



Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary (Oxford Paperback Reference)

By Robert E. Bell

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Everyone is familiar with some of the women of classical myth. Athena, goddess of wisdom, and Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty are particularly well-known, as are the snake-haired Gorgon Medusa, and the vicious harpies, half woman, half beast. Humans, too, have their place in the ancient lore: Medea, who killed her own children to gain revenge upon her husband Jason, and Helen of Troy, whose abduction by Paris incited the ten-year Trojan War. But these figures represent only a handful of the hundreds and hundreds of female characters who played essential roles in the poetry, drama, and folklore that arose from Greek and Roman mythology. And despite the rich diversity of these figures, standard reference works on mythology and related subjects often give them short shrift.

This fascinating book is the first and only comprehensive biographical dictionary devoted to mythological women. It offers unprecedented access to information on hard-to-find women in Greek and Roman myth, as well as a fresh look at the better-known figures. From the famous to the obscure, all of them are here--from Cardea, a Roman divinity who protected the hinges of doors, to Echidna, a half-woman, half-serpent who mated with her fire-breathing brother Typhon, to Ate, the goddess of error. In addition, readers will learn new facts about old favorites: how Zeus ordered the proverbially garrulous Echo to distract Hera while he enjoyed sexual relations with Echo's sister nymphs; that Melpomene, muse of tragedy, was reputed to be mother of the sirens; that Diana--known as the Roman equivalent of Artemis, goddess of chastity and the hunt--had been worshiped as a Latin and Sabine diety from a much earlier era.

The approximately 2,600 lively, engagingly written entries are arranged alphabetically and completely cross-referenced for easy access, and vary from one sentence to several pages. Each entry places its subject both in the overall context of classical myth, and in the frame of reference of her better-known male counterparts. For each figure there is a description of her particular contribution to folklore, and a list of the various poems, tragedies, epics, and other types of stories in which she plays a central role. In addition, the handy special index "The Men in Their Lives" makes it simple to locate a particular women known primarily through relations, for instance, Theseus's mother, or Achilles's wife.

Heroines, murderers, lovers, wives, animals, hermaphrodites, monsters, and transsexuals--the *Women of Classical Mythology* offers a unique and rich guide to an aspect of ancient literature often overlooked. It will provide readers not only with a valuable reference source, but with hours of delightful browsing.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Bell, a retired librarian formerly with the University of California, has gathered an impressive array of information on the female divinities, surnames, monsters, wives, animals, mothers, lovers, heroines, and villains of classical Greek and Roman mythology. The coverage is extensive, including both the obscure and well known. Entries are in dictionary format and range in length from a brief paragraph to several pages. The various myths are retold well in nontechnical language with occasional character insights. The book is quite browsable and could easily spark deeper interest. A name index, called "The Men in Their Lives," will lead from the better-known male character to his less recognizable female acolyte. The restriction to only women of mythology, however, limits the usefulness of the work. A better source for general use is Edward Tripp's Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology (LJ 12/1/70). For subject collections or academic libraries.

- *Marianne Cawley, Kingwood Branch Lib., Tex.*

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Review

"Although Greco-Roman mythology has traditionally been presented as 'tales of gods and heroes,' this clear, modern reference reveals the importance and diversity of the goddesses and heroines who also figured in these stories. Bell carefully organizes the confusing changes that occurred in individual myths over time, and lists the numerous entities that share a single name (there were seven Europas). These carefully documented entries provide a useful counter to half-baked New Age 'goddess' evocations."--*The Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Bell...has gathered an impressive array of information....Fills a major gap in the reference literature of classical mythology."--*Library Journal*

"The author is able to delineate history from legend and legend from myth. He is sensitive to the political and social position of women in the classical world. He editorializes with a light pen or humorous turn of phrase....The more obscure names included here that aren't found in standard dictionaries of mythology make it especially helpful."--*Booklist*

"Bell's comments...make these distant figures familiar and accessible....[An] imaginative, invaluable reference on classical mythology."--*Wilson Library Bulletin*

About the Author

Robert E. Bell recently retired as Coordinator of Humanities Collection Development at the Shields Library

of the University of California, Davis. He is also the author of *Dictionary of Classical Mythology: Symbols, Attributes and Associations*, and *Place Names in Classical Mythology: Greece*.

Users Review

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Beatrice Pearson:

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