



CLASSICISM FOR THE EUROPEAN DRIVER

or... The Highway Code for Classicists

References



Like many self-proclaimed tricksters, **Sisyphus** annoyed just about everyone, and so it was only right and proper that he be condemned for all eternity to roll a huge stone up a hill, only for it to roll down again. Most of us will feel empathy for that situation. Few of us will actually have to emulate him.



When the **Sphinx** was outwitted by Oedipus, she was so annoyed that she leaped from her favourite rock and was dashed into a thousand pieces. And that was the end of her. Which just goes to show - you should never play games with someone presenting pretty serious psychological issues.



As is the way with fire-breathing giants, **Cacus** attracted the attention of various macho heroes of the Ancient World. His fate was sealed when he was sitting at home in his cave, enjoying the fruits of a perfectly innocent cattle-raid. Hercules heard the mooing of the expropriated cattle, stormed in unannounced and killed the giant. Cacus had a sister, the unfortunately-named Caca, also of the fire-breathing persuasion.

Vulcan, dad to Cacus and Caca, spent a lot of time at his forge, forging this and that, and hammering to his heart's content.



Woe betide you if you were a Vestal Virgin and mislaid your virginity: the punishment was to be buried alive. Not pleasant. Quite enough to put you off going out on a Saturday night. **Vesta**, being the Roman hearth-goddess, liked her servants to stay at home, looking after the fires.



On the Scythian steppes there lived a fabulous people named the **Arimaspi**. They were said to possess only one eye - per person, naturally: one eye for a whole people would be quite inconvenient - and to spend their working days trying to prise a hoard of gold from a bunch of griffins. There are probably worse jobs. But with one eye apiece, it could be a bit of an uphill struggle. Perhaps the Arimaspi still live on the Scythian steppes, perhaps they're still vying with the griffins: stranger things have happened.



More famously ocularly disabled were the **Cyclops**. Certainly residents of a country without laws or government - probably Sicily: but hey! let's not be prejudiced - they spent their life as herders and/or as workers in the forge of Vulcan. Most famous of these free spirits was **Polyphemus**, encountered by that man who was late home for tea, Odysseus. That famous wanderer blinded Polyphemus in his one eye and then escaped from his cave. Tough gig.





Daedelus, something like the Da Vinci of his day (but without any stupid codes for latter-day mystics to break), managed to get himself into a bit of a pickle in Crete, where he had just built a labyrinth to house the Minotaur. Oh, and a hollow cow - but that's another story. Anyway, having being detained, he decided to make some wings for himself and his son Icarus. Though made of not much more than sticking-plaster and some feathers, the wings worked a treat. Daedelus managed to fly to the Bay of Naples and thence to Sicily, landing at Ryanair's 'Naples Airport' - no mean flight in those days. He took no hand-luggage obviously.



His son **Icarus** sealed his own fate. Boys being boys, he thought he'd push things to the limit, flew too close to the sun and - wham! - the wax that held the feathers together melted, and before you know it, there's Icarus at the bottom of the deep blue sea. All's well that end's well, though - his dad renamed the nearby island to Icaria and the surrounding sea to the Icarian Sea.



One of the few Roman gods to have no Greek equivalent was **Janus**, who spent his time looking both ways. The god of school-crossings. The Greeks threw caution to the winds, and never looked both ways. Having said that, would you rather drive in Italy or in Greece? Hard choice. Just why Janus looked both ways has never been properly established - perhaps he had just been brought up that way. Still, he got a whole month named after him, which can't be bad. His temple in Rome had double gates - left open in times of peace, and closed in times of war: that way, the citizens never had to read the newspapers.



At the entrance to the Underworld stood a dog. Not a Labrador or a Spaniel, or some child-friendly sort. More one of the pit-bull type. His owner was usually depicted in art as an overweight, skull-shaven man in a shell-suit. The dog, **Cerberus**, had anything between three and fifty heads, depending on whether he'd had a bit of exercise that day. Hercules, who could never leave anything alone, decided to bring him up from Hell, thereby kick-starting the tradition of macho men to have growling dogs on the end of a leash.



Minos' wife **Pasiphaë** had some serious issues. Not content simply with falling in love with a bull sent by Poseidon for sacrifice, she persuaded the artist Daedelus to build a hollow cow for her to climb inside and to be impregnated by said bull. I shall leave the mechanics to your imagination. Kinky, or what? And what *was* the bull thinking? Could he not tell the difference?



