



Myths: Lessons in Living

Look For

Writing

Vocabulary

Baucis and Philemon

Because myths have been retold so often, they exist in many different versions. One of the best known collections of myths is the *Metamorphoses*, by the Roman poet **Ovid** (äv' id) (43 B.C.–A.D. 17). This long poem, whose title means “changes,” contains many accounts of supernatural magical changes caused by the gods.

Edith Hamilton (1867–1963) used Ovid’s poem as a source for her version of “Baucis and Philemon.” She was famous for her books on ancient Greece and Rome.

Myths served many purposes. Although they tended to concentrate on explaining the origins of natural phenomena, often they also taught lessons. While stories about the gods and heroes explained such matters as how a certain flower or tree came to exist or how the sun traveled across the sky each day, myths also taught people how to live their lives. In “Baucis and Philemon,” for instance, a devoted couple who treat guests kindly are rewarded by the gods for their behavior.

Look for the many ways in which Baucis (bô' sis) and Philemon (fi lê' mən) make their guests feel welcome. How do the gods show their appreciation?

Through the myths of a people, we learn what they value. The ancient Greeks and Romans valued hospitality. Recall an enjoyable visit you made to the home of a friend or relative. Tell how your host made you feel at ease.

Knowing the following words will help you as you read “Baucis and Philemon.”

immeasurable (i mez'h' ə b'l) *adj.*: So great it cannot be measured (p. 577)

pious (pī' əs) *adj.*: Good; virtuous (p. 577)

shrewdest (shrōd' əst) *adj.*: Cleverest (p. 577)

insolently (in' sə lənt lē) *adv.*: Rudely; disrespectfully (p. 577)

snug (snug) *adj.*: Cozy; comfortable (p. 577)

bustled (bus' ld) *v.*: Hurried (p. 577)

quavering (kwā' vər iŋ) *adj.*: Shaking (p. 578)

despises (di spīz' əz) *v.*: Looks down on with scorn (p. 578)

Baucis and Philemon

Edith Hamilton

In the Phrygian¹ hill-country there were once two trees which all the peasants near and far pointed out as a great marvel, and no wonder, for one was an oak and the other a linden, yet they grew from a single trunk. The story of how this came about is a proof of the immeasurable power of the gods, and also of the way they reward the humble and the pious.

Sometimes when Jupiter² was tired of eating ambrosia and drinking nectar³ up in Olympus and even a little weary of listening to Apollo's lyre and watching the Graces⁴ dance, he would come down to the earth, disguise himself as a mortal and go looking for adventures. His favorite companion on these tours was Mercury,⁵ the most entertaining of all the gods, the shrewdest and the most resourceful. On this particular trip Jupiter had determined to find out how hospitable the people of Phrygia were. Hospitality was, of course, very important to him, since all guests, all who seek shelter in a strange land, were under his especial protection.

The two gods, accordingly, took on the

appearance of poor wayfarers and wandered through the land, knocking at each lowly hut or great house they came to and asking for food and a place to rest in. Not one would admit them; every time they were dismissed insolently and the door barred against them. They made trial of hundreds; all treated them in the same way. At last they came upon a little hovel of the humblest sort, poorer than any they had yet found, with a roof made only of reeds. But here, when they knocked, the door was opened wide and a cheerful voice bade them enter. They had to stoop to pass through the low entrance, but once inside they found themselves in a snug and very clean room, where a kindly-faced old man and woman welcomed them in the friendliest fashion and bustled about to make them comfortable.

The old man set a bench near the fire and told them to stretch out on it and rest their tired limbs, and the old woman threw a soft covering over it. Her name was Baucis, she told the strangers, and her husband was called Philemon. They had lived in that cottage all their married life and had always been happy. "We are poor folk," she said, "but poverty isn't so bad when you're willing to own up to it, and a contented spirit is a great help, too." All the while she was talking, she was busy doing things for them. The coals under the ashes on the dark hearth she fanned to life until a cheerful fire was burning. Over this she hung a little kettle full of water and just as it began to boil her husband came in with a fine cabbage he

1. Phrygian (frij' ē ən): Phrygia was an ancient country in Asia.

2. Jupiter (jōō' pə tər): King of the gods in Roman Mythology, like Zeus in Greek Mythology.

3. ambrosia (am brō' zhə) . . . **nectar**: The food and drink of the gods that enabled them to live forever.

4. the Graces: Three sister goddesses who were associated with pleasure, charm, and beauty.

5. Mercury (mər' kyoo rē): The messenger of the gods in Roman Mythology, like Hermes in Greek Mythology.



had got from the garden. Into the kettle it went, with a piece of the pork which was hanging from one of the beams. While this cooked Baucis set the table with her trembling old hands. One table-leg was too short, but she propped it up with a bit of broken dish. On the board she placed olives and radishes and several eggs which she had roasted in the ashes. By this time the cabbage and bacon were done, and the old man pushed two rickety couches up to the table and bade his guests recline and eat.

