

# A WILD- GOOSE CHASE

## THE STORY OF PHILEMON AND BAUCIS

Retold by Geraldine McCaughrean

### Before You Read

**The Scene:** This story takes place in ancient Rome in the legendary time when gods visited Earth to interact with humans in person.

**The Characters:** Philemon and Baucis are the man and woman who welcome guests to their home. Clio is their goose. Jupiter and Mercury are two ancient Roman gods.

**The Plot:** A husband and wife welcome two guests into their cottage. They have no food for the guests, but they do have a pet goose. As the pair try to provide their guests with food, the guests reveal their identities and reward the host and hostess for their generosity.

### Vocabulary Preview

**fowl:** bird

**wielding:** controlling

**gaped:** hung open

**quills:** feathers

**hospitality:** friendliness and generosity toward guests

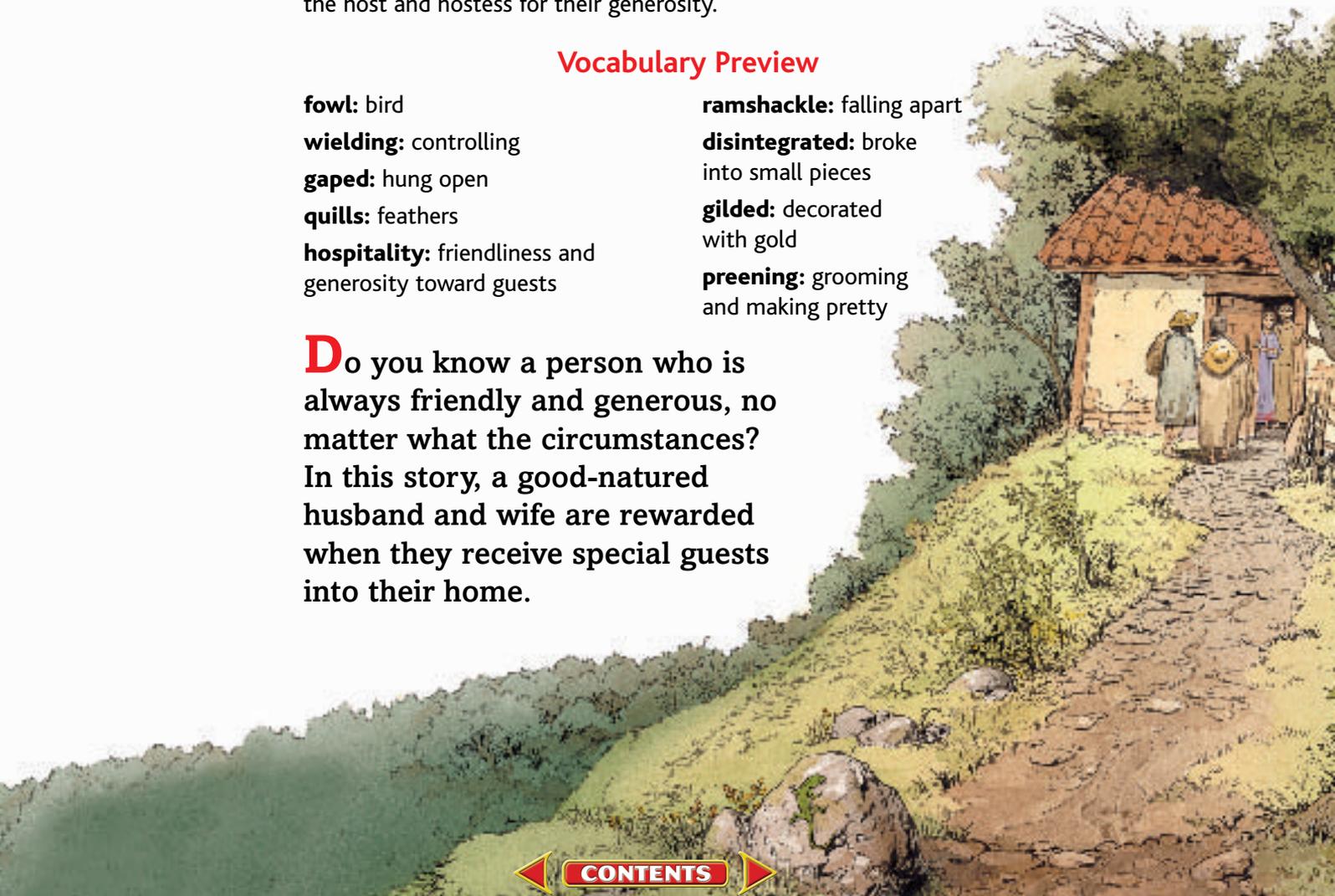
**ramshackle:** falling apart

**disintegrated:** broke into small pieces

**gilded:** decorated with gold

**preening:** grooming and making pretty

**D**o you know a person who is always friendly and generous, no matter what the circumstances? In this story, a good-natured husband and wife are rewarded when they receive special guests into their home.





