

Cygnus: Myths and Retcons(tellations)

Intro

Jordan: Hi, I'm Jordan.

Kit: And I'm Kit.

Jordan: Welcome to Starry Time, where stars plus lines

Kit: equal stories.

Jordan: Today we're going to be continuing our exploration of the constellation Cygnus with a focus on the history and myths of this constellation.

Background and History

Kit: So Cygnus is the Latin word for swan but the word itself is a latinized Greek word, so it's actually being taken from Greek and put into Latin

Jordan: And even though this constellation name is swan not all cultures and parts of the world have seen this as a swan. For example, according to Gavin White's book Babylonian Star Lore, which we do reference occasionally here on the pod. Thank you, Kit. This figure may be derived from or similar to a mythological lion headed eagle

called the Anzu bird. The Anzu bird was associated with the winds and also the winter, but it was eventually removed from the Babylonian star map and replaced in part with the panther constellation, which is, of course, actually a griffin like creature that brings storms.

Kit: And in ancient Chinese astronomy, this area of the sky is in the black tortoise of the north quadrant. And the stars that the IAU recognizes as part of Cygnus are actually part of a few different asterisms in Chinese astronomy, such as the imperial passageway, the celestial ford, and several others.

Jordan: As we talked about last episode, Cygnus represents a pretty big area of the night sky. Didn't we say I went with like 1.8 or 1.9% of the entire night sky?

Kit: Yeah. So it definitely is this really big area with lots and lots of stars in it.

Jordan: And still other cultures looked up at this area of the night sky and saw a goose, which is something the Cree People imagined. In this part of the night sky, the Dakota People thought it looked closer to a salamander. And the Ojibwe People saw something closer to a crane.

Kit: Yes, we've definitely got some bird themes in here, but that's not the only interpretation that's out there.

Greco-Roman Myth Retelling

Jordan: All right, switching tracks here, let's focus in on the Cygnus of the Greco-

Roman mythology. And if only it was that simple. But there's actually quite a few cases of a guy named Cygnus who gets turned into a swan. Sometimes that's the entire story. But today we'll focus in on one of the more substantive myths and one that endured in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and other sources.

Kit: Yeah. So before we roll into it, I want to make two notes. So the first is that this constellation is sometimes associated with Orpheus, but we're going to be talking about him and the myths about him in an upcoming episode. So we're just going to table that entire discussion even though we recognize that this constellation Cygnus has been associated with Orpheus. And the second note is that this constellation is also sometimes associated with another famous myth in Greek mythology. You know, that one that's totally not weird at all about Zeus.

Jordan: Not creepy.

Kit: Not weird, not creepy. Zeus turns into a swan and seduces Leda.

Jordan: No, we're not going to focus on that version today either. Um, but a quick note. Leda was, of course, the queen of Sparta. And this seduced by swan Zeus story kind of does sound familiar because we kind of danced around and discussed this myth and reconstellated it all the way back in season one, episode six, when we discussed Gemini.

Kit: Yes. So this is the story where we get the birth of those quadruplets. We get Pollux, Castor, Clytemnestra and Helena.

Jordan: Ah, yes. The Trojan War Helen and Helen and Pollux are Zeus's kiddos. And

Castor and Clytemnestra are Leda's husband's.

Kit: Yeah. So if none of this sounds familiar to you and you're like, this is weird, it really. That sounds like a thing that could use a reconstellation. Uh, we got you in the back catalog, so you should maybe go check those out and see what you think.

Jordan: I think we've got out all our caveats. So let's talk about one of the most common myths of this constellation. The one that I mentioned earlier is in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. And this story centers around Phaethon the son of an Oceanid, who most commonly is Clymene, but sometimes is various other Oceanids

Kit: Right. Remember, there's 3000 of them, so maybe they're kind of interchangeable.

Jordan: The source material for this myth is pretty fragmented. And there are partial plays about Phaethon that come from various authors, not just Ovid, but also Aeschylus and Euripides and Plato. And the part about Cygnus actually comes in later and was added by the Romans.

