

## 3-Down from Mount Olympus

Words from the Greeks and the Romans: You probably don't spend much time worrying about the gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman mythology. While they are no longer objects of anyone's worship, many of them have a kind of fossil form in the shapes of words. Even their dwelling place, Mount Olympus, lives on beyond its geographical existence in the name of the peak of athletes' dreams, the Olympics. Let's look at some other verbal legacies from various Greek and Roman heroes or supernatural powers.

1. **aphrodisiac:** The Greek goddess Aphrodite was the goddess of erotic love. She has appropriately left her mark in this word. It refers to food or drugs that allegedly make men and women feel more amorous. It can be used as a noun or an adjective.
  - Mr. Parbst doesn't really believe oysters are an **aphrodisiac**, but he does give away bumper stickers saying "Oyster eaters are better lovers" at his store—a seafood market.
  - For many people, poetry and music in the right setting can have more of an **aphrodisiac** effect than something like powdered rhinoceros horn.
  
2. **chthonic:** This adjective, describing something related to forces from the underworld, won't often come out of your mouth. (But if it does, remember the "ch" is silent: say "thonic:~) Still, you'll impress people with your knowledge of a word that begins with four consonants, and you'll be ready for the wise guy (or the textbook) that pulls the related word "autochthonous" on you. (Don't ask why, but the "c" IS pronounced in this word—say aTOKthonous.) It means, roughly, "on native ground, originating where found;" as in autochthonous folktales.
  - Linnell had had such a run of bad luck that she quipped, "Could **chthonic** forces be unhappy with me?"
  - The doctors were not sure whether the blood clot on Henry's lung was **autochthonous** or whether it had traveled through the bloodstream and lodged there.
  
3. **hector:** This verb means "to bully or to try to force someone to do something:~ Too bad for the original Hector, the greatest warrior for Troy during the Trojan War, and really a very decent guy. The negative sense of the word came in with a mid-seventeenth-century street gang named The Hectors; others perceived them not as valiant but bullying.
  - I'll be more likely to get this physics project done if you don't **hector** me about it all the time.
  - The supervisor, Mr. Logan, consistently spoke in such a **hectoring** tone that his employees shuddered when he approached the office water cooler.

- 4. hermetic:** Here we have an interesting adjective. It can describe something very literal, a jar so completely sealed that no air can get in. Or in past ages it was used to describe a kind of pseudo-science such as alchemy that was "sealed off" to those who had not been given the supposed secrets. Its name came from a namesake of the Greek god Hermes, whom we know better by his Latin name Mercury. See #6. ).
- Ms. Fulton struggled patiently with the childproof medicine bottle before I sighing and saying, "I think it is **hermetically** sealed. I'll never get it open."
  - Movies such *Young Frankenstein* give us a humorous depiction of mad scientists roaming the graveyards for body parts or hunkered over stealing lab equipment, practicing their **hermetic** art.
- 5. junoesque:** This adjective, reserved for women, is a compliment that comes via the Roman goddess Juno. It describes a woman who is unusually tall and stately and so beautiful as to seem divine. Since Juno was the wife of the head honcho Jupiter, she deserves to give her name to this word (as well as to the month of June, even today associated with weddings).
- Members of the Springfield High Film Club, who watched the 1960s film *La Dolce Vita*, enjoyed seeing the **junoesque** Anita Ekberg frolicking in a Roman fountain.
  - While one of the finalists for the title of Miss America was cute and petite, the t;wO others were positively **junoesque**.
- 6. mercurial:** The Roman god Mercury was the messenger of the gods and as such had to be very swift. Thus, his name gets given to the chemical element mercury, which can travel very fast and to the adjective mercurial, used to describe someone whose moods change very rapidly. ( If you've read *Romeo and Juliet*, think of Mercutio, who is certainly mercurial.) Two for one: a synonym would be "volatile;" which comes from a root meaning "flying:"
- Shakespeare's character Hamlet is very **mercurial**: one minute he's very gloomy and the next he's wisecracking with old chums.
  - George's **mercurial** nature can make him fun to be around for a while, but sometimes you want him to be a little more laid back.
- 7. mnemonic:** This adjective refers to memory or relating to memory. (And do remember the "m" is silent-say "neeMONic:!) You'll most often see or hear this word in the phrase "mnemonic device." The noun mnemonics refers to memory in general. If you remember your fifth grade teacher giving you the word HOMES to help you remember the Great lakes, then you've used a mnemonic device. Mnemosyne was the Greek goddess of memory-and here's a mnemonic device to remember that fact. She was the mother of nine daughters, many of whom had four syllable names such as Terpsichore, and so she had to be the goddess of memory to remember them all.
- I find **mnemonics** fascinating: why can I sometimes remember a person's name starts with an "S," but I can't remember the name?
  - Ms. Bevilacqua loves **mnemonic** devices: she taught her seventh graders to spell "rhythm" correctly by having them chant, "Ride Hard, You Thick-Headed Monster."

- 8. muse:** bemuse Maybe you already know the noun "muse;" a traditional female figure of artistic inspiration. In Greek mythology there were nine such women, all daughters of Mnemosyne (see #7 above). The verb "to muse" means to lose yourself in your thoughts, perhaps awaiting inspiration. If you are "bemused;" you have passively gotten to a state of unfocused thinking, again possibly to allow yourself to receive inspiration. (In short, you muse, but you are bemused.)
- Nyelle **mused** over the curriculum offerings for her senior year. Should she continue with Spanish or drop it and take psychology?
  - When the music teacher put on a disk by Mozart, Sean tried to focus but soon became **bemused** and started wondering if chicken nuggets would be on the menu for lunch.
- 9. odyssey:** This useful noun for a long trip comes straight from that great traveler Odysseus, hero of Homer's *Odyssey*. Today it can describe a literal journey or a journey of the intellect or spirit.
- My grandparents took a world cruise to celebrate their Golden Wedding Anniversary. What an **odyssey**! They sailed all the way around the world with stops in ports on every continent.
  - Lex felt he had undergone quite an **odyssey** in his first two years of college, for he had changed his career goals as well as his philosophical outlook on life.
- 10. saturnine:** This adjective means gloomy or even bitterly sarcastic and mocking. The Roman god Saturn doesn't deserve such a melancholy or cynical term. Today many people happily bear his name on their cars, and in ancient times he presided over a very jolly festival (Saturnalia, late December). So think, Saturn was NOT saturnine. (This fate hit Hector as well. See #3 above).
- The judge's **saturnine** countenance increased the nervousness of the first year lawyer.
  - Many people think of *Gulliver's Travels* as a children's book, but careful readers will easily detect the **saturnine** temperament of its author Jonathan Swift.