.[34] Pindar even suggests that the two gods were assisted by a mortal named Aeacus. Because Troy was destined to eventually fall, it could not be built by gods alone (such a city would be truly impregnable); consequently, the segment of the wall built by the mortal Aeacus would always be the weak point.[35]At any rate, Laomedon refused to pay Apollo and Poseidon after they finished building his walls, and even tried to sell them into slavery. This particularly irked the temperamental Poseidon, who sent a sea monster to lay waste to the Trojan countryside. Ultimately, Troy would fall two times: once when Laomedon offended Heracles (in a manner very similar to how he had offended Apollo and Poseidon), and again after the decade-long Trojan War (fought for the love of the beautiful Helen).During the Trojan War, Apollo vigorously defended the city of Troy. In some traditions, he even had an affair with Hecuba, the queen of Troy. He was also closely associated with the Trojan princess Cassandra, whom he had loved and to whom he had given the art of prophecy.Throughout the conflict, Apollo was a key mover of events. In the early stages of the war, Apollo’s rage threatened to undo the Achaeans by causing a rift between the mighty heroes Agamemnon and Achilles. This rift began when Agamemnon carried off Chryseis, the daughter of Apollo’s priest Chryses, as a war captive. Chryses first tried to ransom his daughter. Failing this, he prayed for Apollo’s intercession:Hear me, god of the silver bow, who stand over Chryse and holy Cilla, and rule mightily over Tenedos, Sminthian god, if ever I roofed over a temple to your pleasing, or if ever I burned to you fat thigh-pieces of bulls and goats, fulfill this prayer for me: let the Danaans pay for my tears by your arrows.[36]Apollo immediately came down from heaven, bringing plague and death in his wake—a terrible sight to behold:Down from the peaks of Olympus he strode, angered at heart, bearing on his shoulders his bow and covered quiver. The arrows rattled on the shoulders of the angry god as he moved, and his coming was like the night. Then he sat down apart from the ships and let fly an arrow: terrible was the twang of the silver bow. The mules he assailed first and the swift dogs, but then on the men themselves he let fly his stinging shafts, and struck; and constantly the pyres of the dead burned thick.[37]After numerous deaths, the Greeks realized why they were suffering, and Achilles demanded that Agamemnon return Chryseis to the offended priest. Agamemnon relented, but the goodwill between the two would remain forever broken: Agamemnon took Achilles’ captive, Briseis, to replace Chryseis, and in response, Achilles refused to fight any more for the Greeks. Apollo Preceding Hector with His Aegis and Dispersing the Greeks by John Flaxman (ca. 1787).Yale Center for British ArtPublic DomainAt other points in the conflict, Apollo fought on the side of the Trojans or interceded on behalf of Trojan heroes such as Aeneas and Hector. When the former fell injured on the battlefield at the hands of Diomedes, Apollo enveloped the scene with a fog that protected Aeneas.[38] Apollo also helped Hector kill Achilles’ dearest friend, Patroclus, when Patroclus entered the battle in Achilles’ invincible armor.[39] Later, Apollo would use his power again with Hector, who had been bested by Achilles in hand-to-hand combat. When Achilles finally vanquished Hector, Apollo used his protective mist to cover the body, which Achilles had wanted to mutilate in his triumph and rage.[40]In the end, Apollo brought about the death of the nearly invincible Achilles. Apollo had long nursed a grudge against Achilles for slaying his son Tenes before the Trojan War began. In most traditions, Apollo guided an arrow shot by the Trojan prince Paris to kill Achilles.[41]Apollo, like most of the Greek gods, had many love affairs. Not all of these ended happily, and indeed, many of Apollo’s most famous affairs are tales of disappointment, betrayal, or unrequited love.In one myth, Apollo fell in love with a beautiful woman named Coronis (though in some traditions, her name was Arsinoe). But Coronis loved the mortal Ischys and slept with him while she was pregnant with Apollo’s child. When Apollo found out about Coronis’ infidelity, he killed her in a jealous rage.While Coronis’ body was being burned on the funeral pyre, Apollo remembered that the girl was pregnant with his child and removed the baby from the burning body (the first caesarean section). The boy, named Asclepius, became a great physician, though he ended up also dying a tragic death.Another famous myth is that of Apollo’s homesexual relationship with the handsome youth Hyacinthus. One day, while Apollo and Hyacinthus were training in the fields, Apollo accidentally struck Hyacinthus on the head with a discus, killing the mortal boy. The heartbroken god transformed his deceased lover into a flower, the hyacinth, whose petals formed the Greek word aiai, meaning “alas.”Other individuals loved by Apollo did not return the god’s love. Daphne, for example, a beautiful nymph, ran from Apollo when he tried to rape her. Just as the god was about to grab her in his arms, Daphne was transformed into a laurel tree. In Ovid’s beautiful rendition,torpor seized on all her body, and a thin bark closed around her gentle bosom, and her hair became as moving leaves; her arms were changed to waving branches, and her active feet as clinging roots were fastened to the ground—her face was hidden with encircling leaves.[42]Even in her new form, Daphne would forever hold a special place in Apollo’s heart: Apollo decreed that the laurel wreath would be worn by his priests and priestesses and by the winners of the Pythian Games held at Delphi in his honor.Apollo also loved the beautiful Cassandra, a Trojan princess who was the daughter of Priam and Hecuba. Apollo gave Cassandra the gift of prophecy, hoping she would sleep with him in return; when Cassandra refused, Apollo cursed her so that nobody would believe her prophecies. Thus, even though Cassandra repeatedly warned her people that the city of Troy would fall, nobody listened.Apollo is virtually ubiquitous in Greek mythology. The myths outlined above represent only a small fraction of the countless stories in which Apollo played a part. Other noteworthy myths describe Apollo’s role in the Gigantomachy, the terrible war between the Olympians and the Giants. In most sources, Apollo was one of the gods who battled a Giant named Ephialtes, and according to Pindar, it was he who killed the Giant Porphyrion with his arrows.