Kit: Yeah. And I'll definitely be sure to post some of these alternatives on our socials at starytimepod, on Twitter and on the Universeodon server of Mastodon, or maybe in the show notes section of our website, which is starytimepodcast dot com

Jordan: starytimepodcast dot com. Alright, so the most common passed down version of the story, or at least the one that we thought was least problematic and wanted to discuss in this version, Phaethon is the son of Helios, who is the sun god, who pulls the sun across the sky in a four horse chariot,

Kit: Auriga!

Jordan: Auriga! And guess what? This isn't just a normal chariot, this is a chariot where the horses breathe fire. It's not necessarily crucial to the entire story, but I think it's pretty cool. And if we don't mention it, then we're doing the original myth a lot of disservice. For some reason, Phaethon sets out to the east to talk to his father. And in some versions, it's because his friends didn't believe Helios was his dad, and he wanted to prove it to them. Other versions, because he didn't even know he was Helios's son until his mother told him later in life. So he was trying to figure it out for himself.

Kit: And she might have hidden this from Phaethon because she was actually married to a King of, um, Aethiopia.

Jordan: Our guy Phaethon he goes to see Helios, who is indeed, spoilers, his father. And for once in Greek mythology, a dad is happy to see their kid. And it's like, whatever you want, my son Phaethon you got it.

Kit: I mean, Helios is happy to see him, but it definitely has that, like, absent dad, like, I'll buy you anything you want for your love. It has that kind of, like, vibe to it.

Jordan: Phaethon is like, I gotta prove you're actually my dad. And the best way to prove to you that I'm your son, Helios, is that if you allow me to take your sun chariot out for a spin, you know, maybe just for a day, and I'll prove to you I'm your son.

Kit: And to everybody else. I will note here that this sounds a lot like the Hercules animated series pilot, where Zeus gets Hercules a job leading the chariot. Helios's

chariot. And that didn't go wrong at all. That was fine.

Jordan: Kit. It is exactly the same plot. They literally stole all of this for the pilot of Hercules animated series. Except we get our Disney Zeus as the absent dad trying to buy your love energy. Yes, they appropriated this story wholly. And just like in the Hercules animated series, what could go wrong? Well, Kit, likely a lot. A lot could go wrong because Helios really tries to talk Phaethon out of it. And according to Ovid, Helios says "the first part of the track is steep and one that my fresh horses at dawn can hardly climb. In midheaven, it is highest where to look down on earth and sea often alarms even me and makes my heart tremble with awesome fear." So he's trying to warn Phaethon this ain't no easy ride, but in the end, he grants Phaethon's request.

Kit: It is worth noting here that Phaethon is sometimes also associated with auriga the charioteer for this exact reason.

Jordan: It's not a coincidence that we've put these episodes so close together. Unfortunately, as you can see in 23 minutes in the Hercules animated series pilot, things do go very wrong. And just like our guy, young Herc, Phaethon loses control of the chariot, and he swoops down, scorches the earth, and creates vast deserts across the African continent. Apparently, and this is just the myth, he also causes the skin of Ethiopians to turn Black, all the while creating frozen hellscape and darkness in other areas. Basically, dude, he effed up, and Gaia is absolutely screaming. And Zeus, meanwhile, is like, ah, shoot. Thought Helios

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Jordan: had this. Thought Phaethon had this. But I guess at the end of the day, the

buck stops with me, and I gotta do something before this kid sets the whole planet on fire.

Kit: Oh, uh, no. And we know how helpful Zeus's interventions are. See also the Pleiades episode. Oh my gosh.

Jordan: Zeus decides the best way to deal with Phaethon and this errant chariot is to send a lightning bolt to kill both Phaethon as well as bring the chariot back down to earth. And shocker, lightning doesn't go too great with the human form, and Phaethon falls dead into the river Eridanus.

Kit: Oh, RIP.

Jordan: I mean, Zeus solved the problem. But at this point in the story, we have a lot of people mourning Phaethon. We have his father, Helios, who should probably be saying, oops, um, threatening to never drive the chariot again. And then Zeus threatens him back and says, basically, this is your job, Helios. We also have his sisters, the Heliades, who have also said to have mourned Phaethon for four months. Standing at the edge of this same river, Eridanus. Their tears are described as becoming amber. And when Clymene, or many other Oceanids, depending on who you talk to, tries to move them, they have fully transformed into the black poplar trees, and they root at the edge of this river forever in their sorrow.

