



Zeus and Europa

Author: Moschus

Time Period: 999 BCE–1 BCE

Country or Culture: Greek

Genre: Myth

OVERVIEW

Accounts of abduction and rape recur throughout Western history, spanning thousands of years from oral cultures to the present. A complex theme rooted in deception, violence, and overwhelming passion, it assumes many forms and meanings in different contexts. The myth of Zeus disguised as a bull and smitten by the maidenly beauty of Europa is central to this tradition, even given local variations in folk tradition. Scholarly consensus suggests that the Europa myth originated in Crete. According to one commentator, the story of Europa and the bull “is one of the oldest and most widespread myths of antiquity,” originally appearing in graphic form throughout the Mediterranean and later transmitted orally and through writing (Ziolkowski 27). Working around the same time as Homer, Hesiod mentions Europa in his *Theogony*. Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad* relates a sequence of momentous abductions and rapes, including the abduction of Helen from Sparta by Paris, which caused the siege and eventual downfall of Troy at the hands of the Greek army led by Helen’s husband, Menelaus, and his brother Agamemnon. The *Iliad* also contains a humorous version of the Europa myth in which Zeus attempts to seduce his wife, Hera, by telling her that he desires her even more than he desired the princess Europa, with whom he had two sons. Other ancient accounts of the Europa myth include those of the Roman poets Horace and Ovid.

At 166 lines, “Europa” by the Greek idyllic poet Moschus (ca. 150 BCE) is the longest extant version of this myth. A highly stylized poem featuring sudden scene shifts and rapid pacing, it begins with Europa dreaming, surrounded by her friends in a

lush pastoral setting. In the dream, “two lands near and far” in the guise of women struggle to abduct Europa (Moschus 429; 2.1–21). The dreaming Europa recognizes one of the women as a native of her country. Though this woman claims to be her mother, Europa willingly goes with the rougher, foreign-looking woman (the outlander), who invokes Zeus’s decree that Europa depart with her. Awakening from this strange dream, Europa seeks her companions, who are frolicking and splashing in a nearby brook, filling decorative baskets with flowers. Soon Zeus appears among them in the form of a gentle bull, entices the virginal Europa to mount his back, and swiftly transports her across the sea to Crete, where he reveals his identity and his deep love for her. They marry and have children, one of whom was Minos, “the generic name for the kings of Crete during their Minoan sea-empire of the second millennium BC” (Grant 339).

The Zeus and Europa myth functions on many levels and lends itself to different interpretations and approaches. Commentators have noted, for example, that as a geopolitical allegory the women in Europa’s dream could personify Asia (Europa’s homeland) and the West (Greece or Crete). The course of the action implies a transition from enmity and conflict to a cultural sphere in which alien cultures and peoples find harmony in a new civilization. A psychoanalytic analysis of the myth might emphasize the subtle connections between deception and erotic desire. A feminist approach might critique the Zeus and Europa myth as a self-serving rationalization of male sexual aggression and patriarchal oppression generally. Some modernist artists and writers view Europa herself as a symbol of liberated female desire. A historical perspective demonstrates that no single explanation exhausts the myth’s meaning, which is one reason why it has persisted in various forms into the twenty-first century.

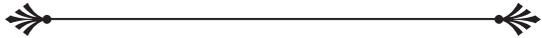
SUMMARY

As characters, Zeus and Europa feature in all ancient versions of the myth, including later Roman adaptations and graphic representations. In the Greek Olympian pantheon, Zeus is the preeminent deity. Europa is said to be a Phoenician princess from Tyre. Roman writers refer to Zeus as Jupiter or Jove, while Europa retains her Asiatic identity in the ancient versions. Zeus also assumes the guise of a bull. Many scholars agree that what has been transmitted to us about the Zeus and Europa myth comes chiefly from the poetry of Moschus, Horace, and Ovid.

In Moschus's telling, Europa is chosen by Zeus from a group of maidens because he is smitten by her beauty and by Eros, the "only vanquisher of Zeus" (435; 2.75). At home, Europa has a disturbing dream of two women vying for custody of her, which foreshadows her abduction by Zeus. She awakens in a confused state of fear and arousal because of the dream's ambiguity and startling realism. She questions the dream's meaning aloud and then goes outside to join her friends, who are picking spring flowers and bathing in a nearby river.

At this point, the story launches into a curious digression about Europa's flower basket. This highly wrought basket was made by Hephaestus, the Greek god of artisans and blacksmiths, who gave it to Libya on the occasion of her ravishment by Poseidon, the "Earth-Shaker." Libya is said to be a personification of the region near Egypt and, in one genealogy, is said to be Zeus's granddaughter. Libya gave Hephaestus's basket to her daughter with Poseidon, Telephassa, who in turn gave it to her daughter, Europa. In this passage, the Aegean gift economy intersects with the tangled genealogical web of Greek gods, demigods, and humans.

This flower basket has further significance because its elaborate filigree hints at Europa's abduction in another tale involving Zeus. These images tell a story of role reversal, however, with the priestess Io in the guise of a heifer skimming over a sea made of "blue lacquer" (431; 2.45–46) until she arrives, a brass figure, at the bank of the streaming Nile, which "was of silver wrought" (433; 2.49). At that point, Zeus (depicted in gold) gently touches the young cow, turning her back into Io. Underneath the rim of the basket, Hephaestus also fashioned images of Hermes, a guide and go-between, and Argus, a giant who is Io's guardian. Argus is associated in Greek mythology with the



So saying, she sat her down smiling upon his back . . . but suddenly the bull, possessed of his desire, leapt up and made hot-foot for the sea. Then did the rapt Europa turn her about and stretch forth her hands and call upon her dear companions; but nay, they might not come at her, and the sea-shore reached, 'twas till forward, forward till he was faring over the wide waves with hooves as unharmed of the water as the finds of any dolphin.

"Europa," The Poems of Moschus



epithet *panoptes*, a creature who "surpassed all others in ever-waking eyes" (433; 2.51–52). This tableau scrolls over the edge of Europa's flower basket and concludes in a dramatic scene in which a spectacular bird emerges from Argus's "purple blood" (433; 2.52). The bird motif suggests the mythical Phoenix, a sacred symbol of life eternally renewing itself through death. Moschus does not make clear that Zeus had sent Hermes to slay Argus and rescue Io from Hera, Zeus's long-suffering, jealous wife. Zeus used animal disguises and other ploys to conceal his extramarital affairs from Hera, often without success.

Moschus suggests that Europa's comeliness and social rank resembles the "Child o' the Foam among the Graces" (433; 2.69), a reference to Aphrodite, Greek goddess of erotic love and beauty, whose name and birth both relate to foam. The foam image recurs a few lines later when Zeus, appearing as an attractive bull, suddenly appears in the meadow, and as it tenderly licks Europa's neck, she gently wipes away "the foam that was thick upon his mouth" (435; 2.94). Soon, Europa is enticed to mount the bull's back and is swiftly transported across the sea, clutching the bull's horn (which is associated with Minoan religious practices). En route, the sea god Poseidon pilots their course while the Tritons, messengers and heralds of