

26 Pygmalion

searched for clouds which could smother the fires upon the earth with a deluge of rain. However, even they had perished in the heat.

Zeus, who delights in thunder, took his weapons and with unerring aim, he hurled his lightning bolts at the youth in the shining chariot of the sun. He had no other choice. With one mighty blow, the Lord of Olympus removed Phaëthon from his life and from shining Helios's fiery crown and chariot. His body was hurled helplessly through the air, and it blazed a trail down to earth as if he were a falling star. The River Po in Italy extinguished the flames from his burning corpse, and its nymphs buried him. The terrified horses and the remains of the chariot dashed wildly to their stables, returning the crown of the sun to shining Helios's palace.

Phaëthon's father, shining Helios, spent a day secluded with his own grief, while the renowned smith, Hephaestus, fashioned a new chariot. However, blazing ruins so illuminated the earth that the absence of the sun was no deprivation. Phaëthon's mother, Clymene, searched the earth for the remains of her son. Upon finding his marble tomb, she tearfully embraced his epitaph, which proclaimed, "Here lies Phaëthon, who died because he dared to drive shining Helios's chariot."

1. Ovid gives Apollo as Phaëthon's father, because at the time Ovid wrote his version of the myth, Apollo had assumed the role of sun god in Rome.
2. The oath on the River Styx is explained in Section I, In the Beginning—The Rule of Zeus.
3. The Dreaded Thunderer is Zeus.
4. Poseidon.
5. Hades.
6. Zeus is the grandson Gaia is calling.
7. Zeus.

REFLECTIONS

1. Who do you think was more responsible for Phaëthon's fate, Helios or Phaëthon?
2. Should Phaëthon have risked death in order to drive his father's chariot? Explain.
3. In what other ways do you think Phaëthon could have achieved the prestige he sought?
4. Become Phaëthon. Write a letter to Icarus explaining why your father was or was not a good father. In your opening paragraph, discuss what is meant by a "good" father.
5. Compare and contrast Phaëthon and Icarus. List the ways they were alike in one column and the ways they were different in another. What conclusions can you draw from your lists?

INTRODUCTION

Pygmalion is mentioned in Greek myth as a king of Cyprus. However, the great Roman writer of myths, Ovid, created the following romantic version about him. The myth is very short and simple. It is provocative because it ends just as the interesting part could begin, leaving the rest to the reader's imagination.

ANTICIPATIONS

1. We all like to think that we approach the roles in our lives with a sense of completeness and commitment to the values we have. We admire "perfect" things: "perfect" beauty, "perfect" scenery, "perfect" meals. We ourselves sometimes try hard to become "perfect" in one way or another. Is there such a thing as "perfection" in human beings? What is the result of searching for it?
2. How many kinds of love are there in the world?
3. Sometimes our desire for perfection gives rise to a feeling of dissatisfaction. Rank the following things in the order of importance to you:
 - a. orderly bedroom
 - b. knowing your daily schedule in advance
 - c. doing homework assignments on time
 - d. household chores
 - e. being selective about television programs
 - f. accepting the foibles of your friends

THE MYTH

Pygmalion was a man who was frightened by women because he believed they had evil qualities. Consequently, he chose to remain unmarried.

ried. He spent his time carving an ivory statue of a woman who was more beautiful than any mortal woman he had ever seen.

Gradually, Pygmalion fell in love with the statue. Unlike real women, his statue was perfect. He began to treat it as if it were real. It felt so real to him that Pygmalion even thought it returned his kisses. He touched the statue carefully so as not to hurt it and spoke flattering words to it. He gave presents to the statue of precious jewels, birds, and flowers. He dressed it in rich robes and placed rings on its fingers. He also adorned the statue with necklaces and earrings.

One night, Pygmalion placed the statue upon his bed. Its head rested upon a goose-down pillow; its body lay upon a rich spread of Phoenician purple. Fondly Pygmalion kissed the statue and called it his wife.

The day of the festival of golden-wreathed Aphrodite was a solemn one on her sacred island of Cyprus. On this day, white cows, their horns decorated with gold, were sacrificed at the altars of the goddess. Standing before Aphrodite's altar, Pygmalion asked that the statue become his wife. Aphrodite heard his prayer.

When Pygmalion returned to his statue, he lay upon the bed and held the statue in his arms, kissing it. Suddenly he found that its lips were warm and its body soft. His fingers imprinted themselves on the ivory surface. He doubted still whether or not it was real. The statue, however, had become a real warm-blooded woman.

