Stephen Fry

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MYTHOS

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The Greek Myths Retold

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Mythos

Stephen Fry is an award-winning comedian, actor, presenter and director. He rose to fame alongside Hugh Laurie in *A Bit of Fry and Laurie* (which he co-wrote with Laurie) and *Jeeves and Wooster*, and was unforgettable as General Melchett in *Blackadder*. He hosted over 180 episodes of *QI*, and has narrated all seven of the Harry Potter novels for the audiobook recordings. He is the bestselling author of four novels – *The Stars' Tennis Balls*, *Making History*, *The Hippopotamus* and *The Liar* – as well as three volumes of autobiography – *Moab is My Washpot*, *The Fry Chronicles* and *More Fool Me*.

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ΓΙΑ ΤΟΝ ΈΛΛΙΟΤΤ ΜΕ ΑΓΆΠΗ

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Foreword

I was lucky enough to pick up a book called *Tales from Ancient Greece* when I was quite small. It was love at first meeting. Much as I went on to enjoy myths and legends from other cultures and peoples, there was something about these Greek stories that lit me up inside. The energy, humour, passion, particularity and believable detail of their world held me enthralled from the very first. I hope they will do the same for you. Perhaps you already know some of the myths told here, but I especially welcome those who may never have encountered the characters and stories of Greek myth before. You don't need to know anything to read this book; it starts with an empty universe. Certainly no 'classical education' is called for, no knowledge of the difference between nectar and nymphs, satyrs and centaurs or the Fates and the Furies is required. There is absolutely nothing academic or intellectual about Greek mythology; it is addictive, entertaining, approachable and astonishingly human.

But where did they come from, these myths of ancient Greece? In the tangle of human history we may be able to pull on a single Greek thread and follow it back, but by picking out only one civilization and its stories we might be thought of as taking liberties with the true source of universal myth. Early human beings the world over wondered at the sources of power that fuelled volcanoes, thunderstorms, tidal waves and earthquakes. They celebrated and venerated the rhythm of the seasons, the procession of heavenly bodies in the night sky and the daily miracle of the sunrise. They

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questioned how it might all have started. The collective unconscious of many civilizations has told stories of angry gods, dying and renewing gods, fertility goddesses, deities, demons and spirits of fire, earth and water.

Of course the Greeks were not the only people to weave a tapestry of legends and lore out of the puzzling fabric of existence. The gods of Greece, if we are archaeological and palaeoanthropological about it all, can be traced back to the sky fathers, moon goddesses and demons of the 'fertile crescent' of Mesopotamia – today's Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Babylonians, Sumerians, Akkadians and other civilizations there, which first flourished far earlier than the Greeks, had their creation stories and folk myths which, like the languages that expressed them, could find ancestry in India and thence westwards back to prehistory, Africa and the birth of our species.

But whenever we tell any story we have to snip the narrative string somewhere in order to make a starting point. It is easy to do this with Greek mythology because it has survived with a detail, richness, life and colour that distinguish it from other mythologies. It was captured and preserved by the very first poets and has come down to us in an unbroken line from almost the beginning of writing to the present day. While Greek myths have much in common with Chinese, Iranian, Indian, Maya, African, Russian, Native American, Hebrew and Norse myths, they are uniquely – as the writer and mythographer Edith Hamilton put it – 'the creation of great poets'. The Greeks were the first people to make coherent narratives, a literature even, of their gods, monsters and heroes.

The arc of the Greek myths follows the rise of mankind, our battle to free ourselves from the interference of the gods – their abuse, their meddling, their tyranny over human

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life and civilization. Greeks did not grovel before their gods. They were aware of their vain need to be supplicated and venerated, but they believed men were their equal. Their myths understand that whoever created this baffling world, with its cruelties, wonders, caprices, beauties, madness and injustice, must themselves have been cruel, wonderful, capricious, beautiful, mad and unjust. The Greeks created gods that were in their image: warlike but creative, wise but ferocious, loving but jealous, tender but brutal, compassionate but vengeful.

Mythos begins at the beginning, but it does not end at the end. Had I included heroes like Oedipus, Perseus, Theseus, Jason and Herakles and the details of the Trojan War this book would have been too heavy even for a Titan to pick up. Moreover, I am only concerned with *telling* the stories, not with explaining them or investigating the human truths and psychological insights that may lie behind them. The myths are fascinating enough in all their disturbing, surprising, romantic, comic, tragic, violent and enchanting detail to stand on their own as stories. If, as you read, you cannot help wondering what inspired the Greeks to invent a world so rich and elaborate in character and incident, and you find yourself pondering the deep truths that the myths embody – well, that is certainly part of the pleasure.

And pleasure is what immersing yourself in the world of Greek myth is all about.

Stephen Fry

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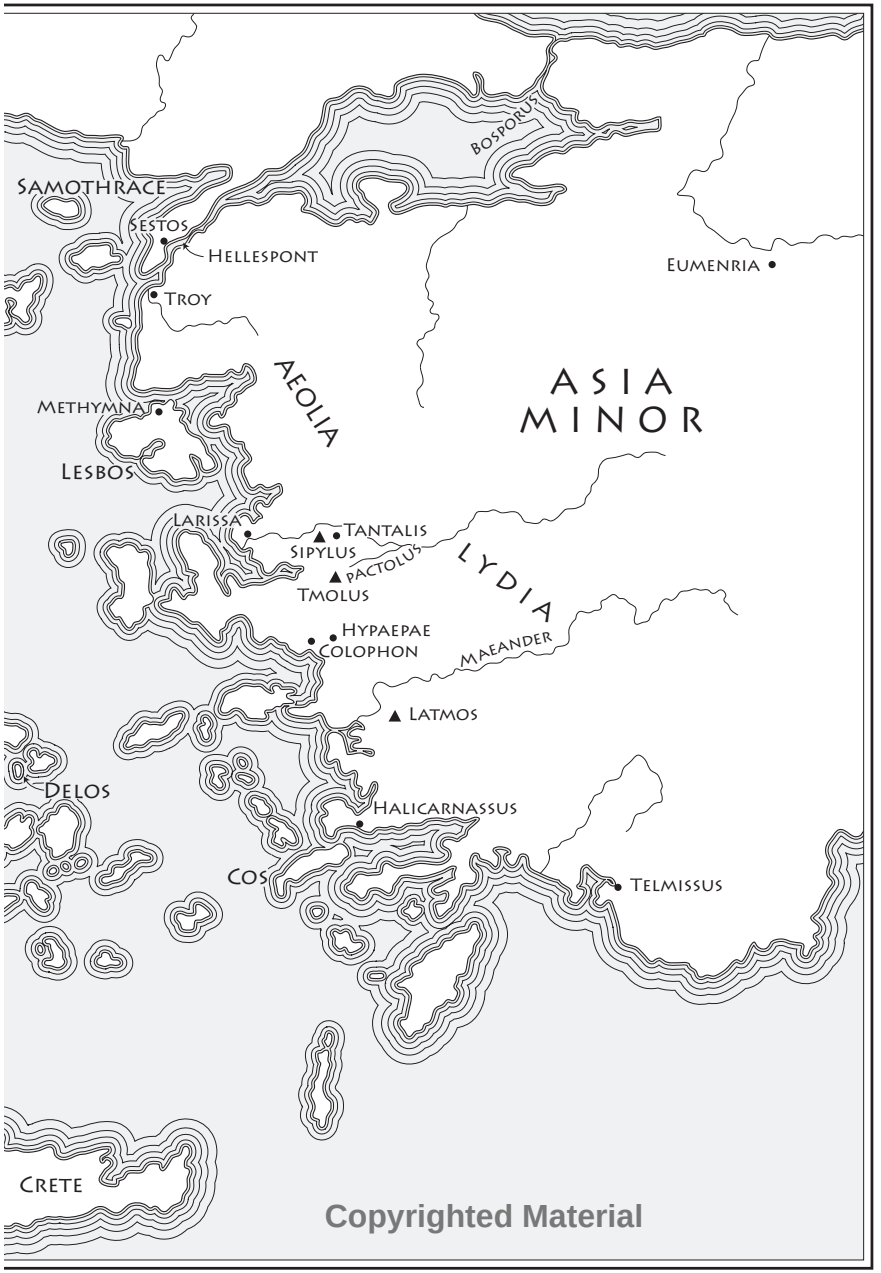

