

**CLAS 104 COURSE NOTES**  
**CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY**

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# 1 WHAT IS MYTHOLOGY?

## 1.1 Introduction

- Mythology is derived from the Greek word “mythos”, dating as far back as Homer in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E, meaning “word”, “speech”, “tale”, or “story”
- One important misconception about mythology is that it is a genre of stories which are entirely false
- Mythology can, despite having many elements which we do not consider to be truth, reveal and explore certain absolute truths of human nature and existence
- Example: Cupid striking someone with an arrow to fall in love, we don’t take this action as the literal truth, but rather the suffering and joys of love every human experiences
- Therefore, myth can be defined broadly as a story that may or may not have historical reality, and can consider and explore universal truths about humanity

### 1.1.1 Three Categories of Myths

- **Myth Proper:** Stories which deal primarily with the gods, and the relationship between humans and gods (for example, The Homeric Hymns)
- **Saga/Legend:** Stories which have more of a connection to history (for example, the Theban saga, in which Thebes, a real Greek city, is at the centre)
- **Folktale:** Tales of fantastical adventure of particular heroes (for example, the adventures of Heracles or Hercules)
- These divisions are not absolute, for example, Homer’s poem in Iliad contain elements from both myth proper and saga/legend

## 1.2 Interpretative Theories

- There is no one correct interpretation of a myth, can have different meaning for different people, they don’t provide particular answers but rather provoke questions
- Mythology has been interpreted as etiological stories, that is, from the Greek word “aitia” which means “cause”, implying it explains the causes or origins of certain things
- Mythology can also be allegorical or symbolic, meaning that what one encounters in mythology is representative of aspects of human nature and other universal truths

- Psychoanalysis, developed by Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and others, studies the connection between mythology and the deepest of human wants and desires
- Connected the Oedipus Complex with Classical mythology
- One of the major criticisms of Freud and Jung is their approach is too generalized and doesn't account for differences in the myths of distinct cultures around the world
- Of importance for the development of theories which admitted a connection between myth and society, was the work of the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski
- French scholar Claude Levi-Strauss is most famous for his structuralist approach to myths, where social interactions represent a structure which appears as binary opposites
- Walter Burkert, a famous contemporary scholar of Greek religion, sees the structuralist approach to myths as useful, but only if they are grounded in culture
- This approach recognizes universal truths, accepts structuralism and psychology, but at the same time, grounds such approaches in historical and religious context of a society

## **2 THE HISTORY BEHIND CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY**

### **2.1 Neolithic Period**

- People first entered Greece over 40,000 years ago
- 6500 B.C.E., agriculture rose in Greece in this period, also known as the late Stone Age

### **2.2 Early and Middle Bronze Ages**

- The innovation of bronze, by adding tin to copper, allowed for a great development in Greece between c. 3000 and 1600 B.C.E.
- In the Middle Bronze age, the arrival of the first Greek speakers occurred in Greece
- Earlier languages were non-Indo-European "Aegean" languages, but the Greek language eventually replaced them

### **2.3 Late Bronze Age (Mycenaean)**

- In 1899, Arthur Evans discovered the site of Knossos, in Crete, a large palace of what was a powerful and influential society known as the Minoans
- In c. 1600-1400, the Mycenaean kingdoms first started to build large palaces and flourished in Greece until c. 1150 B.C.E.

- Many aspects of the myth of the Trojan war derive from Mycenaean civilization
- The Trojan war is now thought by many to be based on an actual conflict in the cite of Troy in the Troad

#### **2.4 Dark Age, c. 1150-900 B.C.E. and Period of Revival c. 900-750 B.C.E.**

- Mastery of iron was achieved and innovations in potting that allowed for new designs
- Extremely important during this period was the development of the alphabet

#### **2.5 Archaic Period, c. 750-500 B.C.E.**

- A period where particular versions of myths first came to be recorded
- Examples such as the poems of Hesiod, Homer, and the so-called Homeric Hymns
- Colonization, expansion, and innovation characterize this period in Greece

#### **2.6 Classical Period, c. 500-323 B.C.E.**

- Dominated by Athenian perspective which held enormous power in the Mediterranean
- Myth was retold and adapted in many forms, including in dramatic performance
- Examples such as the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and Aristophanes

#### **2.7 Hellenistic Period, c. 323-30 B.C.E.**

- Began at the death of Alexander the Great and ended at the death of Cleopatra
- The period is dominated politically by kingdoms, most prominently the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt
- Greek scholarship and the study of its literacy past began in earnest

#### **2.8 Foundation of Rome and Roman Republic, c. 753-27 B.C.E.**

- The first Roman literature which we possess is from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.
- But it is in the late Republic, the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E., that Roman literature reach what is often called its golden age
- Roman literature and art of this and later periods often draw extensively upon Greek versions of myth and compositional techniques, but Roman versions are not slavish

## **2.9 Early and High Roman Empire, 27 B.C.E. - 200 C.E.**

- The end of the Republican period through the reign of Augustus (14-27 C.E.) was a thriving time for Roman literature (often called Augustan literature)
- It was during this period that the poets Vergil (early 30's B.C.E. to c. 19 B.C.E) and Ovid (20's B.C.E. to 17 C.E.) rose to fame, both important to Greco-Roman mythology
- Following the Augustan Age, Roman literature continued to thrive, but also changed as it innovated upon earlier models of both Greek and Roman literature

## **3 HESIOD'S THEOGONY, THE TITANOMACHY AND HUMANS**

- Hesiod: 700-650 B.C.E.

