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When Nature Speaks: Sacred Landscapes and Living Elements in Greco-Roman Myth

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Abstract: This article explores Greco-Roman mythology through the lens of ecocriticism, focusing on how sacred landscapes and natural elements were imagined as animate, divine, and morally instructive forces. In ancient Mediterranean cultures, nature was not merely a passive setting for human action but a dynamic presence—rivers that judged, groves that punished, and mountains that sheltered or revealed. Texts such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Virgil’s *Georgics*, and Homer’s epics present nature as both sacred and sentient, often intervening in human affairs through transformation, vengeance, or protection. Forests, springs, and coastlines functioned as thresholds between human and divine, civilization and wilderness, mortal and eternal. By analyzing these representations, this article reveals a rich tradition in which nature teaches, punishes, guides, and transforms, long before ecological consciousness became a formalized discipline. Drawing connections between classical literary landscapes and contemporary environmental concerns, the article argues that myth can inform today’s ecological imagination, offering an alternative to extractive, anthropocentric paradigms. Recovering the reverence and narrative agency once granted to nature in classical thought may help us rethink our ethical relationship with the environment in the age of climate crisis.

Keywords: Greco-Roman mythology; ecocriticism; sacred landscapes; nature and agency; environmental humanities; myth and the natural world



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1. Introduction

In Greco-Roman antiquity, nature was neither passive nor mute. Rather, it was experienced, narrated, and revered as a living presence—capable of agency, transformation, and moral instruction. Sacred groves harbored retribution, rivers served as witnesses to oaths, and metamorphosis functioned as a narrative technology for negotiating the porous boundaries between the human and the more-than-human world (Buxton 2004; Hughes 2014). Within this symbolic ecology, nature was not merely the stage upon which human dramas unfolded but an active protagonist in the mythic imagination.

This article positions classical mythology as a repository of ecological values and metaphors, in which ancient cultures encoded their understanding of interdependence, vulnerability, and reverence for nonhuman life. Far from being fantastical or obsolete, these narratives reflect an early form of environmental ethics—one that resists the anthropocentric dualisms of modernity (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996; Santamarina 2016). Through myth, Mediterranean societies articulated a cosmology in which nature was sacred, animate, and deeply entangled with human fate.

Drawing from canonical texts such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Virgil’s *Georgics*, Homer’s *Odyssey*, and Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, this work examines how classical mythology shaped

ancient perceptions of nature, often presenting the environment not as a neutral backdrop but as a moral and metaphysical force. Landscapes in these texts—forests, springs, mountains, and coastlines—function as symbolic thresholds between worlds, mediating tensions between culture and wilderness, mortality and the divine (Hesiod 1988; Segal 1998b; Thomas 1988).

Situating these texts within the framework of the environmental humanities, this article contributes to the broader project of re-reading cultural traditions for their ecological wisdom and ethical insight. As scholars have noted, ancient myth served as a lens for understanding the entanglement of human and nonhuman life, long before ecological interdependence became a scientific or political concern (Iovino and Oppermann 2014; Garrard 2012).

Thus, this article argues for the relevance of Greco-Roman myth to contemporary environmental ethics, particularly in light of the climate crisis and the ongoing degradation of the natural world. Classical texts provide not only literary representations of sacred landscapes but also ethical imaginaries that foreground humility, reciprocity, and care. By recovering the agency once granted to rivers, groves, and mountains, we may uncover narrative tools for resisting extractivist paradigms and imagining more sustainable modes of cohabitation with the Earth.

While this study concentrates on Greco-Roman sources, it is essential to acknowledge that the view of nature as sentient and morally responsive is by no means exclusive to classical antiquity. Comparable cosmologies—many of them still active today—can be found in Indigenous traditions across the Americas, Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in ancient East Asian systems of thought. Moreover, Greco-Roman mythology itself developed through interaction with Near Eastern, Egyptian, and Persian traditions, reflecting a shared Mediterranean ecology of meaning. Situating classical myth within this broader intercultural and transhistorical context does not diminish its value; rather, it affirms its place within a global archive of ecological storytelling—one strand among many through which humans have narrated their entanglement with the more-than-human world.

2. Materials and Methods

This article adopts a theoretical and ecocritical framework, grounded in the close reading of primary classical sources in both Greek and Latin, alongside sustained engagement with contemporary scholarship in environmental humanities, ecocriticism, classical reception studies, and philosophical thought. The methodology follows an interdisciplinary hermeneutic approach, combining literary analysis, cultural history, and ethical theory in order to elucidate how Greco-Roman mythology encodes ecological relationships and cosmological meaning.

The primary corpus includes epic poetry (e.g., *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, *Metamorphoses*, *Works and Days*, *Argonautica*), philosophical treatises (*De Rerum Natura*, *Naturales Quaestiones*), and agricultural texts (e.g., *Georgics*, Columella's *De Re Rustica*). These works were analyzed in their original languages and in authoritative modern translations, with reference to major critical editions and commentaries where relevant.

Secondary sources were selected through a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature in ecocriticism, classical studies, and environmental philosophy, with particular attention to recent developments in the study of ancient nature–culture relations. Research databases consulted included JSTOR, Project MUSE, and Scopus.

