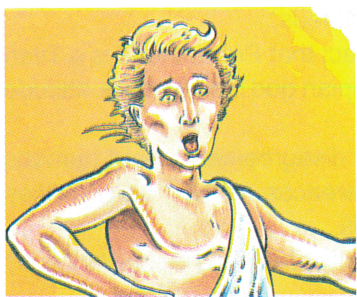


GUIDE FOR READING



Character in Myth: Hubris

Look For

Writing

Vocabulary

Phaëthon, Son of Apollo

Apollo (ə päl' ō) was the son of Zeus and Leto. He is portrayed in Greek art as a handsome and athletic young man. He was known as the god of poetry and music, and he was often shown carrying the ancient stringed instrument called a lyre. He was also associated with the life-giving power of the sun, as you will see in this myth.

Olivia E. Coolidge (1908–), the modern teller of this myth, has written many books for young people about history and ancient legends.

Hubris is a Greek word meaning excessive pride or arrogance. The ancient Greeks believed very strongly in the separation between mortal humans and immortal gods. A human being who boasted of god-like powers was guilty of hubris and would almost certainly be punished. In "Phaëthon, Son of Apollo," you will see what happens to a young man who reaches too high.

Phaëthon (fā' ə thən) displays his hubris in many ways. Look for evidence of his excessive pride in both his words and deeds. Also, look for clues that hint at the outcome.

At the end of this myth, Phaëthon is taken on a wild ride as he tries to steer the chariot of the sun. Recall the most dangerous carnival ride that you have ever been on or seen and freewrite about it.

Knowing the following words will help you as you read "Phaëthon, Son of Apollo."

mortal (môr' t'l) *n.*: A being who must eventually die (p. 571)

rash (rash) *adj.*: Reckless (p. 571)

deference (def' ər əns) *n.*: Respect (p. 571)

implored (im plôrd') *v.*: Begged (p. 571)

dissuade (di swād') *v.*: Advise someone against an action (p. 572)

anointed (ə noint' əd) *v.*: Rubbed oil or ointment on (p. 573)

precipitous (pri sip' ə təs) *adj.*: Very steep (p. 574)

amber (am' bər) *n.*: A yellowish or brownish substance that comes from certain trees (p. 574)

Phaëthon, Son of Apollo

Olivia E. Coolidge

Though Apollo always honored the memory of Daphne she was not his only love. Another was a mortal, Clymene,¹ by whom he had a son named Phaëthon. Phaëthon grew up with his mother, who, since she was mortal, could not dwell in the halls of Olympus² or in the palace of the sun. She lived not far from the East in the land of Ethiopia, and as her son grew up, she would point to the place where Eos,³ goddess of the dawn, lighted up the sky and tell him that there his father dwelt. Phaëthon loved to boast of his divine father as he saw the golden chariot riding high through the air. He would remind his comrades of other sons of gods and mortal women who, by virtue of their great deeds, had themselves become gods at last. He must always be first in everything, and in most things this was easy, since he was in truth stronger, swifter, and more daring than the others. Even if he were not victorious, Phaëthon always claimed to be first in honor. He could never bear to be beaten, even if he must risk his life in some rash way to win.

Most of the princes of Ethiopia willingly paid Phaëthon honor, since they admired him greatly for his fire and beauty. There was one boy, however, Epaphos,⁴ who was rumored to be a child of Zeus himself. Since

this was not certainly proved, Phaëthon chose to disbelieve it and to demand from Epaphos the deference that he obtained from all others. Epaphos was proud too, and one day he lost his temper with Phaëthon and turned on him, saying, "You are a fool to believe all that your mother tells you. You are all swelled up with false ideas about your father."

Crimson with rage, the lad rushed home to his mother and demanded that she prove to him the truth of the story that she had often told. "Give me some proof," he implored her, "with which I can answer this insult of Epaphos. It is a matter of life and death to me, for if I cannot, I shall die of shame."

"I swear to you," replied his mother solemnly, "by the bright orb of the sun itself that you are his son. If I swear falsely, may I never look on the sun again, but die before the next time he mounts the heavens. More than this I cannot do, but you, my child, can go to the eastern palace of Phoebus⁵ Apollo—it lies not far away—and there speak with the god himself."

The son of Clymene leaped up with joy at his mother's words. The palace of Apollo was indeed not far. It stood just below the eastern horizon, its tall pillars glistening with bronze and gold. Above these it was white with gleaming ivory, and the great doors were flashing silver, embossed with pictures of earth, sky, and sea, and the gods that

1. **Clymene** (klim' ə nē)

2. **Olympus** (ō lim' pas): A mountain in Northern Greece that was known as the home of the gods.

