

Mythological Words

Achilles' Heel

Meaning: A person's weak spot.

Greek Myth: A hero of the Trojan War, Achilles was a Greek hero whose mother Thetis was a Nereid, or sea goddess. Since Achilles was destined to die young, Thetis dipped him into the river Styx, which would render him invincible. However, she had held him by the heel, thus leaving a vulnerable area. He would later die, as prophesized, by an arrow to his heel.

Adonis

Meaning: A handsome young man.

Greek Myth: A product of incest, Adonis was a beautiful youth whom the goddess of love, Aphrodite, eventually fell in love with. Adonis was tragically killed by Aphrodite's other lover Ares, disguised as a boar.

Also used to indicate a beautiful male: Apollo (god of music and prophesy)

Amazon

Meaning: A strong, husky woman

Greek Myth: From a race, as the Greeks described them, of warrior women. The word *Amazon* itself is Greek for "breastless", and it was widely believed Amazons severed a breast in order to shoot an arrow with greater ease. *Yowch!*

Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts...

Meaning: Be weary of anyone offering something; they may have an ulterior motive.

Greek Myth: Though it may have been Virgil in his masterpiece the *Aeneid* who immortalized this phrase (*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes...*—" I fear Greeks even

bearing gifts"), it can initially be attributed to the Trojan Horse and the "gift" the goddess Athene gave Priam's barricaded city. The horse contained armed men who sacked Troy during the night.

Caught Between Scylla & Charybdis

Meaning: A difficult choice where either decision could end in disaster. More familiar as "Caught between a rock and a hard place" "between the devil and the deep blue sea".

Greek Myth: The hero Odysseus spent nine years returning home after the Trojan War. Along his voyage by sea, he came upon Scylla and Charybdis. Scylla was an enormous sea monster with numerous hands and six dog heads sprouting from her body; she ate men alive. Charybdis was a tremendous whirlpool that digested ships whole. Since the only way to get home was to choose either route, Odysseus had to decide on one horror or the other. He chose Scylla, losing six crewmen to Scylla's hunger.

Chaos/Chaotic

Meaning: Disorderly, extreme confusion

Greek Myth: According to the Latin poet Ovid, who relayed the the myths of Greece and Rome in his *Metamorphoses*, the gap which all the universe sprung from. Chaos represented the disorder before the gods; eventually, Chaos begot the beginning of it.

Dionysiac Frenzy

Meaning: A state, usually associated with alcohol, where one loses complete control.

Greek Myth: Dionysius was the god of the vine and his followers, the *Bacchae* were women who would roam the woods in an uncontrollable, trance-like demeanor.

Dog as Man's Best Friend or Faithful Companion

Meaning: Self-explanatory

Greek Myth: Many ancient cultures treated the dog as a scavenger. One classic example is the belief that any dissident's body, such as Jezebel, should be "thrown to

the dogs" after death. But one story overrides such belief of the dog: when Odysseus returned home in disguise, his faithful dog, who had patiently awaited his return though near death, managed to stay alive to see his master--and was practically the only one who recognized him. On its deathbed, it managed to look up at its master and wag its tail in appreciation. Now *that's* loyalty.

Elysium Fields

Meaning: Paradise

Greek Myth: The Greeks did not believe in a heaven and hell per se; instead, their dead went to the realm of the god Hades. Elysium, also known as "Isle of the Blessed", was where the exceptional humans were sent; most mere mortals became mere "shades" upon their deaths. A few worthless beings ended their being in Tartarus, the closest equivalent to hell in Greek mythology.

The Face That Launched A Thousand Ships

Meaning: Any one person causing disaster, especially war.

Greek Myth: This is a direct reference to Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world. The abduction of her by the Trojan prince Paris caused Menelaus, her husband, to declare war on Troy. Because of prior alliances, eventually all of the Argives (Greeks) were involved; thus, Helen's beauty had "launched a thousand ships" into war.

Fate

Meaning: Evitable, predestined turn of events.

Greek Myth: The Fates were three sisters: Lachesis (lot), Clotho (the spinner), and Atropos (not to be turned). Based on the Greek notion of the "thread of life", the Fates are represented as spinners. Lachesis allots each man a length of the thread of life, Clotho spins it, and Atropos severs it. No one — not even Zeus, ruler of the gods — could alter their decisions.