No empirical or experimental methods were employed. This is a conceptual and interpretive study; it does not involve human subjects, datasets, or reproducible results in the scientific sense. Instead, it offers a comparative and synthetic reading of classical texts,

seeking to recover ancient ecological imaginaries and interpret them through the lens of contemporary environmental ethics.

All sources cited are publicly available or fully referenced within the bibliography. The approach prioritizes textual nuance, intertextual resonance, and thematic coherence over exhaustive philological analysis, aiming to contribute to a broader dialogue between classical traditions and modern ecological thought.

3. Nature as Sacred Space: Groves, Springs, and Mountains

In Greco-Roman mythology, natural landscapes—groves, springs, mountains—are not passive settings but charged, sentient presences. These places function as liminal thresholds, where the divine reveals itself, human actions are tested, and transformation becomes possible. Sacred nature in myth acts not only as a sanctuary but also as a boundary, mediating encounters between mortals and gods. Their sacrality lies not merely in religious designation but in their perceived vitality: trees bleed, rivers speak, mountains conceal or disclose fate. Animated by meaning, these landscapes are capable of blessing, punishing, or metamorphosing those who enter their domain.

Among the deities most intimately associated with sacred natural spaces is Artemis, goddess of wilderness, childbirth, and chastity. Her groves—such as those at Brauron and near Ephesus—stand as liminal zones where wildness and holiness converge. Artemis protects animals and young girls, but violations within her territory provoke violent retribution. A well-known example is the myth of Actaeon, a hunter who accidentally stumbles upon the goddess while she is bathing. As punishment for this transgression, she transforms him into a stag, and he is torn apart by his own hounds—an act that marks the grove as a site of taboo, inversion, and metamorphic justice (Stephens 2015, pp. 114–30; Ovid 2004, Met. 3.138–252).

Yet, Artemis is not alone in embodying nature's ambivalence. Pan, the rustic god of shepherds and wild places, haunts mountains, caves, and groves, embodying untamed vitality and primal fear (*panikon deima*). His sudden appearances incite panic in humans and animals alike, illustrating nature's unpredictability and chaotic agency (cf. Herodotus 2003, Histories 2.§145; Pausanias 1918, *Description of Greece* 8.30.2). Similarly, Dionysos, though often associated with wine and ecstasy, is deeply rooted in vegetal life and seasonal rhythms. His rites take place in forests and on mountainsides, where maenads commune with the god through frenzied dances and ritual dismemberment—a celebration of natural excess and transformative dissolution (Euripides 1912, *Bacchae* 104–115, 670–774).

Together, these deities frame sacred nature not as benign or passive but as dynamic and volatile—a space of enchantment, danger, and threshold crossings.

These groves were not symbolic abstractions but ritually anchored landscapes. Archaeological evidence suggests that many sanctuaries of Artemis were integrated into local ecosystems, incorporating living trees, springs, and groves into their architectural and ritual design (Cole 2004). In this sense, the mythological and cultic status of groves reinforced a worldview in which nature was not inert matter but a vital presence—worthy of reverence, caution, and ethical attention.

Daphne, a river nymph and daughter of Peneus, is pursued by Apollo despite her vows of chastity. In desperation, she calls upon her father to save her and is transformed into a laurel tree just before Apollo reaches her.

The myth of Daphne, pursued by Apollo and transformed into a laurel tree, reveals another layer of sacred nature: that of refuge through metamorphosis. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.452–567), just as Apollo is about to seize her, Daphne cries out to her father, the river god Peneus, who responds by transforming her into a laurel. This divine act of protection not only rescues Daphne from violence but also establishes the moral and

affective agency of river deities in Greco-Roman myth. As observed by [Salowey \(2017\)](#), river gods like Peneus are not merely symbolic of fluidity or change; they serve as agents of local identity, power, and protection. Peneus, as both a father and a deity of flowing waters, embodies the dual power of nature to transform and preserve.

Unlike the impersonal Earth invoked in generalized interpretations of metamorphosis, this paternal intervention re-centers the river deity Peneus as an emotionally and ethically charged figure. Rather than merely facilitating Daphne's escape, Peneus embodies the dual role of protector and moral arbiter—a father-god whose fluid essence is capable of enacting justice through transformation. While [Martelli and Sissa \(2023\)](#) do not claim explicitly that rivers function as ethical agents, their volume compellingly traces how hydrological motifs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* resonate with affective and moral dimensions of narrative structure. The editors underscore that transformations involving rivers—such as those of Daphne, Arethusa, or Cyane—are not merely visual spectacles but enactments of resistance, refuge, or mourning. In this sense, rivers in Ovid become more than topographical features; they are narrative actors whose flows encode the emotional economies of myth. Their interpretive framework allows us to see that, even in the absence of personification, aquatic entities shape ethical trajectories, providing shelter or sentence, echo or obliteration.

Daphne's metamorphosis, mediated through a familial and divine relationship, becomes a gesture of resistance and continuity: her body takes root, her voice fades, but her essence survives in vegetal form. Ovid's narrative, as [Segal \(1998a\)](#) notes, invites a reading of transformation as reassertion—where fusion with nature allows escape not into oblivion but into symbolic permanence. The laurel, sacred to Apollo, becomes a sign of poetic consecration—but it is born from a boundary-crossing act in which nature is not backdrop but moral actor and guardian. In this sense, Daphne's story prepares the ground for a broader view of Greco-Roman rivers, springs, and lakes—not as inert topographies but as animate forces within cosmological and ethical systems.