Pygmalion joyfully thanked golden Aphrodite. The living statue felt the kisses and saw Pygmalion as her lover. Joyfully Pygmalion made this extraordinarily beautiful woman his wife¹, and Aphrodite blessed their union. In time they had a daughter named Paphos.

1. Modern writers have called Pygmalion's live statue Galatea.

REFLECTIONS

1. Did the creator of this myth want you to believe that once she is human, Pygmalion's wife would be perfect?
2. This myth could be the dream of a dissatisfied husband, because it is opposite to what he has in his life in reality. The dream could also be called "wish-fulfillment." Seen this way, this myth is a "fantasy," or a wish. What, if anything, are the limitations of this story, in terms of real life?
3. In what ways do you think this myth is more like a fairy-tale than a myth? What are its characteristics?
4. Write a continuation of the myth.

27 Narcissus and Echo

INTRODUCTION

Both Echo and Narcissus underwent transformations. Echo lost her bodily form and remained only a voice, also known by the name of Echo. Narcissus, upon his death, became a flower that bears his name. Thus, both myths provided a non-scientific explanation for a phenomenon in nature. The myth of Echo explained why a person's words could be repeated in certain circumstances. The myth of Narcissus explained the origin of a particular flower.

In addition, both myths described how readily the Greek gods punished those who offended them, and how uniquely appropriate their punishments were. When Echo helped Zeus pursue his extramarital relationships, she miscalculated Hera's reaction. As always, Hera's vengeance was swift and harsh. Hera turned Echo's greatest asset, her *areté*, her excellent conversational ability, into her punishment.

Narcissus's *areté* or excellence, was his physical beauty. He attracted so much admiration that he became excessively proud of his appearance. The Greeks called this kind of pride *hybris*. Narcissus felt so superior to other people that he became arrogant. He believed that those who loved him did not deserve to receive his love. Such extreme pride produced *átē*, "temporary madness." Narcissus's love of himself became his punishment (*nemesis*), and it destroyed him.

ANTICIPATIONS

1. Do people usually like other people who are more like them or who are more *unlike* them? Why? Are your friends more like you than unlike you?
2. Do you think anyone can love another human being if he or she doesn't think much of him or herself? Explain.

3. Do you think the saying, "opposites attract" is true? Support your answer with examples.
4. Do you think self-interest is fostered by
 - a. advertisements?
 - b. politics?
 - c. family life?
 - d. career?
 - e. other?
5. What do you think is the difference between self-love and self-esteem?
6. In what ways are you certain that your comments, opinions, and values are strictly your own and not those you have heard?

THE MYTH

The river god, Cepheissus, loved a beautiful sea nymph, Leirioppe, in his watery dwelling. She gave birth to a beautiful baby boy and named him Narcissus.¹ Leirioppe inquired of the blind Theban prophet, Teiresias,² whether her newborn son would live a long life. Teiresias replied, "If he never knows himself." Leirioppe, not fully understanding what the words of the prophet meant, kept all mirrors away from him. She reared him so that he would never be able to see what he looked like.

Narcissus was a very handsome young man and many youths would have liked to love him. He, however, scorned them all, including the nymph Echo.

Echo was a companion of golden-throned Hera on Mount Olympus. Many times when Hera might have stopped Olympian Zeus from courting other nymphs, Echo would engage Hera in long conversations until the nymphs had time to run away. When Hera realized that Echo was helping her husband in his amorous pursuits, she said, "I shall stop the powers of that tongue which has tricked me! For this abuse, your tongue, from this point on, shall be of little use."

She carried out her threats. Thereafter, Echo was condemned to repeat the last words spoken, and give back only the sounds she had heard.

Echo discovered Narcissus while he was hunting deer in the forest. As he chased the deer into nets, Echo pursued him. The closer she came, the more she burned with love of him, as a match burns when it approaches fire. She longed to pursue him with words of love, but her punishment did not permit her freedom of speech. She could not initiate a conversation with him; she could only repeat his last words.

Finding herself despised by Narcissus, Echo sadly retreated to the woods and hid herself in caves. Her soul still longed for Narcissus, and her grief at his rejection increased. Her body became withered, and her

blood converted to air. Soon, nothing was left of her but her voice, for her bones became stones.

Another youth whom Narcissus scorned prayed that Narcissus, himself, might experience the same heartache he had so heartlessly inflicted upon others. This prayer was heard by Nemesis, the Goddess of Retribution. Because she felt this prayer was justified, she consented to its fulfillment.

