

ECHO AND NARCISSUS



Echo was a beautiful mountain nymph who was a favorite friend of Artemis, the goddess of the hunt and a special protector of maidens. Echo, friendly and fun-loving, adored talking to her many sisters and friends. Nevertheless, no one ever complained that she talked too much, because Echo was so much fun to be with, and everyone loved her.

One of the other nymphs was having a love affair with Zeus, the king of the gods. Often, the couple would meet in a secret glade in the forest, far from the jealous eyes of Hera, Zeus's wife. Echo did not know about the affair, and she did not mind when her friends and sisters asked her to stand guard outside the secret glade. She never even thought to ask them why the glade needed guarding. All that Echo knew was that her sisters and friends warned her that her most important job was to keep Hera away from the glade.

Before long, Hera heard rumors that her husband was having an affair, and she became determined to find out which nymph was tempting her husband away. As she entered the forest and neared the glade, Hera saw Echo lounging near a shady group of trees. It was clear to Echo that Hera wanted to enter the glade, and, remembering



her sisters' warning, Echo struck up a friendly conversation with the goddess, trying to distract her. While Echo was busy chatting with Hera, Zeus and his lover heard Hera's unmistakable voice and managed to escape before they could be discovered.

When Hera finally insisted on entering the glade and found that her husband had gotten away, she was furious! And even though Echo had played no part at all in Zeus's affair, Hera decided to punish her. In a high, shrill voice, the queen of the gods pronounced, "Young lady, your chattering has done you in, and you will be punished for it! From this moment forward, the only words you will ever be able to utter will be exactly those words, no more and no less, that other people have said to you first."

Echo was very upset. She had not meant to make Hera angry. She had only been helping her sisters and friends. Now she was burdened with an unbearable punishment, especially for someone who loved to talk! It seemed like nothing could be worse than silence or being doomed to repeat someone else's words.

Sadly, Echo left the glade, waving silently to her sisters and friends and wondering what she was going to do. Distracted by her thoughts, Echo suddenly found herself near a beautiful pond. There, sitting at the water's edge, was the handsomest young man Echo had ever seen. Desperately, Echo wished to make conversation with this youth, whose name was Narcissus, but since she had no way to talk to him, the young nymph hid herself behind a tree and watched to see what he was doing.

Narcissus was so good-looking that people were constantly falling in love with him at first sight. He was tall and naturally strong, and his curly hair was cut in such a way that it framed his elegant face. Having never seen himself, however, Narcissus had no idea how handsome

Echo and Narcissus



he was, and he never understood why he received so much attention from those around him. In fact, that very day he had come into the forest trying to get away from all the people who had been gawking at him.

Thirsty from his long walk, Narcissus decided to stop at the pond for a drink. As he knelt before the still water, he saw the most beautiful face staring back at him from beneath the wet surface. But when he reached down to touch the beautiful person in the water, the face got blurry and quickly disappeared. Narcissus was so saddened at the disappearance of the beautiful water person that he sat back on the bank and cried. A few minutes later, he looked into the pond. There was the beautiful face, looking back at him. This time there were sad tears streaming down the handsome face. Narcissus felt sorry for the beautiful water person. He reached into the water to try to comfort him, but once again, the water person disappeared.