Water, too, is portrayed in Greco-Roman myth as animated and ethically charged, though not uniformly so. Springs, rivers, and lakes occupy distinct symbolic and cosmological roles. Springs are frequently linked to purity, inspiration, and divine favor—often associated with the Muses or nymphs (e.g., Castalia at Delphi; [Larson 2001](#)). Rivers, by contrast, are commonly personified and embody generative or violent power, as seen in the myths of Achelous, Peneus, or Alpheus ([Isler 1970](#); [Salowey 2017](#)). Lakes, although less anthropomorphized, can still function as liminal or sacred sites—as in Lake Avernus in *Aeneid* 6—associated with passage into the underworld or spiritual transformation ([Hardie 1994](#)). These waters are not inert scenery; they operate as active forces that catalyze metamorphosis, resistance, or divine judgment. For example, Achelous, the shapeshifting river god, wrestles Heracles for the hand of Deianira, embodying fluid potency and contestation ([Sophocles 1991](#), *Trachiniae*, pp. 9–25; [Ovid 2004](#), *Met.* 9.1–88). Far from a marginal figure, Achelous was venerated as one of the most powerful river deities in ancient Greece, closely tied to fertility, territorial identity, and cult practices. His ability to assume multiple forms—bull, serpent, or man—mirrors a cosmology in which rivers are volatile agents of both generative and destructive power. The episode also reflects the broader symbolic and religious significance of river gods in mythic geography, particularly in western Greece, where Achelous functioned as a boundary marker and guarantor of abundance ([Isler 1970](#); [Salowey 2017](#)).

In Ovid's version of the myth (*Met.* 5.572–641), Arethusa is a nymph who, while bathing in a river, attracts the attention of the river god Alpheus. As he pursues her with forceful intent, she flees across land and sea, eventually calling upon Artemis for help. The goddess envelops her in a cloud and transforms her into a freshwater spring, thereby granting her escape through metamorphosis.

Arethusa's transformation into a spring to escape the river god Alpheius exemplifies aquatic agency as a form of gendered resistance in Ovid's version.

However, the myth predates Ovid and is deeply rooted in the historical context of Greek colonization in the western Mediterranean, particularly in Sicily. The narrative was strongly associated with the founding of Syracuse, where the spring of Arethusa became a central religious and symbolic landmark. As Diodorus Siculus notes, the spring was considered sacred and directly linked to the colonial identity of the city ([Siculus 1939, Library of History 4.59](#)), while Thucydides highlights the use of this myth in justifying Athenian interest in the region (*Histories* 6.3.4; [Smith 1919](#)). River deities like Alpheius, in this context, embodied more than natural forces; they represented territorial claims, cultural continuity, and the legitimation of colonial presence ([Dougherty 1993](#); [Malkin 1998](#)). The myth thus reflects how ancient communities used divine narratives to naturalize their spatial expansion, integrating environmental elements like rivers into expressions of political and cultural sovereignty.

Rivers such as the Styx not only function cosmologically as barriers but also serve moral functions as enforcers of divine oaths (As such, different types of water are animated by distinct mythological, ethical, and theological significances, each reflecting the multifaceted role of nature in ancient cosmologies).

Within this hydrological framework, the figure of Okeanos, the primordial Titan whose stream encircles the world, occupies a foundational position. Described by both Homer and Hesiod as the progenitor of rivers, springs, and even gods, Okeanos represents a cosmic boundary and source, reinforcing the idea that water in Greco-Roman thought is not merely local or elemental but cosmological and generative ([Homer 1998, Il. 14.200–210](#); [Hesiod 1988, Theog. pp. 133–38, 337–70](#)).

Groves, in particular, emerge as natural temples—places of divine encounter unmediated by walls or constructed altars. Their holiness is immediate, marked by silence, stillness, and the taboo against profanation. As Pausanias relates in his *Description of Greece* (2nd century CE), sacred groves were revered across the Hellenic world, often feared for their association with deities who punished hubris or sacrilege. Entering such a space without reverence could provoke madness, infertility, or death. In this way, groves operate not only as sites of cultic practice but also as moralized ecosystems—landscapes in which myth, ethics, and ecology converge ([Larson 2001](#)).

Recent scholarship has explored the complex ritual, symbolic, and political dimensions of these wooded sanctuaries. [De Cazanove and Scheid \(1993\)](#) analyze the legal and spatial ambiguities of the *lucus* in Roman religion, revealing how groves functioned as liminal zones where divine and civic orders intersected.

The Roman *lucus* emerges not merely as a sacred space but as a site of legal, symbolic, and ecological entanglement—a reading developed in depth by [Hunt \(2017\)](#), whose work foregrounds the interpretive complexity of these wooded sanctuaries.

[Hunt \(2017\)](#) offers a sophisticated and deeply contextualized reading of sacred groves within the Roman religious and ecological imagination. Rather than viewing groves simply as passive religious sites, Hunt reconstructs their complex legal, ritual, and symbolic functions. She emphasizes that *luci* were spaces of controlled ambiguity—zones where political authority, divine presence, and natural processes intersected in highly choreographed ways. In particular, her analysis draws attention to the way groves challenged the binary between wild and cultivated, revealing how Roman religious practice conceptualized arboreal space not as marginal wilderness but as cosmologically resonant and legally encoded. Sacred trees were not metaphors but juridical and affective entities—subjects of ritual protection, political symbolism, and ecological negotiation. Hunt's contribution underscores that

groves were not merely loci of sanctity but vital participants in Roman cosmologies of land, power, and divine presence.