There was a spring in the middle of the woods whose silver waters were as clear and as smooth as a polished mirror. It was totally secluded. Neither bird nor beast disturbed its surface. Narcissus, one day, wandered to it, tired and overheated from his hunting. He lay down upon the grass and quenched his thirst at the spring.

Soon another kind of thirst arose within him. He gazed into the still water and beheld a form which gazed back at him. He fell in love with the image he saw in the water. He became completely distracted with love for the reflection. He lay by the water's edge, still as a marble statue. He continued to admire the beauty of this image, totally unaware that it was his own reflected beauty that had captivated him. In return, the reflection in the spring admired his beauty and appeared equally charmed by Narcissus.

Narcissus tried to kiss the flattering image within the spring and thrust his arms down into the water in an attempt to circle the neck of his beloved. Whenever he did this, however, the image would slip away from his embraces. Neither sleep nor hunger could induce Narcissus to leave his lover in the spring.

Finally, lifting his head toward the trees, Narcissus asked, "You, woods, which spread your branches round about, was there ever such an unfortunate lover as I am? You have seen many pairs of lovers. Have you known of any other lovers to pine away as we do?"

If he had only turned aside, the reflection would have faded away, and Narcissus might have known that his own reflection was what he loved—that his love had no independence from himself.

However, he continued, sadly, "I am not separated from my love either by sea or mountain, walls or roads. Only a little water separates us. My love himself," he continued, "desires to be loved. When I lean down to kiss him, his lips meet mine. Why can't we touch each other?"

"Ah love," he said, looking into the pool, "come forth, whoever you are. Why do you evade me? Why do you disdain me? Nymphs have often loved me in vain. Somehow you seem to encourage my hopes and to desire the hand I offer you. You smile at my smile and cry when I cry.

"Ah!" he said, suddenly, "You are I. Now I plainly see that it is my own shadow which has bewitched me. It is love of myself which tortures me. What can I love, since what I desire I already have? Too much love of this kind has made me poor."

"Oh, gods!" he cried. "Disjoin me from myself. I want to be separated from what I love. Grief is destroying me. It does not grieve me half so much to part with life, itself, for my grief will find its perfect cure in death."

Gazing sadly upon his image again, his tears created troubled circles upon the water, which made his image vanish. He begged it to stay and beat himself upon the breast. Seeing this action reflected in the water, he could no longer bear his sorrow. As wax dissolves with heat or morning frost melts with the sun's warmth, so Narcissus melted away from the fire of his hopeless love.

Echo, watching him waste away, remained in the woods. Although she still felt anger because he had spurned her, she pitied Narcissus, and whenever in his sorrow he cried, "Alas!" she repeated, "Alas!" His last words were, "My hopeless love, farewell." And Echo repeated, "Love, farewell."

Then Narcissus lay down, and Death's cold hands shut his self-admiring eyes. The water-nymphs, in mourning for their dead brother, spread their clipped locks of hair upon his body. Then they grieved over the death of Narcissus, and Echo pined in every closing phrase of sorrow.

When the funeral pyre was built, no one could find Narcissus's body. In its place was a yellow flower with tufts of white petals, which came to be called the narcissus. Narcissus's shade entered the Underworld, where, for eternity, he gazes upon his reflection in the waters of the River Styx.

1. The word *narcissus* comes from the Greek *narkissos*, a plant which produces narcotic effects. The word *narcotic* can also mean *sleepy* and *numbness*.

2. Teiresias was blinded by Hera for taking Zeus's position in an argument. Zeus compensated Teiresias for this cruel punishment by giving him the power of prophecy and an unusually long lifetime. Teiresias first gained his reputation by accurately predicting the future of Narcissus.

REFLECTIONS

1. Take turns being Narcissus or the interviewer on a popular talk show. What questions would you ask Narcissus? As Narcissus, how would you respond?
2. Write an essay or poem expressing your feelings about Narcissus or Echo.
3. Write a new ending for the myth of Narcissus.
4. Write a diary that Echo might keep. Explain her feelings about Hera's attitude and actions, as well as the attitudes and actions of Narcissus.

HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The word *narcissism* has come to mean self-love. Those people who derive pleasure only from their own physical or mental attributes to the

exclusion of interest in others are called *narcissistic*. Another word for narcissism is *egotistical*. In Latin, the word *ego* means *I*. Narcissism is a normal state in infants. If a child has loving parents, he learns to trust them and realize that he is different from them. As he matures, he is able to realize that there are other people in the world he can also trust and love. If people reach adulthood, still unable to trust others, they remain *narcissistic*. They see others only as extensions of themselves, rather than as separate individuals. They also may demand that others be like them, or may be uncomfortable or unable to understand people who are different from themselves. Often, they even marry people who are mirror-images of themselves, and they may be intolerant of differences. Frequently, narcissists cannot put their trust in other human beings at all. When this occurs, they can turn only to themselves, feeling that other people will always disappoint them.

Love for a narcissist is a strange phenomenon. He is unable to form close bonds with other people. He will search for someone exactly like himself (a *self-object*). The normal, mature adult will be able to love someone else quite different from himself (a *love-object*). Narcissists cannot love others as distinctive persons but only if the qualities of the other person reflect themselves either as they are or as they would like to be.

One of the reasons for the relationship between the Greek *narkissos* or narcotic, and narcissism is that when one is entirely devoted to himself, he becomes numb or stuporous to the outside world and hence, anesthetized to it, and to the needs of others.

Narcissus feels he is the center of the universe. His flaw is abnormal self-love. Fascinated by his own beauty, he feels superior to others. No one, he feels, is good enough for him, and this excessive pride causes his downfall. In the myth, Teiresias correctly prophesies that Narcissus will live to an old age if he does not know himself. When Narcissus first looks into the pool, he does not recognize the reflection with whom he falls in love as himself. Later, he realizes that he is in love with his own image, and not that of another.

He literally withers away, transformed into a flower. People who do not recognize that their lives leave no room for caring for others, cannot live full lives. Narcissistic love is felt as nonreciprocal. The narcissist feels rejected by most people, but in some ways, he rejects others because behind the facade of loving himself "too much," he really does not have enough self-esteem. He is afraid that if he gives love, he will have it taken from him.

The Narcissus and Echo myths are told together because each character has similar problems. Narcissus is over-involved with himself to the exclusion of others, and Echo only repeats the final words of others. She has lost her uniqueness, her individuality, her sense of self. Echo reflects the voices of others, while Narcissus reflects himself and loses others.

Originally intended by the Greeks, perhaps, as a way of explaining the natural phenomenon of the echo, the myth of Echo, today, has many more implications in our daily lives. We adopt the speech and slang of our friends, sometimes, in order to be loved or accepted. This practice can abolish free or imaginative communication and we lose not only our ability to express our own feelings, but limit ourselves to the expressions of others, thus deadening the uniqueness of our own personalities.

28 Orpheus and Eurydice

INTRODUCTION

The *aretē* of Orpheus was his voice. He sang so magnificently that he charmed the Sirens on the voyage with Jason to recover the golden fleece, and also the gods and shades in Hades' dismal kingdom. The ancient Greeks believed that excellence could lead to *hybris* or excessive pride. This was true in the case of Orpheus. Although his *hybris* did not become insolence as it did with Arachne and Niobe, he was as arrogant as they were. Orpheus believed that, because he loved Eurydice, the inevitability of death should not apply to her.

The "átē" (temporary madness) of Orpheus revealed itself in his refusal to recognize that he was not a god. He forgot his human limitations. He abandoned the *goldēn mean* when his emotions usurped the powers of rationality, intellect, and reason.

The gods punished Orpheus by showing him that his own weakness (his inability to obey the command of the gods) forced Eurydice to return to the kingdom of Hades. Orpheus was forced to learn that, being human, he could not control the universe, and that, in fact, he could not even control himself.

Yet, even after he was punished, Orpheus did not regain his dignity. He accepted the death of Eurydice, but his emotions continued to rule his life. Because he was ruled solely by passion, he lost the ability to command admiration from others. The kind of a man he was became more important than his excellent voice.

The ancient Greeks realized that life and happiness were unpredictable for everyone. One's blessings could evaporate, and death could come at any time. The story of Orpheus shows that the inability to accept and to cope with the crises of life produces great misery. Without Eurydice, Orpheus could have returned to a meaningful life in society. He could have received the pleasure that came from giving of oneself, and receiving in return. Instead, he became a misanthrope, and as a result, his excellent voice was no longer valued or admired.

His violent death may indicate that Orpheus was either a sacred king in a matriarchal society or a youth who represented Dionysus in the ritual drama of the wine-god's death and rebirth. In either role, Orpheus would have been dismembered and eaten.