[43] Apollo was also usually depicted as the god who killed the Aloadae, Otus and Ephialtes. These two cocky brothers wanted to carry off Hera and Artemis to be their wives. Thus, they piled two mountains on top of each other and attacked the gods on Olympus. In some versions, Apollo killed the Aloadae with his arrows.[44] In other versions, Apollo used a trick to kill them: he sent a deer between the brothers, and when they threw their javelins at the animal, they each struck the other instead.[45]In another popular myth—one that was a common theme in Greek art—Apollo fought with Heracles. As the story goes, Heracles consulted Apollo’s oracle at Delphi on a matter but was unhappy with the response; consequently, he tried to steal the Delphic tripod in order to start his own oracle. Apollo immediately came down from Olympus and tried to wrestle the tripod away from Heracles. The battle only ended when Zeus separated the half-brothers.Hydria depicting Apollo and Heracles fighting for the Delphic tripod by the Madrid Painter (ca. 520 BCE). Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia CommonsApollo was the ultimate expression of Greek culture as the Greeks envisioned it: youthful and vital, powerful and wise, peaceful (with the occasional outburst of righteous fury), full of light, poetry, music, and civilization. It was this positive cultural representation that made Apollo so widely loved and admired throughout the Greek world. Even his fluid sexuality suggests a culture that embraced the erotic pleasures of both sexes. With so many temples, statues, and other monuments built in Apollo’s honor, admiration for the deity cannot be overstated.The most important of Apollo’s festivals were the Pythian Games, held every four years at Delphi. Events included both athletic contests (wrestling, running, horse and chariot racing, etc.) and artistic contests (music, poetry, and even painting). Uniquely for the ancient Greek world, women were allowed to compete in most events. Winners were crowned with a wreath of laurel leaves.According to legend, the Pythian Games were instituted by Apollo himself after he vanquished the monster Python and made Delphi his oracle. Historians, however, generally agree that the Pythian Games began around 582 BCE.Another important festival of Apollo was the Delia, celebrated on the sacred island of Delos every four years. During the Delia, visitors and pilgrims from all over Greece would gather on Delos for musical performances, sacrifices, and feasting.There were countless other festivals of Apollo that were celebrated throughout the cities of ancient Greece. In Athens, annual festivals of Apollo included the Boedromia, Metageitnia, Pyanepsia, and Thargelia. In Sparta, annual festivals included the Carneia and Hyacinthia (the latter named for Apollo’s lover Hyacinthus, said to have been a Spartan prince). In Thebes, the Daphnephoria, a great festival in honor of Apollo, was celebrated every nine years.Apollo had numerous temples, sanctuaries, and shrines throughout Greece. Temple worship of Apollo is attested from an early date: some of the god’s temples can be traced back as far as the ninth century BCE. Many of these ancient temples, moreover, were actually built over cult sites in use since the Mycenaean Period (ca. 1600–1100 BCE).In the Greek world, Apollo was first and foremost a god of prophecy and divination. Indeed, almost all of Apollo’s major temples in ancient Greece highlighted his prophetic function, with the exception of the temple on Delos. But Apollo was also widely worshipped as the god of music and the arts, colonization, and healing and medicine.Perhaps the most important of Apollo’s temples was his temple and oracle at Delphi. Here, a priestess called a pythia delivered Apollo’s prophecies and advice. It was said that the pythia became inspired by breathing vapors arising from a spring that flowed underneath the temple. Scholars have long been divided over the veracity of this claim, and archaeological and geological investigation into possible fumes arising from faultlines beneath Delphi continues to this day.[46] Ruins of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, Greece (fourth century BCE). Bernard Gagnon / Wikimedia CommonsCC BY-SA 4.0Apollo had other major oracles scattered throughout the Greek world: at Thebes and Mount Ptoos in Boeotia; at Abae in Phocis; and at Didyma, Claros, and Pergamum in Asia Minor. Apollo also had important temples at Gortyn and Dreros in Crete and at Syracuse and Selinus in Sicily.Apollo was worshipped widely in Italy, especially at Magna Graecia and Etruria. However, he was virtually unheard of in Rome until relatively late, and his first temples there only appear around the fifth century BCE. In the Roman world, Apollo was worshipped primarily in his capacity as a healer. His oracular priestesses in Italy were called sibyls.Apollo has been regularly featured in popular culture, though these depictions are often brief and superficial, failing to capture the complexity of his ancient personae. In both Percy Jackson and the Olympians, a book series by Rick Riordan, and the God of War video game series, Apollo plays only a small role.Apollo has a unique connection to modern culture through space travel. Drawing on his association with the sun (an association that, contrary to popular belief, did not enter Apollo’s theology until relatively late), NASA named their famous moon-bound space program after Apollo. They hoped to emulate the exceptionally accurate archer in their journey to the moon.Avi Kapach is a writer, scholar, and educator who received his PhD in Classics from Brown University The Sphinx was a hybrid creature of Greek, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian lore, usually represented as part human and part lion. Sometimes it also boasted avian anatomy, such as the wings of an eagle or falcon. In Greek mythology, the Sphinx was always female. The Greek version of the Sphinx was usually called the offspring of either Orthus and the Chimera or of Typhoeus and Echidna (there were different versions). She made her lair outside the city of Thebes, where she confronted travelers and passers-by with a riddle and killed them when they failed to answer correctly. But when Oedipus finally solved her riddle, the Sphinx leapt to her death.The Greeks also thought of the Sphinx as a kind of Underworld demon. Sphinxes were extremely popular in ancient art and continue to make frequent appearances in modern media.It seems that in ancient Greece, a popular or folk etymology derived the name “Sphinx” (Σφίγξ, translit. Sphínx) from the Greek verb σφίγγω (sphíngō, “to bind”).[1] But the true etymology is uncertain.