Kit: Yeah. And so some versions of the myth say that Phaethon didn't actually have permission to drive the chariot and that his sisters readied the chariot for him to steal. So instead of them becoming trees in mourning, they're turned into trees as punishment.

Jordan: In later Roman mythology, this is where Ovid comes in and Virgil and others come in. We have the addition of Cygnus, who is said to be Phaethon's lover. Cygnus is said to be a musician who mourned Phaethon's death. And he is said to have taken months collect all of Phaethon's bones to give him a proper funeral. And the gods were said to have turned Cygnus into a swan either to relieve his pain or in old age or after his death, to honor his mourning and how he care took for Phaethon's memory.

Kit: Oh, poor Cygnus.

Jordan: It's hard when you fall in love

Myth Analysis

Kit: I would say that this myth is one of the more straightforward ones we've covered so far in terms of why it was told and what lessons it was trying to teach us.

Jordan: We, of course, get back to the common warning of hubris and consequences for violating the boundaries of the gods. We have here a demigod who literally plays with fire, horse breathing fire and gets burnt. But we also have a lot of explaining of the natural world, and that's a part of this myth, too.

Kit: We have the origins of the black poplar trees, which are common in North America, Europe, and western Asia. We also have the origins of amber, both of which are associated with the god Helios in ancient Greek religion.

Jordan: Then we have some insight, of course, here into the behavior of swans

themselves, the songs that they make, supposedly in mourning. And we'll discuss that more in this month's creature corner.

Kit: Of course, we also have an explanation for different climates and biomes, along with a take, uh, on variation in skin color.

Jordan: The take on skin color is certainly, uh, an explanation. This myth also has some undertones related to mourning and loss.

Kit: Yeah, it's a rare example of us seeing some of the aftermath of some of these tragic events that happen a lot in Greek mythology. And so we get at least a little bit of a hint into the effects that maybe that has on a community or a family or a lover in ways that we haven't really seen that before. But I'd say, overall, we really have this myth that hits a lot of different notes. It hits this issue about morality, the natural world, and just trying to explain how we should be and why things are the way they are, which, in the end, is what most myths are about.

Jordan: Let's take a quick break, and then we'll return with some reconstellations of this myth.

Retconstellations

Welcome back to our segment, retconstellations. In this segment, we reimagine, reboot, and revise the myths of our monthly constellation in hopes that we can modernize it or subvert it or perhaps even deepen the story

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of this constellation. Sometimes if it's Zeus- centric, the best we can do is just make it a bit less cringey. So would you like to start off this week, Kit?

Kit: Yeah. So mine is pretty short or relatively short, I guess. Um, in general, I don't really object to the myth. Uh, there wasn't anything that I found really horrifying, at least comparatively to the usual nature of these myths. But it did make me want to know a lot more about this relationship between Cygnus and Phaethon. And so I want a retcon that makes more about this relationship. So I came up with a myth with three endings, um, one that retains the fully tragic arc of the myth, one that's slightly less tragic and one that isn't tragic at all. But the setup to all of them is kind of the same.

Jordan: And you've set up a wonderful choose your own adventure. I'll let you continue.

Kit: Okay, so the working title is Swan Song. It begins with Phaethon meeting Cygnus, who's a musician at a taverna. They fall in love and Phaethon supports Cygnus in the pursuit of his art. Eventually, Cygnus is getting a lot of attention, and some random person in a crowd one night says that he's better than even Apollo at music. Now, we all know about these gods, and Apollo overhears this and decides that the right thing to do is to curse Cygnus, because that's what you do.

Jordan: I mean, these gods have a lot of power and often very petty.

Kit: Yes. So Apollo makes this curse, and the curse is that when Helios next makes his journey across the sky, Cygnus will be turned into a swan as punishment, which obviously is a punishment because birds are scary to me. So Phaethon is, of course,

devastated, the loss of his beloved partner. And so he decides the only thing he can do is steal his father Helios's chariot to keep the sun from making its way across the sky. In the first ending, the tragic ending, Phaethon is killed by Zeus, as in the original myth. And Cygnus mourns the love of his life. And in his sorrow, he vows never to sing again, which, of course, appeases Apollo, who decides not to turn Cygnus into a swan after all. And that is the tragic ending.

