

Phaëthon, Son of Apollo

Retold by Olivia Coolidge

Though Apollo always honored the memory of Daphne,¹ she was not his only love. Another was a mortal, Clymene,² by whom he had a son named Phaëthon.³ Phaëthon grew up with his mother, who, since she was mortal, could not dwell in the halls of Olympus or in the palace of the sun. She lived not far from the East in the land of Ethiopia, and as her son grew up, she would point to the place where Eos,⁴ goddess of the dawn, lighted up the sky and tell him that there his father dwelt. Phaëthon loved to boast of his divine father as he saw the golden chariot riding high through the air. He would remind his comrades of other
 10 sons of gods and mortal women who, by virtue of their great deeds, had themselves become gods at last. He must always be first in everything, and in most things this was easy, since he was in truth stronger, swifter, and more daring than the others. Even if he were not victorious, Phaëthon always claimed to be first in honor. He could never bear to be beaten, even if he must risk his life in some **rash** way to win. **E**

ANALYZE VISUALS

Is the **mood**, or feeling, of this painting one of tension, exhilaration, or something else? Identify shapes that contribute to the mood.

rash (răsh) *adj.* reckless and careless

E CULTURAL VALUES

Reread lines 8–15. What can you **infer** about Phaëthon's personality?

1. **Daphne** (dăf'nē): a wood nymph who did not return Apollo's love. She disappeared, and a laurel tree grew in her place.

2. **Clymene** (klī'mə-nē).

3. **Phaëthon** (fā'ə-thŏn').

4. **Eos** (ē'ŏs').



Most of the princes of Ethiopia willingly paid Phaëthon honor, since they admired him greatly for his fire and beauty. There was one boy, however, Epaphos,⁵ who was rumored to be a child of Zeus himself. Since this was not certainly proved, Phaëthon chose to disbelieve it and
20 to demand from Epaphos the **deference** that he obtained from all others. Epaphos was proud too, and one day he lost his temper with Phaëthon and turned on him, saying, “You are a fool to believe all that your mother tells you. You are all swelled up with false ideas about your father.”

deference (dĕf’ər-əns)
n. respect and honor

Crimson with rage, the lad rushed home to his mother and demanded that she prove to him the truth of the story that she had often told. “Give me some proof,” he implored her, “with which I can answer this insult of Epaphos. It is a matter of life and death to me, for if I cannot, I shall die of shame.”

“I swear to you,” replied his mother solemnly, “by the bright orb of the
30 sun itself that you are his son. If I swear falsely, may I never look on the sun again, but die before the next time he mounts the heavens. More than this I cannot do, but you, my child, can go to the eastern palace of Phoebus Apollo—it lies not far away—and there speak with the god himself.”

The son of Clymene leaped up with joy at his mother’s words. The palace of Apollo was indeed not far. It stood just below the eastern horizon, its tall pillars glistening with bronze and gold. Above these it was white with gleaming ivory, and the great doors were flashing silver, embossed with pictures of earth, sky, and sea, and the gods that dwelt therein. Up the steep hill and the bright steps climbed Phaëthon, passing
40 unafraid through the silver doors, and stood in the presence of the sun. Here at last he was forced to turn away his face, for Phoebus sat in state on his golden throne. It gleamed with emeralds and precious stones, while on the head of the god was a brilliant diamond crown upon which no eye could look undazzled.

Phaëthon hid his face, but the god had recognized his son, and he spoke kindly, asking him why he had come. Then Phaëthon plucked up courage and said, “I come to ask you if you are indeed my father. If you are so, I beg you to give me some proof of it so that all may recognize me as Phoebus’ son.”

50 The god smiled, being well pleased with his son’s beauty and daring. He took off his crown so that Phaëthon could look at him, and coming down from his throne, he put his arms around the boy, and said, “You are indeed my son and Clymene’s, and worthy to be called so. Ask of me whatever thing you wish to prove your origin to men, and you shall have it.” **F**

Phaëthon swayed for a moment and was dizzy with excitement at the touch of the god. His heart leaped; the blood rushed into his face. Now

F CAUSE AND EFFECT

Why does Apollo agree to grant Phaëthon proof of his origin?