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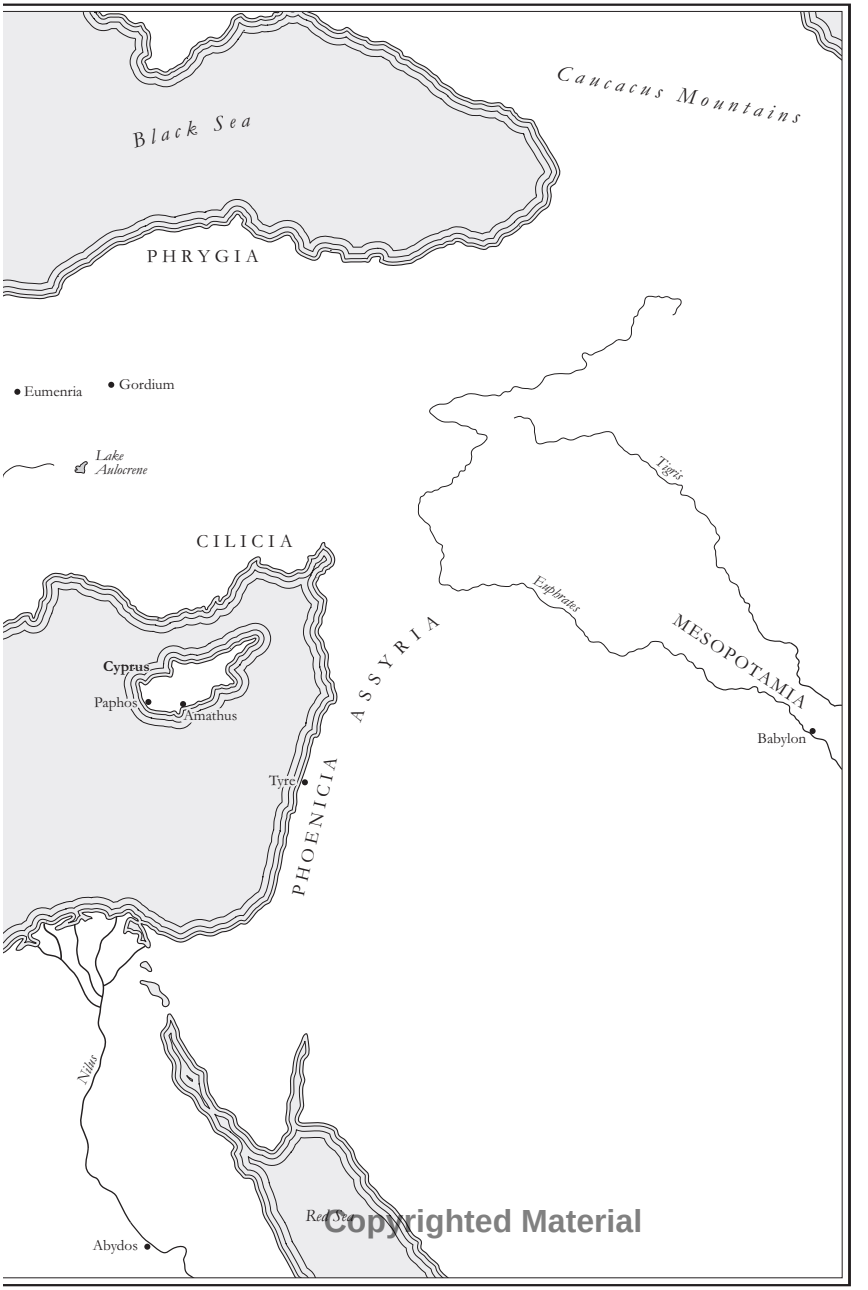

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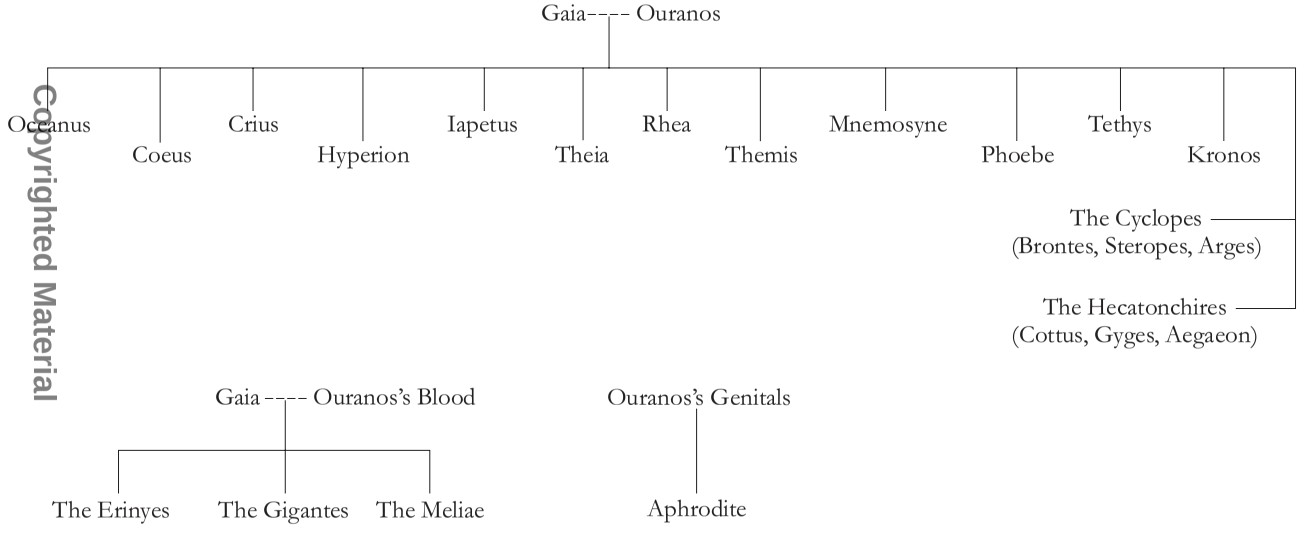
The Second Order



