The Life of Phaethon

Light Night

6pm Friday 9th October
The Life of Phaethon

1. The Palace of the Sun (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 1-30)
2. Phaethon and his father (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 31-48)
3. The Sun’s admonitions (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 49-62)
4. His further warnings (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 63-89)
5. Phaethon insists on driving the chariot (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 90-110)
6. The Sun’s instructions (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 11-149)
7. The Horses run wild (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 150-177)
8. Phaethon lets go of the reins (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 178-200)
9. The mountains burn (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 201-226)
10. The rivers are dried up (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 227-271)
11. Earth complains (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 272-300)
12. Jupiter intervenes and Phaethon dies (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 301-328)
13. Phaethon’s sisters grieve for him (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 329-343)
14. The sisters turned into poplar trees (Ovid, Metamorphoses book 2 lines 344-366)


On Light Night as part of Greek Fire, will you dare to drive the chariot of the sun? For more information about the content of Greek Fire, see https://lightnightgreekfire.wordpress.com/.
When he was a teenager Phaethon, as was the custom, was sent to live with another family for a year. Though he enjoyed this at first, by the end of the year he even missed his seven little sisters and looked forward to returning home. This was especially the case because while away he had been told his mother had been married before and some doubts had been expressed as to the identity of his father...
Helios at work

Helios at leisure
He returned to the Palace of the Sun, which towered up with raised columns, bright with glittering gold, with shining ivory crowning the roofs and twin doors radiated light from polished silver.

Phaethon immediately went to speak to Helios, to ask whether he was his father, but stopped some way off, unable to bear his light too close.
Helios, seated among the Seasons and Hours, looked at the boy with eyes that see everything and said, “What troubles you, my son?”

Phaethon replied, “Light of the World, some people do not believe you are in truth my father. Please, give me some proof that will take away the uncertainty I they made me feel.”

His father removed the crown of glittering rays from his head and bade him to come nearer. Embracing him, he said “It is not to be denied you are worthy to be mine, and Clymene, your mother, has told you the truth of your birth. So that you can banish doubt, ask for any favour, so that I can grant it to you. This I swear by the Styx, that my eyes have never seen, by which the gods swear.”
Hardly had he settled back properly in his seat when Phaethon asked to drive his father’s chariot for a day.

Helios shook his head sadly, regretting the oath he had sworn. “My son, I wish I could refuse you this! Only I have the power to occupy the chariot of fire. What you want is unsafe. You are not old enough or strong enough. Not even Zeus, king of the gods, who hurls terrifying lightning bolts from his right hand, can handle the team. Reconsider, my son! It is fatherly feeling that makes me beg this of you. Look around you at the riches the world holds, and ask for anything. I can you refuse you nothing. But to drive my chariot would be a punishment not an honour. You have my oath, but make a wiser choice.”

But Phaethon would not be persuaded and, bound by his oath, Helios had to agree. Phaethon still insisted on driving the chariot. So, his father led the youth to the high chariot with its gold axle chariot pole, wheels with golden rims, and circles of silver spokes.

The horses, Aethion (Fiery-red), Asterope (Starry-eyed), Bronte (Thunder) and Phlegon (Burning), were brought from the stables and hitched to the chariot while Helios gave Phaethon advice about how to control them.
As Phaethon boarded, his father rubbed his face with a sacred ointment to make it proof against consuming flames, and placed his rays amongst his hair, and foreseeing tragedy, and fetching up sighs from his troubled heart, gave him advice, hoping to keep him safe,

“The first part of the track is steep, and one that my fresh horses at dawn can hardly climb. In mid-heaven it is highest, there to look down on earth and sea often alarms even me, and makes my heart tremble with awesome fear. The last part of the track is downwards and needs sure control. But Tethys herself is no longer afraid that I might dive headlong into her waves.