[2]Sphinx, Sphinxes/SphingesΣφίγξ, Σφίγγες (translit. Sphínx, Sphínges)The name “Sphinx” varied somewhat according to local dialects. The most significant variation is the Boeotian Φίξ (Phíx), employed, for example, by the great Boeotian poet Hesiod in his Theogony.[3]The Greek Sphinx lived near Thebes, an important city in the central Greek region of Boeotia. Some sources provided an even more precise location for her lair: Mount Phicium, to the west of Thebes.[4] Others added that the Sphinx originally came from Ethiopia.[5]The Sphinx was a hybrid creature, like the Chimera or griffin. Though versions of it were known in Egypt and Mesopotamia (see below), the Greek Sphinx was usually represented with the body of a lion and the head of a human woman. In many sources it also had wings, while later sources added that it had a snake for a tail.[6]Armed with her famous riddle, which she was sometimes said to have learned from the Muses themselves, the Sphinx brought much suffering to the city of Thebes. She would sit in her lair outside the city, present her riddle to travelers and passers-by, and kill and devour those who failed to answer correctly.[7]Sphinxes were popular in Greek art from as early as the Bronze Age. Some of these early representations featured a man’s head, but by the fifth century BCE, the Sphinx—increasingly connected with the mythology of Thebes—was always female. In art as in literature,

Euryganeia.Oedipus Before the Temple of the Furies Between his Daughters Antigone and Ismene by Anton Raphael Mengs (ca. 1760–1761)The Metropolitan Museum of ArtPublic DomainIn Sophocles’ tragedy Antigone, Ismene outlives her sister, who is executed for defying their uncle Creon, though other sources had Ismene die together with her sister.In a very different tradition, known from the poetry of Mimnermus, Ismene was killed by the Argive hero Tydeus. Guided by Athena, Tydeus found Ismene while she was meeting with her lover Periclymenus, killing her in spite of her pleas.Gem engraved with Tydeus with a strigil (500–475 BCE)Antikensammlung, BerlinPublic DomainSophocles’ Antigone recounts the tale of how Antigone tried to convince Ismene to help bury their brother Polynices, who had died while leading an invasion against Thebes. Since Polynices was a traitor, the new regent, Creon—the girls’ uncle—forbade this burial.Ismene warned her sister of the dangers of defying Creon, begging her not to go through with her plan—but to no avail. Antigone, reproaching Ismene for her lack of courage, buried Polynices’ body herself and was caught. When Ismene tried to take the blame for Antigone’s act, Antigone rejected her help and insisted on dying alone.Illustration of Antigone and Ismene (1892)Flickr CommonsPublic Domain The Eumenides is an Attic tragedy by Aeschylus, one of the most famous tragedians of classical Athens. It was originally staged in 458 BCE at the City Dionysia, an annual dramatic festival in which playwrights would compete to entertain the citizens of Athens. It serves as the final play of the Oresteia, a trilogy of connected tragedies depicting the murder of Agamemnon and its aftermath.In the Eumenides, Agamemnon’s son Orestes is tormented by the Erinyes (the “Furies”) as punishment for killing his own mother Clytemnestra (which he did to avenge her murder of Agamemnon). Supported by the gods Apollo and Athena, Orestes receives a trial on the Areopagus in Athens and is ultimately acquitted. The play, which explores the themes of law, purification, and familial and religious piety, is still widely read today.The title Eumenides (Greek Εὐμενίδες, translit. Eumenídes) comes from a euphemistic name for the Erinyes, or “Furies”—Orestes’ tormentors in the play. Significantly, however, the term “Eumenides” never occurs in the text; there is thus some doubt as to whether this was the original title.EumenidesΕὐμενίδες (Eumenídes)[yoo-MEN-i-deez]/yuˈmɛn ɪˌdiz/Aeschylus (ca. 525/4–456/5 BCE) was the oldest of the three canonical Attic tragedians (the other two being Sophocles and Euripides). Regarded as the “father of tragedy,” Aeschylus introduced important innovations to the genre and was highly esteemed for his dextrous use of symbolism and metaphor, as well as his exploration of justice and the role of the gods in human life.A herm, conventionally said to be a bust of Aeschylus (first century CE)Capitoline Museums, RomePublic DomainFrom the many legends surrounding Aeschylus’ life, we can extract a few details that are probably factual. Aeschylus was born to an aristocratic family from Eleusis (or thereabouts). He began producing tragedies in the 490s BCE, winning his first victory at the Dionysia in 484 BCE. He fought against the Persians at Marathon in 490 BCE and at Salamis in 480 BCE. Around 470 BCE, he visited Sicily at the invitation of the Syracusan tyrant Hieron; he later returned to Sicily and ultimately died there.Over the course of his distinguished career, Aeschylus composed some ninety plays and won thirteen victories at the Dionysia. He was revered both during his life and after, though by the fourth century BCE his plays were increasingly seen as archaic, especially compared to the works of his successors, Sophocles and Euripides.As the final entry in Aeschylus’ Oresteia trilogy, the Eumenides covers Orestes’ experiences following the events of the previous play, the Libation Bearers. In the Libation Bearers, Orestes returns to Argos after a long exile to punish his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus for their murder of his father Agamemnon (Agamemnon’s death, in turn, is the central event of the Agamemnon, the first play of the Oresteia). By the end of the Libation Bearers, Orestes has successfully enacted his revenge; but by shedding the blood of his own mother, he incurs the wrath of the Erinyes, the Underworld goddesses responsible for pursuing murderers.The Eumenides—which begins at an unspecified time after Orestes’ murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus—describes Orestes’ journey to Athens. There he is finally acquitted of his crimes through a trial at the Areopagus. Orestes’ acquittal breaks the cycle of violence and retribution that has haunted his family for generations. While the first two plays of the Oresteia closely follow events from Homer’s Odyssey, the Eumenides is not indebted to Homer in the same way. In fact, the play sometimes contradicts details from Homer’s account. For example, while Homer has Orestes travel from Athens to kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, Aeschylus’ Eumenides depicts him coming to Athens only after he has carried out his revenge.