

The Burning Deck, Parts III and IV

Wisdom of the Ancients

Read Parts I and II [here](#).

by [Peter Dreyer](#) (October 2023)



Sword in hand, Ajax grabs hold of Cassandra, who clings to the Palladion. Attic red-figured hydria in the Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Naples, no. 2422, by the Kleophrades Painter, early 5th C, BCE

My preamble to Parts I and II of "The Burning Deck" (NER,

September 2023) notes its model, Sir Francis Bacon's *De sapientia veterum*, a book seeking to explicate thirty-one Greco-Roman myths, translated into English by Arthur Gorges in under the title *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609). "Upon deliberate consideration. my judgment is, that a concealed instruction and allegory was originally intended in many of the ancient fables," Bacon writes—if not, he opines, they are simply absurd! I have condensed the fables into anachronic sonnets, borrowing a few words here and there from the Bacon/Gorges text (in quotes where I've remembered). And to make a round number of myths, I've added one of my own, "Bacon, or, A Legend," no. 32. Since they had multiple authors, these fables should not "be read first as a sequence, one voice running through many personalities" (Robert Lowell, *Imitations*); each stands or falls on its own. Limericks by the late British poet Christopher Logue serve as epigraphs.[\[1\]](#)

Part III

"There was a young sailor named Bates
Who did the fandango on skates.
He fell on his cutlass
Which rendered him nutless
And practically useless on dates.

– Christopher Logue (Count Palmiro Vicarion, pseud.)

17. Cupid, or, Ontology

Lacking a progenitor, Eros, of
the gods the eldest, apart from coeval
Chaos (from whom Love conceives all things),
was born of Nyx, an egg "laid in the dark,"
and has these attributes: eternal

infancy, blind, naked, and archery.
There's a doppelganger, too—cute Cupid,
Aphrodite's brat, the youngest deity.

Democritus, who ... but let's not go there!
“And, if it were possible to conceive
its modus and process, yet it could not
be known from its cause, . . . the cause of causes,
and itself without a cause,” Bacon says.
On such scruples “exquisite sympathies depend”??

18. Diomedes, or, Blasphemy

Diomedes stuck Aphrodite in the arm
the only combatant at Troy to wound
a god. Pallas Athena ordered it,
if Aphrodite were to fight, and his name
foretold this. Then as guest in Apulia
of King Daunus, he bringing on bad luck
caused by this impiety, the king slew him,
his men all turning swans, which chanted dirges

about their sad mischance. Well, blasphemy
was the felony at issue—the man
had pilfered the Palladion, Athena's
gift, from Troy. But he'd already returned
the damned thing to Trojan Aeneas in Rome,
and swans' lamentations I call over the top.

19. Dædalus, or, Hubris

Snugging the queen of Crete in a fake cow
to try the yard-long prick of Poseidon
's bull, thus engendering the Minotaur,
half-Bos, half-Sapiens, Dædalus then built

the Labyrinth of Knossos for it
to inhabit and devour young girls and boys.
Crafts like his thrive among us today:
the spies' "business of exquisite poisons,"

the traders in guns, and military
shit is everywhere condemned and shelters.
"This stuff will always be prohibited
but yet be accepted in our city,"
Tacitus despaired an aeon ago in Rome.

20. Erichthonius, or, Pretensions

Hephaestos seeking to screw Athena,
and she being unwilling, his semen
fell on Earth. The product of this union
was Erichthonius who, though fine-bodied
from the middle up, had legs like an eel.
In attempting gracefully to conceal
this defect, he invented the four-wheeled
chariot, which overran his mother.

When art violates nature, it seldom
attains the end sought, but rather specious
works that are arrogantly adopted,
shown off, and rejoiced in by their dupes—
witness most mechanical inventions,
although dreamt up with charitable intentions.

21. Deucalion, or, A Category Error

The population of the world wiped out,
the Bronze Age over, an oracle advised
Deucalion (that's Noah) and his wife Pyrrha,
Afterthought's child, to toss their mother's bones

behind them—but the Flood having leveled everything, her sarcophagus was lost. Weeping, they flung rocks over their shoulders. and new happy apes sprang up from these.