Fox (2023) underscores how trees and groves were deeply entangled in imperial ideology, serving both as metaphors for control and as agents of divine power in urban and rural settings. This body of work highlights that sacred groves were far from passive settings; they were dynamic cultural artefacts that mediated relationships between humans, gods, and the natural world.

3.1. Nature as Metamorphosis: Eco-Transformation and Moral Ecology in Greco-Roman Myth

“Omnia mutantur, nihil interit”—“Everything changes, nothing perishes”.

With this axiom, Ovid opens *Metamorphoses* (1.165), affirming a vision of the world in which transformation is not only inevitable but also constitutive of life itself. In Greco-Roman mythology, metamorphosis is never merely a literary device; it is a worldview—an ontological framework through which bodies, landscapes, and identities are constantly shifting; an imaginative structure through which the relationship between humans and nature is rendered mutable, reciprocal, and morally legible (Martelli 2021).

Transformation becomes the poetic expression of a cosmos in motion, where humans are not masters of nature but participants in its cycles of grief, desire, punishment, and renewal. Most memorably captured in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, metamorphosis serves as a device for expressing not only divine whim or punishment but also a worldview in which the self is perpetually entangled with the material and moral dynamics of nature. Across the fifteen books of Ovid’s epic (1–15 CE), over 250 transformations occur—each one inscribed with emotional, ethical, and ecological significance. These changes, while often driven by desire or transgression, grief, or resistance, dramatize the entanglement of the human with the nonhuman.

Recent scholarship has reframed Ovidian metamorphosis as a proto-ecological discourse, wherein bodies, landscapes, and elements shift in response to moral stimuli, producing what Martelli and Sissa (2023) term an “environmental imagination”. Nature becomes not a passive stage but an active interlocutor in ethical deliberation.

Some transformations represent reward and eternal harmony with the earth. For instance, the tale of Philemon and Baucis (*Met.* 8.611–724), the hospitable couple who offer shelter to disguised gods, is more than a reward narrative; it encodes a vision of ecological continuity through care. They are, upon their death, transformed into entwined trees—forever rooted together in gratitude and mutual devotion. Their metamorphosis is not an erasure but a poetic culmination: a return to the earth as a form of enduring presence.

Others, by contrast, bear the imprint of violence and consequence. Niobe, whose pride in her children offends Leto, is punished through their slaughter; her transformation into a weeping stone (*Met.* 6.146–312) marks the fossilization of grief and moral reckoning. These narratives suggest that metamorphosis in Ovid operates as a moral ecology: the natural world responds to human behavior, not passively but with reflective, often irreversible transformations that carry ethical meaning (Segal 1969; Hardie 2002).

These episodes invite a re-reading of nature not as inert matter but as a dynamic archive of emotional and cosmic order. The myth of Phaethon (*Met.* 1.747–2.400), for example, has recently been interpreted as a reflection on anthropogenic hubris and climate disruption, where the scorching of the Earth by the chariot of the sun god anticipates narratives of planetary instability (Sharrock 2025).

Taken together, these transformations suggest that *Metamorphoses* stages an ethics of relationality. As James and Soper (2014) argue, classical myths of transformation can be read as a premodern articulation of ecological accountability, wherein human actions reverberate across species, matter, and cosmos. The boundary-crossing nature of metamor-

phosis disrupts rigid taxonomies and reimagines the human as enmeshed within the life of the world.

Crucially, Ovidian metamorphosis foregrounds the hybridity of human–nature relations. Transformations such as Daphne’s, who becomes a laurel tree to escape Apollo (*Met.* 1.452–567), dramatize a shift not toward disappearance but toward vegetal persistence. Though her voice is silenced, her body is rooted, honored, and symbolically incorporated into Apollo’s identity—his laurel crown becoming a monument to resistance, desire, and sacred boundary. The myth, often read through gendered and ecological lenses, encodes a form of embodied resistance, in which metamorphosis is less a loss than a reconfiguration of agency (Leach 1974). Likewise, Cyane, the nymph who attempts to stop Hades from abducting Persephone, is melted into the waters of her own spring—a gesture of witness and sorrow, where water becomes both setting and subject (*Met.* 5.409–437). In both cases, nature absorbs and preserves emotional truth, suggesting a fluid ontology in which rivers and trees act not only as scenery but also as participants in narrative and moral consequence (Hinds 1987; Kenney 2009).

Animal transformations, too, operate within this framework. In the harrowing tale of Procne and Philomela, who become a swallow and nightingale after enduring extreme violence (*Met.* 6.424–674), the transformation encodes trauma into sound: birdsong becomes a lament, a memory that cannot be silenced. These myths emphasize that metamorphosis can be not only escape or survival but also a means of inscribing suffering into the sensory world, allowing ecological forms—trees, birds, rivers—to carry memory, protest, and witness (Zeitlin 1988). The landscape thus acquires not only life but history.