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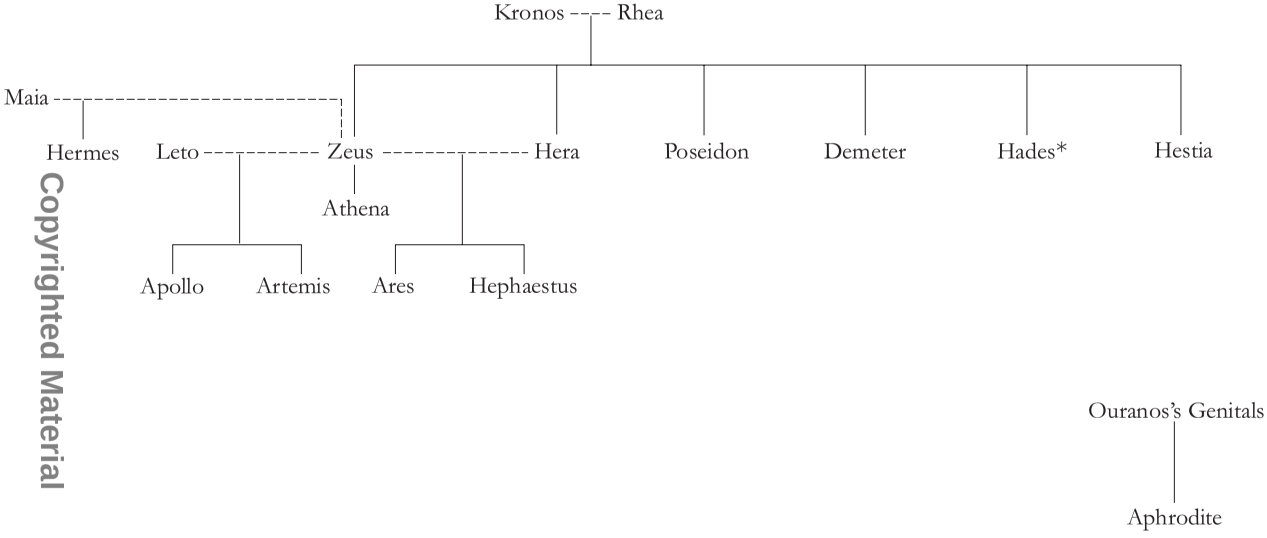

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**Hades is not technically an Olympian, as he spent all of his time in the underworld.*

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The Beginning

part one

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OUT OF CHAOS

These days the origin of the universe is explained by proposing a Big Bang, a single event that instantly brought into being all the matter from which everything and everyone are made.

The ancient Greeks had a different idea. They said that it all started not with a bang, but with CHAOS.

Was Chaos a god – a divine being – or simply a state of nothingness? Or was Chaos, just as we would use the word today, a kind of terrible mess, like a teenager's bedroom only worse?

Think of Chaos perhaps as a kind of grand cosmic yawn. As in a yawning chasm or a yawning void.

Whether Chaos brought life and substance out of nothing or whether Chaos yawned life up or dreamed it up, or conjured it up in some other way I don't know. I wasn't there. Nor were you. And yet in a way we were, because all the bits that make us were there. It is enough to say that the Greeks thought it was Chaos who, with a massive heave, or a great shrug, or hiccup, vomit or cough, began the long chain of creation that has ended with pelicans and penicillin and toadstools and toads, sea-lions, seals, lions, human beings and daffodils and murder and art and love and confusion and death and madness and biscuits.

Whatever the truth, science today agrees that everything is destined to *return* to Chaos. It calls this inevitable fate *entropy*: part of the great cycle from Chaos to order and back again to Chaos. Your trousers began as chaotic atoms that

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somehow coalesced into matter that ordered itself over aeons into a living substance that slowly evolved into a cotton plant that was woven into the handsome stuff that sheathes your lovely legs. In time you will abandon your trousers – not now, I hope – and they will rot down in a landfill or be burned. In either case their matter will at length be set free to become part of the atmosphere of the planet. And when the sun explodes and takes every particle of this world with it, including the ingredients of your trousers, all the constituent atoms will return to cold Chaos. And what is true for your trousers is of course true for you.

So the Chaos that began everything is also the Chaos that will end everything.

Now, you might be the kind of person who asks, 'But who or what was there *before* Chaos?' or 'Who or what was there before the Big Bang? There must have been *something*.'

Well, there wasn't. We have to accept that there was no 'before', because there was no Time yet. No one had pressed the start button on Time. No one had shouted *Now*! And since Time had yet to be created, time words like 'before', 'during', 'when', 'then', 'after lunch' and 'last Wednesday' had no possible meaning. It screws with the head, but there it is.

The Greek word for 'everything that is the case', what we could call 'the universe', is COSMOS. And at the moment – although 'moment' is a time word and makes no sense just now (neither does the phrase 'just now') – at the moment, Cosmos is Chaos and only Chaos because Chaos is the only thing that is the case. A stretching, a tuning up of the orchestra . . .

But things are about to change very quickly.

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THE FIRST ORDER

From formless Chaos sprang two creations: EREBUS and NYX. Erebus, he was darkness, and Nyx, she was night. They coupled at once and the flashing fruits of their union were HEMERA, day, and AETHER, light.

At the same time – because everything must happen simultaneously until Time is there to separate events – Chaos brought forth two more entities: GAIA, the earth, and TARTARUS, the depths and caves beneath the earth.

I can guess what you might be thinking. These creations sound charming enough – Day, Night, Light, Depths and Caves. But these were not gods and goddesses, they were not even personalities. And it may have struck you also that since there was no time there could be no dramatic narrative, no stories; for stories depend on Once Upon a Time and What Happened Next.

You would be right to think this. What first emerged from Chaos were primal, elemental principles that were devoid of any real colour, character or interest. These were the PRIMORDIAL DEITIES, the First Order of divine beings from whom all the gods, heroes and monsters of Greek myth spring. They brooded over and lay beneath everything . . . waiting.

The silent emptiness of this world was filled when Gaia bore two sons all on her own.* The first was PONTUS, the

* This trick of virgin birth, or *parthenogenesis*, can be found in nature still. In aphids, some lizards and even sharks it is a reasonably common way to have young. There won't be the variation that two sets of genes allow; this is the same in the genesis of the Greek gods. The interesting ones are all the fruit of two parents, not one.

