

# Monarchs and Greek heroes

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The Monarch butterfly has been referred to by many names, but today's lepidopterists have reverted back to the original *Danaus plexippus*, bestowed in the early 1700s by Karl von Linne (Linnaeus), the Swedish naturalist who first established a system to classify plants and animals.

Amateur lepidopterist and writer Jo Brewer traces the story of a Danaus in her book "Wings in the Meadow," and begins by describing Linnaeus' method of binomial nomenclature — the giving of a generic and a specific name to each species.

When he came to the butterflies, Linnaeus used the names of Greek and Trojan heroes. In the past 200 years, students have shifted the names about and added new ones to keep pace with new discoveries.

The Monarch has been called *Danaus archippus*, *Danaus erippus* and *Anosia plexippus*. To us, the "heroes" seem obscure. *Danaus*, for example, was a son of King Belus and had 50 daughters, while his twin brother, Aegyptus had 50 sons. The 50 daughters were expected by their father to marry their 50 cousins and murder them on the wedding night in order to assure his security from them as rivals.

*Plexippus*, according to sketchy tales, became involved in some sort of ill-fated boar hunt, disputed with his nephew over the boar's hide and was slain by the nephew.

Brewer muses — why did Linnaeus chose names of rather miserable heroes for the order Lepidoptera, which has a major position on the evolutionary scale, and dubbed a far more primitive butterfly *Parnassius apollo*, after true mythological heroes? Was it done, she wonders, in a moment of whimsy?

The Monarch is listed in the "Handbook of Biological Data" (1956) as a pest. Ironically, Brewer points out, its larva eats nothing but milkweed, which also is considered a pest. If milkweed is a pest, then shouldn't something that destroys it be listed as an asset?

Such are the questions of Monarch butterfly lovers.