

# WORLDVIEW GUIDE

## BULFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY: THE AGE OF FABLE



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## CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	I
The World Around . . . . .	3
About the Author . . . . .	7
What Other Notables Said . . . . .	11
Setting, Characters, and Plot Summary . . . . .	13
Worldview Analysis . . . . .	17
Quotables . . . . .	31
21 Significant Questions and Answers . . . . .	33
Further Discussion and Review . . . . .	49
Taking the Classics Quiz . . . . .	51





## INTRODUCTION

Have you ever read a poem and realized you could not fully appreciate it? Say you are reading John Milton's "Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity" and come across references to Isis, Horus, Anubis, and Osiris being put to flight upon the birth of Christ. Would you understand what Milton was talking about? Would you be able to identify these figures from Egyptian mythology? If such allusions perplex you, Thomas Bulfinch intended to help when he wrote his famous collection of mythology, *The Age of Fable*.





## THE WORLD AROUND

The stories in *Bulfinch's Mythology* date back thousands of years before the time of Christ, but the retellings in *The Age of Fable* come from the American banker and writer Thomas Bulfinch in the year 1855.

In the early decades of the United States, classical education, based on the Greek and Latin languages and the study of classic works in those languages, was accessible mainly to male children of wealthy families. But American culture was moving toward democratization, sharing with the many an education that was once limited to the few.<sup>1</sup>

The decades preceding the publication of *Bulfinch's Mythology* saw a flourishing of American literature. Many of these American authors used references to Greek and Roman mythology to tell their stories. Edgar Allan Poe's stories and poems of the 1830s and 1840s often make

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1. Charles Martin, Introduction to *Bulfinch's Mythology* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2006), xxix.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Bulfinch descended from wealthy Boston families, the Bulfinches and the Apthorps.<sup>4</sup> Thomas's father, Charles, took a tour of Europe as a young man. Deeply influenced by the architecture he saw in Europe,<sup>5</sup> Charles went on to become a famous architect of classically-influenced buildings including the Massachusetts State House, Harvard's University Hall, and the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington D.C.<sup>6</sup> Still, because of some bad business deals, Charles and his family did not prosper financially—Charles even spent a month in debtors' prison!

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4. For the biographical information in this section, I have drawn on the excellent, thorough study by Marie Sally Cleary, *Myths for the Millions: Thomas Bulfinch, His America, and His Mythology Book* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007).

5. Cleary, 24.

6. Charles Bulfinch did not design the Capitol building itself, but he directed its restoration and completion as Architect to the Capitol from 1818 to 1829. See Cleary, 124.



## WHAT OTHER NOTABLES SAID

Dudley Fitts, a well-known translator of the classics, observes of Bulfinch,

His great merit lies in his freshness, the apparent spontaneity of his story-telling. Again and again one is touched by the urgent mingling of old and new. It is as though Bulfinch had so saturated his mind in Ovid that he could call the ghost up, without conscious effort and certainly without strain, to exert the ancient enchantment in an unforeseen and unexpectedly appealing way.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Graves, a famous poet, novelist, and mythologist, remarks,

Bulfinch's 'Mythology' is a book that has been enjoyed for generations. Many readers will have first found it in their grandfather's library, perhaps with a

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10. Dudley Fitts, "An Introductory Essay" to Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Fable* (New York, NY: The Heritage Press, 1958), xii.



## SETTING, CHARACTERS, AND PLOT SUMMARY

### *Setting*

The setting is the ancient world, centered on Greece. Bulfinch describes the central point as either Mount Olympus, where the gods lived, or Delphi, with its famous oracle (2).<sup>14</sup>

### *Characters*

The main characters are the gods and goddesses of Greco-Roman mythology. While the Greek names may be more familiar to some readers, Bulfinch mainly uses the Roman names for these gods—as do many of the later poets who allude to them—so you should know both sets

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Press, 2020), 366.

14. Numbers in parentheses correspond to the pages of our Canon Classics edition, *Thomas Bulfinch's Mythology: Age of Fable*.



## WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

First, we will address Bulfinch's unique approach to introducing mythology to his contemporary readers. Then we will provide Christian perspectives about how to read Bulfinch's work more profitably.

### *Bulfinch's Approach*

As a Unitarian, Bulfinch was not interested in defending the historic Christian faith that proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. But in terms of retelling mythology and connecting the myths to later poets, some of whom were Christians, Bulfinch provides a valuable service for his readers.

Bulfinch's approach is based on the *practical* benefits of knowing these myths. In his Preface to the 1855 publication of *The Age of Fable*, Bulfinch observes,

If no other knowledge deserves to be called useful  
but that which helps to enlarge our possessions or to

raise our station in society, then Mythology has no claim to the appellation. But if that which tends to make us happier and better can be called useful, then we claim that epithet for our subject. For Mythology is the handmaid of literature; and literature is one of the best allies of virtue and promoters of happiness.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, Bulfinch claims that studying mythology will not make you rich or famous, but it will help you become a happier and more virtuous person.

Some examples of ways the myths promote virtue come from stories of children who disobey their parents, with disastrous outcomes. In Chapter V, Phaeton insists on flying his father Apollo's chariot that carries the sun across the sky, despite Apollo's strong warning not to. When Phaeton disregards the warning, Apollo gives him instructions: "Keep within the limit of the middle zone, and avoid the northern and the southern alike. You will see the marks of the wheels, and they will serve to guide you" (47). Of course, Phaeton is unable to control the horses, leading eventually to his death. Similarly, in Chapter XX when Daedalus presents Icarus with the flying wings, he charges his son, "keep at a moderate height, for if you fly too low the damp will clog your wings, and if too high the heat will melt them. Keep near me and you will be safe"

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16. Thomas Bulfinch, Preface to *The Age of Fable*, online at <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4925/pg4925.html>. Though this preface is not included in the Canon Classics edition, it is worth reading to get a sense of Bulfinch's goals for his work.