Food of the Gods

Meaning: Lucious, unbelievably delicious delicacies.

Greek Myth: Nectar and ambrosia were what the gods normally ate (they could, of course, eat almost anything, including humans). If a mortal were to eat the ambrosia (nectar was the drink) he or she would be rendered immortal.

Fury

Meaning: Intense, uncontrollable anger.

Greek Myth: The Furies were the "avengers", so to speak, of crimes. They would pursue anyone with bloodstained hands; they are particularly cruel to Orestes after the murder of Clytemnestra, his mother. Some scholars believe the Furies represent one's own tormented conscious.

Giant/Titan

Meaning: Large, massive beings

Greek Myth: Giants were an enormous race whose existence began when Uranus, the first king of gods, was castrated by his son Cronus. Cronus was a Titan and the father of the gods; the Titans were therefore the "original" gods and actually aunts and uncles of them. Both Giants and Titans went to war with the gods, with the gods crushing both.

Gordian Knots

Meaning: An extremely perplexing puzzle or problem.

Greek Myth: Legend mixes with mythology with this term. King Gordius of Phrygia tied the knot and it was destined that whomever could untie it revealed himself as the future lord of Asia. After many frustrating attempts to untie it, Alexander the Great finally sliced the knot with his sword, proving it would take brute force to eventually capture Asia. Thus, to *cut the Gordian knot* means to solve a puzzle in a powerful, decisive manner.

Gorgon/Medusa

Meaning: A severely ugly woman.

Greek Myth: The Gorgons were three sisters who were so repulsive looking that their very gaze would turn a man to stone. Although they had apparently always been that way, there is a myth that one sister, Medusa, actually had been beautiful once; she was caught making love to the god Poseidon in the temple of Athena. Athena caught the lovers and immediately changed Medusa into a horrid Gorgon.

To Harp

Meaning: Incessantly bother.

Greek Myth: Jason, in quest for the golden fleece, encounters King Phineus, who is continually tormented by Harpies. The Harpies are winged creatures whose origins might actually represent wind spirits. To King Phineus, the Harpies are grotesque women who constantly snatch his food and drink and will not let him be.

Herculean Effort

Meaning: A mighty try

Greek Myth: Heracles, not Hercules (the Roman/Latin name), as you may know from the campy TV series, was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman. What the "action pack" show may not tell you is that Heracles was obligated to fulfill twelve tasks, called the Labors of Heracles. Any effort we nowadays may deem as tremendous can be attributed as "Herculean", or great, and is associated with the Labors.

Hermaphrodite

Meaning: Possessing both male and female genitalia.

Greek Myth: Hermaphroditus was the son of Hermes and Aphrodite. The nymph Salmacis fell in love with him, but he rejected her. She entwined her arms around him and held tight; the gods molded the two bodies together, never to part. Two sexes became one.

Hot as Hades

Meaning: Sweltering heat

Greek Myth: As previously mentioned, Hades was the ruler of the underworld, and the Greeks did not have a concept of heaven or hell. However, it might be deduced that perhaps the real origin of this saying may be more appropriately changed to "hot as Tartarus", since that was the place in Hades's realm where punishment was dealt and would have been surely "hot".

Hounds of Hell

Meaning: Allegory for evil, or the pursuit by evil

Greek Myth: Again, in reference to Hades's kingdom, Cerberus was a dog who guarded the entrance to the netherworld. There weren't really any "hounds", but Cerberus is often depicted with three—sometimes fifty—heads.

A Judgement of Paris

Meaning: Any difficult decision.

Greek Myth: Paris, a Trojan prince, was given the impossible task of deciding which goddess--Athena, Aphrodite, or Hera—was the most beautiful. All three tried bribes, but Aphrodite's—the love of the most beautiful mortal woman in the world—was the most enticing. Of course, Paris (and Troy) gained the other goddesses' animosity, and the judgement of Paris proved fatal to his city.

Leave No Stone Unturned

Meaning: Search every minute detail

Greek Myth: Eurystheus, the king responsible for Heracles's twelve labors, eventually goes after Heracles's sons following his death. He wants "no stone left unturned" in finding and killing them. Euripedes, better known for his masterpiece *The Bacchae*, wrote a play with this catch-phrase included in it.