“The rushing sky is constantly turning, and drags along the remote stars, and whirls them in rapid orbits. Move the opposite way, so its momentum does not overcome you as it does all other things, and ride contrary to its swift rotation. Even if you keep your course, and do not steer awry, you must still avoid the horns of Taurus the Bull, Sagittarius the Archer, raging Leo’s lion’s jaw, Scorpio’s cruel pincers, and Cancer’s crab-claws.

“You will not easily rule those proud horses, breathing out through mouth and nostrils the fires burning in their chests. They scarcely tolerate my control when their fierce spirits are hot, and their necks resist the reins. They run swiftly of their own accord. It is a hard task to check their eagerness. Spare the whip and rein them in more strongly!

“Follow my wheel-marks along the track of Heaven, avoiding the southern pole and the Arctic North. So that heaven and earth receive equal warmth, do not sink down too far or heave the chariot into the upper air! Too high and you will scorch the roof of heaven: too low, the earth. The middle way is safest.”
The sun’s swift horses filled the air with fiery whinnying, and rushing out tore through the mists in the way with their hooves and, lifted by their wings, overtook the East winds. But the weight was lighter than the horses of the Sun could feel and the chariot, free of its usual burden, leaped into the air and rushed into the heights as though it were empty.

When Phaethon looked down from the heights of the sky at the earth far, far below he grew pale and his knees quaked with sudden fear, wishing he had never been granted what he had asked for.

He saw the marvellous forms of huge creatures everywhere in the glowing sky. Where Scorpio bends his pincers in twin arcs, and, with his tail and his curving arms stretched out to both sides, spreads his body and limbs over two star signs. When Phaethon saw this monster drenched with black and poisonous venom threatening to wound him with its arched sting, robbed of his wits by chilling horror, he dropped the reins.
When the horses felt the reins lying across their backs, they veered off course and ran unchecked through unknown regions of the air. Running wherever their momentum took them: striking against the fixed stars in deep space and hurrying the chariot along remote tracks, now climbing to the heights of heaven, now rush headlong down its precipitous slope, sweeping a course nearer to the earth.

The earth bursts into flame, in the highest regions first, opens in deep fissures and all its moisture dries up. The meadows turn white, the trees are consumed with all their leaves, and the scorched corn makes its own destruction. Great cities are destroyed with all their walls, and the flames reduce whole nations with all their peoples to ashes. The woodlands burn, with the hills.
Kindly Earth, surrounded as she was by sea, lifted her smothered face. Putting her hand to her brow, and shaking everything with her mighty tremors, and choking with the heat, she spoke in a faint voice, “If this pleases you, if I have deserved it, O king of the gods, why delay your lightning bolts? If it is right for me to die through the power of fire, let me die by your fire! Look at my scorched hair and the ashes in my eyes! Look around you on either side: both the poles are steaming! If the fire should melt them, your own palace will fall! Atlas himself is suffering, and can barely hold up the white-hot sky on his shoulders! If the sea and the land and the kingdom of the heavens are destroyed, we are lost in ancient chaos! Save whatever is left from the flames!”

Zeus climbed to the highest summit of heaven, only to find that he had no clouds to cover the earth, or rain to shower from the sky. He thundered, and balancing a lightning bolt in his right hand threw it from eye-level at the charioteer, removing him, at the same moment, from the chariot and from life, extinguishing fire with fierce fire.

Thrown into confusion the horses lurched in different directions, wrenched their necks from the yoke and threw off the broken harness. Here the reins lay, there the axle, there the spokes of shattered wheels: the fragments of the wrecked chariot were flung far and wide.
But Phaethon, flames ravaging his glowing hair, was hurled headlong, leaving a long trail in the air, like a shooting star.

Far from his own country, in a distant part of the world, the river god Eridanus took him from the air, and bathed his smoke-blackened face and the Italian nymphs buried his body, carving a verse in the rock:

**HERE PHAETHON LIES WHO THE SUN’S JOURNEY MADE: HE DARED ALL, THOUGH HE BY WEAKNESS WAS BETRAYED.**
Helios hid his face and a whole day went by without the sun. His mother, Clymene, grieving and frantic, wandered over the Earth seeking her son. She found his tomb beside the riverbank in a foreign country. Falling to the ground she bathed with tears the name she read on the cold stone. His sisters, the Heliadae joined her and cried no less, calling for their brother night and day.