## As You Read

*Keep in mind that this story is a myth. Like the Greeks, Romans passed myths from one generation to the next to explain some aspect of the world. Often, the stories involved gods and goddesses as well as humans.*

**A** knock at the door. A pair of passing strangers. Philemon and Baucis did not know the two men on their doorstep, but they had never yet failed to offer a warm welcome to anyone who called at their little cottage.

“Come in! Sit down! My wife will cook you supper!” said Philemon.

His wife tugged at his sleeve. She did not need to say more. Both of them knew there was no food in the house. Not a bite. Baucis and Philemon themselves had been living on eggs and olives for days. There was not even any bread.

Philemon smiled sadly at Baucis, and she smiled sadly back. “It’s the goose, is it?” he said.

“The goose it is,” she replied.

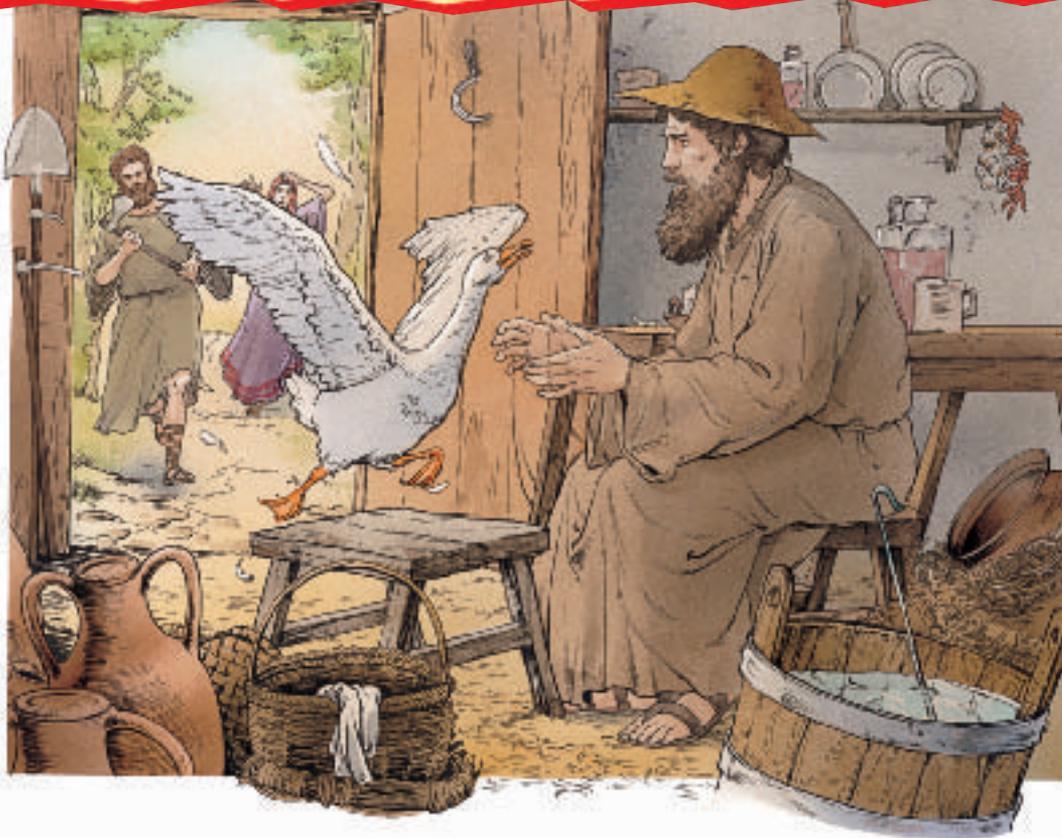
Clio was all they had left. She was more like a pet than a farmyard fowl. And yet, guests are a blessing sent by the gods, and guests must be fed. So Philemon fetched his sharp ax and Baucis began to chase the goose, trying to drive it into the cottage.

