

# Ancient Greece Figurative Language

## Table of Contents

<b><i>Ancient Greece Figurative Language</i></b> .....	<b>1</b>
1. Achilles' Heel .....	2
2. Adonis .....	2
3. Amazon .....	2
4. Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts .....	3
5. Blow Hot and Cold .....	3
6. Call a Spade a Spade .....	3
7. Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place .....	3
8. Chaos/Chaotic .....	3
9. Cuckoo Land .....	3
10. Cry Wolf .....	4
11. Dog as Man's Best Friend or Faithful Companion .....	4
12. Elysium Fields .....	4
13. The Face That Launched A Thousand Ships .....	4
14. Fate .....	5
15. Food of the Gods .....	5
16. Fury.....	5
17. Gordian Knots.....	5
18. Gorgon/Medusa .....	5
19. To Harp.....	5
20. Herculean Effort.....	6
21. Hot as Hades.....	6
22. Hounds of Hell .....	6
23. A Judgement of Paris .....	6
24. Leave No Stone Unturned .....	6
25. Labyrinth .....	7
26. Marathon .....	7
27. Mercurial.....	7
28. <i>Midas Touch</i> .....	7

29.	Modern-day Medea .....	7
30.	Nemesis.....	8
31.	Odyssey.....	8
32.	Pandora's Box.....	8
33.	Phobias .....	8
34.	Resting on his Laurels.....	8
35.	Sisyphean Task .....	8
36.	Sour Grapes .....	9
37.	Spill the Beans .....	9
38.	Tantalize.....	9
39.	Touch Wood .....	9
40.	Trojan Horse .....	9
41.	Zephyr .....	10
	Sources.....	10

## 1. Achilles' Heel

*Meaning:* A person's weak spot, or a fault or weakness that can cause someone to fail.

*Greek Myth:* A hero of the Trojan War, Achilles was a Greek hero whose mother Thetis was a Nereid, or sea goddess. Since Achilles was destined to die young, Thetis dipped him into the river Styx, which would render him invincible. However, she had held him by the heel, thus leaving a vulnerable area. He would later die, as prophesized, by an arrow to his heel.

## 2. Adonis

*Meaning:* A handsome young man.

*Greek Myth:* Adonis was a beautiful youth whom the goddess of love, Aphrodite, fell in love with. Adonis was tragically killed by the god of War, Ares, disguised as a boar.

## 3. Amazon

*Meaning:* A big, strong, warrior- like woman

*Greek Myth:* From a race, as the Greeks described them, of warrior women. Appolonius Rhodius, in his Argonautica, mentions that the Amazons were the daughters of Ares, the god of war, and Harmonia, a nymph, and that they were brutal and aggressive, with their main concern in life being that of war.

## 4. Beware of Greeks Bearing Gifts

*Meaning:* Be careful of anyone offering something; they may have an ulterior motive.

*Greek Myth:* This phrase is attributed to the Trojan Horse and the "gift" the goddess Athene gave Priam's barricaded city. The horse contained armed men who sacked Troy during the night.

## 5. Blow Hot and Cold

*Meaning:* To be inconsistent, and to frequently change one's mind

*Greek Roots:* This phrase comes from one of Aesop's fables, 'The Satyr and the Traveler.' One winter's day a traveler happens upon a satyr (a mythical creature, half man, half goat), who invites the man into his house. The traveler accepts. As the traveler awaits his meal, he blows on his cold hands to warm them. When hot food is put in front of him, the traveler blows upon it to cool it. The satyr exclaims, "I will have nothing to do with a man who blows both hot and cold with the same breath," and promptly throws the traveler out of his house.

## 6. Call a Spade a Spade

*Meaning:* Call something by its name, however impolite. Don't beat about the bush, say it as it is.

*Greek Roots:* The saying comes from 'Apophthegmata Laconia', a work by Plutarch, a Greek biographer and essayist (46 AD-120 AD), where he states, 'call a fig a fig, and a trough a trough.'

## 7. Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place

*Meaning:* A difficult choice where either decision could end in disaster.

*Greek Myth:* In Homer's Odyssey, the hero, Odysseus, must pass between two sea monsters, Charybdis, a treacherous whirlpool, and Scylla, a six-headed monster, who reside on opposite sides of the strait of Messina. Odysseus chose to pass by Scylla, the lesser of the two evils, thinking he would lose fewer men than passing through Charybdis, the whirlpool.