Presently he brought them cups of beechwood and an earthenware mixing bowl which held some wine very like vinegar, plentifully diluted with water. Philemon, however, was clearly proud and happy at being able to add such cheer to the supper and he kept on the watch to refill each cup as soon as it was emptied. The two old folks were so pleased and excited by the success of their hospitality that only very slowly a strange thing dawned upon them. The mixing bowl kept full. No matter how many cups were poured out from it, the level of the wine stayed the same, up to the brim. As they saw this wonder each looked in terror at the other, and dropping their eyes they prayed silently. Then in quavering voices and trembling all over they begged their guests to pardon the poor refreshments they had offered. "We have a goose," the old man said, "which we ought to have given your lordships. But if you will only wait, it shall be done at once." To catch the goose, however, proved beyond their powers. They tried in vain until they were worn out, while Jupiter and Mercury watched them greatly entertained.

But when both Philemon and Baucis had had to give up the chase panting and exhausted, the gods felt that the time had come for them to take action. They were really very kind. "You have been hosts to

gods," they said, "and you shall have your reward. This wicked country which despises the poor stranger will be bitterly punished, but not you." They then escorted the two out of the hut and told them to look around them. To their amazement all they saw was water. The whole countryside had disappeared. A great lake surrounded them. Their neighbors had not been good to the old couple; nevertheless standing there they wept for them. But of a sudden their tears were dried by an overwhelming wonder. Before their eyes the tiny, lowly hut which had been their home for so long was turned into a stately pillared temple of whitest marble with a golden roof.

"Good people," Jupiter said, "ask whatever you want and you shall have your wish." The old people exchanged a hurried whisper, then Philemon spoke. "Let us be your priests, guarding this temple for you—and oh, since we have lived so long together, let neither of us ever have to live alone. Grant that we may die together."

The gods assented, well pleased with the two. A long time they served in that grand building, and the story does not say whether they ever missed their little cozy room with its cheerful hearth. But one day standing before the marble and golden magnificence they fell to talking about that former life, which had been so hard and yet so happy. By now both were in extreme old age. Suddenly, as they exchanged memories each saw the other putting forth leaves. Then bark was growing around them. They had time only to cry, "Farewell, dear companion." As the words passed their lips they became trees, but still they were together. The linden and the oak grew from one trunk.

From far and wide people came to admire the wonder, and always wreaths of flowers hung on the branches in honor of the pious and faithful pair.

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Recalling

1. What is special about the oak and linden mentioned in the opening paragraph?
2. Why does Jupiter disguise himself as a poor traveler to visit Phrygia?
3. How do most of the people greet him and Mercury? How do Baucis and Philemon treat them differently?
4. How do the gods reward Baucis and Philemon? How do they treat the other Phrygians?
5. What transformation, or changes, do Baucis and Philemon undergo?

Interpreting

6. Find two details that make the scene inside the little cottage come alive.
7. Why is it accurate to say that Baucis and Philemon are rewarded *twice* by the gods?

Applying

8. How would you make a guest feel comfortable in your home?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Lessons in Myth

Myths were not only meant to entertain people or explain facts of nature. Sometimes these stories also contained lessons about the way to live. In this story, the gods reward Baucis and Philemon. You can therefore deduce what the myth is teaching by examining the couple's behavior and attitudes.

1. What does Baucis and Philemon's treatment of the two strangers reveal about them?
2. What do the two requests they make of the gods reveal about the couple?
3. What lessons is the myth teaching by holding up Baucis and Philemon as models of behavior?

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Learning About a Culture from Its Myths

You can learn what a culture values by examining its myths. The story of Baucis and Philemon indicates that the ancient Greeks and Romans valued hospitality.

1. How does Jupiter expect people to treat unexpected and unknown guests?
2. Why do you think hospitality was so important to the ancient Greeks and Romans?
3. Is hospitality as important in our society today? Why or why not?

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

Analyzing Words with the Root *Phil*

The meaning of *Philemon* in Greek is "affectionate." This name contains the root *phil*, which means "love of." The Greek root *phil* (or *philo*, or *phile*) appears in many English words. Look up the following words in a dictionary, and write their meanings. Note how the definitions relate to the concept of love. Use each word in a sentence: 1. philosophy; 2. philanthropy; 3. philharmonic; 4. Anglophile

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing Dialogue for a Myth

Dialogue is the words that characters speak to each other. Edith Hamilton includes only a few of the words that the characters would say. Imagine that you must make up more dialogue for a dramatized version of this myth to be presented before your classmates. Focus on the conversation that the characters have around the dinner table. Read the myth again to make sure you understand the sequence of events. Then write the dialogue. When revising this dialogue make sure it will not sound old-fashioned. Also, check to see that each character's words are in keeping with his or her personality.