

That's a Myth!



1. “They, the Muses, once taught Hesiod beautiful song, / while he was shepherding his flocks on holy Mount Helicon; / these goddesses of Olympus, daughters of aegis-bearing Zeus, / first of all spoke this word [*mythos*] to me, / ‘Oh, you shepherds of the fields, base and lowly things, little more than bellies, / we know how to tell many falsehoods [*pseudea*] that seem like truths / but we also know, when we so desire, how to utter the absolute truth.’”

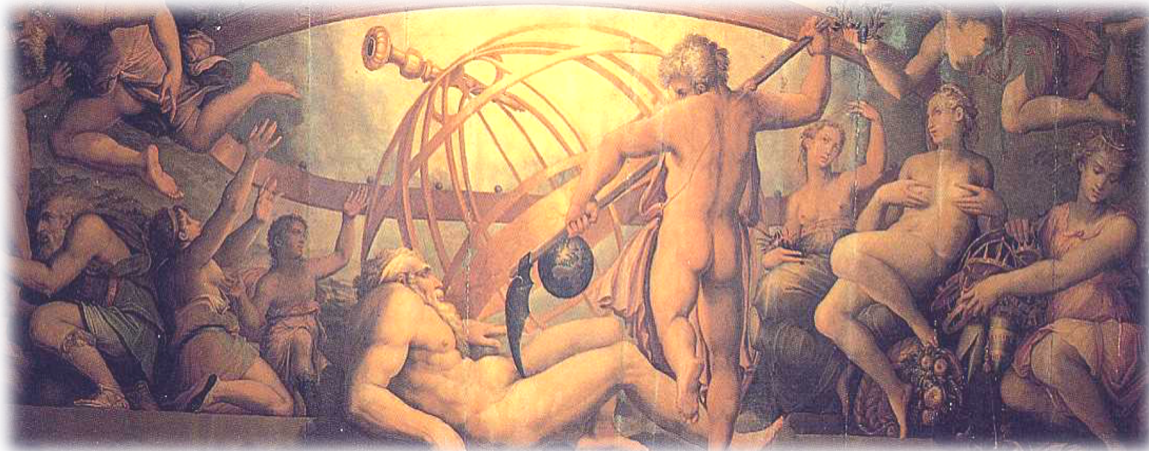
Hesiod, *Theogony* 22-28

(8th cent. B.C.?; cf. Morford *et al.*, p. 60)

(left) *Hesiod and a Muse*. Gustave Moreau, 1891. Oil on canvas. Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. ‘Symbolist’ painters like Moreau captured the dream-like quality of ancient mythology, situating their subjects in fantastic landscapes crowded with unusual emblems (e.g., the Muse, equipped with a sword and angelic wings). Even Hesiod, an historical personage who described himself as a rough shepherd, is here ‘mythologized’ into a Romantic poet.

True and False Lies

2. [Socrates speaking:] “Come, let us educate [*paideuōmen*] our fellow men with a myth [*mythos*], passing the time in our discussion [*logos*] by mythologizing [*mythologountes*] We [customarily] begin a child’s education by telling stories [*mythous legomen*]; these may be either complete falsehoods [*pseudea*] or, perhaps, true in some respect But should we allow children to hear random tales invented by random persons, taking into their souls opinions [*doxai*] that are mostly contrary to those we want them to hold once they become adults? . . . It seems to me that mythmakers [*mythopoioi*] ought to be monitored. If they tell a good story [*kalos mythos*], that should be permitted; if not, it should be rejected Of the stories that nursemaids and mothers now tell children, however, most should be thrown out . . . such as those that Hesiod and Homer used to relate, and the other poets too . . . who are to be blamed, in the first instance, for composing false stories . . . and, what is more, for not conveying those falsehoods well [*mē kalōs pseudetai*] The greatest falsehood, concerning things of the greatest importance, is the one that is told—and not well—of how Ouranos did what Hesiod says he did, and of how Cronus, in turn, got his revenge, and then of what Cronus suffered at the hands of his son.” Plato, *Republic* 2.376d-378a (4th cent. B.C.; tr. J.R. Hume)



(above) *The Castration of Uranus (Ouranos) by Saturn (Cronus).*
Mural by Giorgio Vasari, 1550-55. Ducal Palace, Florence.

Pausanias: Myths as Wise Riddles

3. “When I began to write my history [*syngraphē*] I regarded these accounts [*logoi*, i.e. about the gods] as full of naïveté [*euētheia*], but . . . I grew to hold a more thoughtful view [*pronoia*] of them, which is this. In ancient times those Greeks who were considered wise [*sophoi*] spoke their sayings [*logoi*] not directly but in riddles [*ainigmata*], and so I conjectured that the legends [*eirēmena*] about Cronus were a kind of Greek wisdom [*sophia*]. In matters of divinity [*to theion*], therefore, I shall adopt the received tradition [*eirēmena*].”

Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8.8.3 (2nd cent. A.D.),
adapted from W.H.S. Jones’ translation

A Textbook Definition of Myth

4. “A classical myth is a story that, through its classical form, has attained a kind of immortality because its inherent archetypal beauty, profundity, and power have inspired rewarding renewal and transformation by successive generations.”

Morford *et al.*, *Classical Mythology*, p. 26