The ethical dimension of these transformations is underscored by their didactic function. Ovid often frames metamorphosis as the outcome of cosmic justice—whether as punishment for hubris, as in the case of Arachne transformed into a spider for challenging divine authority (*Met.* 6.1–145), or as redemptive closure, as with Ceyx and Alcyone, lovers reunited as seabirds after death (*Met.* 11.410–748). While punitive tales serve as cautionary exempla, they also reveal tensions between mortal creativity and divine hierarchy, particularly in cases where human skill or agency challenges the gods. Arachne’s transformation, though cast as punishment, also invites sympathy—highlighting the unequal power structures embedded within mythic cosmologies and opening space for critique of divine overreach.

Underlying these narratives is the sense that nature is not a backdrop but a moral field—capable of remembering, judging, and reshaping. As Charles Segal argues, Ovid’s myths unfold within an “ecological ethics”, where the universe is not only alive but also responsive to human action (Segal 1969). Contemporary ecocriticism has returned to these classical models, reframing metamorphosis as a proto-environmental discourse that articulates interdependence, accountability, and the agency of the nonhuman (James and Soper 2014). The fluidity of myth becomes an epistemology of connection: bodies shift, boundaries blur, and nature becomes a site of both metamorphosis and meaning.

3.2. *Nature, Hubris, and Ecological Justice in Greco-Roman Myth*

Long before climate science, Greco-Roman myth imagined a world where nature responded to human error—where catastrophe followed greed, and healing required reverence. These stories, read today, reveal an ancient ecology of consequence, a moral cosmos in which natural disaster is not anomaly but warning, not rupture but rebalancing.

In Greco-Roman mythology, nature is never a neutral or passive backdrop. It is a dynamic and morally responsive field—capable of nurturing life but equally of punishing excess, greed, and transgression. This ambivalent portrayal reflects an ancient awareness of nature’s power not merely to sustain but to correct and avenge. Myths often dramatize

human attempts to exceed natural or divine limits, resulting in cosmic imbalance, ecological crisis, or irreversible metamorphosis. These narratives, when read through an ecocritical lens, resonate powerfully with contemporary anxieties surrounding climate change, environmental degradation, and the ethics of planetary stewardship. They articulate a worldview in which hubris leads to catastrophe, and harmony with the natural order must be restored through suffering, humility, or ritual realignment.

While these narratives emerge from vastly different cosmological assumptions than those of contemporary science, their moral logic and symbolic structure anticipate certain principles of ecological theory—particularly the notion that human actions have systemic consequences, and that balance within the more-than-human world must be maintained through restraint and reciprocity. Such themes find echoes in modern environmental thought, including systems ecology and posthumanist ethics, which likewise challenge anthropocentric paradigms and foreground interdependence (cf. [Haraway 2016](#); [Bennett 2010](#); [Morton 2013](#)).

The myth of Phaethon, son of Helios, vividly embodies the consequences of ecological arrogance. In [Ovid's \(2004\) *Metamorphoses*](#) (2.1–400), Phaethon demands the right to drive his father's solar chariot, but he loses control of the divine horses, setting fire to the Earth, desiccating rivers, and destabilizing climates. The Earth, personified as Tellus, pleads with Jupiter to intervene, lamenting her wounds and invoking her role as a maternal, suffering body (2.268–271). Jupiter responds by striking Phaethon down with a thunderbolt, and his charred body plunges into the Eridanus River. Ovid's account is more than a tale of youthful ambition; it becomes a cosmic ecological disaster, the result of unchecked human aspiration and disregard for divine balance. The myth thus anticipates modern critiques of anthropogenic climate disruption and technological overreach ([Hardie 2002](#); [Segal 2001](#)), suggesting that the desire to control solar power—a potent metaphor—without wisdom or humility can lead to irreversible harm.

A parallel critique of human excess is found in the myth of King Midas, whose wish that all he touches become gold transforms the blessings of nature into lifeless commodity (*Met.* 11.85–145). His gift quickly becomes a curse: food, drink, and even his daughter are turned to metal, rendering the natural world sterile and inert. Midas's desire, once realized, enacts an allegory of extractivist economics, in which organic life is consumed by the logic of accumulation. His eventual redemption requires immersion in the river Pactolus, whose sands, rich in gold, continue to bear witness to his transgression. This transformation of nature into wealth—and the necessity of symbolic purification—offers a proto-ecological critique of unsustainable consumption and instrumental attitudes toward the environment ([Leach 1974](#); [Thomas 1988](#)).

Flood myths, too, serve as archetypes of environmental correction. The story of Deucalion and Pyrrha, as recounted by Ovid (*Met.* 1.253–415) and Hyginus (*Fabulae* 153), reflects the idea of a divine ecological reset. Here, Zeus unleashes a deluge to purge the Earth of human impiety and moral corruption, sparing only the pious Deucalion and Pyrrha. Their survival depends not on strength or ingenuity but on humility and ethical alignment with divine will. After the flood, they repopulate the Earth by casting stones over their shoulders—interpreted as the bones of Gaia herself. This act of regeneration is deeply symbolic: it implies a literal and figurative return to the Earth as moral ground and maternal origin ([Buxton 2004](#); [Gowers 2005](#)). Unlike modern techno-utopian flood narratives, which frame survival through control or innovation, the myth emphasizes the ethical preconditions of renewal, linking human flourishing to reverence for the sacred order of nature.