Jordan: It makes me sad, but I get it. And it focuses on the relationship a lot more than just Phaethon wants to impress his absent dad.

Kit: So I wrote that and then it made me sad and.

Jordan: Oh, it did, did you?

Kit: I made myself sad. I have a lot of. It made me sad, and it didn't really dismantle parts of the myth that I didn't like as much. So, in an alternative ending, Phaethon uses his leverage, which is the literal sun, because he's still stolen the chariot. And he gets Apollo to agree to turn them both into swans so they can live their lives together.

Jordan: Less sad. Uh, you know, there's some symbiosis, there's some reciprocity.

Kit: One more. So the final ending is that Phaethon escalates his behavior, you know, um, creating deserts, just causing havoc on earth. And Zeus basically calls up Apollo and is like, just drop this whole thing, swan thing. Like, we don't, I don't have time for this, and this is kind of your fault for whatever you're doing. So just, like, tell Phaethon that, you know, you're not going to turn that musician kid into a swan and Apollo reluctantly agrees. And then Phaethon and Cygnus get to live happily ever after forever,

and their lives sort of continue on as normal with Apollo not bothering them. And that's the third ending.

Jordan: I love the third ending. I'm not gonna lie. The third ending finally has the vain and petty god just being told to, like, come on, just. Just shut it. You know, we get it. You're jealous. You're envious. Sure, this mortal is very good at playing this instrument and singing, and you're taking it personally. You know what? Do some self reflection.

Kit: All right, Jordan, where did you go with this one?

Jordan: Very wholesome, Kit nightmare fuel.

Kit: No, I guess, like, I don't know what's coming, but I guess we should preface it by, I am afraid of birds. I'm afraid of birds because our mother is afraid of birds. And, um, that's one of the fun things that she, um, convinced me was scary. So I assume it has to do with that. I can only assume.

Jordan: Kit, you might be on to something.

Kit: Oh, no. Well, you know how sometimes on podcasts, it'll be like, skip forward x amount? You know, can I do that or I.

Jordan: Oh, no.

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Jordan: Oh, no, no, no.

Kit: All right.

Jordan: So, a long time ago, in a city that has been built and destroyed on top of itself many times over. A city like Troy or Constantinople or Alexandria or one of the any very first cities in Mesopotamia, there are all sorts of local legends that arise as to how this city survived as long as it did. And through all these different forms. And one legend goes like, this long ago, thousands upon thousands of years ago, a giant egg washed ashore. And the citizens of this very first city, they didn't know what to make of it. This egg lying in the middle of their city center, it was the size of a house. And for decades, this ancient city built up around this egg without anything happening to it. They sheltered it, warmed it during the winter. Generations passed, and no one even knew how the egg got there in the first place. And so, hundreds upon hundreds of years ago, the egg did hatch. And out of this egg came a gigantic swan already the size of an elephant or an amphitheater. And the citizens were amazed and loving. They worked together to raise it, and it had a naturally friendly and kind disposition, too. This giant swan would walk around town kind of like a giant dog, like Clifford, or some sort of dragon. And legends continue to say the city grew in size over the course of another hundred years and another hundred years. All the while, this giant swan grew with it until hundred years had passed and the swan had wings almost as long as a whole city block. The city had grown bigger than any city in the world. And it was said the gods, they felt humiliated by this work. They were angry that humans had worked together and accomplished what they had. And the ancient gods tried to destroy this city using all the natural forces they could. Hurricanes and tidal waves and lightning for hours after hours after hours. And it was said in this moment, after watching over this city for over a hundred years and growing with it and being taken care of by it, Cygnus flew into the air and protected the city. Blocked the gods' anger and rage with its wings, and sang reverberations that echoed against the gods' will. And it was the longest night the city

had ever seen. But at the end, it still existed, and the swan was no more. Now, I'm going to send you a link of illustrations of this story, and I want you to scroll through with them, and I want your live feedback of these images from the file titled Cygnus: Kit Nightmare Fuel.