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sea, and the second was OURANOS, the sky – better known to us as Uranus, the sound of whose name has ever been the cause of great delight to children from nine to ninety. Hemera and Aether bred too, and from their union came THALASSA, the female counterpart of Pontus the sea.

Ouranos, who preferred to pronounce himself Ooranoss, *was* the sky and the heavens in the way that – at the very beginning – the primordial deities always *were* the things they represented and ruled over.* You could say that Gaia was the earth of hills, valleys, caves and mountains yet capable of gathering herself into a form that could walk and talk. The clouds of Ouranos the sky rolled and seethed above her but they too could coalesce into a shape we might recognize. It was so early on in the life of everything. Very little was settled.

* Indeed *ouranos* is the Greek word for 'sky' to this very day.

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THE SECOND ORDER

Ouranos the sky covered his mother Gaia the earth everywhere. He covered Gaia in both senses: he covered her as the sky still covers the earth to this day and he covered her as a stallion covers a mare. When he did so, something remarkable happened. *Time began*.

Something else began too – what shall we call it? Personality? Drama? Individuality? Character, with all its flaws and failings, fashions and passions, schemes and dreams. *Meaning* began, you might say. The seeding of Gaia gave us meaning, a germination of thought into shape. Seminal semantic semiology from the semen of the sky. I will leave such speculation to those better qualified, but it was nevertheless a great moment. In the creation of and conjoining with Ouranos, her son and now her husband, Gaia unwound the ribbon of life that runs all the way to human history and our own very selves, yours and mine.

Right from the start, the union of Ouranos and Gaia was gratifyingly productive. Twelve robust, healthy children came first – six male, six female. The males were OCEANUS, COEUS, CRIUS, HYPERION, IAPETUS and KRONOS. The females, THEIA, THEMIS, MNEMOSYNE, PHOEBE, TETHYS and RHEA. These twelve were destined to become the Second Order of divine beings, earning themselves a legendary name.

And somewhere, as Time crept into being the clock began, the clock of cosmic history that still ticks today. Perhaps one of these newborns was responsible, we can look into that later.

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Not content with these twelve strong beautiful brothers and sisters, Ouranos and Gaia gave the world yet more progeny – two distinctive, but distinctly *not* beautiful, sets of triplets. The three CYCLOPES came first, one-eyed giants who gave their father sky a whole new range of expressions and modulations. The eldest cyclops was called BRONTES, thunder,* next came STEROPES, the lightning, and then ARGES, brightness. Ouranos could fill the heavens with flashes of lightning and crashing thunder. He gloried in the noise and spectacle. But the second set of triplets Gaia bore sent even greater shudders through him and all who saw them.

Perhaps it is kindest to say that they were a mutational experiment never to be repeated, a genetic dead end. For these newborns – the HECATONCHIRES† – each had fifty heads and a hundred hands and were as hideous, fierce, violent and powerful as anything that had yet been released into being. Their names were COTTUS the furious, GYGES the long-limbed and AEGAEON the sea goat, sometimes also called BRIAREOS the vigorous one. Gaia loved them. Ouranos was revolted by them. Maybe he was most horrified by the thought that he, Lord of the Sky, could have fathered such strange and ugly things, but I think that like most hatred his revulsion was rooted in fear.

Filled with disgust, he cursed them: 'For offending my eyes, you shall never see light again!' As he roared these furious words, he pushed them and the Cyclopes back into Gaia's womb.

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* The brontosaurus or 'thunder lizard' got his name from Brontes. The novelist sisters from Yorkshire *may* have too. Their father was born 'Brunty' but changed it to Brontë, perhaps to lend a grand peal of classical thunder to his Irish name, perhaps in honour of Admiral Nelson who had been made Duke of Brontë – the dukedom was located on the slopes of Etna and is believed to have derived its name from the Cyclops slumbering beneath.

† Pronounced heck-a-ton *key*-rays – the *hecaton* means 'hundred' and the *chires* 'hands' (as in 'chiropractor').

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We have good cause to wonder here what 'he pushed them into Gaia's womb' really means. Some people have taken it to indicate that he buried the Hecatonchires in the earth. Divine identity at this early time was fluid, how much a god was a person and how much an attribute is hard to determine. There were no capital letters then. Gaia the Earth Mother was the same as *gaia*, the earth itself, just as *ouranos*, the sky, and Ouranos the Sky Father were one and the same.

What is certain is that in reacting like this to the three Hecatonchires, his own children, and in treating his wife with such abominable cruelty, Ouranos was committing the first crime. An elemental crime that would not go unpunished.

Gaia's agony was unbearable and inside her, alongside the trio of writhing, flailing three-hundred-handed clawing and a hundred-and-fifty-headed butting Hecatonchires, there sprang up a hatred, a most terrible and implacable hatred against Ouranos, the son she had borne and the husband with whom she had given birth to a new generation. And, like ivy twisting round a tree, there grew a plan of revenge.

The piercing pain of the Hecatonchires still gnawing at her, Gaia visited Othrys, a great mountain that looks down over what we now call the central Greek region of Phthiotis. From its peak you can see the plain of Magnesia reaching down to the blue waters of the western Aegean as they curl round the Malian Gulf and embrace the sporadic scattering of islands called the Sporades. But Gaia was consumed with too much pain and too much fury to enjoy one of the world's most charming views. On the summit of Mount Othrys she set to work fashioning a most unusual and terrible artefact from its rock. For nine days and nights she laboured until

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she had produced an object which she then hid in the cleft of the mountain.

Next she took herself off to visit her twelve beautiful, strong children.

'Will you kill your father Ouranos and rule the cosmos with me?' she asked each in turn. 'You will inherit the sky from him and together all of creation will be our dominion.'

Perhaps we imagine that Gaia – Mother Earth – is soft, warm, bountiful and kind. Well, sometimes she is, but remember that she banks down fire inside. Sometimes she can be crueller, harsher and more terrifying than even the wildest sea.

And talking of the marine world, the first of the children that Gaia tried to win to her side were Oceanus and his sister Tethys.* But they were in the middle of negotiating a share of the oceans with Thalassa, the primordial goddess of the sea. All of this generation were stretching and flexing their muscles at this time, establishing their areas of expertise and control, nipping, growling and testing each other's strength and dominance like puppies in a basket. Oceanus had conceived the idea of creating tides and currents, which were to run like a great salt river around the world. Tethys was about to have his baby – no sin in those early days of course: propagation would not have been possible without incestuous couplings. She was pregnant with NILUS, the Nile, and would go on to give birth to other rivers and to at least three thousand Oceanids or sea nymphs, attractive deities who moved as easily on dry land as in the waters of the sea. They already had two fully grown daughters: CLYMENE, who was the lover of Iapetus, and the clever and wise METIS, who is due

* 'Tethys' is also the name palaeontologists give to the great ancient sea that was an ancestor of the Mediterranean.

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to play a very important part in what is to come.* The pair were happy and looking forward to life on the ocean wave, so neither saw any reason to help kill their father Ouranos.

