

POOR WOMEN: THE STORIES OF IO AND EUROPA

Zeus, king of the gods, often fell in love with beautiful young women on earth. Naturally Queen Hera, his wife, was jealous, and Zeus thought up clever schemes to disguise his pursuit of them.

One of Zeus's loves was Io, the beautiful daughter of a river god. Whenever Zeus was with Io, he ordered a dark, thick cloud to cover the earth, concealing them. But one day Hera, sitting on her throne on Mount Olympus, said to herself, it is unnatural for the sky to become so dark right in the middle of the day. My husband must be deceiving me again.

She glided down to earth to surprise Zeus, but Zeus was too quick for her. He changed Io into a beautiful white cow, and when Hera arrived, he was stroking the animal. Hera, used to Zeus's crafty ways, was still suspicious, and she said to Zeus, "That is a lovely white cow. May I have her as a gift?" Zeus knew that if he refused, he might give himself away. So he gave Io, who was now a cow, to Hera. Hera immediately took the white cow to Argus, a monster with one hundred eyes, and asked him to guard her.

Io was miserable, tied up in a cave with a rope cutting into her neck, helpless and far from home. One day her father and sisters happened by, and Io moaned at them frantically, trying to tell them who she was. But of course they could not understand her bellows. When they turned to leave, she scratched her name- IO-in the dirt with her hoof. At last her father realized that this white cow was his beloved daughter. He tried desperately to untie her, but Argus chased him away, and Io was left to suffer alone.

Zeus, who could see all things on earth, pitied Io and sent his son Hermes to kill Argus and set Io free. But how was Hermes to take a hundred-eyed creature by surprise? Even when Argus slept, he closed only two eyes.

Clever Hermes disguised himself as a shepherd and sat beside Argus, telling him a long tale, on and on in a monotonous tone of voice. Argus became so bored that, one by one, all of his eyes closed. Then Hermes seized his chance to kill Argus, and at last Io was free.

But Io's troubles were not over. She was still a cow, and Hera was still jealous. And when Hera saw that Io was free, she sent a gadfly to sting her repeatedly. Tormented, Io ran in a mad frenzy from mountain to seacoast and across a sea that was later called the Ionian Sea in her memory.

Finally Io reached the river Nile in Egypt. Zeus followed her there, and, after promising Hera that he would never love Io again, he changed her back into her true form--that of a lovely maiden.

Europa, daughter of a king, was another of Zeus's loves. She was luckier than Io, for Hera was unaware of Zeus's feelings for Europa.

One day Zeus looked down from heaven and saw a group of girls gathering flowers in a meadow near the sea. All of them were winsome, but one, called Europa, outshone the others. Zeus was smitten with love for her and immediately went to earth in disguise, just in case Hera should try to find him.

Suddenly the girls looked up and saw a herd of bulls coming toward them. "Oh, look!" cried Europa to her friends. "Have you ever seen a bull as magnificent as that one? What a rich chestnut color he is! And he has a silver circle on his brow!" The bull, who was Zeus of course, ambled toward Europa and mooed softly. "How gentle he is!" Europa said, stroking him. Then the bull lay down at her feet, as if inviting her to climb onto his back.

Europa did so without fear. But before her friends could join her, the bull leaped up, dashed toward the ocean, and then flew over it, far out to sea. Clinging to the bull's horns, Europa looked down and saw a procession of sea gods riding on dolphins, led by Poseidon.

Europa cried out to the bull, "You, too, must be a god. And if you are, take pity on me. Do not carry me off to some strange land far from all my friends."

And the bull answered, "I am Zeus, lord of the sky, but do not be afraid, for I love you. I am carrying you to my own special island, Crete, where I was born. There I shall show myself to you as a god, and you shall bear me sons who one day will be famous and revered."

And so it happened. Europa became the mother of a great king, Minos, and also of Rhadamanthus, both judges of the dead. And Europa, after whom the continent of Europe is named, became even more famous than her sons.

THE STORY OF NIOBE

Niobe was queen of the city of Thebes and daughter of Tantalus, who was a son of Zeus by a mortal. She had a loving husband, and together they ruled Thebes in harmony. Though Niobe had power and beauty and wealth, her greatest joy was her fourteen children--seven strapping sons and seven lovely daughters. She would have continued to be a proud, happy mother had she not defied a goddess and placed herself above her.

Niobe's downfall began at a celebration to honor Leto the Titan, mother of the goddess Artemis and the god Apollo. The people of Thebes were crowding into the temple to burn incense in Leto's honor. Suddenly Niobe appeared, and her commanding voice rang out. "Foolish people! Why do you honor Leto, when I am your queen? Why do you worship Leto, who has only two children, while I have fourteen? Leto is of no importance compared to me. Make your vows and sacrifices to me, not to her."

Leto heard Niobe's taunting words, and she called her twins, Apollo and Artemis, to a mountaintop on the island of Delos. "Niobe, a mortal, is trying to displace me, a goddess," she told them. "What is more, she claims that because she has fourteen children, she is more worthy than I, a mother of two. But you, Apollo and Artemis, are a god and a goddess, far more important than all her children put together. We must teach Niobe not to belittle us."

"We must take revenge immediately," said Apollo, picking up his silver bow and arrows.

"Yes," said Artemis. "We will use our arrows to defend our mother."

And they glided to Thebes, covered by clouds, and stationed themselves on a tower. Below them was a parade ground, and there they saw Niobe's sons, richly outfitted, exercising their prancing horses.

Apollo and Artemis took aim. Zing! An arrow pierced the heart of Niobe's eldest son. He dropped from his horse, lifeless. Then: Zing! Zing! Zing! One by one, Niobe's seven sons fell to the ground and died.

Niobe heard the wailing of the bystanders and rushed to the scene, followed by her seven daughters. She knelt over her sons' bodies, screaming with grief. Yet, even in mourning, she was proud and cried to Leto, "You have not triumphed, for I am still more worthy than you. Seven of my children remain, while you have only two."

But she had hardly finished her sentence when seven more arrows felled her seven daughters

Niobe ceased her taunting and wailing. She was so overcome with grief that she could not move or utter a word. The only sign of life in her crouching figure was her tears, which flowed without end. The gods had punished her. They had changed her into a stone that is wet with tears to this very day.