ANTICIPATIONS

1. How do you react to a crisis?
 - a. get sick (headache, stomach ache, and so on)
 - b. get angry
 - c. pretend it hasn't happened
 - d. dream about it
 - e. prepare for it
 - f. talk about it with someone
 - g. other

THE MYTH

Orpheus was a master poet of Thrace, a country to the east of Macedonia. His beautiful voice and accompanying lyre could charm man and beast, and some said it could even move stones.

But alas! When Orpheus married Eurydice, catastrophe followed. As his bride walked with the river nymphs along the Hebrus River, a serpent bit her on the heel. It killed her instantly, separating her from her devoted husband.

Orpheus was overcome with grief. He neither ate nor slept. Finally, in a desperate attempt to recover his wife, he descended to the Underworld by the road from Taenarum in southern Greece. In order that his misery might move the deathless gods, he sought fair Persephone and her husband, grim Hades, Lord of All beneath the Earth.

Upon his arrival, Orpheus tuned his strings. Then the great poet sang to the song of his lyre before the dread rulers of the dismal land:

"Your powers that sway the world beneath the earth, that last land of all mortal men, hear me. I wish to tell the truth. I have not come here merely to explore the Underworld out of curiosity. Nor have I come to find scowling Cerberus, who, barking, shakes his triple heads. I am only searching for my wife. Only for love of her do I suffer these terrors. My unfortunate, young wife stepped upon a snake's head, and it bit her in the heel. Thus she has suffered an untimely death. I have striven to bear her loss, but I cannot endure it.

"Eros," he continued, "is a god well-known above. Perhaps he is known here, also. For if Fame truly reports all passions," he said darkly, "the Lord of the Underworld has also felt its flames."

"By these prayers of mine," Orpheus implored, "reverse Eurydice's too hasty fate. Restore her to me. After a short stay on earth, early or late, we must all come to your kingdom. Here we throng, assigned to our last home. So Eurydice, too, when her time on earth has expired, will again be yours. If the Fates deny me and you will not postpone her death, my second choice is to abide here. So rejoice in both our deaths, or return us both to life!"

While he sang these words, the bloodless shades silently wept. Springs no longer tempted Tantalus,¹ Ixion's² whirling wheel of fire stood still, and Sisyphus³ sat listening upon his stone. Even the Furies, who never wept, now were seen to weep, while the triple jaws of Cerberus opened wide with wonder.

Fair Persephone yielded to the powerful plea of Orpheus, and grim Hades, too, felt pity for him.

From among the lately arrived shades, they called Eurydice. She arrived, still limping from her painful wound. The Lord of the Underworld gave her to Orpheus with this decree, "Until you pass the entrance to the world of light, you may not look back to see Eurydice. If you disobey, you will lose what you have, and your wife will remain a lifeless shade here, forever."

Together, Orpheus and Eurydice left grim Hades' kingdom. With difficulty, they climbed the steep and rugged ascent, dark and thick with fog. Finally, they approached the light of the upper world. Fearing to lose Eurydice, yet longing for the sight of her, the impatient lover Orpheus felt compelled to look behind him in order to see her face. Three times the Underworld shook with thunder. Eurydice, instantly dying, slid back to the dismal kingdom beneath the earth. "What madness has destroyed us, Orpheus?" she asked. "The Fates draw me into the grip of Death, and eternal sleep closes my eyes.

"Farewell, Orpheus. I am enveloped in endless night. I reach for you, but I no longer belong to you. I cannot see beyond the dismal mist which blinds my eyes." Fearing that he would lose her forever, Orpheus tried to grasp her. However, his hands closed upon air, not flesh.

Eurydice, dying a second death, did not blame her husband, for what could she complain of but his love. She managed to utter one last farewell, but so softly that Orpheus scarcely heard her voice.

Orpheus was now desolate and grief-stricken. He realized that through his love for her he had lost Eurydice once more. He returned to the Underworld and pleaded with Charon to help him, but the ferryman angrily refused to take him across the River Styx.

Orpheus sat forlorn upon the banks of the River Styx for seven months, abstaining from any kind of food or drink. Grief and tears filled his days and nights. He called the gods of the Underworld severe. He complained of the cruel Fates and railed against all those who had deprived him of his love.

At length, he went to the snowy mountains of Thrace. There Boreas, the north wind, blasted him mercilessly.