Next Gaia visited her daughter Mnemosyne, who was busy being unpronounceable. She seemed a very shallow, silly and ignorant being, who knew nothing and appeared to understand less. This was deceptive, for each day that passed she got smarter and smarter, more and more well informed and more and more capable. Her name means 'memory' (giving us the word 'mnemonic'). At the time of her mother's visit, the world and the cosmos were very young, so Mnemosyne had had no opportunity to prime herself with knowledge or experience. As the years passed, her endless capacity for the storage of information and sensory experience would make her wiser than almost anyone. One day she would mother nine daughters, the MUSES, whom we shall meet later.

'You want me to help you kill Ouranos? Surely the Sky Father cannot die?'

'Dethrone or disable him, then . . . it is no more than he deserves.'

'I will not help you.'

'Why not?'

'There is a reason and when I know it I will remember it and tell you.'

Exasperated, Gaia went next to Theia, who was also paired off in another sibling union, to her brother Hyperion.

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* Since there were perhaps three thousand Oceanids it would be fruitless to list them, even if all their names were known. But it is worth introducing CALYPSO, AMPHITRITE and the dark and fearful STYX who – like her brother Nilus – was to become the deity of a very significant river. One more Oceanid merits a mention, but only because of her name – DORIS. Doris the Oceanid. She went on to marry the sea god NEREUS and by him mother many NEREIDS, friendly nymphs of the sea.

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In due course she would give birth to HELIOS the sun, SELENE the moon and EOS the dawn, quite enough parenting to be getting on with, so they too showed no interest in Gaia's plans to depose Ouranos.

Despairing at her pallid and unadventurous brood's refusal to live up to what she imagined to be their divine destinies – not to mention repulsed by how loved up and domesticated they all appeared to be – Gaia next tried Phoebe, perhaps the most intelligent and insightful of the twelve. From the earliest age shining Phoebe had shown that she possessed the gift of prophecy.

'Oh no, Mother Earth,' she said, when she had heard Gaia's plan. 'I could take no part in such a plot. I see no good coming from it. Besides, I'm pregnant . . .'

'Damn you,' snapped Gaia. 'Who by? Coeus, I bet.'

She was right, Phoebe's brother Coeus was indeed her consort. Gaia stormed off with renewed fury to visit her remaining offspring. Surely one of them had the stomach for a fight?

She called on Themis, who would one day be regarded everywhere as the embodiment of justice and wise counsel,* and Themis wisely counselled her mother to forget the unjust idea of usurping Ouranos. Gaia listened carefully to this wise counsel and – as we all do, whether mortal or immortal – ignored it, choosing instead to try the mettle of her son Crius, who consorted with her daughter by Pontus, EURYBIA.

'Kill my father?' Crius stared at his mother in disbelief. 'B-but how . . . I mean . . . why? . . . I mean . . . oh.'

'What's in it for us, mother?' asked Eurybia, who was known as 'the flint-hearted'.

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* Themis later became a personification of law, justice, custom – *mores*, the rules that govern how manners and things are or should be.

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'Oh, just the world and all that's in it,' said Gaia.

'To share with you?'

'To share with me.'

'No!' said Crius. 'Leave, mother.'

'It's worth considering,' said Eurybia.

'It's too dangerous,' said Crius. 'I forbid it.'

Gaia turned with a snarl and sought out her son Iapetus.

'Iapetus, beloved boy. Destroy the monster Ouranos and rule with me!'

The Oceanid Clymene, who had borne Iapetus two sons and was pregnant with another, stepped forward. 'What mother could ask such a thing? For a son to kill his own father would be the most terrible crime. All Cosmos would cry out.'

'I must agree, mother,' said Iapetus.

'A curse on you and a curse on your children!' spat Gaia.

A mother's curse is a terrible thing. We shall see how the children of Iapetus and Clymene, ATLAS, EPIMETHEUS and PROMETHEUS, met their ends.

Rhea, the eleventh of Gaia's children to be asked, said that she would have no part in the plan, but – throwing up her hands to stop a savage torrent of abuse from her mother – suggested that her brother Kronos, the last of these strong beautiful children, might very well like the idea of deposing his father. She, Rhea, had heard him many times cursing Ouranos and his power.

'Really?' cried Gaia. 'You say so? Well, where is he?'

'He's probably mooching around down by the caves of Tartarus. He and Tartarus get on so well. They're both dark. Moody. Mean. Magnificent. Cruel.'

'Oh god, don't tell me you're in love with Kronos . . .'

'Put in a good word for me, mummy, please! He's just so dreamy. Those black flashing eyes. The thunderous brows. The long silences.' Copyrighted Material

Gaia had always thought that her youngest's long silences indicated nothing more than dullness of intellect, but she sensibly refrained from saying so. After assuring Rhea that she would of course recommend her warmly to Kronos, Gaia sped down, down, down to the caves of Tartarus to find him.

If you were to drop a bronze anvil from the heavens it would take nine days to reach the earth. If you were to drop that anvil from the earth it would take another nine days to reach Tartarus. In other words the earth is halfway between the sky and Tartarus. Or you might say Tartarus is as far from the ground as the ground is from the sky. A very deep, abysmal place then, but more than just a place. Remember Tartarus was a primordial being too, who was born out of Chaos at the same time as Gaia. So when she approached him, they greeted each other as family members will.

'Gaia, you've put on weight.'

'You look a mess, Tartarus.'

'What the hell do you want down here?'

'Shut up for once and I'll tell you . . .'

These testy exchanges won't stop them, at a future date, from mating and producing TYPHON – the worst and deadliest of all the monsters.* But just now Gaia is in no mood for love or for trading insults.

'Listen. My son Kronos – is he nearby?'

A resigned groan from her brother.

'Almost certainly. I wish you'd tell him to leave me alone. He does nothing all day but hang around looking at me with his eyes drooping and his mouth open. I think

* Typhon gave us typhus, typhoid and the deadly tropical storm, the typhoon. Later we will meet two of Typhon's repulsive offspring by a half woman, half water snake, called ECHIDNA.

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he's got some kind of man-crush on me. He copies my hairstyle and leans limply against trees and boulders looking miserable, melancholy and misunderstood. As if he's waiting for someone to paint him or something. When he's not gazing at me he's staring down into that lava vent over there. In fact there he is now, look. Try and talk some sense into him.'

Gaia approached her son.

The Sickle

Now, Kronos (or Cronus as he sometimes styled himself) was not quite the pained and vulnerable emo-like youth that Rhea's and Tartarus's descriptions may have led us to picture, for he was the strongest of an unimaginably strong race. He was darkly handsome, certainly; and yes, he was moody. Had Kronos the examples to go by, he would perhaps have identified with Hamlet at his most introspective, or Jaques at his most self-indulgently morbid. Konstantin from *The Seagull* with a suggestion of Morrissey. Yet there was something of a Macbeth in him too and more than a little Hannibal Lecter – as we shall see.