3. **Eos** (ē əs)

4. **Epaphos** (ep' ə fəs)

5. **Phoebus** (fē' bəs): Means "bright one" in Greek.

dwelt therein. Up the steep hill and the bright steps climbed Phaëthon, passing unafraid through the silver doors, and stood in the presence of the sun. Here at last he was forced to turn away his face, for Phoebus sat in state on his golden throne. It gleamed with emeralds and precious stones, while on the head of the god was a brilliant diamond crown upon which no eye could look undazzled.

Phaëthon hid his face, but the god had recognized his son, and he spoke kindly, asking him why he had come. Then Phaëthon plucked up courage and said, "I come to ask you if you are indeed my father. If you are so, I beg you to give me some proof of it so that all may recognize me as Phoebus' son."

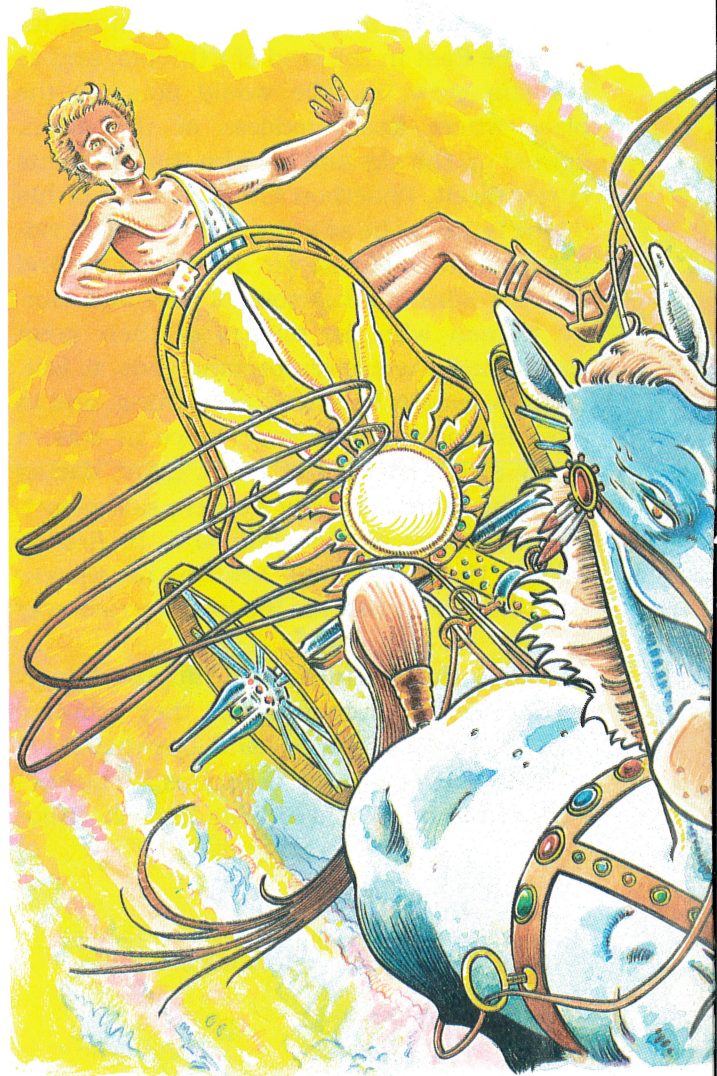
The god smiled, being well pleased with his son's beauty and daring. He took off his crown so that Phaëthon could look at him, and coming down from his throne, he put his arms around the boy, and said, "You are indeed my son and Clymene's, and worthy to be called so. Ask of me whatever thing you wish to prove your origin to men, and you shall have it."

Phaëthon swayed for a moment and was dizzy with excitement at the touch of the god. His heart leaped; the blood rushed into his face. Now he felt that he was truly divine, unlike other men, and he did not wish to be counted with men any more. He looked up for a moment at his radiant father. "Let me drive the chariot of the sun across the heavens for one day," he said.

Apollo frowned and shook his head. "I cannot break my promise, but I will dissuade you if I can," he answered. "How can you drive my chariot, whose horses need a strong hand on the reins? The climb is too steep for you. The immense height will make you dizzy. The swift streams of air in the upper heaven will sweep you off your course.

Even the immortal gods could not drive my chariot. How then can you? Be wise and make some other choice."