Jupiter sat back in his chair and waited patiently for dinner. “Do you think we should help?” he said to Mercury, hearing the commotion in the yard.

“I know we shall have a wait,” replied Mercury.

“Here—you try,” said Baucis, passing the ax to Philemon.

The goose was squawking, Baucis was yelping, and Philemon was coughing as he ran



about wielding the ax. He struck at Clio, but the goose moved, and he demolished a bush. He swung again and hit the wooden pail. The goose shrieked with outrage, then with terror, and slapped about on her big, triangular feet—plat, plat, plat—skidding into their homemade altar piled high with flowers, into the fish-drying rack,<sup>1</sup> into the washing on the tree.<sup>2</sup> Olives rained down on the roof of the shack.

“Do you think we should go?” said Jupiter, as he and Mercury listened to the wild-geese chase and their hungry stomachs growled quietly.

At last Philemon and Baucis cornered the goose against the cottage door. Her orange beak gaped. Philemon raised the ax . . . and Clio bolted backward into the shack, running around the room like a black-footed pillow fight until she caught sight of Jupiter.

Now, animals are not so easily fooled by disguises, and although Jupiter and Mercury were dressed as peasants, in woolen tunics and straw hats, she instantly recognized the King of the gods and threw herself on his mercy. Neck outstretched, eyes bulging, she ran straight between his knees and into his lap. He was overrun with goose.

“A thousand pardons, friend,” gasped Baucis, crawling in at the door, her hair stuck with goose quills. “Won’t you take an olive while you wait?”

Jupiter stroked the goose, which stood paddling<sup>3</sup> on his thighs, and spat out a few feathers. “Shield me! Save me! Protect me!” said the goose, in the language of geese.

<sup>1</sup>**fish-drying rack:** large wooden structure on which fish are hung to dry

<sup>2</sup>**washing on the tree:** laundry hung on the tree branches to dry

<sup>3</sup>**paddling:** moving its feet

Jupiter tickled it under the beak. “Your hospitality is a marvel, dear Philemon, gentle Baucis. In all my long travels over the face of the world, I have never met such unselfish hosts. Here is your only goose, and you were ready to cook it for us! Your generosity surpasses that of the gods themselves!”

“Now, sir,” said Baucis sternly. “You may be a guest, but I’ll have no ill spoken of the gods in this house. Though we have little to offer, the gods have been good to us, have they not, my love?”

“They have, they have,” said Philemon. Mercury concealed a grin.

“And they shall be good to you ever after!” declared Jupiter, rising to his feet. He rose and rose, ’til his head touched the rafters, and his face brightened ’til the room was light as day. His disguise fell away and Mercury folded it small and smaller ’til it fit inside one fist and was gone.

“As you see, I am Jupiter, King of the gods, and this is my messenger, Mercury. We like to travel the world and visit the people whose sacrificial smoke perfumes the halls of Heaven. But travel where we may and stay where we might, we never met with such hospitality as yours! Name any favor and it shall be your reward. A small kingdom, perhaps? A palace? A chest of sea treasure from the vaults of Poseidon?<sup>4</sup> Wings to fly or the gift of prophecy? Name it!”

Mercury looked uneasy. He had seen the greed and ambition of mortals all too often. This mild-looking couple would probably demand to be gods and to dine at the table of the gods; would ask for immortality or a banner of stars wide as the

Milky Way, spelling out “Philemon the Philanthropist,”<sup>5</sup> “Baucis the Beautiful.”

