The Story of the Two Bears

Zeus (Jupiter) was the amorous type, often having his way with mortal women. As the head of the gods, this was probably his wont, but that did not make Hera, his wife happy with his escapades. One of Zeus’ lovers was Callisto. After Callisto gave birth to Zeus’ son, Arcas, Hera turned Callisto into a bear. There is no record of Zeus’ reaction.

Some 15 years later Arcas and Callisto met. She was still a bear; he was hunting. He was about to spear her (he had no idea that his mother was a bear), when Zeus intervened, and put both up into the sky, Calliso as the Great Bear, *Ursa Major*, and Arcas as either *Bootes* the herdsman or as the lesser Bear, *Uras Minor* (the legends differ).

This did not please Hera. She got her revenge by moving the bears to the north of the celestial sphere, where, as circumpolar constellations, they can never bathe in the ocean.

There are some questions as to why the bears have such long tails. One theory is that Zeus grabbed them by the tail to throw them into the sky, and in so doing stretched the tails out. Another theory is that the Greeks and later cartographers didn’t know what bears looked like.

The asterism known to us as the **Big Dipper** forms the hindquarters and tail of the Great Bear. This asterism appears in the celestial mythology of many cultures. For example, it was an ox cart in Roman myth, while the Arabs saw it as a coffin. It was a ladle in Teutonic myth and a plow (the Starry Plough) in Celtic myth.