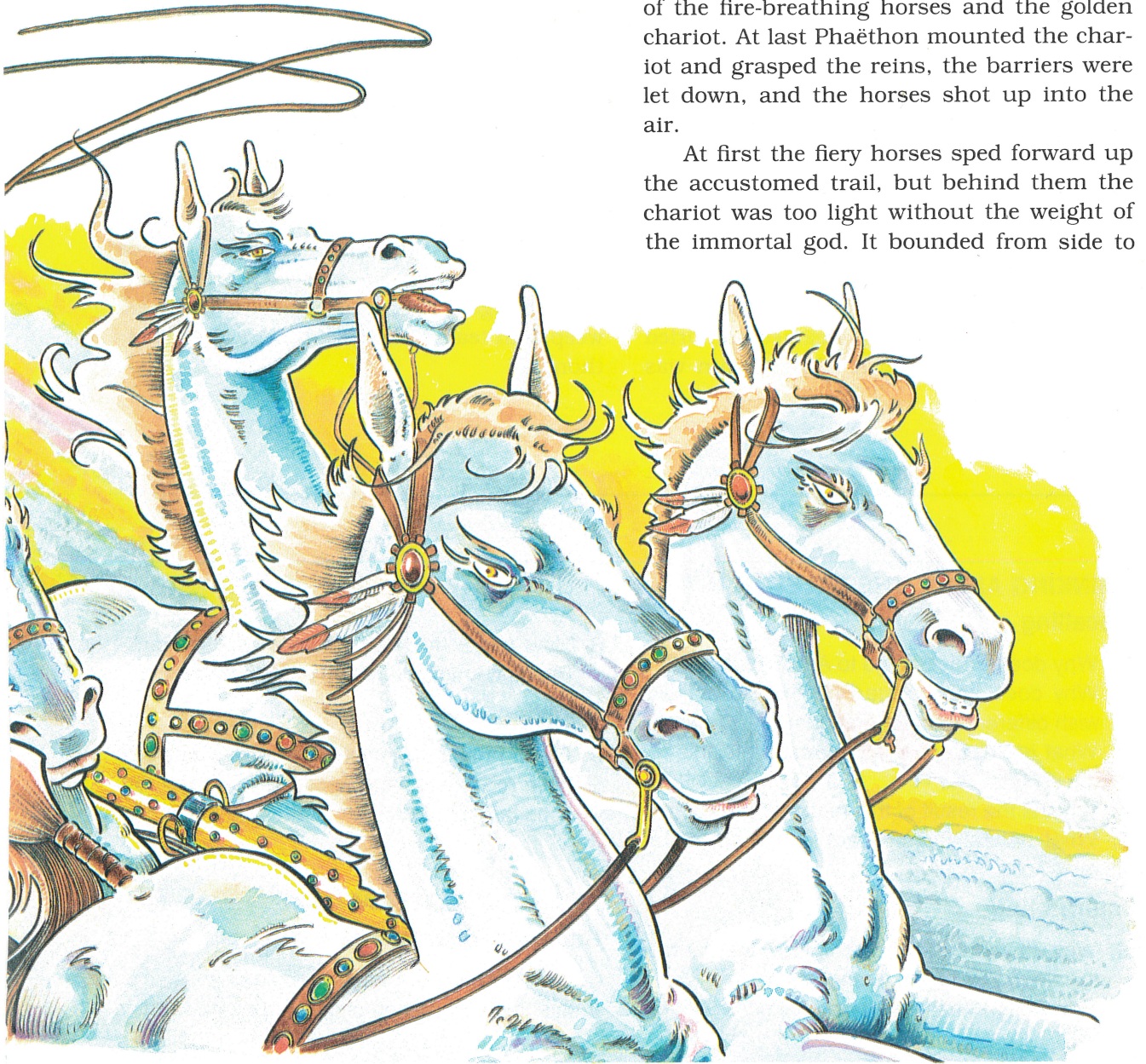
The pride of Phaëthon was stubborn, for he thought the god was merely trying to frighten him. Besides, if he could guide the sun's chariot, would he not have proved his right to be divine rather than mortal? For that he would risk his life. Indeed, once he had seen Apollo's splendor, he did not wish to go back and live among men. Therefore, he insisted on his right until Apollo had to give way.



When the father saw that nothing else would satisfy the boy, he bade the Hours bring forth his chariot and yoke the horses. The chariot was of gold and had two gold-rimmed wheels with spokes of silver. In it there was room for one man to stand and hold the reins. Around the front and sides of it ran a rail, but the back was open. At

the end of a long pole there were yokes for the four horses. The pole was of gold and shone with precious jewels: the golden topaz, the bright diamond, the green emerald, and the flashing ruby. While the Hours were yoking the swift, pawing horses, rosy-fingered Dawn hastened to the gates of heaven to draw them open. Meanwhile Apollo anointed his son's face with a magic ointment, that he might be able to bear the heat of the fire-breathing horses and the golden chariot. At last Phaëthon mounted the chariot and grasped the reins, the barriers were let down, and the horses shot up into the air.

