Most Greek myths originated very early and were passed down by oral tradition before first being recorded in writing; as time went by, variants were rung on the traditional tales. Both Pherecydes of Syros around 500 and Apollodorus under the Roman Empire, for example, sought to exonerate Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens, from the charge of abandoning his fiancée Ariadne on the island of Naxos after she had been instrumental in his escaping from the Minotaur. Pherecydes claimed that he left the princess on the island at the orders of Athens, and Apollodorus suggested that Dionysus had fallen in love with her and carried her off even before Theseus had set sail. Others elaborated greatly on what they had heard, like Apollonius of Rhodes, whose *Argonautica* detailed the adventures of Jason and Medea. The tragedians of the fifth century often presented conflicting versions of the myths that formed their plots. It was not only Herodotus, who delighted in extraordinary stories, who took myth seriously. The participants in the wars about which he writes did too. When the Greeks were drawing up their battle lines before Plataea in 479, Herodotus reports, the Tegeans and the Athenians, arguing over which of them should have the honor of holding one of the wings, appealed comfortably to the evidence of myth, maintaining that Sparta had always granted them the honor of holding a wing in all Peloponnesian campaigns since their king Echemus had defeated the Heraclid Hyllus in single combat when the descendants of Heracles invaded the Peloponnesus. By way of reply the Athenians in turn list their own good deeds from the heroic age, adding their hospitality to those same Heraclids, their attack on Thebes to retrieve the dead bodies of those lost in the war between Oedipus’ sons, and their defeat in battle of the invading Amazons; “and in the arduous struggle at Troy,” they add, “we were second to none” (Herodotus 9.27).

Not even the sober Thucydides, who prided himself on his separation of history from myth, was able to excise myth entirely from his consciousness. Although he questioned the importance of Helen as a motivating factor, he believed every bit as much as his contemporaries that Agamemnon had led a vast host against Troy, and in discussing the Athenians’ attempt to ally with the Thracian king Sitalces, he makes a point of stressing that Sitalces’ father Teres was in no way related to Tereus, the husband of Procris (who with her sister had murdered Tereus’ son Itys when she discovered Tereus’ rape of her sister and was subsequently turned into a nightingale to escape his wrath). Indeed, he says, the two men lived in different parts of Thrace, Tereus having lived in Daulis, “and it was here the women slaughtered Itys; and many of the poets in seeking an epithet for the nightingale have dubbed it ‘Daulian’” (Thucydides 2.29.3). It is one thing to believe in the historicity of the wars of the heroic age and quite another to believe that the gods can turn women into birds.

Late in the fourth century, one Euhemerus, whose origins are unknown, put forward the theory that myth was nothing but history misremembered: tales that acquired elements of the fantastic as they grew in the retelling. The gods, he claimed, were nothing but illustrious men, generally kings, whose achievements were magnified after death to the point that they were held to be divine. Euhemerus was not the first to put forward such ideas. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, written a couple of generations earlier, Socrates raised this very possibility. As the dialogue opens, Socrates and Phaedrus are walking along the banks of the Ilissus River on the outskirts of Athens when Phaedrus realizes that they are in the