Where the mythic imagination often relies on catastrophe, Hesiod's *Works and Days* ([West 1988](#)) presents a more continuous and didactic vision of ecological ethics. Composed

in the 8th century BCE, the poem advocates for attunement to seasonality, labor, and cosmic justice (Dike), emphasizing that human well-being is contingent upon observing the rhythms of nature (ll. 213–285). The agrarian calendar Hesiod outlines—sowing, harvesting, watching the skies—becomes not merely a manual of subsistence but a moral program. Disorder, idleness, and injustice are not only civic or personal failures but also violations of ecological balance. The Ages of Man myth (ll. 106–201), which charts the descent from the golden age of abundance to the iron age of toil and conflict, encodes a story of moral and ecological decline: as human virtues decay, so too does the Earth's generosity (Nelson 1998; Lamberton 1988). In contrast to myths of sudden divine retribution, Hesiod offers a sustained pedagogy of moderation, humility, and respect for the divine laws inscribed in the cycles of the land.

Underlying these narratives is a shared theological ecology: nature enacts justice. The eruption of Mount Etna, believed to signal the unrest of buried Titans, or the myth of Erysichthon, who is cursed with insatiable hunger after felling a sacred tree (*Met.* 8.738–878), exemplify a cosmos in which violation of natural sanctity provokes divine retribution. Such stories affirm the principle that catastrophe is not arbitrary; it is the outcome of imbalance, whether between mortals and gods, humans and Earth, or culture and cosmos. Rivers, mountains, and groves become moral actors, enforcing boundaries and restoring equilibrium.

Rather than projecting animism, these myths articulate what might be called a symbolic ecology: a system in which environmental phenomena—droughts, floods, infertility—are understood as legible, interpretable, and ethically meaningful. In this light, myth becomes a technology of moral interpretation, a way of reading environmental disruption not as accident but as consequence. The parallels with contemporary ecological theory are striking just as feedback loops and tipping points in climate systems now reveal the cumulative cost of overreach, so too do ancient myths dramatize the recursive effects of hubris and disregard for planetary limits (Folke et al. 2004).

Taken together, these myths do not advocate for fear of nature but for a relational ethic of humility, reciprocity, and reverence. They suggest that thriving requires restraint—not mastery—and that survival is contingent not on domination but on alignment with the deeper order of things. In this sense, classical mythology continues to offer a resonant archive for thinking ecologically in the Anthropocene.

3.3. *Sea, Stone, and Storm: The Hero's Journey Through Ecological Ordeals*

If myth teaches that nature enacts justice, it also reveals that this justice is not abstract but lived and embodied—often through the figure of the hero. In epic and journey narratives, the natural world becomes not only a moral agent but also a teacher, guiding transformation through ordeal. Sea, storm, desert, and cave are not merely settings for adventure; they are the elemental thresholds through which ethical growth, ecological alignment, and spiritual insight are tested. The trials of heroes such as Odysseus, Aeneas, and Jason dramatize a central theme in Greco-Roman cosmology: that one's fate is bound to one's relationship with the natural world.

In *The Odyssey*, Homer presents the sea not as a neutral route home but as a volatile, sentient presence—capable of both punishing transgression and refining character. Odysseus, having blinded the Cyclops Polyphemus and violated the rules of *xenia*, incurs the wrath of Poseidon, god of the sea. The resulting tempests, shipwrecks, and detours are not random acts of divine fury but trials that confront the hero with the consequences of his overreach. The sea thus becomes a moral landscape: its winds and waves enact judgment, demanding humility and ethical recalibration (Homer 1996, *Odyssey*, Book 5; Segal 1994). The sea, as rendered in *The Odyssey*, becomes a moralized medium—its tempests and perils

functioning as instruments through which divine will enacts judgment. While Poseidon is clearly the agent of vengeance, the elemental force of the sea itself becomes symbolically charged, representing a cosmos in which transgression is met with ordeal. Rather than attributing agency to the sea per se, the narrative constructs nature as a moral environment, through which human error is exposed and corrected.

In this vision, nature disciplines—less as retribution and more as initiation.

A similar dynamic unfolds in Virgil's *Aeneid*, where nature is repeatedly enlisted as the medium through which divine will and human destiny are revealed. In Book 1, a storm conjured by Juno scatters Aeneas' fleet, forcing him into a series of unplanned landings and divine encounters. Later, in Book 6, Aeneas descends into the underworld—a symbolic earth-body structured by rivers, groves, and thresholds of memory and judgment (Virgil 1916, *Aeneid*, 6.268–901). This journey across elemental spaces is at once spiritual and ecological: it teaches Aeneas not just about the past and future of Rome but also about the ethics of coexistence with a cosmos infused with will and consequence (Thomas 1988; Gowers 2005).

Recent scholarship has significantly expanded our understanding of how Virgil's landscapes encode ecological instability and ethical entanglement. In particular, Armstrong's (2019) reading of vegetal life in Virgil's *Georgics* and *Aeneid* reveals the presence of a vegetal poetics that resists simplistic categorizations of nature as either passive or hostile. She demonstrates that plants in Virgil are not inert background matter but epistemological agents—symbols of resilience, fragility, and the moral uncertainties of human–divine entanglement.

