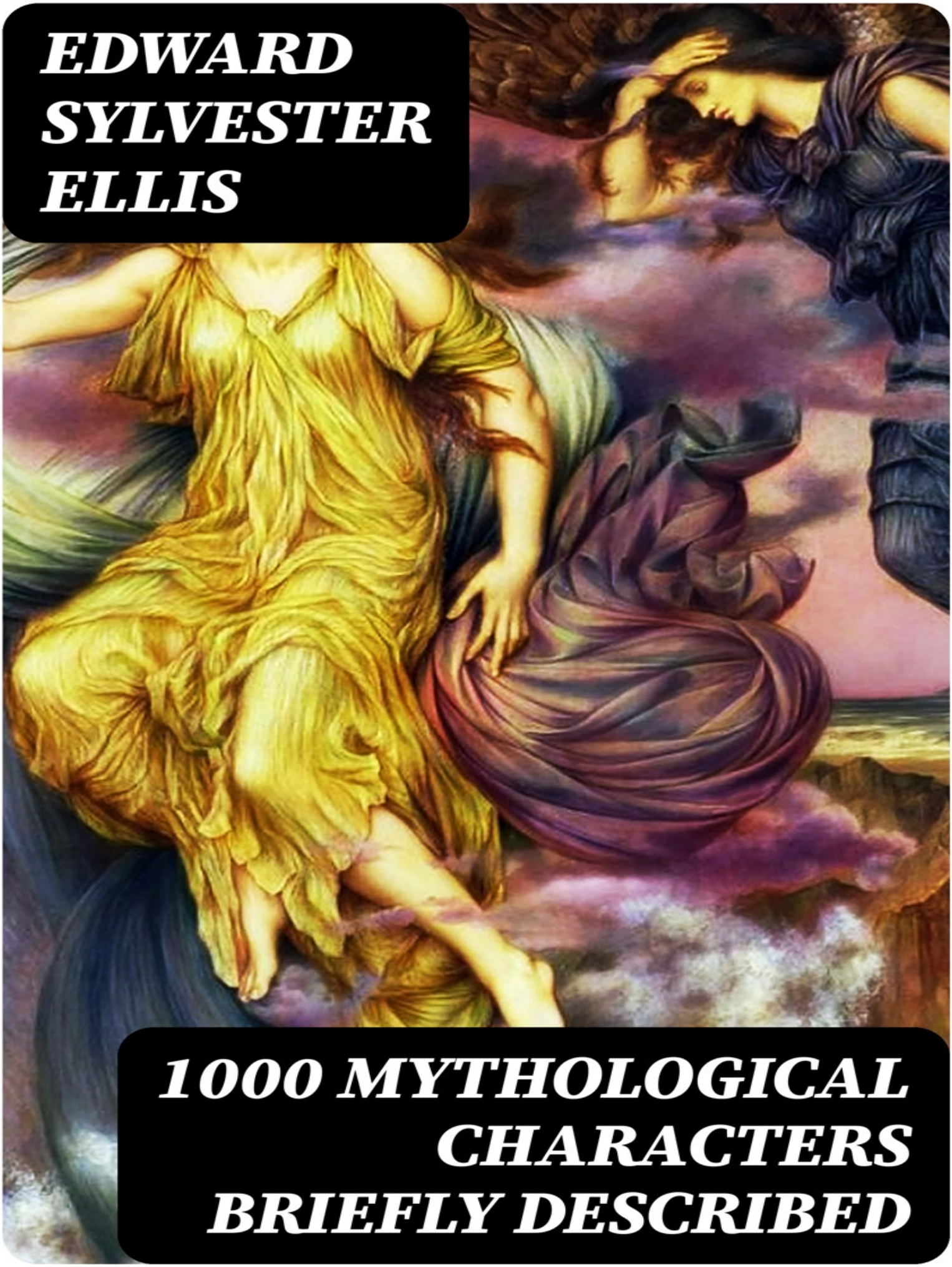
EDWARD SYLVESTER ELLIS



1000 MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS BRIEFLY DESCRIBED

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Edward Sylvester Ellis

1000 Mythological Characters Briefly Described

Adapted to Private Schools, High Schools and Academies

EAN 8596547045762

DigiCat, 2022
Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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INTRODUCTION.

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There are many expressions which, though simple in themselves, must forever remain beyond the grasp of

human comprehension. Eternity, that which has neither end nor beginning, baffles the most profound human thought. It is impossible to think of a point beyond which there is absolutely nothing, or to imagine the passing of a million years without bringing us one day or one minute nearer to their close. Suppose that one could fix upon the terminal point, we would still fancy something beyond that, and then some period still more remote would present itself, and so on *ad infinitum*.

