

The Olympians

The Atlanta Shakespeare Company



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The Olympians

Playwright: Chris Rushing

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Directors: Kati Grace Brown
Adam King

Costume Designer: Nysa Loudon

Fight Choreographer: Drew Reeves



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Introduction to *The Olympians*

The Olympians brings to life seven myths from ancient Greece. Myths are stories that help to explain the history or cultural practices of a specific group of people. The myths illustrated in *The Olympians* tell the stories of the gods and goddesses who lived on Mount Olympus in ancient Greece and their interactions with the humans and creatures who lived on the earth. Most ancient Greeks worshiped the gods and goddesses depicted in these stories. The gods and goddesses were seen as powerful influences in human life; they could bring thunder and rain, make crops flourish or fail, change the outcome of battles, and inflict great pain or great prosperity upon humans. Ancient Greeks feared and revered the gods for their great power. Modern historians view myths relating to these gods and their exploits as a way to understand how the ancient Greeks saw the world around them and communicated their values and culture from generation to generation. Myths are not always factual but contain important lessons, and even though these stories are very old and spring from a culture that is different from our own, we can still learn a great deal from them. As you watch *The Olympians*, pay attention to the types of choices that the characters, both immortal and mortal, make and the consequences of those choices.

The Atlanta Shakespeare Company Education Department

Characters

Aristaeus: Aristaeus loves Eurydice, and he unsuccessfully attempts to steal her away after she marries Orpheus.

Charon: He ferries dead souls across the river Styx to the underworld, but he allows Orpheus, who is not yet dead, to cross the river in search of his dead wife.

Daedalus: After being imprisoned in a maze by King Minos, Daedalus escapes with his son, Icarus, by flying out of the maze using wings he invented, but his son, Icarus, dies in the escape.

Demeter: The goddess of nature, Demeter is so upset when her daughter, Persephone, goes to live with her husband, Hades, in the underworld, that her sadness causes winter.

Dionysus: The god of wine, joy, and theater, Dionysus grants Midas his wish that everything he touches turns to gold.

Echo: A nymph who falls in love with Narcissus, Echo is cursed by the goddess Hera, who makes her only able to repeat what others say.

Epimetheus: Prometheus' brother, Epimetheus is married to Pandora, and he is unable to convince his wife to not open the cursed box that Zeus gives them as a wedding present.

Eurydice: A beautiful wood nymph, Eurydice marries Orpheus but dies and goes to the underworld.

Hades: A god who rules the underworld, Hades falls in love with and marries Persephone.

Hera: Zeus' wife, she curses Echo because she is jealous that her husband spends so much time with the nymphs.

Icarus: While escaping from imprisonment with his father, Daedalus, Icarus flies too close to the sun, which melts the glue that holds together his wings, and he drowns after falling into the ocean.

Marigold: The young daughter of King Midas, Marigold turns to gold when she hugs her father, but she recovers life when Midas repents for his greed and cleanses himself in the river Pactolus.

Melii: A nymph, Melii is friends with Echo and Eurydice.





Characters

Midas: A good but greedy king, Midas wishes for everything he touches to turn to gold, but he repents for his greediness when his beloved daughter Marigold turns to gold.

Minos: King Minos commands Daedalus to build a big maze called a labyrinth to confine the Minotaur, but he imprisons Daedalus and Icarus in the maze when Daedalus divulges to the great hero Theseus how to successfully kill the monster.

Narcissus: An incredibly vain young man, Narcissus stares at his own reflection in a pool of water until he dies.

Orpheus: A very talented musician, Orpheus marries Eurydice and unsuccessfully attempts to retrieve her from the underworld after she dies.



Pandora: A mortal woman, Pandora ignores Zeus' command to never open a box he gives her as a gift; she opens it and releases evil—hatred, disease, greed, and death—as well as good—hope, courage, optimism, and faith—into the world.

Persephone: The daughter of Zeus and Demeter, the beautiful Persephone marries Hades and is forced to stay in the underworld for half of every year.

Prometheus: Zeus' cousin, Prometheus defies Zeus and gives fire to mankind, for which Zeus punishes him by chaining him to a mountain and having an eagle peck out his liver.

Silenus: Silenus is a satyr, a creature who is half man, half goat, and King Midas takes care of him when he finds him asleep on the ground. Silenus offers Midas a wish from the god Dionysus to repay his kindness.



Talus: Talus invents the saw but is killed in a struggle over the invention by his uncle, Daedalus, who takes credit for Talus' creation.

Zeus: Powerful and often vindictive, Zeus rules as King of the gods on Mount Olympus. He punishes Prometheus for giving humans fire.