[1]Other key details from Aeschylus’ play—such as Apollo commanding Orestes to avenge his father, and the Erinyes pursuing Orestes after the fact—are absent from Homer’s epics. Aeschylus probably based the plot of his Eumenides on the works of Stesichorus and Semonides, both of whom seem to have had Apollo advise Orestes on how to avenge his murdered father. Apollo’s role in the myth is also hinted at in Pindar’s eleventh Pythian Ode.Augustan fresco showing Apollo with a kithara from the House of the Scalae Caci on the Palatine Hill in RomePalatine Museum, Rome / Dody escouade deltaPublic DomainLater in the play, it is said that Orestes will protect the Athenians after his death. This was probably modeled on the belief, reported by Herodotus, that it was the Spartans’ recovery of the gigantic bones of Orestes that allowed them to prevail in their war with Tegea.[2]The protection of a specific city from the grave was an important function of Greek heroes, and Orestes represents a magnification of that function, protecting not only his own city of Argos (or Mycenae, according to some accounts) but also allied cities as well (whether Athens or Sparta).The Eumenides also served another function, dramatizing the origins of the Areopagus—a famous Athenian court and council. The “aetiological” myth, or origin myth, of the Areopagus put forward in the Eumenides rests on a connection between Orestes and Athens that may have emerged quite early in Greek history. Nonetheless, Aeschylus’ Eumenides is the only surviving source to fully flesh out that connection. Orestes’ trial is not the only aetiological myth connected with the Areopagus. In another tradition, the murder court of the Areopagus was established when the god Ares was tried there for his murder of Poseidon’s son Hallirrhothius, who had raped Ares’ daughter (hence the name of the Areopagus, which means “Hill of Ares”).[3]The Areopagus in general was tremendously important in the mythology of Athens; it was here, for instance, that Theseus was said to have warded off the Amazon invasion. Thus, Orestes’ association with this specific hill is fairly significant.The Acropolis of Athens by Leo von Klenze (1846)Neue Pinakothek, MunichPublic DomainOrestes was also connected to Athens via the Choes—the second day of an Athenian festival known as the Anthesteria. It was believed that on this day—which was said to commemorate Orestes’ arrival in Athens—the dead would rise up from the Underworld and visit the world of the living. During the festival, celebrants would sit and drink by themselves.The Eumenides also serves as an origin story for the cult of the Eumenides—or, perhaps more accurately, for the cult of the Semnai Theai, the “Holy Goddesses.” In fact, the term “Eumenides” never actually occurs in the play (and may not have been the original title), while the cult of the mollified Erinyes has important similarities with the Athenian cult of the Semnai Theai. The Erinyes were known as punishers of murderers and guarantors of order from the very earliest times; their name is even attested in the Linear B tablets of the Bronze Age. Yet Aeschylus seems to have been the first to identify them with the Semnai Theai, goddesses of justice worshipped in a cave between the Areopagus and the Acropolis.The following is a list of characters from Aeschylus’ Eumenides, in order of appearance:Pythia (priestess of Apollo at Delphi)Orestes (son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra)Apollo (god of prophecy, healing, and music)Ghost of Clytemnestra (wife of Agamemnon; mother of Orestes)Chorus (the Erinyes)Athena (goddess of war and wisdom)Second Chorus (Athenian women)In Greek tragedy, it was conventional for all speaking parts to be distributed among no more than three actors. In the case of the Eumenides, however, scholars disagree on how exactly these parts were assigned. It is possible that one actor (the “Protagonist”) played Orestes; a second actor (the “Deuteragonist”) played the ghost of Clytemnestra and Athena; and a third actor (the “Tritagonist”) played Apollo. The Pythia could have been played by either the Deuteragonist or the Tritagonist. The jury at Orestes’ trial and various court officers would have been played by additional mute actors.The play opens in front of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. In the prologue, the Pythia details the history of Delphi as she prepares to open the temple. Once inside, she is alarmed to find Orestes, who is surrounded by the sleeping Erinyes. Apollo arrives, explaining that his attempts to purify Orestes for murdering his mother Clytemnestra have been unsuccessful thus far. He therefore instructs Orestes to travel to Athens to seek the aid of Athena. As Apollo and Orestes exit, the ghost of Clytemnestra materializes to awaken the Erinyes. Roused from their slumber, the Erinyes sing their first choral ode (the parodos), in which they censure Orestes as well as the Olympian gods who support him.Paestan red-figure bell-krater by Python (ca. 330 BCE) showing Orestes (center) at Delphi, flanked by Apollo (right) and Athena (left); one of the Erinyes can be seen above (top center)British Museum, London / JastrowPublic DomainApollo returns to the stage and argues the justice of his cause with the Erinyes. This debate ends with the Erinyes’ departure as they follow Orestes to Athens.The second episode shows Orestes arriving in Athens and clinging to the statue of Athena as a suppliant. The Erinyes arrive soon after and confront Orestes, singing the first stasimon.[4] This stasimon features the so-called “binding song” that the Erinyes use to immobilize Orestes.In the third episode, Athena arrives. She questions the Erinyes and Orestes in turn, then appoints a jury of Athenians to judge the case. The Erinyes sing the second stasimon, insisting on the importance of allowing them to punish sinners as they always have.The long fourth episode features Athena’s establishment of the Areopagus, the Athenian court responsible for judging murder cases. Apollo arrives to present Orestes’ defense, while the Erinyes act as the prosecution. Apollo makes the argument that Orestes’ murder of his mother should not be interpreted as kindred bloodshed on the grounds that only the male seed plays a biological role in the birth of a child (the female womb merely serves to house this seed). This argument convinces Athena, who casts her vote with the jurors in favor of Orestes. Orestes is thus acquitted. This enrages the Erinyes, who are on the brink of unleashing their wrath upon Athens. However, Athena placates them with the promise of new cult honors in Athens. Putting on new crimson robes, the Erinyes thus become the “Eumenides”—that is, the “Kindly Ones.”In the exodus, a second Chorus made