The resulting child of this dubious union was the **Minotaur**, half-man, half-bull. Even in those odd days, it was deemed best to hide the poor kid away in a labyrinth (Daedelus again). And if the king decided to sent in a few boys and girls as human sacrifice, was it the kid's fault? I think not.



But let's probe the family history and you'll not be surprised at how things turned out. Very tacky indeed. Minos, the king of Crete, was one of three children of **Europa**, a lady who was carried away by Zeus, during one of his binges. The only thing was - Zeus appeared to her in the form of a bull. Is there a pattern here? Anyway, Minos, son of a bull and a woman, marries a woman who fancies a bit of a bull and gives birth to a bull-man. Mrs. Minos could perhaps have

saved herself a lot of trouble and stayed in bed at home.
Just a normal day for the Cretan Social Services.

Meanwhile, back in Sicily, home of tyrants... To be fair, tyrants sprang up everywhere, and one was just as nasty as the next. In Sicily, there was **Phalaris**, whose speciality was sticking his victims inside a hollow bronze bull and - no, not the Pasiphaean rhythm method, you'll be thankful to hear - just roasting them alive.

Cows, bulls and other cattle fair got about in those days. There was **Io**, whom Zeus changed into a heifer in order to protect her from the truly soap-operatic jealousies of the goddess Hera (*aka* Juno). There is no mention of any hanky-panky, but you just have to wonder - Zeus, bulls and heifers?



In the days before blood-sports were banned, one of the leading exponents of the art was young **Actaeon**. A man of quite natural appetite, he got a little excited when, in the woods, he came across the goddess Artemis bathing naked in a pool. She, annoyed at the intrusion, turned the huntsman into a stag and set his own hounds after him. They duly hunted him down and tore him to pieces. A salutary tale for those knuckleheads who wish to reverse the ban on hunting. And a warning to everyone else to steer clear of the bathroom in the morning, should Artemis comes to stay. Not only could you end up at the wrong end of a hound, but there is also a statue of Artemis which depicts her as being covered all over with breasts, symbolising her connections with childbirth. Perhaps that was the reason she was so annoyed with Actaeon - not the kind of thing a young lady would like to have noised about. Would make an awesome Page 3 stunner, though.

Artemis also had the golden-horned Cerynian Hind dedicated to her, a fact that bullet-headed **Hercules** appears not to have noted. Either that, or he had not heard what happened to Actaeon. Or he was just plain stupid. He blunders in and tracks the celebrated hind for a good twelve months, before capturing it alive. Fortunately, Artemis did not notice, possibly too busy applying cream to all her cracked nipples, so he was free to go after the Erymanthian Boar - but that's another story.



Pegasus was, of course, half-horse, half-bird. Nothing going on there, then. His mum was Medusa, not a particularly attractive woman, and he was formed from her blood when she was murdered by Perseus. Sometimes you have to wonder about the Ancients.



The citizens of Troy were a particularly naïve bunch. When a wooden horse turns up outside the gates, with a huge label stating 'Sorry, guys - here's something to make up for all the hassle', they just dragged it inside and left it unguarded overnight. The **Trojan Horse** to end all Trojan Horses. Had the thing turned up a midday, this event might have given rise to the saying 'There's no such thing as a free lunch.' Instead, the best they could do was 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.' - not so snappy, nor very PC, in these modern United European times.





There was quite a bit of it about in the Ancient World - cross-species breeding. The **Centaurs** were half-human, half-horse, and you really have to wonder how THAT happened. They didn't win many Good Citizen awards either - binge-drinking, chasing women and fighting. Much like a county-town on a Saturday night. Only without the half-horse. Something of an anomaly among the Centaurs was Chiron (not to be confused with Charon, ferryman over the River Styx) who had a bit of a reputation as a master of medicine, music and archery.



Down at the Straits of Messina - Sicily again: there's a pattern emerging here - lived a sea-monster named **Scylla**. The usual outfit - six heads, a ring of barking dog round her waist. Why make do with one head when three, six, fifty will do? Some rationalise her down to a giant crab, an octopus or a squid. But Odysseus knew better. Sailors were well-advised to avoid Scylla, and frequently gave that particular promontory a wide berth.



However, there was a problem with Scylla. And that was **Charybdis**. This was a strong whirlpool in - where else? - the Straits of Messina, right bang opposite the rock where Scylla hung out. So, you could dodge Scylla, and end up going round and round and round and eventually down in the whirlpool. Or you steer well clear of the whirlpool and end up in the clutches of the sea-monster. A real bummer, that one. You just can't win.