This interpretive trajectory is further enriched in *Conversing with Chaos* (Eidinow and Schliephake 2024), particularly in Chapters 2 and 8. Chapter 2, authored by Sophie Mills, delves into the representation of environmental disorder in the *Aeneid*, arguing that natural chaos is not merely a foil for imperial order but a constitutive part of Virgil's ethical and narrative logic. Mills examines how storms, landslides, and liminal terrains encode emotional and political transition—reading nature as an interlocutor in Aeneas' moral formation. Chapter 8, by Mark Bradley, shifts focus to sensory and material ecologies, analyzing how Virgil constructs immersive environments that evoke bodily and emotional responses in both characters and readers. Bradley interprets Virgilian landscapes as affective matrices—spaces charged with memory, loss, and instability—which challenge anthropocentric hierarchies and invite an ethics of vulnerability. Together, these chapters offer a vision of the *Aeneid* not as a triumphalist epic but as a meditation on environmental precarity and the affective labor of navigating a fractured world.

Mythic landscapes in these epics function as initiatory spaces, thresholds between the human and the divine, the known and the wild. Forests, caves, rivers, and volcanic ranges act not only as challenges but also as actors in the hero's moral education. In Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, Jason's navigation through the Clashing Rocks (Symplegades) is emblematic of this elemental ordeal—requiring not just strength but ritual foresight and sensitivity to signs (Apollonius of Rhodes 1993, *Argonautica*, 2.317–340). Nature's perils demand more than endurance; they demand ecological literacy. When heroes fail to heed the warnings—when Phaethon loses control of the solar chariot, or Heracles arrogantly diverts a river to clean the Augean stables—the result is not victory but collapse.

Across these traditions, the hero's alignment with the natural order is not incidental; it is determinative of fate. The careful observance of rites—libations to river gods, burial under trees, sacrifices before voyages—reveals a worldview in which ethical action and ecological awareness are inseparable (Clay 1983). When this harmony is violated, nature becomes antagonist. During his journey, Aeneas and his crew are cursed by the

Harpies—monstrous bird-women—after disturbing their territory. The Harpies foretell famine as punishment for the violation of sacred ecological order.

In the *Aeneid* (Book 3), Aeneas fells trees for shipbuilding without ritual consent, provoking the Harpies, who curse his crew with hunger and delay (Virgil 1916, *Aeneid*, 3.209–300). This episode renders explicit the moral charge of resource extraction: even heroic necessity is subject to the judgment of the land.

Indeed, the hero's journey can be read as an ecological bildungsroman—a narrative of gradual realignment, in which success comes not through conquest but through recognition of nature's autonomy. The movement is from dominance to reciprocity, from alienation to belonging. The landscapes traversed are not inert settings but moral terrains—alive with memory, resistance, and the potential for transformation. In this way, Greco-Roman epic narratives anticipate a contemporary ecological ethics that locates moral growth in attunement to the more-than-human world (Buxton 2004).

4. Rupture and Transition: From Harmony to Control

The reverent and animate vision of nature that characterizes early Greco-Roman mythology—where rivers bear witness, forests protect the divine, and metamorphosis reveals ethical truths—begins to erode with the progressive shift from *mythos* to *logos*. This transformation, unfolding across classical literature and philosophy, marks not only a change in narrative style but also a profound reconfiguration of the human–nature relationship. As nature comes to be viewed less as a sentient interlocutor and more as a system of impersonal forces, the mythic sense of reciprocity gives way to an epistemic ambition: to observe, explain, and ultimately control. What emerges is a conceptual rupture—one that not only lays the foundation for natural philosophy and scientific inquiry but also paves the way for anthropocentric paradigms that marginalize ecological agency.

In early cosmologies, natural features were not inert but infused with sacred presence. Springs housed nymphs, groves sheltered goddesses, and rivers swore oaths. These animistic frameworks encoded a moral ecology in which environmental transgressions carried spiritual consequence. Yet, by the classical and especially the Hellenistic period, this world of speaking rivers and sacred trees begins to quiet. The pre-Socratic philosophers, particularly Anaximander and Heraclitus, initiate a search for natural causes, replacing divine intervention with abstract principles such as *apeiron* or *logos* (Lloyd 1979). Nature is no longer a divine being to be revered but a system to be understood. This intellectual turn does not erase wonder; it repositions it within rational frameworks, slowly displacing ontological sacrality with explanatory logic.

The shift deepens in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, where the cosmos is rendered in atomistic terms: a vast arena of collisions and combinations governed by chance, not design. While Lucretius does not deny the gods, he confines them to remote tranquility, uninvolved in human affairs. Natural phenomena, from storms to disease, unfold with sublime indifference to human desires or moral structures (DRN 2.1090–1130). The implications are profound: if nature no longer enacts justice, then its exploitation becomes ethically unproblematic. Lucretius' vision is a double-edged inheritance—on the one hand, a precursor to scientific materialism; on the other, a watershed in the desacralization of the Earth.

Philosophical systems such as Stoicism sought to reconcile reverence with rationality. The Stoics retained the idea of a cosmos pervaded by *logos*, a rational principle that aligned natural order with human virtue. Yet, this very rationalization made nature legible—and therefore governable. In Roman Stoicism, especially in Seneca's *Naturales Quaestiones*, the emphasis shifts toward empirical investigation. Thunder, earthquakes, floods—once divine omens—become phenomena to be explained. As Seneca declares, “We seek to understand lightning not to fear it, but to tame our ignorance” (NQ 2.31). Even as he admires the

complexity of nature, his gaze is analytic, not devotional. Knowledge becomes the path to mastery, and reverence is tempered by the drive to comprehend and, implicitly, to manage.