In the years that followed, Orpheus refused the company of women. He fled from them, either because of his marriage vows or because of his wife's fate. A group of wild maenads, under the influence of Dionysian revels, became furious at his rejection of them. Ferociously, they retaliated by tearing his body limb from limb and scattering the pieces over the land.

The shade of Orpheus was now free to join his beloved wife in the Underworld.

1. Tantalus was a king of Lydia who tricked the Olympians by serving his son Pelops to them for dinner. In Tartarus, he was chained to a tree, up to his neck in water he could not drink, and within reach of fruit he could not eat.
 2. Ixion murdered his father-in-law by throwing him into a fiery pit. He also tried to seduce Hera. In Tartarus, he was chained to a revolving, fiery wheel.
 3. Sisyphus spied on a romantic affair of Zeus and told the river nymph's father. He was condemned to spend eternity in Tartarus pushing a huge boulder to the top of a steep hill. Just as the rock approached the summit, it rolled down again.
- Sisyphus, Ixion, and Tantalus are the three most famous criminals in Greek mythology.

REFLECTIONS

1. Discuss whether or not you think Orpheus is a heroic character. To what extent was his behavior admirable?
2. Write this myth from Eurydice's point of view.
3. Write the myth as a play and perform it.
4. What motivated Orpheus to go down to the land of Hades in search of Eurydice? Discuss the importance of
 - a. his wish to die.
 - b. his wish for immortality.
 - c. his wish to be with the woman he loves.
 - d. his wish to become a hero.

HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The character of Orpheus was ruled by emotion. He was a poet and a musician. He bemoaned his fate both when he lost Eurydice initially, and when he lost her as a result of his compelling desire to look back at her, heedless of warnings.

It was a value of the Greeks to temper emotion with reason. Orpheus was not heroic when he attempted to keep Eurydice with him by pleading for her to join him on earth, or offering to join her in the Underworld. His problem can be seen as his inability to accept the fact that man can-

not control the universe. Man is subject to accident, death, catastrophe, and above all, reality. Reality can sometimes be painful, but in most of our lives, we are required to live with more than one force, drive, goal, or wish at a time. This causes conflict within us, and results, at times, in our inability to deal sensibly with a catastrophe, such as death, or the life-forces we *all* feel that carry with them the need to choose our acts wisely, to accept the full responsibility for making our own choices, and to accept their results. This myth asks us to question how we really react to a number of external stimuli: to love, to death, to orders from others, to loss, to the disappointment of imperfection in ourselves, and in the world.

It is interesting to note that although the myth contains the names of both lovers, Eurydice is virtually a concept rather than a flesh-and-blood woman. At the beginning she was already dead, so the story focuses on the way Orpheus handled his fate. Eurydice's death was a major catastrophe in his life. Orpheus is either a hero because he did *not* accept his fate, or he was a flawed human because he could not live with life as it was.

Our experience usually teaches us that we have certain alternatives in life. We must either learn to accept what we are powerless to change, or to remain in a constant state of misery, or die. These three alternatives inevitably face us in our lives at one time or another. No one escapes the necessity of making choices that affect our lives—our fate, in one sense.

Orpheus looked back either because of weakness, love, or predistination. If we "look back," as did Orpheus, in our own lives, we can learn from past mistakes and correct them. The philosopher Santayana said, "He who never learns history is bound to repeat it." Looking back over our own lives is not the deadly act it is in this myth. It is a continual process in which we try to change our futures for the better by getting to know (having insight into) our past behavior.

Orpheus was given some choices that he resolved in an ambiguous manner: he could have accepted the Fates and not plead for Eurydice's rebirth, he could have chosen to die, or he could have remained alive and miserable. Orpheus, in rejecting every other woman, symbolically rejected life, itself. He did not deal *actively* with his life. Each of us has the ability to choose ways of handling matters of life and death. Usually the Greek notion of using reason to temper feelings brings us into balance with our feelings and lends perspective to our choices.

30 Atalanta

In so doing, we may avoid the risk of changing our minds, but we are also closing ourselves to the possibility of change.

How can we find alternatives to old ways of decision-making and not rely only on the tried-and-true recipes we feel designate our past decisions? Obviously, all decision-making is based upon choice. Choice means eliminating all the alternatives but one.

Once that choice is made, it remains for all decisions to be put into action. Decisions are not active in a vacuum. They cannot influence our lives or create significant changes until we can commit ourselves to acting upon our decisions and living comfortably with the changes such action brings.

