

# NINE MUSES

MODERN PLAYS FROM CLASSIC MYTHS

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*Nine Muses—Softcover sampler*

# PLAYWRIGHT'S FOREWORD

Myth and drama were made for each other. In fact, they have been together for a very long time. No one can say for sure when the first myth was performed on a stage by actors, but the world's oldest plays tell mythic stories. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—Athenian playwrights who wrote during the 5th century B.C.—based most of their plays on mythology.

Playwrights have followed their example up to the present day. Many 20th-century dramatists found exciting stories in Greek and Roman mythology. For example, the American playwright Eugene O'Neill based his trilogy *Mourning Becomes Electra* on the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. Indeed, even as you read these words, some playwright is probably finding inspiration in a classical myth.

What explains the long, happy marriage between mythology and drama? Perhaps it has something to do with the theatre's power to breathe life into the world's oldest stories. On the stage, the gods of Olympus live again. So do mortal heroes and heroines like Odysseus and Psyche.

So this collection continues a truly ancient tradition. Here you will find nine plays based on stories from classical mythology. When you read these plays aloud—or better yet, perform them on stage—I hope you will feel the magic of their stories come alive. Even if you only read the plays silently, you still can conjure up some of that magic in the theatre of your imagination.

Of course, a mere nine stories barely scratch the surface of classical mythology. There are hundreds more, and I hope you will get to know many of them. In the back of this book, you will find an assortment of “Thumbnail Myths”—very short summaries of other stories to be found in classical mythology.

The stories of these plays have been told many times in the past, and never in quite the same way. Like all other playwrights and storytellers, I have approached them with my own ideas, feelings, and questions. The “Playwright's Postscript” following each play will tell you something about choices I have made and liberties I have taken. The bibliography at the end of this book will help you find other retellings of the stories you read here.

But don't stop there. You can also retell the myths in this book in stories, poems, and plays of your own—or simply by repeating them aloud to some other person. For myths live on by being told again and again.

# EROS AND PSYCHE

## CHARACTERS:

ERATO (er' a tō), the Muse of love poetry

PSYCHE (sī' kē), a young princess

KING, Psyche's father

EROS (er' ōs), the god of love, Aphrodite's son

APHRODITE (ăf ro dī' tē), the goddess of love and beauty

PSYCHE'S SISTERS:

OPAL

BERYL

ORACLE

ZEPHYR (zef' er), the west wind

GATEKEEPER

1ST SERVANT

2ND SERVANT

CERBERUS (ser' ber us), the three-headed watchdog of the Underworld

PERSEPHONE (per sef' ō nē), the queen of the Underworld

## OTHER NAMES MENTIONED IN THE PLAY:

HADES (hā' dēz), the king of the Underworld

ZEUS (zūs), the king of the Olympian gods

HERA (hir' a), the queen of the Olympian gods

HERMES (hur' mēz), the messenger god

ATHENA (a thē' na), the goddess of war and wisdom

**SETTING:** *A kingdom in Greece, Eros' palace, Aphrodite's palace, the Underworld*

**TIME:** *No time in particular*

*(The visible stage is bare except for two stools. Upstage, a long bench is concealed behind a curtain. PSYCHE enters and speaks to audience.)*

**PSYCHE.** How deep is the earth? How high is the sky? What are the stars made of?

*(PSYCHE freezes. ERATO enters and addresses the audience.)*

**ERATO.** A young woman's curiosity—that's my theme. We've heard such stories before, haven't we? You may remember Pandora, who just couldn't keep her itchy fingers off

the lid of that jar. And so she released all kinds of evils into the world. And, oh, there was Eve, too. She just had to find out what that apple tasted like, and so Paradise itself was lost! Ah, women and their curiosity! They've brought such terrible trouble to us all, there's no doubt about it. And yet . . . I wonder if we're only getting one side of the story. Has no good ever come from feminine curiosity? I wonder . . . *(Pause)*

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Oh, excuse me. I'm getting way ahead of myself, as usual. I'm Erato, and I'm the Muse of romantic love. Now, you hear all sorts of popular songs about falling in love, falling out of love, unrequited love, betrayal in love. Well, I inspire those songs. I've been doing it for millennia. It's a thriving business, always has been. Love's an endless topic—and one to inspire great curiosity, isn't it? I mean, who really understands it? And who doesn't want to know more about it? Now, when we talk about love, the whole issue of beauty is sure to come up sooner or later. This man is handsome, that one is ugly. This woman is pretty, that one is plain. One oughtn't care one way or the other about people's looks—but one does. And beauty plays a crucial role in the story I'm about to tell.