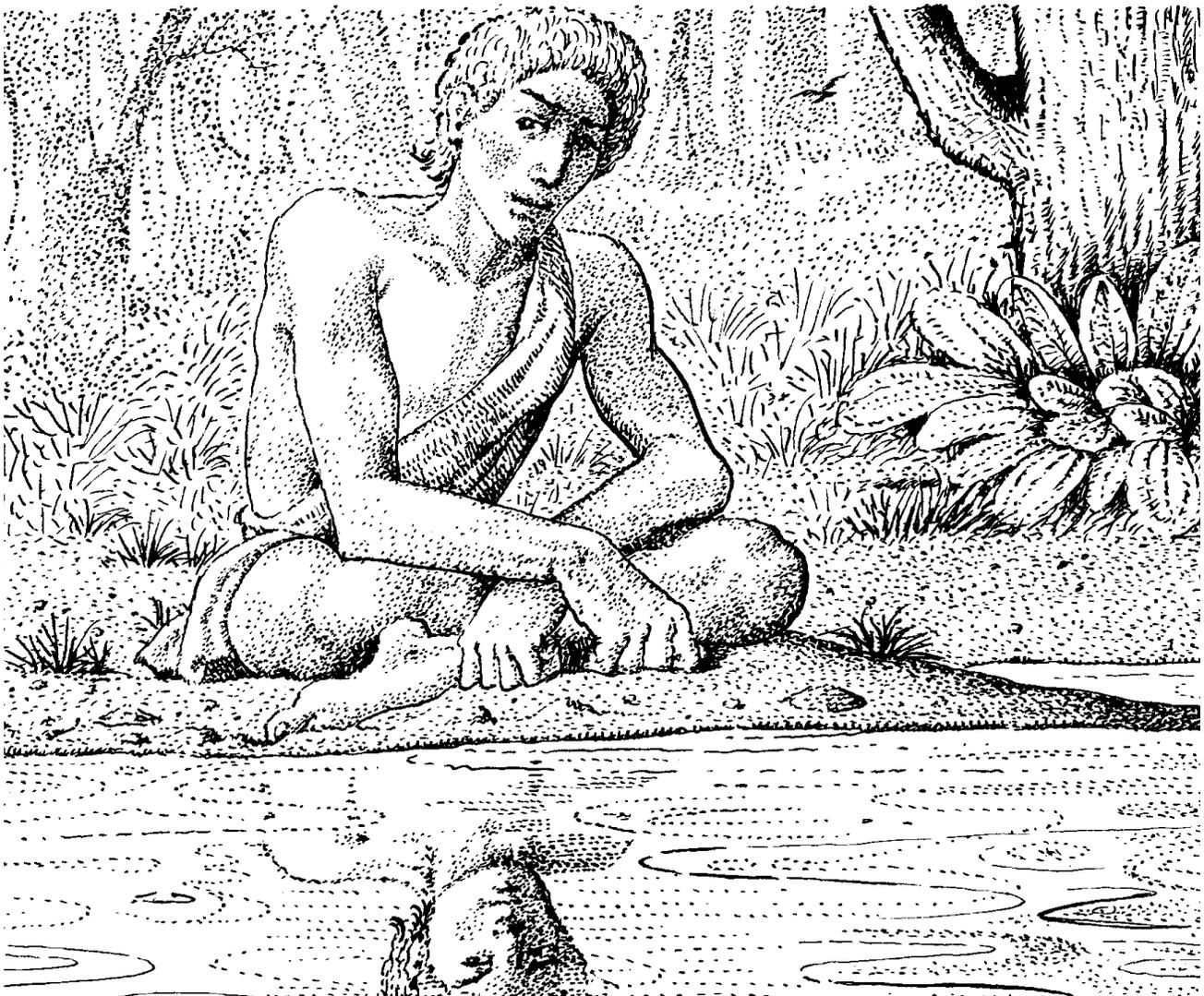
Suddenly, Narcissus heard a rustling in the leaves behind him. He did not know that Echo was hiding nearby, waiting for her chance to attract his attention. Startled and saddened by the disappearance of the beautiful person in the water, Narcissus called out, "Who's there?" In reply, Echo answered, "Who's there?" Since she could only repeat the youth's words, as Hera had commanded her, this was all the conversation she could manage. Echo thought Narcissus was beautiful indeed, and she was beginning to fall in love with him. Ashamed of her inability to speak, however, she remained hidden. Narcissus was surprised to hear his words flung back to him, and he was a little annoyed. Why would anyone be so rude as to repeat the words of someone else? Exasperated, Narcissus turned his attention to the person he saw in the water.

Each time Narcissus tried to touch the water, the beautiful person disappeared. Narcissus did not realize

Gods and Goddesses in Greek Mythology

that there was no person living beneath the surface of the water and that he was actually seeing his own reflection. There was only Narcissus sitting on the bank, looking into the pond. As the sun set behind the trees, the youth could no longer see his reflection in the water. Calling out to the person he believed to live under the surface of the pond, Narcissus cried, "Wait! You are so beautiful! I love you!" All he heard in reply was the sound of Echo's voice repeating his words from her hiding place among the trees.

Narcissus had fallen deeply in love with the person he



Echo and Narcissus

thought he saw in the water, just as Echo had fallen in love with him. Day after day, the youth and the nymph sat near the pond, Narcissus staring at his reflection and Echo staring at him. Narcissus pined for his appearing and disappearing love, and Echo sat nearby, fists clenched in frustration, wishing she could speak her own thoughts.

As time went by, the unhappy lovers forgot to sleep, eat, or drink, so distracted were they by their unfulfilled loves. After some time, Narcissus noticed that the person in the water had grown thin and tired. He did not





understand that it was he who was withering away. From her hiding place, Echo could see Narcissus wasting away, but she could not see how equally gaunt she was becoming herself.

Day after day, Narcissus became more and more distraught as he sat by the bank of the pond, staring mournfully at the water. One day, overcome with frustration, he called out, “My love, why do you ignore me? Do you not see that I am dying for you?” Hiding in the woods, Echo responded, “My love, why do you ignore me? Do you not see that I am dying for you?” Consumed by his own overwhelming sadness, Narcissus took no notice of the nymph’s repetitive answers. He leaned down, clutching at the water, but he could no longer go on. Exhausted, Narcissus died by the water’s edge, trying to embrace his mysterious lover.

At the moment of his death, the gods took pity on the youth and his misdirected love and turned him into the flower called the narcissus. Echo, watching her love transform into a beautiful flower before her eyes, wept silently from her hiding place in the forest. Thus weeping, she died too, leaving only her echoing voice behind.