

The rich world of mythology

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For more than two thousand years, Greek and Roman mythology has been a treasury for the creative mind: a world of possibilities and examples. A vast source of myths was provided by the epics, which were originally part of an oral tradition and lived on in memory only. Reigning supreme over all others, were the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. When written down, they became the foundation of European literature. Greek tragedy, parts of which have survived, brought these tales to the theatre to be seen by audiences of countless thousands. The tales were also recorded in mythographic books of reference. The literary works, which have been passed down to us from antiquity, especially those of the great storytellers, Homer, Virgil and Ovid, have been sources of inspiration for European culture down through the ages. Ovid's vast collection of tales, characteristically entitled the *Metamorphoses*, has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for literature, music and the visual arts.

The lecture opens with an overview of classical mythology and then moves on to introduce three of the most outstanding myths – Hero and Leander, Castor and Pollux, Orpheus and Eurydice.

The sample myths

I

The most tragic of the erotic tales of mythology tells of two lovers, Hero of Sestos and Leander of Abydos. Sestos was a city in Thracian Chersonesus while Abydos was on the other side of the Hellespont in Asia Minor. Every evening, Leander would swim across the strait to meet his beloved in secrecy. The tale ends tragically. In spite of the marriage plans of Hero's parents, Leander plunges into the surging waves to reach her, guided by a lamp that Hero has lit at the top of a tower. But the light is extinguished by the raging winds and Leander is drowned. In the morning, Hero throws herself from the tower and dies beside Leander, whose corpse has been carried ashore by the waves.

The most detailed version of this myth comes from Musaeus' epyllion, which was written in Greek. Ovid, too, in his collection of fictional letters called the *Heroides*, touches on the subject. Glimpses of the story occur in mediaeval and Byzantine literature – and even later. On the other hand, papyri dating back to the Hellenistic Age prove that this subject matter was

popular before the Imperial Era. In modern times, the myth of Hero and Leander occurs in several art forms, especially in folk songs. The role of traditional poetry as source material has been discussed by Martti Haavio in his treatise, "Folklore's explanation of the world."

The lecture also contains samples of the Finnish translation of Musaeus' epyllion.

II

Leda's sons Castor and Pollux were twins, but, according to tradition, Castor's father was Tyndareus, king of Sparta, whereas Pollux' father was Zeus himself. These twin-brothers, also known as Dioscuri (= sons of Zeus), were Doric heros, who took part for example in the expedition of the Argonauts and the hunting of the Calydonian Boar. When Castor lost his life in a fight in Arcadia, Zeus took Pollux to Olympus. But out of love for his brother, Pollux asked Zeus to let him share his immortality with Castor so that they could take turns in staying partly in Hades and partly on Mount Olympus.

Castor was a horseman and an excellent tamer of horses, Pollux a skilful boxer. They were considered as protectors of tradesmen, but people also turned to them in dangerous situations, especially at sea. Their cult spread early to Italy, and in Rome they became patrons of the equites. Grateful for their help in the battle of Lake Regillus, the Romans, as early as the beginning of the Republican Era, built a temple for them in the Forum Romanum, near the fountain of Juturna. Several ancient statues of the Dioscuri have survived, likewise a vase painting, a mosaic and various literary sources from Homer to Ovid. In addition, there are a large number of more recent sculptures, paintings, dramas, poems, operas and ballets.

III

"Through Taenarus' gorge, the abysmal portal of Dis ... he passed."

This is how Virgil, in the fourth book of the *Georgics*, describes the descent of Orpheus to the kingdom of the dead to fetch his wife Eurydice, whom he had lost at their wedding. With the sounds of his lyre he charmed the dead and with his song he dumbfounded the King and the Queen of the Underworld and softened their hearts. So he was allowed to take Eurydice with him on condition that he should not turn back to look at his wife, who was walking behind him, until they both reached the upper world. A very human error made Orpheus forget the condition, and he lost his young wife again – irrevocably. Within our cultural circle, this traditional tale is the

most remarkable singer myth, which knows no boundaries: it can be found in all fields of art – literature (Rilke), opera (Monteverdi, Gluck), tragedy (Anouilh), cinema (Jean Cocteau, Marcel Camus). It is a myth about the trinity of love, song and death.