

Cupid and His Arrows

ORIGINS

Known as Eros to the Greeks, and Cupido or Amor to the Romans, Cupid figures as an instigator of many of the trials both mortals and gods face in classical mythology. His origins vary depending on the storyteller. Some poets claimed he was one of the first gods, born of Chaos, because love is one of the

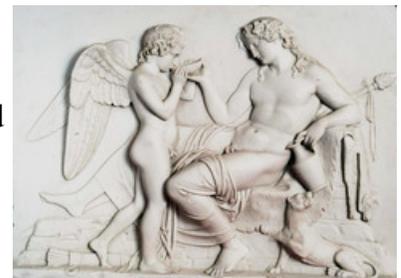


"Diana and Cupid," Pompeo Batoni, 1761

strongest and most powerful forces in man's nature. The more prevalent belief was that he was the son of Venus (Aphrodite), the goddess of beauty and desire, since beauty and desire breed love. He was Venus' almost constant companion in both the Greek and Roman tradition, often used by Venus as an instrument to carry out her whims. One legend tells of how Venus complained to the goddess Themis that Cupid remained always small and weak. Themis said it was because Cupid was alone and had no sibling to make him grow stronger. Venus soon gave birth to Anteros, the God of mutual love, and almost immediately Cupid was seen to increase in size and strength, since love cannot grow without reciprocation.

WEAPONS OF LOVE

Cupid is one of the most powerful figures in mythology because of his famed bow and arrows that were capable of wounding both mortals and gods. The Roman writer Ovid describes Cupid as having two kinds of arrows, which he could reproduce at will. The first, tipped with gold and dipped in honey, made its target fall in love. The second, lead-coated with poisoned tips, caused revulsion in whomever it wounded. Rather than dispense his arrows responsibly, however, he was known to be unsympathetic and careless in inflicting the agonies of love on his unsuspecting victims, often for his own amusement or in revenge. One



Cupid and Dionysus

legend even suggests that Cupid used blood to wet the grindstone on which he sharpened his arrows. It is said that he loved nothing more than tricking men into exposing themselves to his arrows and often partnered with Dionysus (Bacchus), the god of wine and revelry, hiding in men's goblets of wine to more easily wound them as they drank. Mischievous and often thoughtless, he often had to be punished for the havoc he wreaked on gods and men, and this punishment often came in the form of destroying or hiding his thousands of arrows. However, as the story of *Las Nuevas Armas de Amor* shows, Cupid could be spiteful towards those who attempted to separate him from his weapons of love.

CUPID AND PSYCHE

Though Cupid played an important role in classical mythology, there are few ancient myths that feature him as a protagonist. The exception to this is the story of Psyche, a beautiful mortal whom Cupid secretly marries after she incurs the wrath of Venus. When her own curiosity leads Psyche to discover



Cupid and Psyche

her husband's true identity, Cupid is lost to her, and she must attempt a series of impossible tasks before the gods take pity on her. Only after Psyche has suffered can Cupid convince Jupiter (Zeus) to intervene on her behalf and win Venus' approval of the match. Psyche is granted immortality, and Cupid and his bride are reunited for eternity, eventually bearing a daughter named Pleasure. The story of Psyche, like so many legends that feature Cupid, is allegorical. Psyche symbolizes the human soul which is purified of its doubts and fears by the suffering and misfortunes it faces in its hunt for love. It suggests that the suffering human beings face on earth prepares their souls for the eternal enjoyment of true and lasting happiness.

CUPID IN THE RENAISSANCE AND GOLDEN AGE

Cupid gained greater prominence through the art of the Renaissance, during which classical themes experienced a resurgence in popularity. In painting and poetry, Cupid is alternately portrayed as a mythical deity or as personified passion. He is often depicted as a naked, winged boy, with a wicked grin and a quiver full of arrows. In many paintings, he is shown to be standing upon books to indicate the triumph of the heart over the head. When Jupiter declares that he will reinstate the rule of law and order over Cupid's chaotic rule of love in *Las Nuevas Armas de Amor*, Cupid's revenge is swift and resourceful. In this, as in other Golden Age art featuring mythological characters, Cupid's power over the other gods is reaffirmed—Love being an all-powerful and universal emotion.



*"Cupid Carving
His Bow,"
Girolamo
Parmigianino,
1535*