A phoenix cannot be reborn from ash and parental units' resurrection; the error's category—they're trash! Once having had a sentient connection, "dem bones" could not then restore another (provided Earth was actually their mother).

22. Nemesis, or, Fortuna

Nemesis, a goddess at Rhamnous—I've been there!—where the shape-shifting Zeus screwed her, was the daughter of Nyx and Poseidon. Tartarus got a child by her in Hell. Supplied with wings and adorned with a crown, she bears a javelin in her right hand, a mirror in her left, and rides a stag. Her nickname was Implacable.

I'd say she was *Fortuna*, the empress of the world, chastiser of aughtiness, but though gram-positive and detected in old Erratasthenes' colander, such old algorithms aren't respected—not being bingeworthy, like performing fleas.

23. Achelous, or, Cornucopias

In the long run we are all dead.—J. M. Keynes, *A Tract on Monetary Reform* (1923)

The tale's well-known: the River Achelous becomes a bull to combat heroic Hercules for the hand of Princess Deianeira, daughter of Oeneus, god of wine. Hercules snaps off a horn, wins Achelous's cornucopia and the girl. Flash forward, then, to her handing Nessus's poisoned shirt to him; he puts it on.

Denver, Phoenix, and LA, all three contracted with the Colorado river for water. They got their cornucopias but must pay the price. For Hercules dies in agony, and his unwitting bride—whose name means “man destroyer”—hangs herself.

24. Dionysus, or, Shiva

Semele bound Zeus by oath to grant her an unknown request; lightning killed her in its performance, but an infant shut up in Zeus's thigh was born. Called Dionysos—in Rome, Bacchus—and nursed by Persephone, queen of the underworld, the child grew up to be the god of wine-making, insanity, and acting. In India, he's Shiva!

Lusts in the unconscious to perdition play until the dikes of shame and fear give way and we punch in the rampant bad. “Zounds! I was never so bethump'd with words, Since I first call'd my brother's father Dad. . . . Mad world! Mad gods! Crazy composition!”[\[2\]](#)

Part IV

There was a young fellow named Sweeney,
Whose girl was a terrible meanie.
The hatch of her snatch
Had a catch that would latch—
She could only be screwed by Houdini.

—Christopher Logue (pseud., Count Palmiro Vicarion)

25. Atalanta and Hippomenes, or, Holy Deadlock

Atalanta, a virgin Boeotian
huntress, embraced only those able
to beat her in a footrace—defeated,
you lose your head, but Hippomenes wins,
Aphrodite gives him three free bonus shots
(moral equivalent of Puccini's
trinity of riddles in *Turandot*)
and it's holy deadlock for the poor so-and-so,

a contest with nature in which “certain
golden apples” beat art, Bacon explains.
Three guesses as to how such challenges
work out, both now and in antique remains.
Don't forget that failing earns you the chop.
In love the thing to know, of course, is never stop.

26. Prometheus, or, Man's Fate

What a piece of work is Prometheus—“how
cunningly foresighted, qualified
in apprehension, and in action all—

indulgent,"^[3] downloading fire from heaven for human benefit—and, moreover, perpetual youth, the title to which a serpent stole, eternal renewal's recipe thus falling to the race of snakes.

Prometheus is "clearly and expressly" Providence, Bacon says, lodged in "the frail vessel of flesh to redeem mankind. So we indulge ourselves no such liberties as those, for fear of using strange fire." Ah, dust's quintessence, O paragon of beasts!

27. Icarus and Scylla and Charybdis, or, Compromise

All hail mediocrity, the middle way!
And compromise extolled in politics
and morality (but not in science,
which mandates that we be fanatics).
Icarus failed at it, but by sailing
between the rock Scylla and Charybdis
Odysseus escaped the ambiguous "bane
and shipwreck of fine geniuses and arts."

"A dry soul is best," Heraclitus says.
Defect's a reptile; excess, a bird,
the former grounded, the latter upward-
borne, the first clammy, the second heaven-
bent. In practicing to be an eagle
Icarus soared toward the sun. He died.