## 8. Chaos/Chaotic

*Meaning:* Disorderly, extreme confusion

*Greek Myth:* According to the Latin poet Ovid, who relayed the myths of Greece and Rome in his *Metamorphoses*, the gap which all the universe sprung from. Chaos represented the disorder before the gods; eventually, Chaos begot the beginning of it.

## 9. Cuckoo Land

*Meaning:* Being unrealistic or living in a fantasy world

Greek Roots: This comes from the play, 'The Birds,' a comedy by ancient Greek playwright Aristophanes, performed in ancient Athens in 414 BC. Cloud Cuckoo Land is the name of the land which separates humans and gods, a utopian city, an unrealistic, idealist, fantasy world.

## 10. Cry Wolf

Meaning: Someone who tells so many lies that when they do tell the truth nobody believes them.

Greek Roots: From Aesop's fable, 'The Boy Who Cried Wolf', a young shepherd, who, day after day, drove his fellow villagers crazy by telling them the same untrue story about a wolf who was attacking his sheep. After many false alarms, the villagers decided to ignore the silly boy and, then, one day, the young shepherd actually cried the truth, his sheep were being attacked by a wolf. However, because of his constant lying, no one believed him and didn't run to help, and all the poor sheep were killed.

## 11. Dog as Man's Best Friend or Faithful Companion

Meaning: A dog who is faithful and loyal.

Greek Myth: Many ancient cultures treated the dog as a scavenger. One classic example is the belief that any criminal's body should be "thrown to the dogs" after death. But one story overrides such belief of the dog: when Odysseus returned home in disguise, his faithful dog, who had patiently awaited his return though near death, managed to stay alive to see his master--and was practically the only one who recognized him. On its deathbed, it managed to look up at its master and wag its tail in appreciation.

## 12. Elysium Fields

Meaning: Paradise

Greek Myth: The Greeks did not believe in a heaven or hell; instead, their dead went to the realm of the god Hades. Elysium, also known as "Isle of the Blessed," was where the exceptional humans were sent; most mortals became mere "shades" upon their deaths. A few worthless beings ended up in Tartarus, the closest equivalent to hell in Greek mythology.

## 13. The Face That Launched A Thousand Ships

Meaning: Any one person causing disaster, especially war.

Greek Myth: This is a direct reference to Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world. The abduction of her by the Trojan prince Paris caused Menelaus, her husband, to declare war on Troy. Because of prior alliances, eventually all of the Argives (Greeks) were involved; thus, Helen's beauty had "launched a thousand ships" into war.

## 14. Fate

Meaning: Evitable, predestined turn of events.

Greek Myth: The Fates were three sisters: Lachesis (lot), Clotho (the spinner), and Atropos (not to be turned). Based on the Greek notion of the "thread of life", the Fates are represented as spinners. Lachesis allots each man a length of the thread of life, Clotho spins it, and Atropos severs it. No one — not even Zeus, ruler of the gods — could alter their decisions.

## 15. Food of the Gods

Meaning: Luscious, unbelievably delicious delicacies.

Greek Myth: Nectar and ambrosia were what the gods normally ate (they could, of course, eat almost anything, including humans). If a mortal were to eat the ambrosia (nectar was the drink) he or she would be rendered immortal.

## 16. Fury

Meaning: Intense, uncontrollable anger.

Greek Myth: The Furies were the "avengers" of crimes. They would pursue anyone with bloodstained hands; they are particularly cruel to Orestes after the murder of Clytemnestra, his mother. Some scholars believe the Furies represent one's own tormented conscious.

## 17. Gordian Knots

Meaning: An extremely perplexing puzzle or problem.

Greek Myth: Legend mixes with mythology with this term. King Gordius of Phrygia tied the knot and it was destined that whomever could untie it revealed himself as the future lord of Asia. After many frustrating attempts to untie it, Alexander the Great finally sliced the knot with his sword, proving it would take brute force to eventually capture Asia. Thus, to *cut the Gordian knot* means to solve a puzzle in a powerful, decisive manner.

