Mythological Proto–Science-Fiction Texts (Expanded Edition)

The Mah ā bh ā rata – The Vimana Episode

India, ca. 400 BCE – 400 CE — from the *Mah ā bh ā rata*, Books 3 & 8, tr. K. M. Ganguli (1883–96).

In the days when heroes moved between earth and heaven, the sage and craftsman Maya built for the sons of P ā ṇ ḍ u a wondrous aerial car.
It shone like fire, swift as thought, vast as a mountain peak, yet as light as the wind itself.

“ This chariot, ” said Maya, “ shall obey the will of its rider. By thy mind alone, O Arjuna, it shall ascend, descend, or stand still in mid-air.
It needs no steeds, for within it dwell the spirits of fire and air, moving through the paths of heaven. ”

Then the warrior tested it. With a thought, the car rose from the earth; clouds parted before it, and the sun ’ s horses seemed to pause upon their way.
From that height he looked down upon the world—the rivers like silver threads, the mountains like elephant backs in mist—and his heart was filled with wonder and pride.

Later, upon the field of Kuruk ṣ etra, other chariots blazed with divine weapons. Kar ṇ a drew forth the Ś akti given by Indra, a spear burning with the light of a thousand suns.
When it struck, the earth trembled; wind and water were set aflame; trees were uprooted and men blinded by the glare. The hosts of both armies, terrified, thought the end of the world had come.

When the fire subsided, a stillness like death spread over the plain. The heroes stood speechless before their own power, and said: “ We have called upon forces that belong not to men.
Let this knowledge sleep henceforth, lest the earth herself perish. ”

And so the science of the gods passed away from human hands, leaving only rumor of the flying cars and the weapons that could unmake creation.

The Painter and the Mechanical Maiden

Tocharian A/B text (5th – 8th cent.), tr. George S. Lane (1947) and Georges-Jean Pinault (2008).

A painter, traveling far from home, came to a prosperous city. A householder there—a master of mechanisms—welcomed him as guest, laying out food and a good bed.

When night came, the mechanic placed upon the guest ’ s couch a wooden maiden, cunningly made: limbs jointed, eyes inlaid, hair arranged, garments fitted close.
The painter, seeing her in the lamplight, was struck to the heart. “ Such grace! ” he thought. “ Surely she is shy—or sleeping. ” He spoke to her softly; she made no answer.
He restrained his hand— “ She belongs to my host; it would be wrong ” —yet desire overcame him. He reached to take her hand.

At his touch the fingers loosened, the wrist slipped, the arm fell—the whole figure collapsed into pieces on the bed.

Realizing the trick, the painter burned with shame: “ I, who draw life from color, have been fooled by wood! ”

At dawn he plotted a return. Closing the chamber door, he painted himself upon it, hanging by a rope from the beam—face ashen, limbs slack, shadow cast true. Then he hid.

The mechanic came with breakfast, saw the “ corpse, ” cried out, and tore at his hair. Neighbors rushed in; none perceived the deceit.
They wailed and wrung their hands; some ran to call the king ’ s men. All stared at the door, and one said: “ Cut him down! ” Another fetched an axe to strike the rope.

At that moment the painter stepped out laughing, alive and whole. “ Friend, ” he said to the mechanic, “ you fooled me with a man-made girl; I have fooled you with a man made of paint. Let it be even. ”

The onlookers gasped, then laughed, and the mechanic hid his face for shame. The elders declared:
“ Wood and paint stir love and fear in the unwise,
but without wisdom neither art nor strength brings true mastery. ” And the tale ends there—its lesson plain.

Daedalus and Icarus

Rome, 1st cent. BCE – 1st CE — Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VIII 183–235, tr. A. D. Melville (1986) / Brookes More (1922).

When he had built the labyrinth, and none could trace the winding ways, the great craftsman Daedalus yearned to see his native sky once more.
The land and sea were barred by Minos ’ power, but “ the sky, ” he said, “ is open—Minos cannot rule the air. ”

So saying, he turned his mind to unknown arts, to change the laws of nature. He laid feathers in a line, each rising a little higher than the last, like reeds arranged on a panpipe.
He bound them with wax and thread, and bent them gently to an arching curve, shaping from them an instrument of flight.

His son stood by and laughed, not knowing he handled his own doom. Then Daedalus fixed the last feather in place and, poised between fear and hope, taught the boy how to fly:
“ Keep to the middle way, Icarus, ” he warned, “ fly not too low, or waves will clog your wings, nor too high, or the sun will melt the wax.
Follow me, and hold your course between them. ”

They fastened the wings, and the father ’ s cheeks were wet with tears as he kissed his son, never again to see him.
Up they rose—one teaching, one delighting in the air—a father ’ s anxious eyes and a boy ’ s careless joy.