INTRODUCTION

When you read this myth, consider whether Aphrodite made Atalanta fall in love with Hippomenes. As in the "Calydonian Boar Hunt", a divinity structured a situation in which a person was clearly free to make a choice. In fact, except for the magical transformation at the end of the story, Aphrodite's power was unnecessary. Hippomenes could have thought up the trick of the golden apples himself. The goddess was invisible to everyone else.

Yet, it is human nature for people who are competitive in spirit to rationalize another person's success as "luck" or "the gods." In this instance, another suitor might have attributed the trick of Hippomenes to Aphrodite's help if he had not wanted to admit that Hippomenes was more imaginative or that Atalanta simply preferred Hippomenes.

THE MYTH

When Atalanta was born, her father was so disappointed that she was not a male child that he left her exposed in the countryside, hoping that she would die of starvation, illness, or from an assault by wild animals. However, a female bear found the infant and nursed her as if she were its own bear cub. Later, when hunters found Atalanta, they took her home with them and reared her.

Atalanta continued to live in the forest, and she became a famous huntress. Her skills in archery and in running were only equalled by her beauty. No matter where she went, her bow and arrows travelled with her. When two Centaurs attempted to rape her, she killed them with her weapons. Eventually she discovered the identity of her true parents, and returned to their palace and lived with them.

One day Atalanta asked the oracle of Apollo at Delphi whether the

Fates would permit her to take a husband. "A husband will cause your ruin," the oracle prophesied. "You will strive in vain against your fate and although you will continue to live, you will lose yourself."

Frightened by this advice, Atalanta drove all suitors from her, saying, "Unless you beat me in a foot race, I am a wife for no man. The suitor who loses will die."

Atalanta chose a large, enclosed athletic field as the site for the races. One at a time, she would contend with her numerous suitors. Each youth would receive a head start and would race unarmed. Then the maiden huntress would pursue her suitor, dressed in a full set of armor and carrying her bow and arrows. Atalanta would immediately shoot and kill any suitor she defeated in a foot race. She would decapitate the victim and place his head upon a pole. The pole would then be fixed on the circumference of the athletic field.

Even under these gruesome conditions, Atalanta continued to find many men who wished to marry her. She was so beautiful that many young men were eager to undertake that peril in the hope of winning her hand in marriage. Her face attracted suitors, while her feet destroyed them!

Watching one of these contests, Hippomenes' wondered at those who would so rashly risk their lives. "Must a man risk his life in order to gain the blessing of a wife?" he asked. Then he saw Atalanta and fell in love with her. "Forgive my doubts, you suitors who have died," he declared. "I did not know the merit of the prize."

Now Hippomenes envied the runners and hoped that none would win. Meanwhile, the current race ended and Atalanta won. Hippomenes watched as she shot the suitor with her well-aimed arrow.

"Why do you choose such easy victories?" he called to her, challengingly. "Contend instead with me! My victory will not detract from your glory."

In silence, Atalanta looked at Hippomenes, pleased with his appearance. She felt doubts and conflict and did not know whether she would be happier if she lost to him or conquered him.

"What god would destroy this youth who seeks to end his life if he can't marry me?" she wondered. "I am not worth your sacrifice," she mused, as she stood gazing at him. "What is it I feel for you," she asked herself, "is it pity or love? I admire your courage and your contempt of death. You seem to be content to part with your life if the Fates deny me for your wife."

"Be gone, stranger!" she replied to Hippomenes, "Shun my bloody bed while you can. This race will loosen your head from your body. There is no maiden who would refuse to be your wife. Leave while you still can."

Then she thought, "Yet why do I think of you when I've killed so many others? Why does my heart beat for you alone? You have watched your

rivals die. You must be weary of life to court death so intensely. Yet, must death be the payment for love? To destroy such a youth will shame my victory and cause hatred, but I am not to blame. Did I persuade you to run against me?"

Her thoughts ran on, "Oh! Would that you could avoid danger, or, since you are so foolish, would that you could run faster. Poor Hippomenes," she thought, "I wish you had never seen this place. You deserve to live. If the Fates would permit me to marry, you are the only one I would choose for my husband."

Now the king and crowds of people impatiently called for the race between Atalanta and Hippomenes to begin. Hippomenes fervently prayed, "Oh golden Aphrodite, favor my attempt to win the maiden huntress. Help me to win this race and to gain my love. Help the affections you have given me. You have inspired my love."