The same insurmountable difficulty confronts us when we seek to imagine a First Cause. God was the beginning, and yet it seems to our finite minds, that something must have brought Him into existence, and we conclude that back again of that creating Power must have been another originating cause, and perhaps still another, and so on without limitation.

And yet we know that there must have been a period when everything was void, or, in other words, when there was nothing. In the awful grandeur of that loneliness, desolation, and chaos, God we know, however, existed and called the universe into being. All that we, in our present finite condition, can ever comprehend of that stupendous birth is contained in the opening of the first chapter of Genesis.

That is the story of the creation as told by God Himself to His chosen people, the Hebrews, they alone being selected from the nations then existing upon the earth to receive the wonderful revelation.

Every people, no matter how degraded and sunken in barbarism, has some perception, some explanation of, and a

more or less well-grounded belief in, a First Cause. Far back among the mists of antiquity, at the remotest beginnings of the shadowy centuries, sits enthroned a Being, who in His infinite might and power brought mankind, the universe, and all animate and inanimate things into existence, and who rewards those of His children who do His will, and punishes those who disobey His commands. That will, as interpreted by believers, is as various in its application to the conduct of man as are the standards of right and wrong among the civilized and even among the barbarous nations of to-day. What is virtue with one is vice with the other, as beauty and ugliness of form or feature, being relative terms, are opposites with many different peoples.

Since the Greeks and Romans were not among those who received the divine story of creation, they were forced to devise a theory to explain their own existence and account for the origin of all things. The foundation of this theory lay in the marvelous phenomena of nature around them. The growth of the mighty tree from the tiny seed, the bursting bud and blossom, the changing hues and the fragrance of flowers, the alternation of day and night, the flash of the rock-rending lightning, the rage of the tempest, the flow of the rivers; the towering mountains, the lovely valleys; dew, rain, the clouds, and the ever-shifting panorama on every hand; the majestic sweep of the blazing worlds through space—all these pointed unerringly to a First Cause, which originally launched them into being, and maintains the constant order of things and the miraculous procession of the planets and the orderly succession of the seasons in obedience to laws that know no change.

To the Greeks and Romans, there was a time more remote than history gives us any account of, when there was neither land nor water, and when the earth and all things within and upon it were “without form and void.” Over that misty, nebulous mixing and mingling brooded the god Chaos, who shared his throne with Nox, the goddess of night. From this union the innumerable myths gradually sprang up and developed, which in their own imaginative though often grotesque way explained the various phases of creation. These finally became crystallized into a literature, or mythology, which has since been the inspiration alike of romancers and poets.

The most learned of mythologists differ in their analysis of the multitude of myths that have descended to us. Their varying analyses, however, may be separated into two distinct classes or divisions, each of which has its own adherents and supporters.

The first school is that of the philologists, and the second that of the anthropologists, or comparative mythologists.

Philology relates to the study of language, especially when treated in a philosophical manner. This school maintains that the myths had their origin in a “disease of the language, as the pearl is a result of a disease of the oyster.” The key, therefore, to all mythologies, they say, is found in language. The names originally applied to the gods generally referred to the phenomena of the clouds, winds, rain, sunshine, etc. Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, the great languages of antiquity, they demonstrate, had their foundation in a single source which is still older. As further proof of their position, they point to the similarity in the

most ordinary words in the various languages of the same family, and show that they have undergone few or very trifling changes.

The greatest authority among the philologists claims that during the “first period” there was a tribe in Central Asia, whose language consisted of one-syllable words, which contained the germs of the Turanian, Aryan, and Semitic tongues. This age is termed the Rhematic period, and was succeeded by the Nomadic or Agglutinative age, during which the language gradually “received, once for all, that peculiar impress of their formative system which we still find in all the dialects and national idioms comprised under the name of Aryan or Semitic,” which includes over three thousand dialects.

The same authority follows the Agglutinative period with one “represented everywhere by the same characteristic features, called the Mythological, or Mythopoeic age.”

As the name implies, this last-mentioned period saw the evolution and development of mythic lore. As do the American Indians of to-day, so primitive man, in his crude way, explained the operation of physical laws by giving to inanimate objects like passions and sentiments with himself. When the tempest rages, and the crashing lightning splinters the mountain oak, the Indian says that the Great Spirit is angry. When nature becomes serene and calm, the Great Spirit is pleased. The malign forces around him, which work ill to the warrior, are, they say, the direct doings of an evil spirit. Even the heavenly bodies are personified, and “poetry has so far kept alive in our minds the old animative theory of nature, that it is no great effort in us to fancy the

waterspout a huge giant or sea-monster, and to depict, in what we call appropriate metaphor, its march across the field of ocean."