Kronos had been the first to discover that brooding silence is often taken to indicate strength, wisdom and command. The youngest of the twelve, he had always hated his father. The deep and piercing venom of envy and resentment was beginning to unravel his sanity, but he had managed to hide the intensity of his hatred from all but his adoring sister Rhea, who was the only member of his family with whom he felt comfortable enough to reveal his true self.

As they made their way up from Tartarus, Gaia poured more poison into his receptive ear.

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'Ouranos is cruel. He is insane. I fear for myself and for all of you, my beloved children. Come boy, come.'

She was leading him to Mount Othrys. You recall the strange and terrible artefact that I told you she had wrought and hidden in the cleft of the mountain before she went visiting each of her children? Gaia now took Kronos to that place and showed him what she had made.

'Pick it up. Go on.'

Kronos's black eyes glittered as they took in the shape and meaning of this most strange object.

It was a sickle. An enormous scythe whose great curved blade had been forged from adamantine, which means 'untameable'. A massive aggregate of grey flint, granite, diamond and ophiolite, its half-moon blade had been refined to the sharpest edge. An edge that could cut through anything.

Kronos plucked it from its hiding place just as easily as you or I would pick up a pencil. After feeling the balance and heft of it in his hand, he swung it once, twice. The powerful swish as it whipped through the air made Gaia smile.

'Kronos, my son,' she said, 'we must bide our time until Hemera and Aether dive into the waters of the west and Erebus and Nyx prepare to cast the dark –'

'You mean we must wait until evening.' Kronos was impatient and quite lacking in poetry or finer feeling.

'Yes. Eventide. That is when your father will come to me, as he always does. He likes to –'

Kronos nodded curtly. He did not wish to know the details of his parents' love-making.

'Hide there, in that very cleft where I hid the sickle. When you hear him covering me, and he grows loud in his roars of passion and groans of lust – strike.'

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As Gaia predicted, Hemera and Aether were tired after twelve hours of playing and slowly Day and Light slipped down westwards into the sea. At the same time, Nyx slipped off her dark veil and she and Erebus threw it over the world like a shimmering black tablecloth.

As Kronos waited in the cleft, sickle in hand, all creation held its breath. I say 'all creation', for Ouranos and Gaia and their offspring were not the only beings to have reproduced. Others had multiplied and propagated too, with Erebus and Nyx the most productive by far. They had many children, some terrible, some admirable and some lovely. We have already seen how they gave birth to Hemera and Aether. But then Nyx, without Erebus's help, gave birth to MOROS, or Doom, who was to become the most feared entity in creation. Doom comes to every creature, mortal or immortal, but is always hidden. Even the immortals feared Doom's all-powerful, all-knowing control over the cosmos.

After Moros came a great rush of offspring, one after the other, like a monstrous airborne invasion. First came APATE, Deceit, whom the Romans called FRAUS (from whom we derive the words 'fraud', fraudulent' and 'fraudster'). She scuttled off to Crete where she bided her time. GERAS, Old Age, was born next; not necessarily so fearful a demon as we might think today. While Geras might take away suppleness, youth and agility, for the Greeks he more than made up for it by conferring dignity, wisdom and authority. SENECTUS is his Roman name, a word that shares the same root as 'senior', 'senate' and 'senile'.

A pair of perfectly ghastly twins were next: OIZYS

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(MISERIA in Latin) the spirit of Misery, Depression and Anxiety, and her cruel brother MOMOS, the spiteful personification of Mockery, Scorn and Blame.*

Nyx and Erebus were just getting into their stride. Their next child, ERIS (DISCORDIA), Strife, lay behind all disagreements, divorces, scraps, skirmishes, fights, battles and wars. It was her malicious wedding present, the legendary Apple of Discord, that brought about the Trojan War, though that epic clash of arms was a long, long way in the future. Strife's sister NEMESIS was the embodiment of Retribution, that remorseless strand of cosmic justice that punishes presumptuous, overreaching ambition – the vice that the Greeks called *hubris*. Nemesis has elements in common with the eastern idea of karma and we use her today to suggest the fateful retributive opposition the lofty and wicked will one day meet and which will bring them down. I suppose you could say Holmes was Moriarty's Nemesis, Bond was Blofeld's and Jerry was Tom's.†

Erebus and Nyx also gave birth to CHARON, whose infamy would grow once he took up his duties as ferryman for the dead. HYPNOS, the personification of Sleep, was born to them too. They were also the progenitor of the ONEROI – thousands of beings charged with the making and bringing of dreams to the sleeping. Amongst the Oneroi whose names are known to us were PHOBETOR, god of nightmares, and PHANTASOS, responsible for the fantastic manner in which one thing turns into another in dreams. They worked under the supervision of Hypnos's son MORPHEUS, whose name itself suggests the morphing, shifting shapes of the dream

* Momos (MOMUS to the Romans) would go on to be worshipped in a seriocomic literary way as the guiding spirit of Satire. Aesop incorporated him into some of his fables and he is the hero of a lost play by Sophocles.

† The Romans, perhaps confusingly, called Nemesis INVIDIA, which is also the Latin for 'envy'.

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world.* 'Morphine', 'fantasy', 'hypnotic', 'oneiromancy' (the interpretation of dreams) and many other verbal descendants of Greek sleep have survived into our language. Sleep's brother THANATOS, Death himself, gives us the word 'euthanasia', 'good death'. The Roman's called him MORS, of mortals, mortuaries and mortification.

These new beings were frightening and loathsome in the extreme. They left on creation a terrible but necessary mark, for the world seems never to offer anything worthwhile without also providing a dreadful opposite.

There were, however, three lovely exceptions:† three beautiful sisters, the HESPERIDES – nymphs of the west and daughters of the evening. They heralded the daily arrival of their mother and father, but with the soft gold of the gloaming rather than the dread black of night. Their time is what movie cameramen today call 'magic hour', when the light is at its most beguiling and beautiful.

These then were the offspring of Nyx and Erebus, who even now were shrouding the earth in the darkness of night as Gaia lay waiting for her husband for what she hoped would be the last time and Kronos lurked in the shadows of that recess in Mount Othrys, keeping a firm grip on his great scythe.

Ouranos Gelded

At last, Gaia and Kronos heard from the west the sound of a great stamping and shaking. The leaves on the trees

* Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* character, Dream, is also known as Morpheus, and formed the inspiration for the character Morpheus played by Laurence Fishburne in the Wachowskis' *Matrix* films.

† *Four* exceptions perhaps. Hypnos is not so bad after all. The longer you live, the fonder you become of him. And talking of living long – perhaps Geras isn't too awful either. So five.

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shivered. Kronos, standing silently in his hiding place, did not tremble. He was ready.

'Gaia!' roared Ouranos as he approached. 'Prepare yourself. Tonight we shall breed something better than hundred-handed mutants and one-eyed freaks . . .'

'Come to me, glorious son, divine husband!' called Gaia, with what Kronos thought a distastefully convincing show of eagerness.