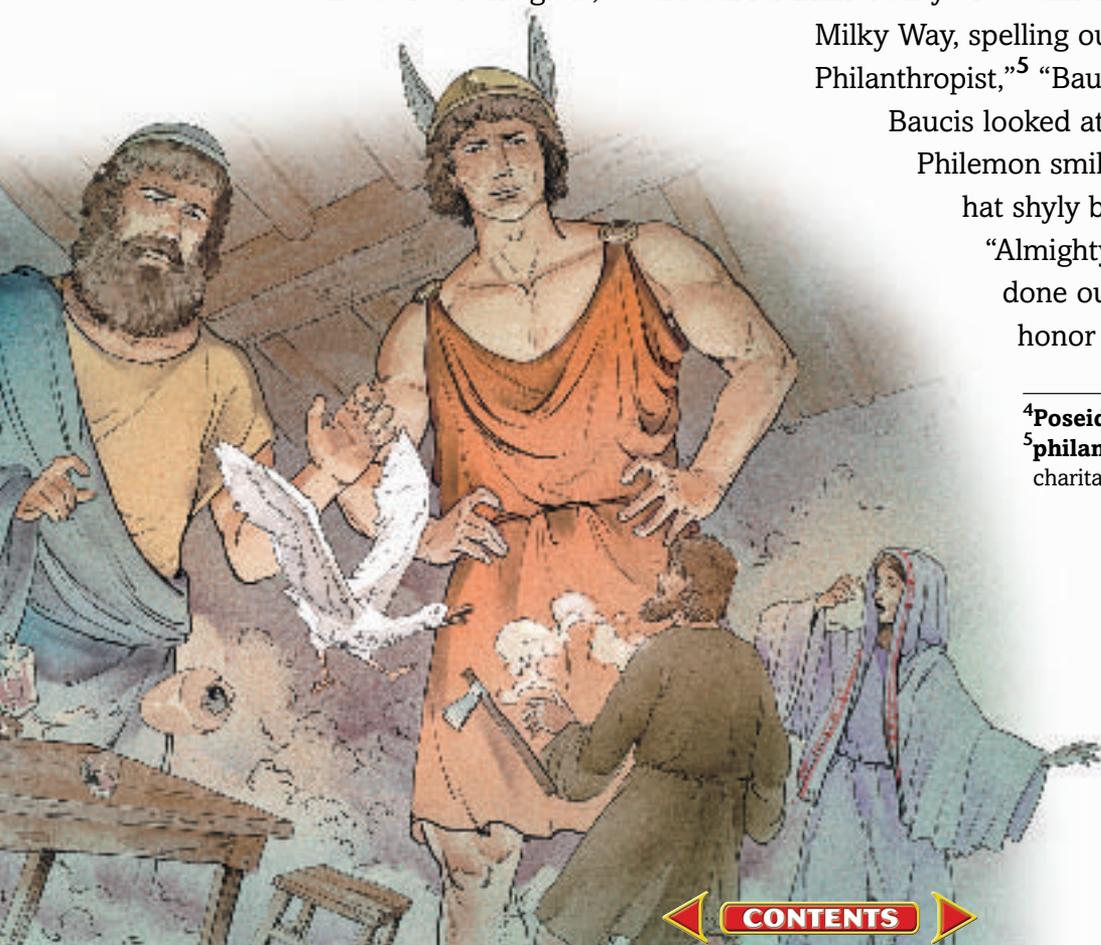
Baucis looked at Philemon, and

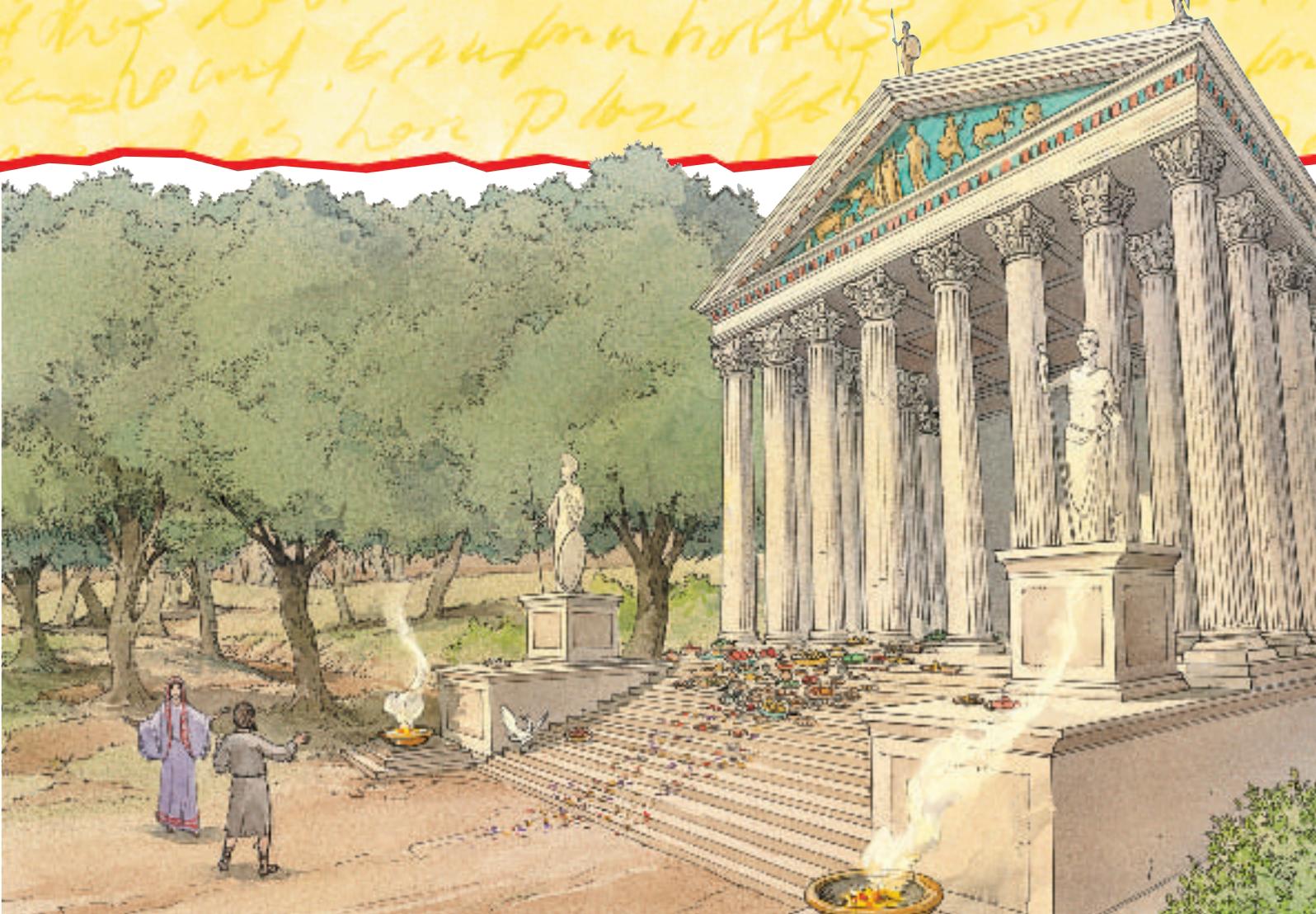
Philemon smiled back and wrung his hat shyly between his hands.

“Almighty Jupiter, you have done our little house such an honor today that we have

<sup>4</sup>**Poseidon:** Roman god of the sea

<sup>5</sup>**philanthropist:** someone who is charitable





hardly breath enough to speak our thanks. Our greatest joy in life has always been to worship at our humble little altar—out there in the yard. What more could we ask than to go on doing that—oh, and both to die at the same hour, so that we may never be parted. My Baucis and I.”

Jupiter complained of a speck of dust in his eye and went outside. He could be heard blowing his nose loudly. When he ducked back through the door, his eyes were quite red-rimmed. “Come, priest and priestess of my shrine! Your temple awaits you!”

All of a sudden, the drafty, ramshackle little hut disintegrated, like a raft of leaves on a river. Around and above it rose the pillars of a mighty temple. The simple cairn<sup>6</sup> of stones that had served for an altar still stood there, piled with firewood and swagged with flowers, but now it stood on a marble floor, and from that floor rose forty marble pillars cloaked with beaten gold, supporting a roof gilded with stars. The living quarters for priest and priestess were piled with feather mattresses and silken pillows, and priestly robes of soft cotton hung waiting about the shoulders of Carrara<sup>7</sup> statues.

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<sup>6</sup>**cairn:** mound

<sup>7</sup>**Carrara:** an Italian city known for its white marble quarries and statues

Already, from all corners of the landscape, pilgrims were setting out at a run to visit the marvelous new temple of Jupiter, whose red roof signaled to them across miles of open countryside. Philemon and Baucis would be kept busy receiving their sacrifices, tending the sacrificial flame, sweeping up the ashes.