Since the names of the Greek heroes and gods show a general correspondence with the Sanskrit appellations of physical things, it is comparatively easy to understand many of the first fancies and reflections of the earliest men who ever lived. It is the argument of the philologists that these fancies and reflections settled into definite shape in that far-away period when most of the nations, now spread to the remotest corners of the earth, dwelt together and used a common language. Following the gradual scattering of this single, unified people, the language became sensitive to the change, many words not only losing their original meaning, but, in some instances, acquiring an opposite significance. Other words, again, in the course of time were utterly lost. "As long as such personified beings as the Heaven or the Sun are consciously talked of in mythic language, the meaning of their legends is open to no question, and the action ascribed to them will, as a rule, be natural and appropriate." The time came, however, when these names were considered simply as applying to heroes or deities, and amid the jumble and confusion of the succeeding ages it became well-nigh impossible to trace the myths back to their original source and meaning. Such is a brief outline of the myth interpretations, as made by the philologists.

Anthropology may be defined as the study of man, considered in his entire nature. In explaining mythology, the anthropologists say that "it is man, it is human thought and

human language combined, which naturally and necessarily produced the strange conglomerate of ancient fable." Instead, therefore, of seeking the source of myths in language, the second class find it in the "condition of thought through which all races have passed."

The argument of the anthropologists is that while all nations have come from one parent-stock, as is claimed also by the philologists, yet the various peoples, in their primitive or savage state, have passed through a like low intellectual condition and growth. The folk-lore of all countries shows that the savages consider themselves of the same nature as beasts, and regard "even plants, inanimate objects, and the most abstract phenomena as persons with human parts and passions." Every religion antedating Christianity has inculcated the worship of idols, which usually take the form of beasts, and it will be noted in the study of myths that the gods often assume the forms of birds and animals. If it were in our power mentally to become savages for a time, so as to look upon nature and our surroundings as do the Blackfeet Indians, or the Patagonians, or the South Africans, it would be a long step toward making clear this particular phase of the question.

From what has been stated, however, the young student will gain an idea of the meaning of the word "myth," which may be termed a story whose origin can never be known with certainty. To most people it has the same significance as a fable, legendary tale, or fanciful falsehood. A collection of myths belonging to a particular age or people is "a mythology," and the branch of inquiry which classifies and interprets them bears the same name.

E. S. E.
November 1st, 1895.

THE YOUTH'S DICTIONARY OF MYTHOLOGY.

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Abas (A′bas), a son of Meganira, was turned into a newt, or water-lizard, for deriding the ceremonies of the Sacrifice.

Absyrtus (Absy′rtus). After Jason had slain the dragon which guarded the golden fleece, he fled with Medea, the beautiful young sorceress, and daughter of Aeetes, who pursued with great energy, for Medea had taken with her the most precious treasure of the king, his only son and heir, Absyrtus. To delay the pursuit, Medea slew her little brother, cut the body in pieces, and dropped them over the side of the vessel. Thus the cruel daughter effected her escape.

Achelous (Achelo′us) was a river god, and the rival of Hercules in his love for Deianira. To decide who should have the bride, Hercules and Achelous had recourse to a wrestling bout, the fame of which extends through all the intervening centuries. In this fierce struggle, Achelous changed himself into the form of a bull and rushed upon his antagonist with lowered horns, intending to hurl him aside. Hercules eluded the onset, and seizing one of the huge horns, held it so firmly that it was broken off by the furious efforts of Achelous to free himself. He was defeated, and finally turned himself into a river, which has since been known by his name.

Acheron (Ach′eron) (see “The Youth’s Classical Dictionary”). The current of the river Acheron, across which all souls had to pass to hear their decree from Pluto, was so swift that the boldest swimmer dare not attempt to breast it; and, since there was no bridge, the spirits were obliged to rely upon the aid of Charon, an aged boatman, who plied the only boat that was available. He would allow no soul to enter this leaky craft until he had received the obolus, or fare, which the ancients carefully placed under the tongue of the dead, that they might not be delayed in their passage to Pluto. Those who had not their fare were forced to wait one hundred years, when Charon reluctantly ferried them over without charge.