5. **Epaphos** (ĕp’ə-fəs).

he felt that he was truly divine, unlike other men, and he did not wish to be counted with men any more. He looked up for a moment at his radiant father. “Let me drive the chariot of the sun across the heavens
60 for one day,” he said.

Apollo frowned and shook his head. “I cannot break my promise, but I will **dissuade** you if I can,” he answered. “How can you drive my chariot, whose horses need a strong hand on the reins? The climb is too steep for you. The immense height will make you dizzy. The swift streams of air in the upper heaven will sweep you off your course. Even the immortal gods could not drive my chariot. How then can you? Be wise and make some other choice.”

The pride of Phaëthon was stubborn, for he thought the god was merely trying to frighten him. Besides, if he could guide the sun’s chariot,
70 would he not have proved his right to be divine rather than mortal? For that he would risk his life. Indeed, once he had seen Apollo’s splendor, he did not wish to go back and live among men. Therefore, he insisted on his right until Apollo had to give way. **G**

When the father saw that nothing else would satisfy the boy, he bade the Hours⁶ bring forth his chariot and yoke the horses. The chariot was of gold and had two gold-rimmed wheels with spokes of silver. In it there was room for one man to stand and hold the reins. Around the front and sides of it ran a rail, but the back was open. At the end of a long pole there were yokes for the four horses. The pole was of gold and shone with
80 precious jewels: the golden topaz, the bright diamond, the green emerald, and the flashing ruby. While the Hours were yoking the swift, pawing horses, rosy-fingered Dawn hastened to the gates of heaven to draw them open. Meanwhile Apollo anointed his son’s face with a magic ointment, that he might be able to bear the heat of the fire-breathing horses and the golden chariot. At last Phaëthon mounted the chariot and grasped the reins, the barriers were let down, and the horses shot up into the air.

At first the fiery horses sped forward up the accustomed trail, but behind them the chariot was too light without the weight of the immortal god. It bounded from side to side and was dashed up and down. Phaëthon was
90 too frightened and too dizzy to pull the reins, nor would he have known anyway whether he was on the usual path. As soon as the horses felt that there was no hand controlling them, they soared up, up with fiery speed into the heavens till the earth grew pale and cold beneath them. Phaëthon shut his eyes, trembling at the dizzy, **precipitous** height. Then the horses dropped down, more swiftly than a falling stone, flinging themselves madly from side to side in panic because they were masterless. Phaëthon dropped the reins entirely and clung with all his might to the chariot rail.

dissuade (dĭ-swād') *v.*
to persuade not to do something

G CULTURAL VALUES

Reread lines 61–73.
What does Apollo request of Phaëthon?
What is Phaëthon’s reaction? Make a **prediction** about whether Phaëthon’s decision will turn out to be a wise one.

precipitous
(prĭ-sĭp'ĭ-təs) *adj.*
very steep

6. the Hours: attendants of Apollo that represented the various hours of the day.



The Cavalier, Wassily Kandinsky. Staedtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo © Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.

ANALYZE VISUALS

Is this painting a good representation of Phaëthon's ride? Why or why not?

Meanwhile as they came near the earth, it dried up and cracked apart. Meadows were reduced to white ashes, cornfields smoked and shriveled, cities perished in flame. Far and wide on the wooded mountains the forests were ablaze, and even the snow-clad Alps were bare and dry. Rivers steamed and dried to dust. The great North African plain was scorched until it became the desert that it is today. Even the sea shrank back to pools and caves, until dried fishes were left baking upon the white-hot sands. At last the great earth mother called upon Zeus to save her from utter destruction, and Zeus hurled a mighty thunderbolt at the unhappy Phaëthon, who was still crouched in the chariot, clinging desperately to the rail. The dart cast him out, and he fell flaming in a long trail through the air. The chariot broke in pieces at the mighty blow, and the maddened horses rushed snorting back to the stable of their master, Apollo. **H**

Unhappy Clymene and her daughters wandered over the whole earth seeking the body of the boy they loved so well. When they found him, they took him and buried him. Over his grave they wept and could not be comforted. At last the gods in pity for their grief changed them into poplar trees, which weep with tears of amber in memory of Phaëthon. **I**

H CAUSE AND EFFECT

What effects does Phaëthon's chariot ride have on the natural world?

I CULTURAL VALUES

What happens to Phaëthon? Draw a **conclusion** about why the Greeks kept his story alive.