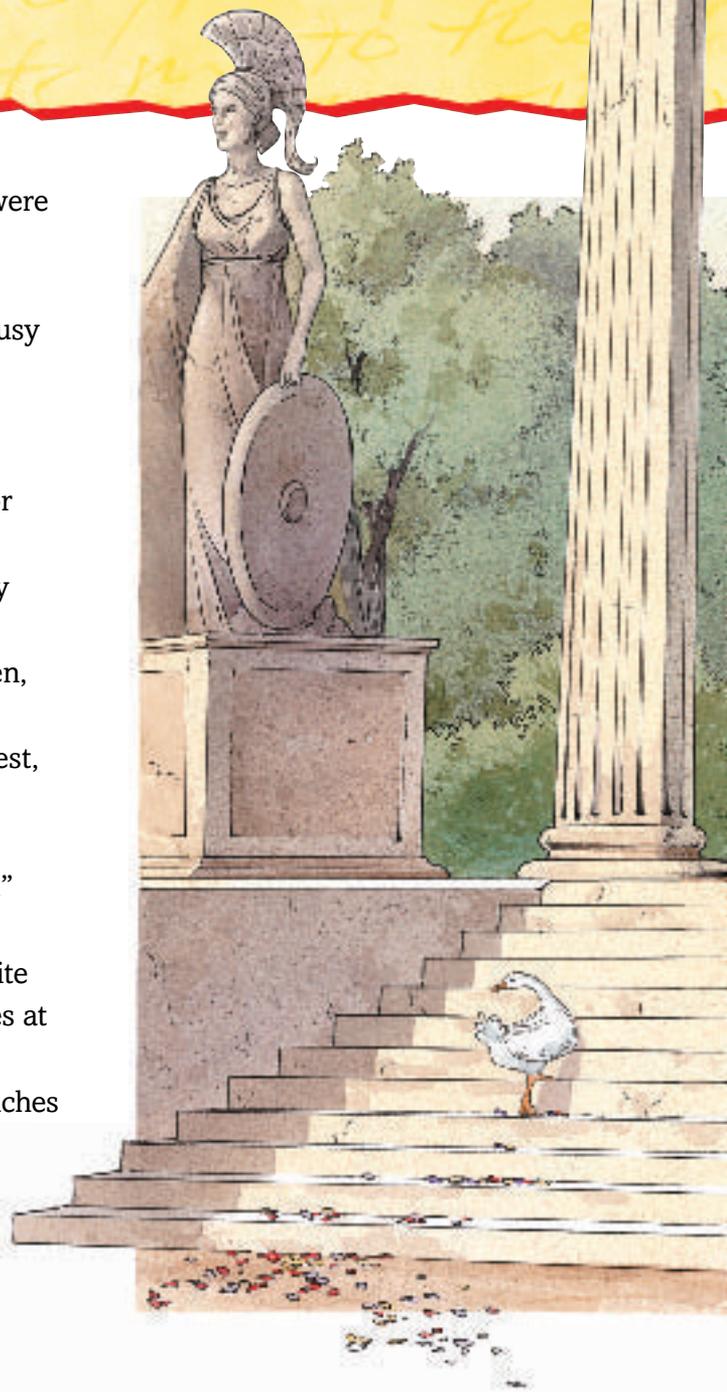
But they thrived on the hard work, just as they had always done. The worshipers brought not only flowers for the altar but baskets of delicious food for the priest and priestess whose fame spread far and wide. Tirelessly they worked until, being mortal, even Baucis and Philemon became exhausted. Watching from the terraces of Heaven, Jupiter saw them pause now, each time they passed one another, and lean one against the other for a moment's rest, Baucis laying her head on Philemon's shoulder.

"They are weary," said Mercury.

"You are right," said Jupiter. "It is time for them to rest."

So instead of breathing in the fragrance from the altar below, he breathed out—a breath that wafted away the white robes of priest and priestess and left behind two noble trees at the very door of the temple. One was an oak, the other a linden tree, and they leaned one toward another, their branches intertwined, casting welcome shade over the threshold.

Clio the goose liked to rest there at noon, preening her . . . feathers and singing.



## Responding to the Reading

1. Why do Philemon and Baucis fail to recognize their guests? Which character does recognize them?
2. Jupiter said that he and Mercury like to "visit the people whose sacrificial smoke perfumes the halls of Heaven." Who does he mean?
3. **Cause and Effect** What is the result of Jupiter's gift to Philemon and Baucis?
4. **Analyze** Why do Philemon and Baucis not ask the gods for fame and power?
5. **Reading** **Read to Write** Imagine that friends who live in another town visit you. What would you provide for them? Would it be different from the things you provide for yourself? Imagine you are Philemon or Baucis, and write one or two paragraphs explaining how you would have treated their guests.