> “Infernal rivers that disgorge
> Into the burning lake their baleful streams
> … Sad Acheron, of sorrow black and deep.”
> Milton.

Achilles (Achil′les) was the most valiant of the Greek heroes in the Trojan War. He was the son of Peleus, King of Thessaly. His mother, Thetis, plunged him, when an infant, into the Stygian pool, which made him invulnerable wherever the waters had washed him; but the heel by which he was held was not wetted, and that part remained vulnerable. He was shot with an arrow in the heel by Paris, at the siege of Troy, and died of his wound.

Acidalia (Acida′lia), a name given to Venus, from a fountain in Boeotia.

Acis (A′cis). A Sicilian shepherd, loved by the nymph Galatea. One of the Cyclops who was jealous of him crushed

him by hurling a rock on him. Galatea turned his blood into a river—the Acis at the foot of Mount Etna.

Actaeon (Actae′on) was the son of Aristaeus, a famous huntsman. He intruded himself on Diana while she was bathing, and was changed by her into a deer, in which form he was hunted by his own dogs and torn in pieces.

Ades (A′des), see Hades.

Adonis (Ado′nis), the beautiful attendant of Venus, who held her train. He was killed by a boar, and turned by Venus into an anemone.

> “Even as the sun with purple-colored face
> Had ta’en his last leave of the weeping morn.
> Rose-cheeked Adonis hied him to the chase;
> Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn.”
> Shakespeare.

Adrastaea (Adrastae′a), another name of Nemesis, one of the goddesses of justice.

Adscriptitii Dii (Adscripti′tii Dii) were the gods of the second grade.

Adversity, see Echidna.

Aeacus (Ae′acus), one of the judges of hell, with Minos and Rhadamanthus. See Eacus.

Aecastor (Aecas′tor), an oath used only by women, referring to the Temple of Castor.

Aedepol (Aed′epol), an oath used by both men and women, referring to the Temple of Pollux.

Aeetes (Aee′tes), a king of Colchis, and father of Medea.

Aegeon (Aege′on), a giant with fifty heads and one hundred hands, who was imprisoned by Jupiter under Mount

Etna. See Briareus.

Aegis (Ae′gis), the shield of Jupiter, so called because it was made of goat-skin.

> “Where was thine Aegis Pallas that appall’d?”
> Byron.

> “Tremendous, Gorgon frowned upon its field,
> And circling terrors filled the expressive shield.”

> “Full on the crest the Gorgon’s head they place,
> With eyes that roll in death, and with distorted face.”
> Pope.

Aegle (Ae′gle). The fairest of the Naiads.

Aello (Ael′lo), the name of one of the Harpies.

Aeneas (Aene′as) was the son of Anchises and Venus. He was one of the few great captains who escaped the destruction of Troy. He behaved with great valor during the siege, encountering Diomed, and even Achilles himself. When the Grecians had set the city on fire Aeneas took his aged father, Anchises, on his shoulders, while his son, Ascanius, and his wife Creusa, clung to his garments. He saved them all from the flames. After wandering about during several years, encountering numerous difficulties, he at length arrived in Italy, where he was hospitably received by Latinus, king of the Latins. After the death of Latinus Aeneas became king.

> “His back, or rather burthen, showed
> As if it stooped with its load;
> For as Aeneas bore his sire

Upon his shoulders through the fire,
Our knight did bear no less a pack
Of his own buttocks on his back.”
Butler.

Aeolus (Aeo′lus) was the god of the winds. Jupiter was his reputed father, and his mother is said to have been a daughter of Hippotus. Aeolus is represented as having the power of holding the winds confined in a cavern, and occasionally giving them liberty to blow over the world. So much command was he supposed to have over them that when Ulysses visited him on his return from Troy he gave him, tied up in a bag, all the winds that could prevent his voyage from being prosperous. The companions of Ulysses, fancying that the bag contained treasure, cut it open just as they came in sight of Ithaca, the port they were making for, and the contrary winds rushing out drove back the ship many leagues. The residence of Aeolus was at Strongyle, now called Strombolo.

“Aeolus from his airy throne
With power imperial curbs the struggling winds,
And sounding tempests in dark prisons binds.”
Dryden.

Aesculapius (Aescula′pius), the god of physic, was a son of Apollo. He was physician to the Argonauts in their famous expedition to Colchis. He became so noted for his cures that Pluto became jealous of him, and he requested Jupiter to kill him with a thunderbolt. To revenge his son’s death Apollo slew the Cyclops who had forged the thunderbolt. By his