up of Athenian women arrives on stage. They sing as they escort the Erinyes to their new home on the slopes of the Athenian Acropolis.The Eumenides was first performed at the annual City Dionysia in 458 BCE. It served as the third play in a tetralogy that contained the Oresteia—a trilogy of connected tragedies about Agamemnon’s homecoming and its aftermath—and a satyr play titled Proteus. The tetralogy won first place in competition.The Oresteia is remarkable for being the only tragic trilogy to survive intact from antiquity. Unfortunately, the Proteus—the satyr play that completed the tetralogy—is now known only from fragments.Clytemnestra by John Collier (1882)Guildhall Art Gallery, LondonPublic DomainThe shared themes of the Oresteia reflect Aeschylus’ rather unique interest in producing connected trilogies (Aeschylus’ successors, Sophocles and Euripides, hardly ever composed these kinds of connected texts). Moreover, as the last of Aeschylus’ extant works (he died only a few years after the production of the Oresteia), the trilogy shows Aeschylus at his most mature. The Oresteia combines some common features of Aeschylus’ style with more innovative elements. For instance, the importance and involvement of the Chorus, the dense symbolism and imagery, and the preoccupation with themes such as justice and religion are all typical of Aeschylus; however, other features, including the addition of a third actor and the complex staging, are more unique to this particular trilogy.The themes explored in the Eumenides continue many of the same threads introduced in the first two plays of the Oresteia (the Agamemnon and the Libation Bearers). These include the themes of justice, retribution, the gods, and gender.Justice is a central preoccupation of the Eumenides, just as it was in the first two plays of the Oresteia. But whereas the justice of the Agamemnon and the Libation Bearers is largely based on retribution, the Eumenides moves towards a notion of justice as fundamentally rooted in law. Thus, while the Erinyes physically embody the retributive justice of the first two plays, legal due process ultimately wins the day over vendetta.In exploring the meaning of justice, the Eumenides introduces a conflict between the older generation of gods and the younger one. The older gods, represented in the play by the Erinyes, are primordial figures associated with the earth, darkness, and the power of the mother; their justice is founded on the ideas of blood-guilt and vendetta. The newer gods, represented in the play by Apollo and Athena, are associated with heaven, light, and the power of the father; their justice is founded on law.This tension between the old and new gods is a central theme of the play. Indeed, the acquittal of Orestes—who is supported throughout by the younger gods Apollo and Athena—affirms the supremacy of the new gods over the old. But the two generations are ultimately reconciled at the end of the play when Athena grants the Erinyes new cult honors at Athens.A key component of the conflict and reconciliation of the old and new gods lies in the opposition between female and male, mother and father. The old gods are depicted throughout the play as feminine and matriarchal, while the new gods are generally masculine and patriarchal, ruled by Zeus, the paternal god of the sky. This conflict between the genders maps onto the conflict in Orestes’ parental allegiances: after all, the very reason Orestes finds himself in trouble in the Eumenides is that he murdered his mother in order to avenge his father. In other words, Orestes has embraced the power of the father (represented by the new gods) over the power of the mother (represented by the old gods).It is no accident, then, that it is Athena who ultimately reconciles the opposing forces of the play. While Athena does, by birth, belong to the younger generation of gods, she is also female, like the older gods. However, her femininity does not manifest itself in the dangerous sexuality that characterizes Clytemnestra in the Agamemnon and the Libation Bearers; in fact, Athena is a virgin goddess and therefore asexual. This asexuality, which she shares with the bestial Erinyes, allows Athena to find common ground with the old gods. In taking the old gods into the fold of her city, Athena transforms them and further consolidates the power of the new gods and their world order—an order based on justice and law.The "Varvakeion Athena" (first half of the third century CE), after the Athena Parthenos by PhidiasNational Archaeological Museum, Athens / George E. KoronaiosCC BY-SA 4.0The city of Athens itself also plays a central role in the Eumenides. Much of the action of the play is set in Athens—the same location where the entire Oresteia trilogy was first produced. Thus, the Eumenides, as performed in antiquity, would have blended with its physical surroundings.The play integrated itself with the city on a political and historical level, too. Today most scholars agree that the Eumenides was responding to at least two specific historical events that had taken place shortly before the play was first produced. First, Orestes’ promise of eternal friendship between his kingdom of Argos and the city of Athens reflects the historical alliance between Argos and Athens that had just been signed in 461 BCE, three years before the staging of the Oresteia. Second, the Eumenides goes to great lengths to describe the origins of the court and council of the Areopagus—an institution whose powers had recently been diminished by the political reforms of Ephialtes in the 460s BCE. Through these historical allusions, the Eumenides engages with the world of contemporary Athens in a very concrete way.The Eumenides had an almost immediate impact on both audiences and other tragedians. Indeed, the entire Oresteia trilogy was quite popular among the ancient Athenians and greatly influenced the works of Aeschylus’ successors. Both Sophocles and Euripides followed in Aeschylus’ footsteps in writing plays about Orestes’ murder of his mother and the consequences of that crime.In contrast to its importance in antiquity, the Oresteia trilogy was not widely read in the Middle Ages or Renaissance. In the eighteenth century, however, it began to resurface in Europe, with many important productions and adaptations.More recently, Eugene O’Neill’s 1931 play cycle Mourning Becomes Electra relocated the Oresteia to an American Civil War setting. T. S. Eliot’s The Family Reunion (1939) and Jean-Paul Sartre’s Les Mouches (The Flies) (1942) similarly retell Aeschylus’ story for a more modern world.Today, the Eumenides and the other plays of the Oresteia remain among Aeschylus’ most widely read and admired works.Translations of Aeschylus’ Eumenides usually appear together with the other two plays of the Oresteia trilogy (the Agamemnon and the Libation Bearers). The following is a selected chronological list of important and useful English translations:Smyth, Herbert W., trans. Aeschylus. Loeb Classical Library 146. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926: An old but reliable prose translation. It was replaced in the Loeb Classical Library by a new translation in 2008 but is still available online through the Perseus Project.Lloyd-Jones, Hugh, trans. Oresteia. London: Duckworth, 1979: An accurate translation with helpful annotations, best suited for more advanced readers.Harrison, Tony, trans. The Oresteia. London: Collings, 1981: A verse translation produced for performance.Raphael, Frederic, and Kenneth McLeish, trans. The Serpent Son: Aeschylus’ Oresteia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981: A translation produced for a BBC performance of the trilogy.Meineck, Peter, trans. Oresteia. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998: A translation produced for performance, with an introduction by Helene Foley.Hughes, Ted, trans. The Oresteia. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999: A readable verse translation by a distinguished poet.Collard, Christopher, trans. Oresteia. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002: A clear translation with brief commentary.Burian, Peter, and Alan Shapiro, trans. The Oresteia. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003: A readable and accurate verse translation.Sommerstein, Alan H., ed. and trans. Aeschylus: Oresteia. Loeb Classical Library 146. 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Born from the blood of Uranus (the primordial god of the sky), the Erinyes were often thought to dwell in the Underworld, along with Hades and his bride Persephone. Their number was originally indeterminate, but later sources listed three Erinyes: Tisiphone, Alecto, and Megaera.The Erinyes were much feared in the ancient world. Once they caught the scent of a particularly horrific crime, they were notoriously difficult to placate. In one famous myth, the Erinyes pursued Orestes after he had killed his own mother, Clytemnestra, tormenting him endlessly until he was finally purified with the help of Apollo and Athena.The etymology of “Erinyes” (Ἐριννύες, translit. Erinyés) is uncertain.[1] The name itself is very ancient: it was already attested in the Mycenaean period (ca. 1600–1100 BCE), where it was written in the Linear B script as e-ri-nu.[2] In antiquity, the Greeks tended to derive the Erinyes’ name from the verb ὀρίνω (orínō, “to stir up, excite”) or the noun ἔρις (éris, “strife”). Modern scholars are less certain of the name’s origin. Some have suggested an Indo-European derivation from *eri-snhₓ-u-, meaning “one who provokes struggle,” while others believe that the name is pre-Greek.[3]It was only at a later period that the Erinyes acquired individual names: Tisiphone (Greek Τισιφόνη, translit. Tisiphónē), Alecto (Greek Ἀληκτώ, translit. Alēktṓ; sometimes spelled Allecto), and Megaera (Greek Μέγαιρα, translit. Mégaira).[4] The etymologies of these names are much more straightforward and correspond to the vengeful roles of the goddesses: Tisiphone translates to “avenger of murder,” Alecto to “implacable one,” and Megaera to “envious one.”Erinys, ErinyesἜρινύς (translit. Erinýs), Ἐρινύες (translit. Erinýes)[ih-RIN-is, ih-RIN-ee-eez] /ɪˈrɪn ɪs, ɪˈrɪn i,iz/The Erinyes were sometimes referred to by various euphemisms, apparently meant to neutralize their dreaded infernal powers. The most famous of these was “Eumenides” (Greek Εὐμενίδες, translit. Eumenídes), which translates to something like “well-meaning ones.”[5] But the Erinyes had other euphemistic names or epithets in the ancient Greek world, including “Semnae” (Greek Σεμναί, translit. Semnaí), meaning “august ones,” a title used for the goddesses in Athens,[6] and “Ablabiae” (Greek Ἀβλάβιαι, translit. Ablábiai), meaning “harmless ones,” a title used in Erythrae.[7]Though these euphemisms were common by the fifth century BCE, it is unclear whether the Eumenides, Semnae, and Ablabiae were always identical with the Erinyes, or whether they were originally independent goddesses that only later became identified with the dreaded Erinyes.The Erinyes’ Roman equivalents were called “Furiae” (“frenzied ones,” from which we get the name “Furies”) or “Dirae” (“ominous ones”).Though their origins are obscure, the Erinyes were regarded as extremely ancient divinities. They were certainly older than the Olympians and thus represented an earlier world order.[8] The Erinyes’ function was to punish and avenge crimes, including disobedience towards parents, disrespect for elders, perjury, violation of the laws of hospitality, mistreatment of suppliants, impiety towards the gods, and, above all, murder. As the Erinyes were primarily associated with family crimes and blood-guilt, they exacted the most vicious punishments of all upon those who had murdered a family member (especially an elder family member like a mother or father).Orestes Pursued by the Furies by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1862). Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, VA. Google Arts and CulturePublic DomainThe Erinyes had various other functions as well. They carried out curses, especially those of a parent, and also personified those curses;[9] they were invoked as guarantors of oaths;[10] they prevented humans from obtaining too much knowledge about the future;[11] and they punished sinners in the Underworld.[12] In fact, Heraclitus, an early Greek philosopher, wrote that the Erinyes had control over all cosmic justice.[13]The Erinyes were much feared in antiquity due to their terrifying powers. They were able to take away a person’s reason, for example, and bring about blindness or madness.[14] Some sources claim that they also had the power to destroy or bestow fertility of any kind.[15]The Erinyes were often seen as Underworld goddesses and were thus said to live in the Underworld.[16] Eventually, the number of the Erinyes became standardized at three—Tisiphone, Alecto, and Megaera—but originally there may have been more.[17] In Athens, it is possible that only two were worshipped.[18]The Erinyes were represented as nightmarish creatures. Aeschylus, for example, portrayed them aswingless in appearance, black, altogether disgusting; they snore with repulsive breaths, they drip from their eyes hateful drops; their attire is not fit to bring either before the statues of the gods or into the homes of men.