At first the fiery horses sped forward up the accustomed trail, but behind them the chariot was too light without the weight of the immortal god. It bounded from side to



side and was dashed up and down. Phaëthon was too frightened and too dizzy to pull the reins, nor would he have known anyway whether he was on the usual path. As soon as the horses felt that there was no hand controlling them, they soared up, up with fiery speed into the heavens till the earth grew pale and cold beneath them. Phaëthon shut his eyes, trembling at the dizzy, precipitous height. Then the horses dropped down, more swiftly than a falling stone, flinging themselves madly from side to side in panic because they were masterless. Phaëthon dropped the reins entirely and clung with all his might to the chariot rail. Meanwhile as they came near the earth, it dried up and cracked apart. Meadows were reduced to white ashes, cornfields smoked and shriveled, cities perished in flame. Far and wide on the wooded mountains the forests were ablaze, and even the snowclad Alps were bare and dry. Rivers steamed and dried to dust. The great North African plain was

scorched until it became the desert that it is today. Even the sea shrank back to pools and caves, until dried fishes were left baking upon the white-hot sands. At last the great earth mother called upon Zeus to save her from utter destruction, and Zeus hurled a mighty thunderbolt at the unhappy Phaëthon, who was still crouched in the chariot, clinging desperately to the rail. The dart cast him out, and he fell flaming in a long trail through the air. The chariot broke in pieces at the mighty blow, and the maddened horses rushed snorting back to the stable of their master, Apollo.

Unhappy Clymene and her daughters wandered over the whole earth seeking the body of the boy they loved so well. When they found him, they took him and buried him. Over his grave they wept and could not be comforted. At last the gods in pity for their grief changed them into poplar trees, which weep with tears of amber in memory of Phaëthon.

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Recalling

1. Why does Phaëthon go to Apollo's palace?
2. Why does Apollo urge Phaëthon to make a wish different from his first one?
3. What is Phaëthon's secret reason for his request?
4. What is the result of this request?
5. What natural features are explained in this myth?

Interpreting

6. Why do you think Phaëthon feels that he had to "always be first in everything"?
7. How does Phaëthon display his pride with his

classmates? How does he display it with Apollo?

8. How might this story have been different if Phaëthon had resembled his father less?

Applying

9. Given Phaëthon's choice, tell what you would have requested from Apollo. Explain the reasons for your decision.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Hubris

Hubris means excessive pride or arrogance. In this myth, Phaëthon shows hubris by wanting

to become an immortal. However, his attempt to assume his father's godlike powers threatens the earth and causes his own death.

1. Why do you think Phaëthon could not stand to be an ordinary human being?
2. Was Phaëthon's hubris his own fault or was it the result of the fact that he was the son of a god? Explain.
3. Was the punishment that Phaëthon received too harsh? Why or why not?
4. What lesson does this myth suggest?

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Recognizing Clues to the Outcome

Throughout this myth there are clues that Phaëthon's behavior may lead to disaster. You can find these hints by looking for remarks he makes or feelings he experiences that seem exaggerated or too intense. These indicate how desperate he is to prove that he is immortal.

1. Find two examples where Phaëthon feels that he would risk his life to get his way.
2. Why is his reaction to Apollo's embrace a clue to the coming disaster?

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

Understanding Word Histories

Olympus is the highest mountain in Greece. The ancient Greeks imagined that the gods lived

on top of this mountain in a great palace surrounded by swirling clouds. As you learn in this myth, mortals "could not dwell in the halls of Olympus." The word *Olympian* has come to be used as an adjective meaning "majestic" or "celestial."

1. Aside from Mount Olympus and the Greek gods themselves, what kind of place or person would you describe with the adjective *Olympian*?
2. What were the Olympic games in ancient Greece?
3. What are they today?

THINKING AND WRITING

Creating a Modern Myth

You and your literary agent have decided that the story of Phaëthon would make a wonderful best-selling novel. However, readers will not buy your book unless the story is up to date. Brainstorm to gather ideas for putting this myth into a modern setting. Phaëthon's father, for instance, cannot be a god, but he could be the president of a billion-dollar company. In this modern setting, perhaps Phaëthon wants to fly his father's corporate jet. Present your best ideas in a letter to your agent explaining the modern situation and setting for your novel. Then revise the letter to make sure your agent will be convinced that the book will sell.