*(The KING comes onto the stage. He freezes near PSYCHE.)*

**ERATO.** In a kingdom somewhere in Greece, there lives a king with a very beautiful daughter named Psyche. Not that Psyche's beauty brings her any happiness. Far from it!

*(The KING and PSYCHE come to life.)*

**PSYCHE.** No, Papa.

**KING.** But, Psyche—

**PSYCHE.** I won't do it, that's all.

**KING.** They're calling your name. Listen.

**PSYCHE.** Yes, I hear them. And every day, I go out on the balcony and let them have a look at me. It's humiliating, Papa. I just can't do it anymore.

**KING.** Is it so terrible that they think you're beautiful?

**PSYCHE.** They think all kinds of things about me. They think I'm a goddess. They even *pray* to me! I'm just a human being, Papa. I don't have any business being prayed to. Can't you do something to stop it?

**KING.** I've tried everything I could think of. I've made laws forbidding people to worship you. I've sent priests and scholars throughout the land to tell people you're *not* a goddess. But no one believes it. And they keep coming here.

**PSYCHE.** I can't do *anything* anymore. I can't leave the palace, not even to go shopping or to take a walk in the forest. When I do, I'm mobbed by people. I'm a prisoner here. Even the servants look at me like I'm some kind of freak.

**KING.** Nobody thinks you're a freak. They think you're the most beautiful creature alive. Is that so bad? Why, every young woman in the world must envy you. Can't you enjoy all the praise and attention, just a little?

**PSYCHE.** No. It's a curse. I don't think of myself as beautiful. I do my best to not *be* beautiful. Look at the way I keep my hair. Look at how I dress. I try to look ordinary—even homely. Why can't people see me that way?

**KING.** Because, my dear daughter, you *are* beautiful—whether you want to be or not.

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**PSYCHE.** Maybe I could pour a bucket of mud over myself.

**KING.** To make yourself ugly? It won't work. Your beauty is something you carry inside. No matter how you try to look, people will always find you beautiful.

**PSYCHE.** But it's terrible to live this way—and terrible for you, too. My poor Papa, because of me, your whole kingdom is completely out of control. Whatever can we do?

**KING.** What about taking a husband, Psyche? If you married, perhaps this fascination with your beauty would simply fade away.

**PSYCHE.** No one will marry me. No man would dare marry a goddess. Not that I've ever met the man I *would* marry. Men are all so dull. I've never met one with an interesting idea in his head—or who can answer any of the questions I yearn to have answered.

**KING.** But *nobody* can answer your questions, child! Your curiosity is boundless—and completely unreasonable. “How deep is the earth?” you keep asking people. And “How high is the sky?” And “What are the stars made of?” Why, only a god could answer such questions!

**PSYCHE.** Then perhaps some day I should talk with a god.

**KING** (*shaking his head sadly*). You're such a dreamer, Psyche.

**PSYCHE.** Yes, I suppose I am.

**KING.** But now—*please* step out onto

the balcony! I'm afraid they'll break into the palace.

(*PSYCHE walks directly downstage and presents herself to an imaginary crowd. VOICES are heard from offstage.*)

**VOICES.** Hail, Psyche, of surpassing beauty! Hail, Psyche, our immortal goddess!

(*PSYCHE freezes.*)

**ERATO.** An immortal goddess, they call her. Dangerous words. For you see, *real* gods and goddesses have a way of resenting such talk.

(*PSYCHE exits.*)

**ERATO.** Not that it's the least bit Psyche's fault. The gods aren't always just, that's all.

(*EROS enters carrying a bow, with a quiver slung over his shoulder, then freezes.*)

**ERATO.** Take a look at this strapping young winged fellow with the bow and arrow. You've probably heard him called Cupid and have seen him portrayed as a little winged baby. The ancient Greeks knew him by the name of Eros, and as you can see, he's actually a handsome young man. A lot of people blame him for all the confusion and craziness of romantic love—and with good reason, I think. You see those arrows of his? If he hits you with one—even if it just grazes your skin—you'll fall hopelessly in love.