Plot of *The Olympians*



In ancient Greece, the gods, ruled by Zeus, the King of the gods, live in luxury on Mount Olympus while the mortals live on the dark, cold earth, struggling to survive. Filled with pity for the humans, the god Prometheus appeals to his cousin, Zeus, to give humans fire, which they had not yet discovered for themselves. Zeus denies Prometheus' request because he is afraid that humans might become too powerful and rise up against the gods. Rebellious against Zeus, Prometheus gives fire to the humans anyway, and Zeus punishes Prometheus by chaining him to a mountain and having an eagle eat out his liver every day. Zeus seeks to punish Prometheus further by hurting Prometheus' brother, Epimetheus, and his new wife, Pandora. Zeus gives Epimetheus and Pandora a beautiful box as a wedding present and tells them that they must never open it, knowing that Pandora will eventually succumb to her human curiosity and release the evils in the box. After giving them the gift, Zeus waits to see how long it will take Pandora to open the box.

The underworld is ruled by Hades, who is overwhelmed with love for Zeus' beautiful daughter, Persephone. Hades gets Zeus' permission to marry Persephone but Persephone's mother Demeter, the goddess of nature, will not allow Hades to marry her daughter. Hades makes Persephone fall asleep by smelling a flower and he carries her to the underworld. When she cannot find her daughter, Demeter's sadness causes all the plants to wilt and die. Hades knows that if Persephone eats in the underworld she will have to stay there, so he leaves her a pomegranate, which she eats because she is so hungry. Persephone is upset because she loves Hades but she does not want to stay in the underworld without ever seeing her mother.

Hades compromises, declaring that Persephone can spend half of the year on earth with her mother and half the year with him in the underworld.

King Midas rules over a prosperous kingdom. He is a powerful ruler and a doting father to his daughter, Marigold, but he is filled with a desire for more wealth. One night, Midas covers the satyr Silenus, who had fallen asleep on the ground, with a blanket and when he wakes Silenus calls on his friend, the god Dionysus, to grant Midas a wish to reward him for his kindness. Midas wishes for everything he touches to turn to gold. Although he is initially delighted with his new power, Midas soon realizes that he has made a terrible mistake. He cannot eat or drink because food and water turn to gold when he touches them and when his beloved daughter rushes to give him a hug she turns to gold too. Distraught, Midas asks Dionysus to undo the wish, and Dionysus tells him that the wish can only be undone if he cleanses himself in the river Pactolus. Although he is hungry, thirsty, and extremely sad, Midas walks hundreds of miles to the river and, after he repents for his greed, the wish is undone. When he returns home, Midas sees that Marigold is once again a healthy little girl, and he dedicates himself to spreading his wealth and caring for his people.

Daedalus is an inventor who has always worked hard but has never received much credit for his work. One day, Daedalus' nephew and apprentice, Talus, comes up with the idea for a tool called a saw. After making the saw with Talus, Daedalus becomes jealous of his nephew's creativity and hits him over the head, killing him. Although he is wracked with guilt for his crime, Daedalus takes credit for the invention of the saw and becomes known throughout the land as a famous inventor. After hearing of Daedalus' skills, King Minos commands him to build a maze

Plot of *The Olympians*

called the Labyrinth, but when he hears that the King is throwing people into the Labyrinth to be killed by the Minotaur, Daedalus gives the hero Theseus the key to navigating the maze and killing the monster. Upon discovering Daedalus' actions, King Minos condemns Daedalus and his son, Icarus, to be locked in the Labyrinth until they die. However, the crafty Daedalus collects feathers and glues them together to create wings that he and his son can use to fly out of the Labyrinth. Daedalus warns Icarus again and again that the glue will melt if he flies too close to the sun but, on the day of their escape, Icarus ignores his father's warnings and flies up towards the sun, which causes his wings to fall apart, leading to his death.

A beautiful wood nymph named Echo is in love with a handsome young man, Narcissus. Echo's friend, Meliai sets Echo and Narcissus up on a date. Before they have the chance to meet up, Hera, Zeus' jealous wife, appears in search of her husband, who has been spending too much time with the nymphs instead of with her. Echo talks to Hera while Zeus slips out, and the angry Hera curses Echo to only repeat what other people say. Narcissus arrives for his date with Echo, but he becomes so entranced with his reflection in a pool of water that he cannot bear to tear himself away. Narcissus stays at the waterside staring at his reflection until he dies from starvation, and Echo, distraught over her dead love, eventually wastes away as well, leaving only her voice, which remains as the echoes in caves and mountains.

Orpheus is an incredibly talented musician who falls in love with Eurydice. Aristaeus, who also loves Eurydice, challenges Orpheus to a duel, which Orpheus wins. On the day of Orpheus and Eurydice's wedding, Aristaeus tries to kidnap

Eurydice, but she is bitten by a viper and dies. Orpheus is so distraught that he goes to the underworld to beg Hades to give Eurydice back. Orpheus convinces Charon, who ferries dead souls across the river Styx to the underworld, to ferry him to the underworld even though he is not yet dead. Orpheus uses his music to convince Hades to send Eurydice back to earth; Hades agrees on the condition that Orpheus does not turn around to look at her while they are leaving the underworld because the living are not supposed to look upon the dead. Just before Orpheus and Eurydice leave the underworld, Orpheus cannot help himself and looks back to make sure his wife is there; because Orpheus breaks Hades' rule, Eurydice is forced to remain in the underworld.