28. Sphinx, or, The Last Sphincter

Sphinx is called a monster by some. Not so, and neither is she “Science,” as Bacon so wordily contends, grinding his axe. “Our words ‘Sphinx’ and ‘sphincter’ go together back to old Greek *sphingo* (σφιγγω), which means . . . ‘bind fast or tight.’” There are over sixty sphincters in your body. Different sorts, they function “to make sure that stuff . . . travels to where it should, and in good time.” The Sphinx—or “Strangler,” as the blunt ancients dubbed her—is the final sphincter, guarding the gap before the supposed sea, the route of the “bare seed” to which Saint Paul refers.^[4]

29. Persephone, or, A Return Ticket

The Romans call Persephone Proserpine. In Sicily, picking narcissi, she was importuned by Hades, who bore her off to Tartarus, where, plumb out of luck, she became Hell’s bride, First Lady of Dis. Half a year gone, she habitually spends the other half with mother. Visitors need a special *aller-retour*—a bit of something like golden mistletoe—see Frazer’s magnum opus, *The Golden Bough* (London: Macmillan, 1890; repr., 1980), 13 vols., passim. . . . Pluck it and a fresh piece shoots up in its stead, service included down among the dead.

30. Mētis, or, Time Spews

Although she shape-shifted to evade him
Zeus had his way with Mētis, impregnating
her. Gaia prophesied the son she bore
would rule heaven, so he swallowed her.
Prometheus (or perhaps Hephaestos)
wacked him with an axe just when her waters
broke, and Athena leapt, fully armored,
from his forehead (near the River Triton).

Later—or maybe before this happened—
Mētis taught Zeus how best to extricate his
brethren from Kronos's paternal belly:
a drop of antimony made Time spew.
Sapiens supposes that everything that's cool
emerges from their addled brains, the fool!

31. The Sirens, or, A Racket

Daughters of Achelous, unlucky river,
and Terpsichore (the muse), they lost their wings
contending with their mother's family,
who snatched their feathers to make themselves crowns.
The Sirens settled on nearby islands,
where they tempted sailors with their racket,
then for fun, apparently, murdered them,
whitening the shore with the seamen's bones,

a blatant warning! But the misfortune
of others does not deter poor human
beings from pleasure. The fittest recourse
is that of Orpheus, who with his singing
drowned out the wicked Sirens' saucy noise.

Prima la musica, dopo le parole!^[5]

Let's have the music first, and then the tale.

32. Bacon, or, A Legend

Birthered by Elizabeth, the Faerie Queen
Gloriana, or Belphebe, he was younger
brother to the duke of Earl beheaded
for rebelling against their Virgin Mom.
A native of Utopia (near St. Albans
on the Thameslink line), he invented
science and wrote plays and poems, using
other names, among them "Shake-Speare," Spenser,
Marlowe, Greene, and Jonson. Battling a Byrd
at Highgate in the Little Ice Age, he untwigged.

Bacon's "lively hazel eye" is compared
to that of a viper. He sometimes hired
free-lance quills to feather his projections
—handy rascals. Perhaps "that Stratford man"?
"The world's a bubble," his lordship lamented.
"Man's life's less than a span. He writes in dust."

[1] Christopher Logue, *Count Palmiro Vicarion's Book of Limericks* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1956), nos. 43, 163

[2] Philip the Bastard in Shakespeare's *King John* 2.1.778-79, 875; last line modified here to suit .

[3] So says Apollodorus, I think. It doesn't seem to be Bacon—too poetic!

[4] "And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be but a bare seed [γυμνὸν κόκκον]."—1 Cor. 15:37. Quotations in this poem are from Peter Dreyer, "Sphinxology," *New English Review*, November 202 2. Bacon's chapter XXVIII is titled "Sphinx, or Science."

[5] *Prima la musica e poi le parole*, "First the music, then the words," is the title of a one-act opera by Antonio

Salieri, libretto by Giovanni Battista Casti, quoted in Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*.

[Table of Contents](#)

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