(*While ERATO has been speaking, EROS has unfrozen and taken an imaginary arrow out of his quiver. He puts it in his bow and draws the*

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*string tightly, pointing the arrow directly at the audience.)*

**ERATO.** Look out! He's aiming right at you!

*(EROS relaxes his pull and puts the imaginary arrow back in the quiver. He freezes.)*

**ERATO.** Oops, sorry. False alarm. He was just exercising his biceps. If only he'd practice his *aim* from time to time! I swear, sometimes he seems to shoot those arrows purely at random.

*(APHRODITE comes onto the stage and freezes.)*

**ERATO.** Anyway, right now he's got other things on his mind. He's been summoned by his mother, Aphrodite—the goddess of love. She's got something urgent to discuss with him.

*(ERATO steps aside to watch. EROS and APHRODITE come to life.)*

**EROS.** Hello, Mother.

**APHRODITE.** Hello, Eros, dear. Do sit down.

*(EROS sits on a stool.)*

**APHRODITE.** Have you noticed anything amiss lately?

**EROS.** Like what, Mother?

**APHRODITE.** Like a lapse of public interest in my goddessness, perhaps. Hardly anyone is worshipping at my temples these days. And how long has it been since anyone offered a sacrifice to me? You *have* noticed this little problem, haven't you?

**EROS.** Yes, I suppose I have, Mother.

**APHRODITE.** It just won't do, dear. A goddess must have worshippers and sacrifices to maintain her prestige. What will the other Olympians think if mortals stop fawning over me altogether? Would you happen to know the cause of this unfortunate situation?

**EROS** *(mumbling).* Well, I've heard . . .

**APHRODITE.** Speak up, dear. I can't hear you.

**EROS** *(a little louder).* I've heard that there's this very beautiful young woman who—

**APHRODITE** *(interrupting).* Beautiful? How beautiful?

**EROS.** Um, extremely beautiful.

**APHRODITE.** As beautiful as me?

**EROS.** That's what people say.

**APHRODITE.** Astonishing! Do continue.

**EROS.** Some people say that she *is* you—that the goddess Aphrodite has appeared on earth in mortal form. People are traveling from all over the world just to get a look at her.

**APHRODITE.** And so people have forgotten all about the real *me*.

**EROS.** That's what I hear.

**APHRODITE.** Yes, I've heard much the same thing. Well, Eros, a dreadful mistake has been made. I mean, I *am* divine—and unmistakably so, I think. Why, even my birth was miraculous. I sprang from the foam of an ocean wave—a creation of the waters!

**EROS.** I know, Mother.

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**APHRODITE** (*ignoring him*). Can this mere girl claim any such marvelous birth? No! She's a creation of mere flesh—of vulgar earth, that's all. Filthy, sooty, clumpy, smelly *dirt*. This attention she's attracting—it's not just sacrilegious, it's unhygienic. We've got to do something about it right away. But what?

**EROS**. I'm sure you've got an idea, Mother.

**APHRODITE**. Well, yes, I suppose I do, dear. I want you to find the girl right away. Wound her with one of your arrows. Then make sure that she falls madly, hopelessly in love with the ugliest, most repulsive creature imaginable. That will make an example of her, once and for all.

**EROS**. But, Mother—

**APHRODITE**. I know, it sounds harsh. But we've got to be ruthless, if only to teach her a lesson. I hope you don't think it's a matter of vanity, dear. I hope *nobody* thinks I've got a vain bone in my body! It's the principle of the thing. Why, if we let this go, we'll soon have mortals pretending to be Zeus, Hera, Hermes, Athena, and all the rest. The cosmic order will go all topsy-turvy. We've got to put a stop to it immediately.

**EROS**. But, Mother—

**APHRODITE**. *What*, dear? Do speak up!

**EROS**. Is it really her fault she's so beautiful?

**APHRODITE**. Is it really her—? Such a question! Eros, I believe you've

missed the entire point of our little talk. *Of course*, it's her fault she's so beautiful! It's anybody's choice to make. I myself could be fearfully ugly if took a mind to it—not that I ever would, since being beautiful is my sacred duty. Why, if the girl would only wear a bag over her head, I'd have no quarrel with her. But if she's being mistaken for *me*, it can only be deliberate. But what makes you say such a thing? You're not falling in love with her yourself, are you?