The Highways Authorities in Ancient Greek cities had certain standards. One stipulated that at all crossroads, square pillars named **Herms** must be set up, as protective guardians of the traffic. Not a bad thing if, in Greece, you were not encouraged to look both ways before attempting to cross. The only thing was that the pillar had to sport male genitals. One would have to wonder if the pillars were in fact then 'square' or perhaps more of a phallic design? Understandably, mutilation of these pillars was considered not simply an act of vandalism, but an act of sacrilege and an ill omen: something for modern City Authorities to consider.



Elsewhere in Greece - probably out in the sticks - the goddess **Hecate** was generally worshipped at crossroads. Unlike the city-slicker variety, statues of Hecate had three heads (or three bodies; but not three heads *and* three bodies, which would have been confusing and offered far too much choice for the already-bewildered traveller in rural Greece), and decidedly no testicles at all.



Meanwhile in Italy, Romans tended to stick up shrines to the dead at crossroads. **Lares**, they were called. You can still see evidence of this in places across modern Britain - where boy-racers have misjudged their speed and sailed out of life over a resisting tree or stone wall, leaving the grieving relatives to set up a roadside shrine, complete with flowers, football-shirt and photograph. Did he look both ways?



Being a prophetess in Greece was always a bit of a risky business. Not only was there the problem of getting things wrong, there was also the problem of getting things right - predict a disaster, and the disaster happens - and who's going to say thanks? And then there was a real risk of mistaken identity. There was a shed-

load of prophetesses named Sibyl. One **Sibyl**, for example, lived for a very long time, but was beginning to have regrets. Having asked Apollo to have as many years of life as there were grains of dust, she then claimed to have forgotten to ask for the essential fashion accessory - perpetual youth. So she just got older and older and older, and ended up inside a small bottle, bleating that she just wanted to die.

Sicily had its tyrants, Attica had its robbers. First among these was **Procrustes**, whose hobby it was to invite people home for a good night's sleep. The slight drawback for his guests was that, if they didn't fit his bed exactly, he would be obliged to chop bits off their bodies, or hammer them a bit longer or flatter to preserve the balance and uniformity that he pursued single-mindedly. The Attican Tourist Board took one of his star-ratings away just as soon as they found out about this.

Over at Rhodes, the locals built a lighthouse. Not just any old lighthouse. This was, like the tram-line in Edinburgh, or the Millennium Dome in London, a civic put-one-over on the next city along the road. Yes, this was a Vanity Project. The **Colossus** was made of bronze and stood a hundred feet high. It fell down after an earthquake in 224 BC. So much for civic pride.



As any mortal should be aware, you upset the gods at your own risk. **Andromeda** made the mistake of boasting that her lovely daughter was far and away more beautiful, talented, clever *etc etc* than the Nereids. So what, you think? Because one of the Nereids was only Poseidon's wife, that's what. Poseidon sent the usual sea-monster to lay waste to the land, but eventually scaled back the punishment to having Andromeda chained to a rock. Which all goes to show - don't boast about your children: no one, but no one, will appreciate it (least of all the child).



'Dad, dad, can I borrow the chariot? Just for an hour. I'll be careful, honest.' A common enough plea in the Ancient World. Thus, **Phaeton** asked his dad Helios, god of the sun. Helios eventually yielded. And what happens? Phaeton immediately loses control on a corner and ends up driving off the road. (Remind you of anyone?) Would have set fire to the Earth, too, if Helios had not send a thunderbolt and killed the lad. Well, he would have lost his licence anyway, and what use is the son of the Sun-God if he can't follow in his father's footsteps?





Ixion was a bit of a lad, really. Started off by murdering his father-in-law. Yeah, shit happens. No big deal in some families. So Zeus purifies him, gives him another chance. Ixion takes it and tries to rape Hera - yes, the wife of Zeus (and his sister, but let's not go there just now). Was Zeus mad? Zeus was livid. Zeus sent a cloud to Ixion, a cloud in the shape of Hera. Ixion had his wicked way with the cloud - did people not notice in those days who they were getting fresh with? - remember the Bull that impregnated Pasiphaë? - and thereby spawned the father of the Centaurs. Yes, it all begins to make sense now, doesn't it? Anyway, after that, Ixion got tacked on to a large wheel, on which he revolves in hell even to this day. Gets along fine down there with Sisyphus and Tantalus, though.