The horrible sounds of a lustful deity slobbering, slapping and grunting suggested to him that his father was attempting some kind of foreplay.

In his alcove Kronos breathed in and out five times. Never for a second did he weigh the moral good of what he was about to do, his thoughts were only for tactics and timing. With a deep inhalation he raised the great sickle and stepped swiftly sideways from his hiding place.

Ouranos, who had been preparing to lie on top of Gaia, sprang to his feet with an angry snarl of surprise. Walking calmly forward, Kronos swung the scythe back and swept it down in a great arc. The blade, hissing through the air, sliced Ouranos's genitals clean from his body.

All Cosmos could hear Ouranos's maddened scream of pain, anguish and rage. Never in creation's short history had there been a sound so loud or so dreadful. All living things heard it and were afraid.

Kronos leapt forward with an obscene cry of triumph, catching the dripping trophy in his hands before it could reach the ground.

Ouranos fell writhing in immortal agony and howled out these words:

'Kronos, vilest of my brood and vilest in all creation. Worst of all beings, fouler than the ugly Cyclopes and the

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loathsome Hecatonchires, with these words I curse you. *May your children destroy you as you destroyed me.*'

Kronos looked down at Ouranos. His black eyes showed nothing, but his mouth curved into a dark smile.

'You have no power to curse, daddy. Your power is in my hands.'

He juggled before his father's eyes his grisly spoils of victory, burst and slimy with blood, oozing and slippery with seed. Laughing, he pulled back his arm and hurled the package of genitals far, far from sight. Across the plains of Greece they flew and out over the darkening sea. All three watched as Ouranos's organs of generation vanished from sight across the waters.

Kronos was surprised, when he turned to look at her, that his mother had covered her mouth in what appeared to be horror. Tears were leaking from Gaia's eyes.

He shrugged. As if she cared.

Erinyes, Gigantes and Meliae

Creation at this time, peopled as it was by primal deities whose whole energy and purpose seems to have been directed towards reproduction, was endowed with an astonishing fertility. The soil was blessed with such a fecund richness that one could almost believe that if you planted a pencil it would burst into flower. Where divine blood fell, life could not help but spring from the earth.

So no matter how murderous, cruel, rapacious and destructive the character of Ouranos, he had been the ruler of creation after all. For his son to have mutilated and emasculated him constituted a most terrible crime against Cosmos.

Perhaps what happened next is not so surprising.

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Great pools of blood formed around the scene of Ouranos's castration. From that blood, the blood which fell from the ruined groin of Ouranos, living beings emerged.

The first to push themselves out of the sodden ground were the ERINYES, whom we call the Furies, ALECTO (remorseless), MEGAERA (jealous rage) and TISIPHONE (vengeance). Perhaps it was an unconscious instinct of Ouranos that caused such vengeful beings to rise up. Their eternal duty, from the moment of their chthonic – or out-of-the-ground – birth, would be to punish the worst and most violent of crimes: relentlessly to chase the perpetrators and to rest only when the guilty had paid the full and dreadful price. Armed with cruel metallic scourges, the Furies flayed the very flesh from the bones of the guilty. The Greeks with characteristic irony nicknamed these female avengers the EUMENIDES or 'kindly ones'.

Next to rise from the soil were the GIGANTES. We have inherited 'giant', 'giga' and 'gigantic' from them, but while they were certainly possessed of prodigious strength, they were no greater in stature than their half-brothers and sisters.*

Finally, in that instant of pain and destruction were created also the MELIAE, graceful nymphs who were to become guardians of an ash tree whose bark exuded a sweet and healthful manna.†

As all these unexpected new beings emerged alive from the blood-soaked ground, Kronos stared at them in disgust and scattered them with a sweep of his scythe. Next he turned to Gaia.

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* Their names signify not their size but their chthonic origins – generated from the earth, 'Gaia-gen' if you will. Gaia's name, incidentally, became worn down to *Ge* in later Greek. She is still there in earth sciences like 'geology' and 'geography', not to mention the later environmental studies that have restored her full name – James Lovelock and his popular 'Gaia Hypothesis' being a prime example.

† The sugars of the 'manna ash', which still grows in southern Europe, give their name to today's sweetener Mannitol.

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'I promised you, Earth Mother,' he said, 'that I would release you from your gnawing agony – hold still.'

With another sweep of the scythe he sliced open Gaia's side. Out tumbled the Cyclopes and Hecatonchires. Kronos looked down at his parents, both of them now bloody, panting and snarling like angry wounded animals.

'No more shall you cover Gaia,' he said to his father. 'I banish you to live out eternity beneath the ground, buried deeper even than Tartarus. May you sulk there in your fury, gelded and powerless.'

'You have overreached yourself,' hissed Ouranos. 'There will be revenge. I curse your life, that it be ground out in slow remorseless perpetuity, its immortal eternity an insufferable burden without end. Your own children will destroy you as –'

'As I destroyed you. Yes, I know. You said. We'll see about that.'

'You and your brothers and sisters, I curse you all, your straining ambition will destroy you.'

The 'striving, straining one', or TITAN, is the title we reserve for Kronos, his eleven siblings and (much of) their progeny. Ouranos meant it as an insult, but somehow the name has resounded through the ages with a ring of grandeur. No one, to this very day, would be insulted to be called a Titan.

Kronos met these curses with a sneer and, corralling his mutilated father and newly freed mutant brothers at the point of his sickle, he led them down to Tartarus. The Hecatonchires and Cyclopes he imprisoned in the caves, but his father he buried even deeper, as far from his natural domain of the heavens as he could contrive.*

* At least the deposed Sky Father has the consolation of the planet Uranus named in his honour – it being the convention that the planets take the *Roman* names of the gods they represent.

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Brooding, simmering and raging in the ground, deep beneath the earth that once loved him, Ouranos compressed all his fury and divine energy into the very rock itself, hoping that one day some excavating creature somewhere would mine it and try to harness the immortal power that radiated from within. That could never happen, of course. It would be too dangerous. Surely the race has yet to be born that could be so foolish as to attempt to unleash the power of uranium?

From the Foam

We return now to the great arc in the heavens traced by Ouranos's severed gonads. Kronos had flung the Sky Father's junk, if you recall, far across the sea.

We can watch it now. Near the Ionian island of Cythera it drops, splashes, bounces, rises up again and finally falls and half sinks beneath the waves. Great ropes of semen trail in its wake like ribbons from a kite. Where they strike the surface of the sea a furious frothing is set up. Soon all the waters bubble and boil. Something arises. From the horrors of patricidal castration and unnatural ambition it must be – surely – something unimaginably ugly, something terrible, something violent, something appalling, that promises only war, blood and anguish?

The whirlpool of blood and seminal fluid foments, fizzes and foams. Out of the spindrift of surf and seed emerges the crown of a head, then a brow and then a face. But what kind of face?