[19]The Erinyes were usually regarded as virgin goddesses,[20] but some local variants (such as the Arcadian Demeter Erinys) had divine consorts.In ancient art, the Erinyes’ attributes included wings, snake hair, hunting boots, and a short chiton (a kind of tunic). They were often depicted punishing the dead in the Underworld. Sometimes they carried torches or whips, their most recognizable symbols.[21]19th century illustration of two Erinyes, after 4th century BCE Apulian vase painting. Wikimedia CommonsPublic DomainAlcmaeon was the son of Amphiaraus, one of the heroes who took part in the doomed war of the Seven against Thebes. The conflict broke out when Oedipus’ son Polyneices attempted to reclaim the throne of Thebes after being banished by his brother Eteocles. Initially, Amphiaraus did not want to take part in the ill-omened expedition, but his wife Eriphyle convinced him to go (after being bribed by Polyneices). When Amphiaraus was killed in the war, his son Alcmaeon blamed Eriphyle for his death and killed her in revenge.For the sin of matricide, the Erinyes hounded Alcmaeon and drove him mad. Alcmaeon fled, first to his grandfather Oicles in Arcadia, then to Phegeus in Psophis. But despite his best efforts, Alcmaeon could not be purified of his crime.The Erinyes Drive Alcmaeon from the Corpse of his Mother, Eriphyle, Whom He Has Killed by Henry Fuseli (1821). Kunsthaus, Zurich, Switzerland. Wikimedia CommonsPublic DomainEventually, Alcmaeon asked the oracle of Delphi what he needed to do to atone for his sin and free himself of the Erinyes. He was instructed to settle a land that did not yet exist at the time of his mother’s murder. Alcmaeon wandered the world until he found a delta by the Achelous River that had just been formed. There he made his new home and took a wife (though he was killed not much later).[33]Orestes was the son of Agamemnon, the commander-in-chief of the Greek force that conquered Troy. When Agamemnon at last returned from the Trojan War, he was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Years later, when Orestes was fully grown, he avenged his father by killing both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.The Erinyes punished Orestes for his matricide just as they had punished Alcmaeon. He was driven mad, constantly haunted by the shade of the mother he had murdered in cold blood. In what eventually became the common tradition, Orestes ended up in Athens. There, he was purified by Apollo and Athena and acquitted of his crime in the first-ever murder trial. This trial was dramatized in Aeschylus’ tragedy the Eumenides (fifth century BCE), in which Apollo and Athena defend the haggard Orestes against the prosecuting Erinyes.[34]Paestan red-figure bell-krater showing Orestes (center) purified at Delphi by Athena (left) and Apollo (right) while the Erinyes stand nearby (far right, top center). Attributed to Python, ca. 330 BCE. British Museum, London, UK. JastrowPublic DomainThe Erinyes can be found “behind-the-scenes” in numerous myths besides those of Alcmaeon and Orestes. When the hero Meleager killed his uncles, for example—the brothers of his mother Aethra—it was to the Erinyes that Aethra prayed for vengeance.[35]When Medea ran off with Jason and killed her brother Apsyrtus in order to slow down her father’s pursuit, she was tormented by the Erinyes until she was purified by her aunt Circe. But in some traditions, Apsyrtus’ Erinyes eventually had their revenge, causing Jason to betray Medea and ultimately leading Medea to kill her own children in an attempt to hurt him.[36]The Erinyes also played a role in the myth of Oedipus. They first entered the scene when Oedipus killed his father (without knowing who he was) and married his mother (also without knowing who she was). Eventually, after the truth was revealed and Oedipus was ruined, he sent the Erinyes against his own sons Eteocles and Polyneices as punishment for dishonoring him. In the end, the Erinyes brought the whole affair to a sad and bloody end, with Oedipus in exile, his mother dead, and his sons killed at each others’ hands.[37]The Erinyes had a few sanctuaries in the region of Attica. In Athens, there was a temple of the Erinyes in a grotto near the Areopagus, where they were known as the Semnae or Semnae Theai (“august goddesses”). This was close to the spot where the Athenians tried murder cases. It was traditional for defendants who had been acquitted of murder to leave offerings for the Erinyes at their temple.[39] There was also a sanctuary of the Erinyes (as the Eumenides) at Colonus, an Attic town not far from Athens. At the center of the sanctuary sat a sacred grove that nobody was allowed to enter.[40]The Erinyes also had temples at Sicyon[41] and Cerynеia[42] (where they were called the Eumenides) and at Erythrae[43] (where they were known as the Ablabiae). At their temple in Arcadia, they were identified with the agricultural goddess Demeter.[44] They may have also been identified with the Maniae (“Madnesses”) at their temple in Megalopolis (though linking the Erinyes to a negative personification would break the pattern of euphemistic religious titles).[45]Festivals in honor of the Erinyes, sometimes called Eumenideia, were celebrated in several Greek cities, including Athens and Sicyon. These festivals usually involved animal sacrifices (sometimes pregnant victims were specifically chosen), nephalia, and flower garlands.[46]The Erinyes (whether known as the Furies, the Eumenides, or simply the Erinyes) continue to make appearances in modern pop culture. In literature, they have featured in T. S. Eliot’s play The Family Reunion (1939), Rick Riordan’s Percy Jackson and the Olympians series (2005–2009), and Neil Gaiman’s graphic novel series The Sandman (1989–). The mythology of the Erinyes, especially as portrayed in Aeschylus’ Eumenides, has also inspired novels by Anthony Powell and Jonathan Littell.The Erinyes can also be found in visual media. For example, they appeared in the 1990s TV series Xena: Warrior Princess, where they were portrayed rather un-classically as three alluring and scantily clad sisters. More recently, the Furies popped up as characters in the 2020 video game Hades. Avi Kapach is a writer, scholar, and educator who received his PhD in Classics from Brown University Oedipus, son of Laius and Jocasta, was a Greek hero and king of Thebes, celebrated for defeating the fearsome Sphinx. He suffered a tragic downfall, however, when he discovered that he had unknowingly killed his father and married his mother.Oedipus was abandoned in the wilderness soon after his birth when his father learned of a prophecy that he would die at the hands of