A Labyrinth

Meaning: An elaborate maze

Greek Myth: Queen Pasiphae gave birth to a horrible half-man, half-bull creature called the Minotaur. To conceal this monster, King Minos had the master craftsman

Daedalus build the labyrinth. Because seven youths and seven maidens from Athens were sacrificed to this beast every year, the labyrinth was a series of perplexing hallways and corridors that no one could escape. Eventually Theseus (with the aid of Ariadne, whom he eventually dumped) did kill the Minotaur and escaped the labyrinth.

Lesbian

Meaning: A homosexual female

Greek Myth: Again, this more based on legend than mythology. Inhabitants of the Greek island of Lesbos were Lesbians, and there was no sexual connotations attributed to them. Perhaps today's meaning refers to one of the famous Lesbians, Sappho, a poet whose works involve the deep, meaningful relationships between females.

Midas Touch

Meaning: A person who always is lucky is said to have the Midas touch.

Greek Myth: Perhaps one of mythology's most famous tales is that of King Midas, who was granted the wish that everything he touched turned to gold. However, he soon realized that he could not eat, or drink, or even hug his daughter. Wisely, he rescinded his wish, and by immersing himself in the river Pactolus, lost the "golden touch".

Modern-day Medea

Meaning: A vengeful, often cruel, woman

Greek Myth: Medea is a fascinating figure in mythology. Some see her as a tragic heroine dissed by a typical chauvenist pig male, others view her as an evil sorceress with a vengeful heart. Euripedes makes either case in his brilliant play *Medea*: After helping Argonauts acquire the Golden Fleece, she leaves her family (by killing her brother and scattering his limbs in the sea for her father) and marries Jason. Jason soon dumps her for a younger princess, claiming it is for the future of their two young sons. Medea, naturally, is furious. She murders her children and leaves a devastated Jason via a serpent-drawn chariot.

Nemesis

Meaning: An adversary, enemy, obstacle

Greek Myth: The personification of retribution, Nemesis was a goddess sent to cause irritation and justification to those who deserved it.

Odyssey

Meaning: A adventure, journey

Greek Myth: From the classical epic by Homer, the *Odyssey*. The hero Odysseus is returning from the Trojan War; it takes him nine long years. Along the way, he has a multitude of adventures—from the Lotus-Eaters to Cyclops.

Oedipus (Electra) Complex

Meaning: A son's (daughter's) attachment to his mother (her father).

Greek Myth: Freud made this term almost a household phrase, but he was borrowing it from the tragic poet Sophocles and Sophocles's immortal play *Oedipus Tyrannos*. More commonly known as *Oedipus Rex* (again, the Latin), Oedipus (which means "swollen foot") was left to die as a baby after a horrific prophesy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Well, you'll have to read the play for the particulars but suffice is to say it came true, hence Freud's interpretation. Electra, the "female Oedipus", was the daughter of Agamemnon. When her mother Clytemnestra murdered him, Electra swore vengeance in Agamemnon's honor and her relentless obsession was ultimately the cause of Clytemnestra's death. Both Sophocles and Euripedes wrote plays that bear her name.

Pandora's Box

Meaning: To *open a Pandora's box* means to introduce yourself to trouble.

Greek Myth: Zeus was disgusted with man and decided to inflict him with the worst trouble imaginable: the creation of woman. Hephaestus molded the woman from clay, and the goddesses bestowed gifts of charm and beauty to her. Zeus then gave her to Epimetheus (whose name means "afterthought") to marry, with a beautiful box (or jar) of evils as her dowry. Although told not to open it, she inevitably did, with only Hope flying out as salvage.

Phobias

Meaning: Fear

Greek Myth: Phobos is the Greek word for fear, but originally Phobos was a son of Ares who was, indeed, the representation of fear, essentially in battles. He and his brother Deimos (panic) eventually became names of moons of Mars (the Roman version of Ares).

Trojan Horse

Meaning: Subversion or destruction from a seemingly serene person, people, or object, especially from the inside

Greek Myth: The Trojan Horse was related by the Latin genius Virgil in the *Aeneid*. The Trojans were barricaded within their city walls while the Achaeans (Greeks) lay in wait outside. An enormous wooden horse is brought within the city; a gift from the gods, the Trojans believe, despite warnings from the princess Cassandra and the priest Laocoon. During the night, hidden soldiers from the horse's belly emerged and sacked the city. *See also Greeks bearing gifts.*