And who, seeing them, could have thought them not divine? They passed Samos and Delos, left Paros behind, and saw Lebinthos and Calymne with their honeyed rocks.
Then the boy began to soar higher, drawn by desire for the sky above—nearer the sun. The wax softened;

his arms beat bare; and, in terror, he called to his father—the blue sea swallowed his cry.

The father, calling “ Icarus! Icarus! ” saw the feathers afloat upon the waves, cursed his own art, and laid the body in a tomb that bears the boy ’ s name.

King Kakudmi and Revati

India — *Bh ā gavata Pur ā ṇ a* 9.3.28–33, tr. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhup ā da (1974).

King Kakudmi, seeking a worthy husband for his daughter Revati, ascended to the realm of Brahm ā .
There he found the Creator surrounded by musicians of heaven, and waited until the song was finished before presenting his question.
When he spoke, Brahm ā laughed gently and said, “ O King, while thou wert here, listening, twenty-seven cycles of the Four Ages have passed upon the earth.
The men thou knewest are dust. Go, therefore, and give thy daughter to Balar ā ma, for the world has changed. ”

So Kakudmi and Revati returned—and found the race of men diminished, their stature and strength fallen away, their lifetimes shortened.
They bowed before Balar ā ma and gave her in marriage. Thus, what seemed to them a brief visit had encompassed the death and rebirth of ages.

King Muchukunda Awakens

India — *Bh ā gavata Pur ā ṇ a* 10.51, tr. A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhup ā da (1974).

Muchukunda, a warrior-king, had aided the gods in battles against the demons.
After long years of war he desired rest, and the gods granted him a boon: “ Sleep long and untroubled, and whoso wakes thee unbidden shall be burned by thy gaze. ”

He lay down in a mountain cave and slept through the passing of ages—kingdoms rose and fell, and mankind forgot his name.
At last, when K ṛ ṣ ṇ a pursued the tyrant K ā layavana into that cave, the invader mistook the sleeper for his foe and kicked him.
Muchukunda awoke; his eyes flashed fire, and K ā layavana was consumed.

Looking around, the king beheld a world utterly changed. He asked, “ What age is this? The faces of men are different. ”
And K ṛ ṣ ṇ a replied, “ The Yuga has turned many times since thou didst close thine eyes. ”
Then Muchukunda, understanding, renounced the world and went forth to wander among the mountains, praising the Lord who wakes the ages.

Wang Ziqiao Ascends to Heaven

China — *Shenxian Zhuan* (4th cent.), tr. R. F. Campany (2002); *Liezi* ch. 5, tr. A. C. Graham (1960).

Wang Ziqiao, prince of Zhou, studied the secret arts of the Dao.
One day he mounted a white crane and rose into the sky, vanishing among the clouds.

Centuries later, travelers climbing Mount Song heard celestial music and saw a company of immortals. Among them was Wang Ziqiao, radiant and serene.

He said to them, “ Tell my descendants that I dwell above among the heavens.
For us, one day is three hundred years below. ”
The travelers bowed, and when they descended they found their cities gone, their families forgotten, and new kingdoms in their place.

Thus the man who soared for a day returned to a world of dust—a lesson in the difference between the clocks of heaven and the clocks of men.

The Shipwrecked Sailor

Egypt — Middle Kingdom (12th Dynasty), Papyrus Hermitage 1115; tr. R. B. Parkinson (1997).

A sailor, cast ashore upon a desert island, found it fertile and filled with sweet fruit.
When he kindled a fire, the ground shook and a giant serpent appeared, glittering with gold and lapis.
Its body was thirty cubits long, its beard two cubits.
The serpent spoke: “ Fear not, man of speech. The God has brought thee here. ”

The sailor told his story. The serpent replied, “ I am prince of the island of Ka.
Once a star fell, and fire rained upon us, destroying all my family. I alone survived.
But now thou shalt be rescued, for a ship will come, and thou wilt return home. ”

When the ship indeed arrived, the serpent gave him gifts of myrrh and incense, saying, “ Remember me when thou standest before the king. ”
But when the sailor looked back from the sea, the island had vanished in smoke.

Thus he told the Pharaoh: “ Marvels exist in the world beyond our sight. ”
And the Pharaoh smiled, unbelieving.

The Hymn to Soma

India — *Ṛg Veda* 9.113, tr. R. T. H. Griffith (1896).

> Flow onward, Soma, rich in sweets, enrapturing, bright, inspiring song,
>
> All-conquering, best of warriors, bold, the juice divine of holy rites.
>
> We have drunk Soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the Gods discovered.
>
> Now what can foeman ’ s malice do to harm us? What, O Immortal, mortal man ’ s deception?
>
> Be gracious, O Thou heavenly, wondrous Soma: bring us beyond all sorrows and afflictions.
>
> Expand our mind with wisdom ever-flowing, give us the life that never knows decay.
>
> Soma, flow on for Indra ’ s sake, for glory, for our great strength and conquest over foemen;
>
> Flow for our healing, hero-making, mighty, O juice of life, immortal and all-glorious.