his son. But the child was found by a herdsman and raised by the Corinthian king Polybus. When Oedipus heard that he was destined to kill his father and marry his mother, he left home in an effort to avoid his fate. Unfortunately, this led him to inadvertently fulfill the prophecy: he killed an old man that he met on his travels (not recognizing him as his father Laius) and later married Jocasta (not knowing she was his mother) after defeating the Sphinx.When Oedipus found out what he had done, he blinded himself and went into exile. Because of this sharp reversal in fortune, Oedipus is often remembered as the great “tragic hero” of Greek mythology.Key FactsOedipus was the son of Laius, the king of Thebes, and his wife Jocasta (called Epicasta in some sources). Laius had learned from an oracle that he was destined to be killed by his son, so he pierced Oedipus’ ankles with a pin and left him in the wilderness to die when he was just a baby.Oedipus was found by a passing herdsman and raised by Polybus, the childless king of Corinth. Upon reaching adulthood, Oedipus heard the prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Thinking that Polybus and his wife were his parents, Oedipus left home to avoid this destiny and wound up in Thebes—where he ironically fulfilled the prophecy by killing Laius and marrying Jocasta, not realizing they were his true parents.Oedipus Separating from Jocasta by Alexandre Cabanel (1843)Wikimedia CommonsPublic DomainIn the standard version of his myth, Oedipus blinded himself after discovering that he had killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta. He did this to punish himself for his unnatural crimes.In a lesser-known tradition, however, Oedipus did not blind himself at all. Instead, he was blinded by Laius’ attendants, who pinned him down and tore out his eyes after he killed their master.Oedipus and Antigone by Franz Dietrich (19th century)Crocker Art Museum, SacramentoPublic DomainLittle is known of Oedipus’ death. After discovering his true identity, he blinded himself and went into exile, guided and cared for by his dutiful daughter Antigone. Sophocles’ tragedy Oedipus in Colonus tells of how Oedipus, by now an old man, eventually came to the Attic town of Colonus to die.After his death, the Athenian king Theseus gave Oedipus a fine funeral and tomb at Colonus. The site where he died was thought to be sacred.Oedipus at Colonus by Jean-Antoine-Théodore Giroust (1788)Dallas Museum of Art (Texas)Public DomainOedipus’ most glorious moment was his destruction of the Sphinx—a fearsome creature who was part lion, part eagle, and part woman. She occupied a cliff overlooking the road to Thebes and would kill anyone who failed to answer her riddle.When Oedipus met the Sphinx, she posed her usual riddle to him (“What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?”). Oedipus answered correctly (“man”), and the Sphinx leapt to her death. The Thebans, grateful to Oedipus for ridding them of the monster, made him their king and married him to their widowed queen Jocasta.Oedipus and the Sphinx by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1864)The Walters Art MuseumCC0The name “Oedipus” is derived from the Greek verb oideō, meaning “to swell,” and the noun pous, meaning “foot.” Oedipus’ name thus translates to “he who has a swollen foot.” This etymology is reflected in the myth that Oedipus’ ankles were pierced when he was abandoned as a baby.[1]An alternative etymology derives the name from the verb oida, “to know” (rather than oideō, “to swell”), so that Oedipus’ name means “he who knows feet.” This is also related to his mythology, for the famous “riddle of the Sphinx,” which Oedipus solved, was about feet.[ED-uh-puhs, EE-duh-]/ˈɛd ə pəs, ˈi də-/There are a handful of variants of Oedipus’ name, including Oedipos, Oedipodos, and Oedipoun.Oedipus’ father was Laius, a king of Thebes. His mother was usually named as Jocasta,[2] though ancient sources did not all agree on this name: Homer, for example, called Oedipus’ mother Epicasta.[3] In some traditions, Laius fathered several other children, including the Sphinx, with various concubines.[4]After being raised in Corinth by Polybus and his wife (whose name was either Merope,[5] Periboea,[6] or Medusa[7]), Oedipus found his way back to Thebes and unknowingly married his own mother.Before Oedipus was born, the Theban king Laius had been warned by an oracle that if he ever had a son, that son would someday kill him. Despite the prophecy, Laius slept with his wife Jocasta (sometimes called Epicasta) one night while he was drunk. Soon after, Oedipus was born. Hoping to escape his preordained doom, Laius pierced the baby’s ankles with pins and left him to die in the mountains.But a passing herdsman found the baby and took him to Polybus, the king of Corinth (about 85 miles southeast of Thebes). Polybus brought the child up as his own, naming him “Oedipus” (“he who has a swollen foot”) because the pins Laius had placed in the baby’s ankles left his feet permanently swollen.[11]Once Oedipus was an adult, he learned from the oracle at Delphi that he would kill his father and commit incest with his mother. He therefore vowed never to return to Corinth, believing that that was where his parents lived.As he was leaving Delphi, Oedipus met an old man at a crossroads (often associated with a real crossroads in ancient Greece called the “Triple Way” or the “Cleft Way”). The two quarreled, the argument grew heated, and Oedipus ended up killing the old man. What he did not know was that the man was none other than Laius, the king of Thebes and his real father.[12]Continuing his travels, Oedipus crossed paths with the Sphinx, a creature usually represented with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and bird’s wings.[13] Ever since Laius’ death (by Oedipus), the Sphinx had been terrorizing Thebes by sitting on a cliff outside the city and putting a riddle to any Theban who passed by. If the Theban could not solve the riddle, she killed him on the spot.Red-figure Kylix from Vulci showing Oedipus and the Sphinx. Attributed to the Oedipus Painter (ca. 470 BCE). Vatican Museums, Vatican.Carole RaddatoCC BY-SA 2.0When the Sphinx saw Oedipus, she presented her riddle as always, usually quoted as: “What is that which has one voice and yet becomes four-footed and two-footed and three-footed?”[14]The answer, Oedipus realized, was “a human being”: humans crawl on four legs as babies, walk on two legs as adults, and become “three-footed” in old age (when they use a cane to walk). As soon as Oedipus solved the riddle, the Sphinx killed herself by leaping from her cliff.The Thebans were overjoyed to