This philosophical evolution aligns with the imperial logic of control that defined Roman statecraft. Engineering feats—bridges, aqueducts, drainage systems—translate the rationalization of nature into infrastructure. Pliny the Elder, while cataloguing nature's marvels in his *Naturalis Historia*, does so with an eye toward utility: medicinal herbs, precious stones, and agricultural yields are valued in terms of extraction and benefit (NH, Book 12; [Murphy 2004](#)). The world is wondrous, yes—but it is also a resource. Nature becomes inventory.

And yet, even as this paradigm takes hold, cracks appear—voices of ecological anxiety that resist full disenchantment. In Roman poetry, especially, we find moments of unease about environmental manipulation and urban excess. Horace, in *Epodes* 2 and *Odes* 3.1, evokes the simplicity of rural life as a contrast to imperial ambition, praising moderation and closeness to the land. Virgil, in the *Georgics*, offers a more ambivalent vision: While celebrating agricultural labor, he does not romanticize domination. His verses are shadowed by the costs of cultivation, the violence necessary to subdue the soil, and the fragility of seasonal balance (*Georg.* 1.143–203; [Fallon 2006](#)). Nature, in Virgil's telling, is cooperative but exacting—a partner, not a servant.

Perhaps the most forward-looking ecological voice is that of Columella, whose agricultural treatises advocate for sustainability in the form of crop rotation, soil preservation, and measured use. Warning against overextraction and monoculture, he articulates principles that echo contemporary agroecology. For Columella, the land must not only be worked but also respected; fertility depends not on conquest but on harmony. His vision reminds us that even within a rationalist and utilitarian frame, countercurrents of restraint and ecological intelligence persisted.

Ultimately, this section of classical thought reveals a transitional zone—where mythic reverence fades, but environmental ethics do not vanish entirely. The shift from sacred to secular does not eliminate the sense of ecological consequence; rather, it reframes it within emerging modes of inquiry, administration, and critique. The tension between harmony and control is not simply modern; it is inscribed in the foundations of Western intellectual history.

5. Conclusions

Classical mythology is more than a repository of symbolic tales or spiritual metaphors; it is a cultural archive of ecological awareness, a narrative framework through which ancient societies articulated the entanglement of humans and nature. Across epic, tragedy, hymn, and didactic verse, the natural world appears not as inert scenery but as a sentient and morally responsive presence. Forests punish, rivers remember, storms teach, and metamorphosis mediates the boundary between justice and embodiment. As this article has argued, Greco-Roman myth encodes a sustained recognition of nature as agent, teacher, and boundary—capable of retribution, regeneration, and redefinition.

These mythic patterns offer more than allegorical insight into ancient thought; they articulate a worldview in which the human is never autonomous but always enmeshed within a network of elemental, divine, and ethical relationships. Against the dominant logics of modernity—extraction, commodification, control—myth gestures toward reciprocity, humility, and relational limits. The story of Daphne, who becomes a laurel to escape violation, speaks not only of flight and transformation but also of the autonomy of the vegetal and the sacred constraints of desire. Flood myths such as that of Deucalion and Pyrrha recount not just annihilation but renewal—framing catastrophe as a passage toward ethical reorientation and not simply survival.

Far from static or obsolete, these narratives retain their power precisely because they offer symbolic grammars for ecological feeling—for making sense of rupture, dependence, and rebalance. In an era marked by climate instability, biodiversity loss, and cultural estrangement from the more-than-human world, myth can function as a mode of critical remembrance. It invites us to recall what our epistemologies have sought to sever: that knowledge is not only measurement but also mythos; that responsibility emerges not only from data but also from stories that bind us to place, season, and consequence.

To re-read classical mythology through an ecocritical lens is not to romanticize the past but to mine it for resources of ethical imagination. Ancient myths do not map neatly onto contemporary ecological theory, but they anticipate certain key insights: the moral responsiveness of the more-than-human world, the consequences of human excess, and the need for reciprocal care. These patterns resonate with modern frameworks such as systems ecology, posthumanist ethics, and political ecologies of interdependence (cf. [Bennett 2010](#); [Haraway 2016](#); [Morton 2013](#)).

However, the claim that myth can serve as a “model” for modern ecological ethics must be understood not as direct applicability but as a symbolic provocation—a mode of thinking that challenges extractive paradigms through narrative, rather than prescription. As classical reception theorists have shown ([Martindale 1993](#); [Hardwick 2003](#)), the reuse of ancient texts involves temporal asymmetries, ideological risks, and interpretive negotiation. Yet, it is precisely through this contested process that myths can enter the Anthropocene—not as relics but as narrative catalysts that foster ethical reorientation, ecological awareness, and a renewed sense of limits.

It is to acknowledge that living wisely on Earth has always required more than science; it has required narrative, orientation, and meaning. In this sense, myth re-enters the Anthropocene not as superstition but as method: a way of telling that discloses patterns of resilience, warning, and interdependence.

As the environmental humanities continue to bridge literature, ethics, ecology, and philosophy, classical myth offers a transhistorical terrain where these disciplines converge. Its stories do not merely describe the world—they shape how we inhabit it. And in a moment of ecological crisis, they may yet teach us to listen again—to trees, to rivers, to storms—not only for their beauty but also for their wisdom.

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