The Underworld was not a place you necessarily wanted to stray into. The authorities therefore kept a few rivers between you and That Place, to prevent unauthorised access. Six of them altogether. The **Styx** was a popular one. The ferryman who would take you over the other side was Charon, who would have been most upset to hear the dark flow described as a muddy black bog, as some iconoclastic Ancients did. Like any self-respecting Public Servant, **Charon** had his pride: being described as a local guide over a bog simply did not do it; Ferryman over the River of Forgetfulness did.



And forget, as it were, the River **Lethe**. There never was one. 'Lethe' in Greek simply means forgetfulness. Hence 'lethargy'. That it was somehow a river was a ridiculous Latin misunderstanding. Language is a bitch, especially a foreign one.

The Hellespont, that narrow stretch that divides the Greeks from the Turks - no resemblance then between the Dead on one side and the Living on the other, then - was another famous waterway for the Ancients. **Xerxes**, one-time King of Persia took umbrage at something the Greeks had done to his dad at Marathon, invaded their country and generally laid it waste. However, while he was busy crossing the Hellespont, a storm blew up. In a rage, King Xerxes ordered that it be given three hundred lashes. The sentence was later reduced to one hundred days of Community Service, which the waterway spent purging stables and the like. But even Community Service did not stop it re-offending.



At the western end of the Mediterranean Sea, stand the **Pillars of Hercules**. One of the lesser-known facts about Hercules was that he dressed up as a woman. There were, of course, extenuating circumstances: he had waltzed off with the sacred tripod at Delphi, in order to ensure that Apollo would purify him. Apollo got his own back by advising our lumpish hero to go and serve Omphale the Lydian Queen. Which Hercules did, dressed as a woman. We should just be thankful he did not dress as something female and bovine.





Down a Delphi, in the old oracle suite, the priestess of Apollo was called the Pythia. Named after the large snake which had previously lived there until Apollo came along and killed it; he had a pretty stunning plan for a new temple; the snake was in the way; the local Planning Committee was in Apollo's pocket. The **Python** was one of the earlier gods. There's no holding back progress.



Back in Crete, in the house of Minos (you remember him - son of a bull, husband of a woman who fancied a bit of rough in a false cow?) there was daughter. **Ariadne**. Quite normal, no funny blood in her, not so's you'd notice. She lent the hero Theseus a ball of thread so that he could find his way out of the labyrinth, after killing the Minotaur. And a fat lot of good it did her - said hero took her off, then promptly abandoned her on the island of Naxos, later a very nice holiday destination. No bars or discos in those days. She was eventually rescued by Bacchus, who did the decent thing: married her, then gave her a crown of seven stars. Well, you have to look after the little lady, don't you? When she died, the stars were recycled as a constellation.



The Ancients didn't go in for old folks much. Not like the Moderns. Possibly because you didn't get to be old very much. One of the few famous old couples were **Baucis & Philemon**, simple country folk who entertained Zeus and Hermes in their humble cottage. Had they known about Zeus' interest in cows, they might have thought twice. Possibly it was that that made just about everyone else in Greece refuse them any overnight accommodation. Anyway, the old folks were advised to climb a nearby mountain where they would escape a great flood which was being sent to sweep away all those whose B&B signs said "No Vacancies". When the waters subsided, they went into service at Zeus' temple, and when they died, they turned into trees. Which is quite sweet. A nice way to go - turned into a tree. Unless you live in the path of a new motorway, or in the Amazon basin.



And then there was the **Sphinx'** famous riddle. What goes on four legs at dawn, on two legs at midday, and on three in the evening? Something that Oedipus got immediately, much to the Sphinx' annoyance. Serves her right. Same story in a modern context might be - what goes on three wheels in the morning, on two at midday and on four in the evening (tricycle, bicycle, zimmer-frame) - but it doesn't work, does it really?



If you're a god, you want to live in the highest possible place. A penthouse suite would have been good, had the Greeks and Romans even considered high-rise living. It was the more ancient Persians and Mesopotamians who went for that, them and their fancy ziggurats. Much good did it do them. The Akkadians and their sort were like the modern Russian oligarchs - here today and gone tomorrow. No, for a Greek, it had to be your **Mount Olympus**. Almost 3,000 metres - 10,000 feet for the more sedate mind. Steep? Certainly. Reached the sky it did, and from the top (if you were a god) you could just about see the sea.



Lightning: incontrovertible proof that the gods exist. Well, do you know different? **Zeus** did a lot of things with lightning, as did his Italian counterpart **Jupiter**. Hurl down a bolt, soon as look at you. Among the victims of Zeus' bolts of thunder and lightning was one **Typhon**. Not to be confused with typhoon, which is a different kind of thing altogether. Typhon was one of those monsters - a hundred heads, the works. Wicked tongues said he was the father of both the Chimaera and the Hydra - neither of them particularly pleasant to look at. the former frightened people off by breathing fire, the latter had poisonous blood and dozens of heads - and the interesting ability to grow two more if you cut one off. There's some mind-boggling maths with that one. We digress: Typhon was buried under a volcano.