**EROS**. Of course not. I've never even seen her.

**APHRODITE**. And you *are* devoted to your dear mother?

**EROS**. Of course, I am.

**APHRODITE**. Always and forever?

**EROS**. Yes.

**APHRODITE**. Eros, *say* it.

**EROS** (*wearily—he has to say this a lot*). I *am* devoted to my dear mother, always and forever.

**APHRODITE**. What a precious little winged darling you are to me! Now—get to work!

(EROS and APHRODITE *exit*. ERATO *steps forward*.)

**ERATO**. Did I happen to mention that Psyche has two older sisters? No, I don't believe I did. They're fairly beautiful, but nothing like Psyche. And they're married, but not especially happily.

(OPAL, BERYL, and the KING *come onto the stage, then freeze*.)

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**ERATO.** In fact, they live what you might call in-between sorts of lives. As you can imagine, it's hard to live an in-between life when your sister is being worshipped as a goddess.

*(ERATO steps aside to watch. OPAL, BERYL, and the KING come to life.)*

**OPAL.** Father, dear, this whole "goddess" thing has gotten completely out of hand.

**KING.** I quite agree, but what's to be done?

**BERYL.** Couldn't she just look a tad less beautiful?

**OPAL.** Maybe even a little bit ugly?

**KING.** That's not a solution, and you know it.

**BERYL.** What about marriage, then?

**KING.** You know your sister. She has extremely high expectations for a husband.

**OPAL.** Tut-tut, the girl always wants the moon and the stars.

**BERYL.** An ordinary man just won't do for her.

**OPAL.** I settled for an ordinary man, and I have no complaints—or at least not many.

**BERYL.** She has to learn to live with lower expectations, like the rest of us.

**KING.** I just don't know what to do.

**OPAL.** If you ask me, this is a good time to go to the oracle.

**BERYL.** Yes! At the very least, the oracle can tell you whom Psyche should marry.

*(OPAL, BERYL, and the KING freeze. ERATO steps forward.)*

**ERATO.** "What's an oracle?" you're asking. Well, it's a kind of fortune-teller. And like most fortune-tellers, oracles are notoriously vague.

*(OPAL, BERYL, and the KING exit.)*

**ERATO.** Let's say you ask an oracle "How long will I live?" The oracle is liable to reply "Red's your favorite color." Or suppose you ask "Will I ever be rich?" The oracle just might say "You're very fond of animals."

*(The ORACLE comes onto the stage and freezes.)*

**ERATO.** But when the king goes to the local oracle to ask about his daughter, the reply is frighteningly clear.

*(ERATO steps aside to watch as the ORACLE delivers her prophecy. She can either recite or sing. She can also dance a bit.)*

**ORACLE.**

A husband for your daughter—  
Now just who might he be?  
My answer will prove odder  
Than you may now foresee.

Prepare her for a wedding,  
But in no gown of white.  
For terror and for dreading  
A black dress will do right.

A monster fierce and frightful  
Will take her by the hand.  
His claim on her is rightful,  
So don't scorn his demand.

And give up all resistance;  
It lies beyond your scope;

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And yearn for no assistance;  
And also give up hope.

At dawn, you must awake her  
And bid her to be meek;  
Then to the mountain take her  
And guide her to its peak.

Then leave her there—yes, leave her.  
It's not for you to see  
The one who'll come to thief her  
From your company.

Then go home and forget her—  
Forget her if you can.  
Forgetfulness is better  
Than trying to understand

The strange and untold reason  
For her to have to go.  
She was yours for a season;  
Content yourself just so.

*(The ORACLE exits. ERATO steps forward.)*

**ERATO.** Horrible words! And oracles are not to be doubted or disobeyed—at least not when they make some sense. But as you can imagine, the king is reluctant.

*(The KING and PSYCHE enter.)*

**KING.** No. It's impossible.

**PSYCHE.** Papa, I've got to go. It's the oracle's command.

**KING.** But to give you to a monster!  
How can I do that?

**PSYCHE.** Poor Papa, you're crying! But you mustn't cry—not now. The time for crying was when I was cursed with such terrible beauty. But soon I'll be free!