A gentle wind sped his prayer to Mount Olympus where golden Aphrodite heard his plea. She immediately descended to the earth and sought her sacred island of Cyprus. There, in the most fertile field grew a tree whose glittering leaves and branches shone with gold.

Aphrodite gathered three golden apples from that tree, and, invisible to all but Hippomenes, she delivered them to him and instructed him in their use.

At the king's command the trumpets sounded. Atalanta gave Hippomenes the customary head start. Swiftly, with agile steps they ran, their feet scarcely touching the surface of the sandy earth.

"Make haste, Hippomenes! Don't delay!" roared the crowd. "Don't be afraid! If you are bold, victory is yours!"

Both Atalanta and Hippomenes were delighted with the encouragement. Atalanta often purposely lagged behind, when she might have increased the distance between them. She would look fondly at Hippomenes, restraining her flying feet, then quickly resume the contest and overtake him. Their short breaths scorched the air; their mouths were parched.

The goal was still far off when Hippomenes threw the first of the three golden apples upon the plain.

Atalanta stopped and admired the unusual golden fruit. Anxious to possess the shining object, she turned aside and bent to catch the rolling, golden apple. It rolled right by her. While she was diverted from her course, the field resounded with shouts of joy as the crowd supported Hippomenes' lead.

Atalanta retrieved the apple. Running as swiftly as the wind, she overtook Hippomenes and soon left him far behind. Hippomenes cast the second golden fruit, this time throwing it farther than before. Again Atalanta stopped and retrieved the shining fruit. Again she overtook Hippomenes in the race.

As the great race approached the end, Hippomenes prayed, "Oh Giver of Golden Apples, help me! Give success to the love you've inspired within me." He then threw the last golden apple across the plain with all his strength, in order to cause Atalanta to detour and delay her victory.

Atalanta was doubtful as to what to do. In order to retrieve the apple, she would risk losing the race. However, conquered by love, Atalanta diverted her pursuit and acquired the shining fruit. The burden of the three heavy golden apples slowed down her speed. Atalanta could not recover the distance that separated her from Hippomenes, and he won the race. The crowd went wild with enthusiastic approval. Atalanta's father awarded his daughter to Hippomenes, and they were married.

However, Hippomenes did not give thanks or sacrifice to Aphrodite for his victory, and golden Aphrodite became provoked with sudden rage at his apparent contempt. She worried, lest other mortals slight her honor because of Hippomenes' example. Thus, golden Aphrodite took revenge upon them both.

One day, while resting from a hunt, Atalanta inspired Hippomenes with a passionate love. He was overcome with desire for her. In the deep forest, they found a grove that was sacred to Olympian Zeus. They entered the shrine and spent the night there.

They awoke to find that Aphrodite and Zeus had punished them for defiling the sacred grove. Atalanta noticed that a yellow mane surrounded Hippomenes' neck and fell upon his smooth shoulders. His arms had become legs, his fingers had turned to claws.

Hippomenes noticed similar changes in Atalanta.

Now, when they attempted to speak to each other, they heard only roars. As they left the sacred grove, their tails swept the ground. Together they moved through the woods, but now in the form of lions, feared by mortal men.

The great Titan goddess, Rhea, yoked them to her chariot. Forever after, they drew her chariot across the earth.

1. Another version of this myth says that Atalanta's suitor was Melanion.

REFLECTIONS

1. Why did Atalanta race against suitors? Why didn't she refuse to race, since she did not intend to marry?
2. Why did Atalanta let Hippomenes win when she knew that there was a prophecy against her marriage?
3. Compare and contrast Atalanta to Arachne and Niobe.

HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Atalanta tried to accept the prophecy of her fate by outracing her suitors until she finally fell in love. This, like other Greek myths, deals with the impact of fate on people's lives. The oracle, functioning as a good friend, showed a way to prevent the inevitable fate from occurring, usually by avoiding some temptation, or living with a dreaded beast. However, when Atalanta succumbed to human frailties, her doom was sealed.

Modern thought denies the existence of fate and insists that one's fate is unknown at birth. It also places great stock in the idea that a person can hope to become that which his intelligence and diligence strive to achieve.

It is, in other words, not fate which prevents our success, but our own limitations or laziness. When circumstances beyond our control influence our success or failure, they are rational or natural, as in the case of illness, unequal ability, economic upheaval, hurricanes, or war. Few modern thinkers believe that a particular person is singled out for special attention to be blessed or cursed. They believe that the story of our lives is written as we live it and unfolds as we, ourselves, create it.