Four times the moon had joined her crescent horns to form her bright disc and still they devoted themselves to mourning. Then, when Merope, his eldest sister, tried to throw herself to the ground, she found that her ankles had stiffened. And when radiant Lampetia tried to come to her aid, she found she was rooted to the spot. A third sister found her hair had turned to leaves. One cried out in pain that her legs were sheathed in wood, another that her arms had become long branches. While they wondered at this, bark closed round their thighs and covered their bodies.

Their mother tried to pull the bark from their bodies, but only succeeded in hurting them because they their bodies were in the poplar trees at which she was tearing.
The bark finally covered them entirely and no trace remained of the girls they once were. Although, their tears still flow, and hardened by the sun, fall as amber from the branches, to be taken by the bright river and sent onwards to adorn Roman brides.

The 7 Poplars by the Eridanus river

Sap tears

Amber bead necklaces
Illustrations

Front cover: “Phaethon” by Amy Cruse, 1925, from The Book of Myths, © The Bridgeman Art Library / Private Collection / The Stapleton Collection.

Helios at Leisure, “Helios as Personification of Midday” by Anton Raphael Mengs, c.1765, one of four paintings with personifications of the times of day intended for the boudoir of Maria Luisa of Parma, Princess of Austria, in the Palace of Moncloa, Madrid.

Helios with the boy Phaethon, “Phaethon and Apollo” by Giovanni (Da San Giovanni) Mannozzi (1590-1636), Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Helios at Work: Helios between Nyx (Night) and Eos (Dawn) by the Sappho Painter, c. 500BC, Attic black-figure on a white-ground lekythos (oil flask), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Helios, with Solar halo, driving the chariot of the sun on an Apulian stitula (“bucket”), c. 350-340BC, Museum of Art & Design, Hamburg. “Apollo in His Chariot with the Hours” (Selene – the Moon – being chased away) by John Singer Sargent, 1922–25, stairway ceiling centre mural, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.


“The Palace of the Sun” or “Petente Chiede ad Apollo di Guidare il Carro del Sol” (“Petitioning Apollo to drive the chariot of the Sun”) by Luigi Ademollo, 1832, from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, © / Private Collection / The Stapleton Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library.


The horses of Helios in “Phaeton Asking Apollo to Drive the Sun Chariot” by Benjamin West, 1804, Louvre, Paris.

Helios points the way to Phaethon in “Phaethon on the Chariot of Apollo” by Nicolas Bertin, 1720, Louvre, Paris.

Phaethon sets out over the Ocean from the tondo (interior) an Apulian red-figure bowl, 400-300BC, location unknown, © Araldo de Luca/Corbis http://www.corbisimages.com/stock-photo/rights-managed/DE005665/greek-bowl-depicting-helios-in-chariot-with

Phaethon steers the horses by Giovanni Caselli (illustrator), 1997, from The Illustrated Bulfinch’s Mythology: The age of fable.

“Apollo’s Chariot” by Odilon Redon, c.1907, Private Collection.

Phaethon among the constellations drops the reins in “Phaethon” by Gustave Moreau, 1878-79, Louvre, Paris.


Zeus hits Phaethon with his thunderbolt in “Phaethon’s Fall” by Sebastiano Ricci, 1704, ceiling in the Civic Museum, Belluno, Italy.

Chariot and horses tumble in “The Fall of Phaethon” by Peter Paul Rubens, c.1600-40, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

Phaethon, in flames, falls to Earth by John Singer Sargent, 1922–25, stairway ceiling side mural, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.


The Heliades turn into poplar trees from a tapestry made by the Jos workshop in Brussels, 1601, National Museum of Romanian Arts, Bucharest, Romania.