Pandora finally succumbs to temptation and opens Zeus' box, releasing terrible things into the world—hatred, disease, greed, and death—but also hope, courage, optimism, and faith.

Prometheus is released from his tortuous existence when a centaur named Chiron sacrifices himself for Prometheus and a great hero named Hercules kills the eagle attacking him. Prometheus looks on humanity and is proud of what they have accomplished.



Literary Sources for *The Olympians*

The myths portrayed in *The Olympians* were prominent in the culture of ancient Greece and were written down by several famous ancient Greek authors. The poet Homer wrote *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, which include some information about the gods and goddesses, but which mainly tell the story of the battle for the ancient city of Troy and the journey of Odysseus to return to his home after fighting. The poet Hesiod wrote the *Theogony*, which tells about the creation of the world and the lives of the gods. Unknown writers wrote a collection of poems that were compiled into what we call the *Homeric Hymns*, which praised the Greek gods, including Demeter and Dionysus, who appear in *The Olympians*. A composer named Pindar wrote lyric songs and poems that contain allusions, or references, to many of the gods and myths that are illustrated in *The Olympians*. Several famous writers—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—wrote plays that included references to popular myths. A famous historian named Herodotus included references to many myths and legends in the long book he wrote about the war between the Greeks and the Persians, while another historian named Thucydides referred to myths in his book about the Peloponnesian war. Famous Roman authors like Virgil, a poet who wrote the *Aeneid*, and Ovid, a poet who wrote *Metamorphosis*, also retold mythic stories from the ancient Greeks in their writings. These and other sources for *The Olympians* are important because without them we would not have such a deep understanding of how the ancient Greeks thought about their gods and the world around them.



Artistic Sources for *The Olympians*

Starting in 700 BC, Greek artists began illustrating myths through paintings, sculptures, mosaics, and vases. Many artists focused on making pottery like vases, cups, and bowls, which featured depictions of the gods and goddesses and portrayals of the characters from famous myths. The production team for *The Olympians* examined ancient Greek art while producing the play.

This Greek jug, which dates from the classical period, about 350-340 B.C., and is owned by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, features the god Dionysus, who appears in *The Olympians*.



Dramatizing Myths in *The Olympians*

In writing *The Olympians*, playwright Chris Rushing used modern language to dramatize what ancient Greek authors wrote. In doing so, he made the myths more accessible to a modern audience, but it is useful to look at excerpts from the sources he used to understand how ancient Greek authors depicted myths. Here we will examine two different literary sources that tell the story of the outcome of Prometheus' decision to disobey Zeus and give humans fire.

Here is an excerpt from Hesiod's *Theogony*, lines 520-525, in which Hesiod describes Zeus' punishment for Prometheus:

"...this is the fate wise Zeus allotted him.
He bound devious Prometheus with inescapable
harsh bonds, fastened through the middle of a column,
and he inflicted on him a long-winged eagle, which ate
his immortal liver; but it grew as much in all
at night as the long-winged bird would eat all day."

This excerpt is full of imagery, which is language that is visually descriptive. Words like "long-winged eagle" help us to picture the eagle that tormented Prometheus without seeing it for ourselves.

Here is an excerpt from Aeschylus' play, *Prometheus Bound*, in which Prometheus explains the crime which made Zeus so angry:

"I sought the fount of fire in hollow reed
Hid privily, a measureless resource
For man, and mighty teacher of all arts.
This is the crime that I must expiate
Hung here in chains, nailed 'neath the open sky."

To understand this passage, the first step is to look up unfamiliar words like "fount," meaning "source," "privily," meaning "secretly," and "expiate," meaning "to make amends for." After defining these words, we can summarize the passage. Prometheus is explaining that the crime for which he is being punished is stealing fire, which he recognized would greatly benefit mankind, and giving it to humans.

In *The Olympians*, Zeus and Prometheus use modern language when they are talking to each other, but the playwright was true to the literary sources that tell of this myth in explaining Prometheus' decision to steal fire for humans and Zeus' decision to punish him.



During and after the play think about...

Characterization: How does the playwright distinguish each character by imbuing them with particular characteristics and how do those characteristics affect the composition of certain scenes? For example, the playwright portrays Hades as sarcastic and comedic with a disinclination to be vulnerable. Hades says he never cries, but Orpheus is able to make Hades cry with his music. The interaction between Hades and Orpheus is made more compelling because of the fact that the playwright previously established that Hades usually does not cry.

Play Structure: How does the playwright weave together the different myths? Does the playwright use particular repeated words, phrases, or themes to link together the different stories? The play begins and ends with the story of Prometheus. Why do you think the playwright chose to bookend *The Olympians* with that story?

Words: Note the similarity between the behavior of the character of Narcissus and the definition of the word "narcissism," which refers to excessive self-love and vanity.

Themes: One of the most important themes in the play is that actions always have consequences. What are moments in the play where characters could have made different choices that would have prevented a tragic outcome? What are times in your life where you should be especially aware of the consequences of your actions?

**"There are consequences to your actions."
- *The Olympians***

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