**KING.** Free? To marry a monster?

**PSYCHE.** Why do you think that's bad? Did the oracle say I wouldn't be happy with a monster? After all, what am I but a kind of monster? A monster might make a perfect husband for me.

**KING.** But you don't know.

**PSYCHE** (*laughs*). Whoever *does* know what they're getting into when they marry? I'll make the best of whatever happens. But now you've got to follow the oracle's instructions. You've got to take me to the mountaintop tomorrow morning.

**KING.** If I must. But the oracle also told me to do something I swear *never* to do.

**PSYCHE.** What's that?

**KING.** She told me to forget you. But I won't ever forget you.

**PSYCHE** (*holding his hand*). Nor I you, Papa.

*(The KING and PSYCHE freeze. ERATO steps forward. As she starts speaking, OPAL and BERYL enter and freeze near the KING and PSYCHE.)*

**ERATO.** So the next morning, the king leads a grim procession escorting Psyche to the mountaintop. It looks more like a funeral than a wedding.

*(The KING, OPAL, BERYL, and PSYCHE come to life and pantomime their farewells while ERATO continues speaking. Then all except PSYCHE exit. PSYCHE steps downstage and freezes.)*

**ERATO.** Everybody is very sad as they say their farewells to our young

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heroine. Even Psyche's sisters cry a little—or at least they appear to. Then, as the oracle ordered, the procession turns and goes back down the mountain, leaving Psyche all alone. She stands at the edge of a cliff, looking out over the valley.

(ERATO *steps aside to watch*. PSYCHE *comes to life*.)

**PSYCHE** (*turning slowly and calling out*). Hello! Is anybody there? You can come for me now. Everybody is gone. And I'm not afraid. (*To herself, uneasily*) Or at least not very.

(As ERATO is speaking, PSYCHE *pantomimes being thrown off balance*. ZEPHYR *enters, dressed in a black robe and a black hood to suggest invisibility*. He *steps behind PSYCHE and guides her outstretched arms in imaginary flight*.)

**ERATO**. At that moment comes a powerful gust of wind. Before Psyche can catch her balance, she topples from the cliff. But does she fall to her death in the valley below? No!

**PSYCHE**. I'm not falling! I'm flying!

**ZEPHYR**. To be more precise, I'm *wafting* you.

**PSYCHE**. But who *are* you? *Where* are you? I can't see you.

**ZEPHYR**. My name is Zephyr.

**PSYCHE**. I've never been wafted before. It's a wonderful feeling. Are you a bird? An angel?

**ZEPHYR**. I'm the west wind.

**PSYCHE**. Are you my husband?

**ZEPHYR**. I wish I were. I work for your husband. He gave me orders to waft you.

**PSYCHE**. But *where* are you wafting me?

**ZEPHYR**. Where would you like to be wafted?

**PSYCHE**. Oh, look! Deep down in the valley by a running stream, there's a splendid palace surrounded by beautiful gardens! I'd love to be wafted there!

**ZEPHYR** (*with a chuckle*). As luck would have it, that's just where I'm supposed to waft you. It's your husband's home.

(ZEPHYR *lets go of PSYCHE's arms and exits*. No longer flying, PSYCHE *gazes around at an imaginary garden*.)

**ERATO**. Zephyr wafts her gently into the garden, and Psyche winds her way through its pathways to the magnificent palace gates.

**PSYCHE**. Well, this must be home.

(PSYCHE *knocks on an imaginary door*. Her hand movement is accompanied by offstage knocks.)

**PSYCHE**. Is anybody here?

(The GATEKEEPER *enters—dressed, like ZEPHYR, in a black robe and hood to suggest invisibility*. He *opens the imaginary door*.)

**GATEKEEPER**. Step right this way, madam. We've been awaiting you.

**PSYCHE**. A talking door?

**GATEKEEPER**. No, an invisible gatekeeper.

**PSYCHE**. Invisible?

**GATEKEEPER**. Yes. That doesn't displease you, I hope.

**PSYCHE**. No. It's just a bit of a surprise. Is the master—er, is my husband in?