

# Bulfinch's Mythology (Leather-bound Classics)

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Legendary tales of myth and romance written so everyone can enjoy the stories!

Can't keep all your gods and goddesses straight? Wondering about mythological references in classic literature? Bulfinch's Mythology offers approachable accounts of ancient legends in a compilation of the works of Thomas Bulfinch, banker and Latinist. This volume includes all three of Bulfinch's original titles: *The Age of Fable*, *The Age of Chivalry*, and *The Legends of Charlemagne*. Bulfinch states his purpose for the book clearly: "Our work is not for the learned, nor for the theologian, nor for the philosopher, but for the reader of English literature...who wishes to comprehend the allusions so frequently made by public speakers, lecturers, essayists, and poets, and those which occur in polite conversation." This compilation was widely used as the authoritative text on mythology in schools for over a century.

Thomas Bulfinch was an American writer born in Newton, Massachusetts.

University of Pennsylvania: M.A., Ph.D. Graduate Group in Ancient History. Dissertation Title: "The Origins of Aphrodite." 1991-2000

From Charles Martin's Introduction to Bulfinch's Mythology

In his Preface, Bulfinch firmly sets his work within the emerging American genre of self-improvement: Other kinds of knowledge may "enlarge our possessions or . . . raise our station in society," and there are, of course, books that will tell us how to get rich quickly and how to behave when we have amassed our pile. But, perhaps because he had seen how fortunes may disappear overnight, never to be recovered, Bulfinch puts his faith in the kind of knowledge that can make us "happier and better." This knowledge is the knowledge of literature, but we cannot understand the literature of our time without first understanding the mythology that literature so often alludes to.

How is this knowledge to be attained? Bulfinch is very certain about his audience. It does not consist of members of his own class, the privileged few who have had the benefits of a classical education and would have acquired such knowledge already or at least have the leisure and the means to acquire it. His audience has never gone with Homer to Troy; the Trojan War is new to them; and they want to know how the story comes out in the end: "Our readers will be anxious to know the fate of Helen, the fair but guilty occasion of so much slaughter." As Bulfinch must have known, Helen is the creation of the poets who wrote about her, and different poets provided her with different fates. Americans love happy endings, so Bulfinch sees her reconciled at last with the husband she abandoned.

Bulfinch's audience consists of those with whom he had come in contact during his long and unsuccessful career as a merchant, the self-made men and their wives, who do not want to have to choke down "only the dry facts without any of the charm of the original narrative." They want the poetry, too, and they don't have a whole lot of time to spend on getting it.

They want to be sure that this knowledge may be let into the parlors of their homes without creating any sort of offense "to pure taste and good morals." Here a word must be said about Bulfinch's prudery: His subservience to his society's desire to pass over these offenses in silence resulted in a number of significant omissions. It is hard to see how it could be otherwise: The proper Bostonian of Bulfinch's day, referring to a bull as Mr. Cow, would scarcely have known what to make of Queen Phaedra's passion for the prize bull in her husband's herd.

Bulfinch's readers also want the assurance that this knowledge, so different from their daily experience, is worth having: "To devote study to a species of learning which relates wholly to false marvels and obsolete faiths is not to be expected of the general reader in a practical age like this. The time even of the young is claimed by so many sciences of facts and things that little can be set for spare treatises on a science of mere fancy." It is not only the time but the energy as well. Bulfinch can sympathize with the tired businessman at the end of his long day in the office: "Thus we hope to teach mythology not as a study, but as a relaxation from study."

This knowledge, easily acquired and promoting not only happiness but virtue as well, will allow the less privileged members of a restlessly mobile society access to the kind of lore that is the patrimony of the privileged. It is not, Bulfinch states explicitly, "for the learned, nor for the theologian, nor for the philosopher, but for the reader of English literature, of either sex, who wishes to comprehend the allusions so frequently made by public speakers, lecturers, essayists, and poets, and those which occur in polite conversation." It is a little bit easier than it ought to be to mock Bulfinch's tone here, but we would be seriously underestimating Bulfinch if we were to regard him as an elitist: His sentiments are as unabashed in their democratic impulse as those of Walt Whitman, in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Bulfinch wishes everyone to have access to the cultural tokens heretofore the possession of the few.

#### Other Books

Bulfinch's *Mythology*. The unabridged version of this definitive work is now available as a highly designed paperback with flaps with a new introduction by Robert Hanks. Part of the Knickerbocker Classics series, a modern design makes this timeless book a perfect travel companion. Thomas Bulfinch helped popularize mythology with his three-volume collection of tales for an English-speaking audience. This edition includes the first volume, *Stories of Gods and Heroes*, which was originally published in 1855 and presents the stories of Greek and Roman mythology. Considered to be one of the most popular and entertaining books of mythology, *Bulfinch's Mythology* is as relevant today as when it was originally published. The Knickerbocker Classics bring together the essential works of classic authors from around the world in stunning editions to be collected and enjoyed.

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