The Ancient World was thick with heroes. The heroes themselves were a bit thick. There was **Capaneus**, who decided to scale the walls of Thebes for a bet, and found himself struck down by one of Zeus' bolts of lightning. His mates embellished the story a little, by elevating him to a symbol of defiance against the gods. But it was really just a booze-fuelled lark that went hideously wrong.

Then there was **Prometheus** who created Man and gave him the gift of fire. Zeus, of course, rescinded that gift. Prometheus then sneaked off with a spark and gave it back to Man. Well, that was the final straw, wasn't it? Zeus sent in Pandora, to be Man's little bit of stuff. And we will see how that ended up...



If ever there was an unpopular woman in the Ancient world, it has to be **Pandora**. The Greek equivalent of Eve, the first woman, she was created by Zeus to punish Man for being whining and demanding and a complete pain in the bum. She came along with a small valise, or box, packed with all manner of illnesses and evils. What she had in there you wouldn't believe, even if I told you: swine flu, daytime TV, reality game-shows, athlete's foot. It was let loose when Prometheus' no-good brother Epimetheus got curious and opened the box. No, someone should have said: take the money! Open the box! He did so. We're still dealing with the consequences. And then some wit said that the one thing left in the box after everything else had escaped, was Hope. What would he know, I ask you? Listen, if Hope was ever in there, then it got out and clean away. We've not seen it since.



We have mentioned the various possible rivers of the Underworld. Apart from the Styx and the Lethe (not a river), there were the Acheron, the Cocytus, the Phlegethon - of these the **Acheron** was deemed (by the Italians, only) to be the greatest. But the **Phlegethon** was probably the most impressive - a river of boiling blood. You've got to be kidding, right? Holy moley! Not one to fall into, or drive your chariot into on a dark Saturday night after a session with the lads.



If you remember the story of the old folks, Baucis and Philemon, then the following will sound familiar: **Deucalion** and his wife Pyrrha managed to

escape a flood sent by Zeus to punish the mortals. When the waters subsided, Deucalion was instructed by Zeus to throw 'his mother's bones' over his shoulder. He gave this instruction careful thought. So would anyone. Eventually he threw some stones from Mother Earth over his shoulder. Quick thinking. The stones so chucked became human beings who re-populated the earth. So much for Darwin, eh?



Pelops, the son of Tantalus, had a grim childhood. His dad, Tantalus, killed him and cooked his flesh as a banquet for the gods. The gods, on this occasion, turned up their noses and brought the boy back to life. What kind of a screwed-up relationship was that? Tantalus was a bit of a serial offender, and ended up in Hell, along with Sisyphus and Ixion, standing up to his chin in water with food and drink kept just out of reach. But Pelops was given a golden chariot by the Criminal Compensation Board. It was a real beauty, top of the range - it went on water as well as it did on land. He drove all over the Aegean Sea in this thing, in search of a wife - even got somewhere 'in the far west'. Arguably, this distant place was Spain, destination of choice for young lads in golden chariots looking for a hot date. He finally hitched up with Hippodamia - now there's a name to conjure with - and settled down. Oh, and founded the Peloponnesian Islands.



It is a complete myth that women are the nosy ones. See Epimetheus above. And then there were the sailors who looked in a sack that did not belong to them. **Aeolus**, who lived among the Aeolian Islands - now, which came first? - was the god of the winds. Crap job, one would think. Clearly, he tired of doing that same thing day after day: when Odysseus came sailing past, he gave the traveller a sack in which were tied up all the winds preventing his ship from reaching home. So what did his sailor-boys do? Yes, of course, they untied the sack. Brilliant. Set Odysseus back a few years, so it did. He was not at all pleased. Set about his sailors, losing some here, some there. He ended up with none at all, in short order. That taught them a lesson.



The **Trojan Wars** just went on and on. And why? No one even remembered. For the Greeks, the whole thing became like a misadventure in Afghanistan or Iraq. Great to start with, just getting completely out of hand after a while. The Greeks all had one kind of shield; and the Trojans had another. Like a football match, except without the referee. Or the ball. Or any particular point. (Just kidding - there was probably a cow or a bull involved.)



Chthonic Gods:

responsibilities unknown

