

# 15 Nemesis

## INTRODUCTION

Nemesis represented retributive justice. She was called upon by men and gods to avenge injustice and excessive pride.

In societies where the Mother Goddess was the primary deity and the framework of society was matriarchal, retributive justice was the major form of justice. A mortal's primary allegiance was to his or her own family. If a member of a family was killed or insulted by a person outside the family, the family was obligated to avenge the crime or insult. The other family in turn was then obligated to avenge that vengeance, thereby continuing the blood feud. This pattern could continue indefinitely. By making the family its own judge and jury, and by providing no other rules than "an eye for an eye," many innocent men and women were killed, and there was great social unrest and bitterness.

This pattern of justice continued under the early rule of Zeus. Yet by the time of Theseus and Daedalus (about 1450 B.C.), those mortals who committed murder were tried on the Areopagus<sup>1</sup> in Athens by a council of respected aristocrats who decided the questions of their guilt and punishment. Those who were found guilty were exiled from the community for eight years, or for the period of the term of the sacred king. This eliminated the repetitive pattern of retributive justice by having an impartial authority determine and enforce social behavior.

1. Daedalus and Orestes were both tried on the Areopagus. Daedalus' story was included in his myth (Section III, The World of Man). Orestes was declared innocent after a long punishment by the Furies.  
Areopagus means "Hill of Ares" or "Hill of Curses." It is actually a rocky hill near the Acropolis in Athens.

## ANTICIPATIONS

1. What does the word "nemesis" mean today?

2. Nemesis was originally the goddess of retribution. To what extent does the principle "an eye for an eye" exist in modern society?
3. Do you feel that the ways in which punishment and crime are handled today work for the welfare of society? If so, why? If not, why not?

## THE MYTH

A later love of Zeus was Nemesis, immortal daughter of Nyx (night). Nemesis was the goddess who brought retribution to those who committed crimes. She bore Zeus the famous Helen of Troy. When Zeus could not persuade Nemesis to accept his amorous advances, the Lord of Olympus transformed himself into a swan. He then asked golden Aphrodite to transform herself into an eagle and to pursue the swan.

As Nemesis sat by the shore, the eagle pursued the swan according to plan, and the swan took refuge in Nemesis's lap. Nemesis cuddled the beautiful swan and then fell into a deep sleep. While she slept, the swan embraced her and then flew away.

Within the year Nemesis gave birth to a large egg. Hermes the Wayfinder collected the egg, carried it to Sparta, and gave it to the mortal queen, Leda. Leda placed the egg in a chest and kept it until it hatched. When it did, out came Helen and Polydeuces. Leda raised these children with her own mortal children of the same age. Clytemnestra and Castor. Castor and Polydeuces became inseparable friends, while Helen and Clytemnestra married the great kings of Greece of that time, Menelaus and Agamemnon.

## REFLECTIONS

1. Have a debate on whether or not there should be capital punishment.
2. What does the existence of Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, reveal about human relationships?
3. Volunteer to report on one of the following aspects of our system of justice.
  - a. the Supreme Court
  - b. the appellate courts
  - c. trial by jury
  - d. police stations