## 18. Gorgon/Medusa

Meaning: A severely ugly woman.

Greek Myth: The Gorgons were three sisters who were so repulsive looking that their very gaze would turn a man to stone. Medusa, one of the sisters, is described as a winged human female with living venomous snakes in place of hair. Those who gazed upon her face would turn to stone.

## 19. To Harp

Meaning: To bother someone continuously.

Greek Myth: Jason, in his quest for the golden fleece, encounters King Phineus, who is

continually tormented by Harpies. The Harpies are winged creatures whose origins might actually represent wind spirits. To King Phineus, the Harpies are grotesque women who constantly snatch his food and drink and will not let him be.

## 20. Herculean Effort

*Meaning:* A mighty try, a task that is difficult and challenging

*Greek Myth:* Heracles was the son of Zeus and a mortal woman. He was obligated to fulfill twelve tasks, called the Labors of Heracles. Any effort we call challenging can be attributed as "Herculean," or great, and is associated with the Labors.

## 21. Hot as Hades

*Meaning:* Sweltering heat

*Greek Myth:* Hades was the ruler of the underworld, and the Greeks did not have a concept of heaven or hell. The real origin of this saying may be more appropriately changed to "hot as Tartarus", since that was the place in Hades's realm where punishment was dealt and would have been surely "hot".

## 22. Hounds of Hell

*Meaning:* Allegory for evil, or the pursuit by evil

*Greek Myth:* In reference to Hades's kingdom, Cerberus was a dog who guarded the entrance to the netherworld. There weren't really any "hounds", but Cerberus is often depicted with three—sometimes fifty—heads.

## 23. A Judgement of Paris

*Meaning:* Any difficult decision.

*Greek Myth:* Paris, a Trojan prince, was given the impossible task of deciding which goddess-- Athena, Aphrodite, or Hera—was the most beautiful. All three tried bribes, but Aphrodite's—the love of the most beautiful mortal woman in the world—was the most enticing. Of course, Paris (and Troy) gained the other goddesses' animosity, and the judgement of Paris proved fatal to his city.

## 24. Leave No Stone Unturned

*Meaning:* Search every minute detail

*Greek Myth:* Eurystheus, the king responsible for Heracles' twelve labors, eventually goes after Heracles' sons following his death. He wants "no stone left unturned" in finding and killing them. Euripedes, better known for his masterpiece *The Bacchae*, wrote a play with this catchphrase included in it.

## 25. Labyrinth

*Meaning:* An elaborate maze

*Greek Myth:* Queen Pasiphae gave birth to a horrible half-man, half-bull creature called the Minotaur. To conceal this monster, King Minos had the master craftsman Daedalus build the labyrinth. Because seven youths and seven maidens from Athens were sacrificed to this beast every year, the labyrinth was a series of perplexing hallways and corridors that no one could escape. Eventually Theseus (with the aid of Ariadne, whom he eventually dumped) did kill the Minotaur and escaped the labyrinth.

## 26. Marathon

*Meaning:* A running race that is about 26 miles in length.

*Greek Roots:* Marathon comes from the legendary story of a Greek soldier who ran from the city of Marathon to Athens to announce the Greek victory over the Persian army.

## 27. Mercurial

*Meaning:* Someone whose moods change quickly and often.

*Greek Roots:* Mercury was a Roman god who was famous for his great speed. This god has his roots from the Greek god Hermes. People whose emotions change quickly are said to be influenced by Mercury.

## 28. Midas Touch

*Meaning:* A person who always is lucky or who has a skill for making money is said to have the Midas touch.

*Greek Myth:* Perhaps one of mythology's most famous tales is that of King Midas, who was granted the wish that everything he touched turned to gold. However, he soon realized that he could not eat, or drink, or even hug his daughter. Wisely, he rescinded his wish, and by immersing himself in the river Pactolus, lost the "golden touch."

## 29. Modern-day Medea

*Meaning:* A vengeful, often cruel, woman

*Greek Myth:* Medea is a fascinating figure in mythology. Some see her as a tragic heroine dissed by a typical chauvinist pig male, others view her as an evil sorceress with a vengeful heart. Euripedes makes either case in his brilliant play *Medea*: After helping Argonauts acquire the Golden Fleece, she leaves her family (by killing her brother and scattering his limbs in the sea for her father) and marries Jason. Jason soon dumps her for a younger princess, claiming it is for the future of their two young sons. Medea, naturally, is furious. She murders her children and leaves a devastated Jason via a serpent-drawn chariot.