Kit: Um, well, before I look at the pictures, I like this retcon. I wish that the swan was a dinosaur or some other kind of, um, creature that wasn't so scary to me, but. Okay, I just got the link. Why are there so many pictures?

Jordan: How many do you think there are?

Kit: A million. I keep scrolling and there keeps being more of them. This also points to how fully terrifying Clifford is. And why are there normal sized swans in the pictures with this giant swan? Well, I will say this, that's something.

Jordan: I hope you post some of these pictures, so

Kit: absolutely

Jordan: our viewers can enjoy them. But now, after introducing some elements of AI, let's go all the way in, in our segment, Oracle AI.

Oracle AI

Kit: So the first thing we asked was for the Oracle to tell us about the problematic themes of this myth. The four themes identified were hubris and consequences,

fatalism and divine intervention, and here it clarified that it was like there, well, I'll just read you what the Oracle said. It said, "this fatalistic outlook suggests that mortals are ultimately subject to the whims and judgments of the gods without agency or autonomy over their own destiny. Such narratives can discourage critical thinking and personal responsibilities, promoting

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Kit: a sense of resignation to external forces beyond one's control." I wasn't sure about that. Then they also had gender dynamics because Phaethon sisters were in a passive role of mourning, turning into the poplar trees. And then the fourth problematic theme was animal transformation. And then it clarified that, ah, this portrayal can, and I quote, get ready for this, this is a lot, "perpetuate hierarchical distinctions between humans and animals, reinforcing human superiority and justifying exploitation or mistreatment of the latter." So then we asked our Oracle AI to tell, to retell the myth, but change it to make it less problematic. Um, Jordan, would you mind taking on the voice of the Oracle so we can hear the oracle's retcon?

Jordan: Kit, I will do my best to voice the Oracle. In this retelling of the myth, Phaethon is not driven by hubris, but by a sincere desire to prove his worth and challenge societal norms. Rather than seeking to drive the sun chariot out of arrogance, he wishes to demonstrate that mortals are capable of great deeds and should not be limited by their perceived inferiority to the gods. Instead of Zeus intervening with this fatalistic thunderbolt, the other gods, recognizing Phaethon's earnest intentions, offer him guidance and support as he embarks upon his journey in parentheses, his first nine to five shift. But the gods provide him with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate the sun chariot safely. These gods work together to emphasize the importance of

humility, cooperation, and most importantly, Kit, the responsible use of power. Yes, I'm editorializing a bit here, but the Oracle speaks through me. Meanwhile, Phaethon's sisters, the Heliades, actively participate in his quest, offering their wisdom and their assistance along the way, but not included in the original text. Rather than being relegated to passive roles, they are portrayed as strong, independent individuals who challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to the success of the mission. As Phaethon guides the sun chariot across the sky, yes, he encounters challenges and setbacks, but faces them with courage, with determination, he learns valuable lessons about the importance of respecting nature and harnessing power with responsibility. When Phaethon's journey comes to an end, it's not marked by tragedy, but by triumph. In this version, Phaethon returns safely to the earth and you know what? He's hailed as a Hero, not just by mortals, but mortals and gods alike. Not just for his bravery, but also his perseverance. Cygnus, his loyal friend. Narrator's note. Nothing to do with anything else other than loyal friend.

Kit: Mhm. I've got a note on that later

Jordan: Mhm. end parentheses Cygnus, his loyal friend, does not suffer a tragic fate, but remains by his side as a symbol of their enduring friendship and mutual respect.

Kit: I want to point out here that, uh, we asked Oracle why it chose to portray Cygnus as a friend and not a lover, which it did both in its original retelling and also its retcon and the explanation ummmmmmmmm

Jordan: I bet I was great.

Kit: It was not compelling. It was like I didn't want to stereotype and I was like, what?

So, um, Oracle needs to do some work, uh, on itself about Uh, about this, it seems like, yikes. Definitely our retcons were way, way, way better than the Oracle's this month.

Jordan: Oracle, do some work on yourself.

Outro

This brings us to the end of our episode this week. Please join us next week as we explore the pop culture segment of the constellation Cygnus.

Kit: This has been Kit

Jordan: And Jordan.

Kit: Sisters, lovers of stars and stories.

Jordan: We'll see you next time on,

Kit: On Starry Time. [music].

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