

# Ancient mythology alive in language

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You might never have thought about them. Their names might be totally unfamiliar to you. But even after countless centuries, they're still with us – the personalities of ancient Greek and Roman mythology.

Do you eat cereal for breakfast? Have you ever panicked? Are you jovial? Or perhaps saturnine? Have you ever heard an echo? Have you ever consulted an atlas? If you've answered yes to any of these questions, then you've been in touch with the spirits (from the Latin "spirare," to breathe) of the ancient world.

It's really quite wonderful. Ancient mythology hasn't crumbled away as dry as dust, nor has it been choked to death between the covers of a book no one opens anymore. No, it has seized the next best thing to immortality by infiltrating our language as words that we use regularly.

The ancient Greeks and Romans had deities, nymphs and satyrs to account for everything that happened in nature and in their own lives. Annually on April 19<sup>th</sup>, for instance, the Romans celebrated a festival – the Cerealia – to beseech Ceres, the grain goddess, for a good harvest. Our word cereal has a history that can be traced all the way back to the same deity.

Have you ever been gripped by fear, out of the blue, and inexplicably? This disquieting sensation is associated with Pan, the Roman deity of wild nature, whom the ancients imagined as a satyr with the horns, ears and legs of a goat. He roamed in the woods, and when disturbed he'd turn violent and inflict nightmares and irrational terror on mortals. In other words, Pan would make them panic.

Do you like to laugh? Are you cheerful? Ancient astrologers believed that the planets – which were named after Roman deities – exerted a force on humans, hence anyone born under the influence of Jupiter (the god also known as Jove) was destined to be happy – in short, jovial. If your planet was Saturn, then, unfortunately, you could expect to be cold and gloomy – in a word, saturnine.

Next time you hear a sound bounce back, think of Echo, the nymph whom the goddess Hera punished by depriving her of normal speech. She was allowed only to repeat the words spoken by others. Echo fell in love with Narcissus, a beautiful Greek youth, but unfortunately Narcissus was already in love with his own reflection (he was narcissistic). He ignored Echo, and in her grief she pined away, until all that was left was her voice.

Aeons ago the god Zeus condemned the titan Atlas to hold up the universe with his shoulders and hands, so that the sky wouldn't fall. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Mercator, a Flemish cartographer, published a book of maps, and on the title page he represented Atlas supporting the heavens. Ever since then, the image of Atlas has been associated with maps, and that's the reason we call a book of maps an atlas.

This is but the merest sampling of ancient Greek and Roman personalities who've impinged on our lives. There's no getting away from them. Think of Eros, Mars, Mercury, Flora, the Fates – and the list goes on and on.