A face far more beautiful than creation has yet seen or will ever see again. Not just someone beautiful but Beauty itself rises fully formed from the foam. In Greek 'from the foam'

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can be rendered as something like APHRODITE, and this is the name of the one who now lifts herself from the spume and spray. She stands on a large scallop shell, a demure and gentle smile playing on her lips. Slowly she alights onto a beach on Cyprus. Where she steps flowers bloom and clouds of butterflies arise. Around her head birds fly in circles, singing in ecstasies of joy. Perfect Love and Beauty has made her landfall and the world will never be the same.

The Romans called her VENUS, and her birth and arrival on the sands of Cyprus on the scallop shell were never better portrayed than in Botticelli's exquisite painting, which once seen is never forgotten.

We leave Aphrodite making her home on Cyprus and return to Kronos, who is on his way back from the dark caves of Tartarus.

Rhea

When he arrived on Mount Othrys, Kronos found his sister Rhea waiting for him. The sight of her darkly handsome brother, a huge sickle dripping blood in his hand, thrilled her to the point of internal explosion.

His authority was established: none of his brother or sister Titans dared question him.* His father was powerless and Gaia, who found she could take no joy in the violent overthrow she had set in motion, withdrew into her realm and into a more passive existence. She never lost her strength, authority or high status as Mother Earth and ancestress of all, but she no longer ventured forth to interact or conjoin. Kronos was the master now. After a great feast in which his

* The females of the race can be called "Titanesses".

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achievement in unmanning and unseating Ouranos was roaringly and most unmusically sung, Kronos turned to the blushing, trembling Rhea and pulled her aside to make love to her.

Rhea's joy was complete. She had played her part in helping the brother she adored achieve mastery of all creation. And now they were united. More than that, in the fullness of time she began to feel a child moving inside her. A baby girl, she felt sure. Her happiness was unclouded.

Kronos, on the other hand . . . His already dour disposition was darkened by something else. The words of his father Ouranos began to echo in his head:

Your own children will overthrow you as you overthrew me.

Over the coming weeks and months Kronos watched with sullen foreboding as Rhea's belly filled and swelled.

Your own children . . . your own children . . .

When the day came for her confinement, Rhea laid herself down in an alcove in the mountain – the same recess in the rocks, in fact, where Gaia had concealed the scythe and Kronos had hidden. Here she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl whom she named HESTIA.

The name was hardly out of Rhea's mouth before Kronos stepped forward, snatched the child from her arms and swallowed it whole. He turned and departed without so much as a hiccup, leaving Rhea white with shock.

The Children of Rhea

Kronos was now lord of earth, sea and sky, with the scythe the symbol of his authority. His sceptre. The earth he took from Gaia, the sky from Ouranos. With threats of violence he wrested dominion over the sea from Pontus and Thalassa

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and from his siblings Oceanus and Tethys. He trusted no one and ruled alone.

Still Kronos continued to take his pleasure with Rhea and still she consented, loving him hopelessly and trusting that the monstrous eating of their firstborn had been some sort of aberration.

It was not. Their next child, a boy she called HADES, was devoured in just the same manner. And then another baby girl, DEMETER. Next was POSEIDON, a second boy, and finally a third girl, HERA. All of them swallowed whole with as much ease as you and I might gulp down an oyster or a spoonful of jelly.

By the time Kronos consumed Hera, Rhea's fifth pregnancy, her love for Kronos had turned to hate. That same night he seized her and made love to her again. She swore to herself that if she became pregnant he would never take her sixth child. But how could she prevent him? He was all powerful.

One morning she arose and felt the familiar nausea. She was pregnant. Her divine instincts told her that her sixth was to be a boy.

She left Othrys and took herself off in search of her mother and father. For all that she had contributed to their downfall she retained a daughter's trust in their wisdom and good will. She knew too that their fury at her part in their ruin was as nothing to their undying hatred of Kronos.

For three days her calls to Gaia and Ouranos rang round the hills and caves of the world.

'Earth Mother, Sky Father, hear your daughter and come to her aid! The son who cut you and cast you out has become the foulest of ogres, the most depraved and unnatural creature in all the world. Five of your grandchildren has he eaten. I have one more baby inside me, ready to come into

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the world. Teach me how to save him. Teach me, I beg, and I will raise him to revere you always.'

A deep and terrible rumbling was heard far below. The ground shook beneath Rhea's feet. The voice of Ouranos came roaring into her ears, but within it she heard too the calmer tones of her mother.

Together the three of them hatched a marvellous plan.

The Switch

In order to set this marvellous plan in motion Rhea went to Crete to confer with a she-goat named AMALTHEA. Also living on the island were the Meliae, nymphs of the manna-bearing ash tree. If you remember, they had sprung from the soil soaked by Ouranos's blood, along with the Furies and the Giants. After an encouraging conversation with Amalthea, Rhea conferred with these mild and sweet-natured nymphs. Satisfied that the things she needed to achieve on Crete could be achieved, she returned to Mount Othrys to prepare for her time.

Kronos had seen by now that his wife was expecting and he readied himself for the happy day when he could consume the sixth of his children. He was taking no chances. The prophecy of Ouranos still rang in his ears and the superstitious pangs of paranoia that ravage all despotic usurpers grew fiercer in this ur-Stalin each day.

Gaia had told Rhea about a certain stone – an object of perfect magnetite just the right size for their purposes, smooth and shaped like a bean – which could be found in the hills not far from Mount Othrys itself.*

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* In fact the area of central Greece where Mount Othrys stands is called Magnesia to this day: it gave its name to magnesium, magnets and, of course, magnetite. Manganese too, through a spelling mistake.

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In the mornings Kronos liked to stride from one end of Greece to the other visiting each of his Titan brothers and sisters, outwardly to consult with them, in truth to make sure that they were not plotting against him. At the time she knew he would be on the seashore, visiting Oceanus and Tethys, Rhea went to the place that Gaia had described, found the stone and took it home to Mount Othrys, where she swaddled it in linen. The plan was coming together.

One afternoon not long afterwards, with Kronos near enough to hear her but far enough away to take some time to arrive, Rhea began to scream the screams of childbirth. Louder and louder came her agonized howls, tearing the fabric of the air until, after a sudden silence, they were replaced by the best impression she could give of a baby's first gasping cries.

Sure enough, Kronos approached. His shadow fell over Rhea.

'Give me the child,' he said.

'Dread lord and husband –' Rhea cast him an imploring look. 'Will you not let me keep this one? Look at him, so sweet, so innocent. So harmless.'

With a rough laugh Kronos snatched the tightly wrapped baby from Rhea's cradling arms and bolted it down in one great gulp, swaddling linen and all. Down it went like the others, never touching the sides. Punching his breastbone once, then twice, Kronos gave a loud belch and left his tormented wife to her grief-stricken sobs.

The moment he had gone, the sobs turned to hysterical, barely suppressed chokes and screams. Chokes and screams of laughter.

Catching her breath and rising from her bed Rhea slipped down the mountainside and made her way to Crete, travelling as fast as anyone could in so heavily pregnant a state.

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