## 30. Nemesis

*Meaning:* An adversary, enemy, obstacle

*Greek Myth:* The personification of retribution, Nemesis was a goddess sent to cause irritation and justification to those who deserved it.

## 31. Odyssey

*Meaning:* A adventure, journey

*Greek Myth:* From the classical epic by Homer, the *Odyssey*. The hero Odysseus is returning from the Trojan War; it takes him nine long years. Along the way, he has a multitude of adventures—from the Lotus-Eaters to Cyclops.

## 32. Pandora's Box

*Meaning:* Beware of curiosity, because you could get yourself in trouble; or something small can lead to many problems.

*Greek Myth:* Pandora, the first mortal woman created by the gods. Pandora was desperate to open a box, presented to her by Zeus, as a wedding present, but her husband, Epimetheus, having been told by Zeus what it contained, told her not to open it. Pandora's curiosity got the better of her, and while Epimetheus slept, she opened the box, letting all the evils of the World fly out.

## 33. Phobias

*Meaning:* A strong fear

*Greek Myth:* Phobos is the Greek word for fear, but originally Phobos was a son of Ares who was the representation of fear, essentially in battles. He and his brother Deimos (panic) eventually became names of moons of Mars (the Roman version of Ares).

## 34. Resting on his Laurels

*Meaning:* After being recognized for doing something important, this is a person who becomes lazy and gives up efforts to better himself.

*Greek Roots:* In ancient Greece, laurel leaves were considered a symbol of victory, a status symbol, associated with the God Apollo. Laurel wreaths were presented to victors of the Pythian Games (6th century BC).

## 35. Sisyphean Task

*Meaning:* A task that requires seemingly endless amounts of labor to complete.

*Greek Roots:* Sisyphus was a Greek king who was forced to roll a heavy boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down.



## 36. Sour Grapes

*Meaning:* Someone who didn't manage to obtain something which they wanted badly, or who is jealous of something someone else has managed to acquire, or achieve, and thereafter speaks critically and unfavorably about it.

*Greek Myth:* Sour grapes originates from Aesop's fable, the 'Fox and the Grapes', in which a fox spies a juicy bunch of grapes hanging from a tree. Try as he might, he can't reach those grapes, gives up and walks off declaring, 'never mind, just as well, they would have been sour anyway'.

## 37. Spill the Beans

*Meaning:* Divulge a secret, either maliciously or by accident.

*Greek Roots:* In ancient Greece, the voting system was for people to cast secret votes by putting either a white bean (positive vote), or a black bean (negative vote), into a jar. If the jar was knocked over, by accident, or other deceitful means, the secret was revealed, the beans were spilled.

## 38. Tantalize

*Meaning:* Something that is tempting but difficult to reach.

*Greek Roots:* Tantalus was a Greek king who was punished by Zeus to forever go thirsty and hungry in Hades despite being near a pool of water and almost within reach of a fruit tree.

## 39. Touch Wood

*Meaning:* Avoid tempting fate, or to bring good luck. Also known as "knock on wood."

*Greek Roots:* In ancient Greece, it was believed dryads, or wood nymphs, lived inside trees. The ancient Greeks would touch a tree, hoping to invoke good luck or protection from the wood nymphs dwelling within.

## 40. Trojan Horse

*Meaning:* Subversion or destruction from a seemingly serene person, people, or object, especially from the inside; or an object that is used to hide something in order to trick someone.

*Greek Myth:* The Trojan Horse was related by the Latin genius Virgil in the *Aeneid*. The Trojans were barricaded within their city walls while the Achaeans (Greeks) lay in wait outside. An enormous wooden horse is brought within the city; a gift from the gods, the Trojans believe, despite warnings from the princess Cassandra and the priest Laocoon. During the night, hidden soldiers from the horse's belly emerged and sacked the city.

## 41. Zephyr

*Meaning:* A gentle breeze

*Greek Roots:* Zephyrus was a Greek god of the west wind, and one of the four seasonal Wind-Gods.

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