### **3.1 Hesiod's Theogony: Genealogy of the Gods**

- Hesiod, the Boeotian poet of the *Theogony*, was regarded by the Greeks as one of the oldest poets
- Composed the *Theogony* even before Homer composed the famous *Iliad and Odyssey* sometime in the late 8<sup>th</sup> or early 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.
- The *Theogony* is of a genre that explains origins and attempts to codify the Olympian system of gods and goddesses
- The *Theogony* is composed in hexameter verse, and is the product of a long oral tradition in which stories were told and retold in performance
- Poetry describing "the origin of the world and the gods, and the events which led to the establishment of the present order"

#### **3.1.1 The Muses**

1. Calliope – Epic Poetry
2. Clio – History/Lyre Playing
3. Euterpe – Lyric Poetry/Flute Playing
4. Melpomene – Tragedy/Lyre Playing
5. Terpsichore – Choral Dancing/Flute Playing
6. Erato – Love Poetry
7. Polyhymnia – Sacred Music/Dancing



8. Urania – Astronomy
9. Thalia – Comedy

### **3.1.2 The Theogony Lines**

- Lines 1-115: Singing on Mount Helicon in Boeotia and the invocation of the Muses
- Lines 116-122: There was Chaos from which we presume that Earth (Gaia), Tartaros, and Love (Eros) emerge, as well as Erebus and Night
- Lines 123-153: Birth of: Ether (air), Hemera (day), Ouranos (sky or heavens), the Mountains and Pontos (the sea), the Titans, the Cyclopes, the Hundred-Handers, Ocean, Koios, Kreios, Hyperion, Iapetos, Thea, Rhea, Themis and Mnemosyne (memory), Phoebe, Tethys, and Kronos
- Lines 155-210: First Succession Myth: Angry at being kept inside the womb, Kronos devises a plan with Gaia to lop off the genitals of Ouranos, Aphrodite is born
- Lines 211-336: The children of Ouranos, Kronos and Rhea, who will give birth to Zeus and the Olympian generation
- Lines 453-506: Second Succession Myth: Children of Kronos take over his power, Kronos' wife and children play a trick upon him and overthrow him
- Lines 507-616: The disobedience of Prometheus and how he gives fire to man, following which Zeus has Hephaestus make woman, made of clay
- Lines 617-731: Zeus must now do battle against the other Titans and is victorious
- Lines 732-819: Description of Tartarus, in which the Titans are confined
- Lines 820-885: Third Succession Myth: Typhoeus was a great monster with one hundred snake heads, who would've defeated Zeus, but Zeus kept a close eye and destroyed him
- Lines 886-929: One of Zeus's wives, Metis, is swallowed by him but gives birth to Athena from his head, who becomes an ally
- Lines 969-1018: Recounts the unions of goddesses with mortal men

### **3.1.3 The Theogony Interpretation**

- Frequent opposition between male and female in the poem
- For most of the poem it is the mother who matters, male is much less prominent
- Since Zeus descended from Mother Earth, goes to non-physical and male dominance

### **3.2 The Creation of Mankind – Hesiod’s Five Ages**

- One of the characteristics of Zeus is his cleverness
- The actual creation of mankind is told in the second of his poems, *Works and Days*
- This poem is not theogonic, but rather, falls into the category of “Wisdom Literature”
- It is a work of instruction which gives humanity advice about how to live

#### **3.2.1 Fives Ages of Humanity**

- The Golden Age: One of plenty and long age, in which man is very close to the gods
- The Silver Age: Created by the gods on Olympus, still quite pleasant, but lower quality
- The Bronze Age: Created by Zeus, is again worse
- The Age of Heroes: Inserted by Hesiod, interrupts the decline, linked to the divine
- The Iron Age: Mankind descended into a miserable state of war and corruption

### **3.3 Prometheus**

- A divinity, the son of Iapetus, one of the Titans and the Oceanid Nymph Clymene
- Prometheus is responsible for tricking Zeus and giving humanity the power of fire
- Fire is a symbol of technology and the advancement of mankind

### **3.4 Pandora and the Creation of Women**

- It is only as a punishment for Prometheus’s actions that Zeus order Pandora to be created
- Pandora is created secondary to humans, and will bring to them great evil
- There are parallels in the myths of many different cultures in which evils are released or men lose immortality because a closed container is opened, often by a woman

## **4 ZEUS AND THE PANTHEON**

- Homer: 750-630 B.C.E
- Ovid: 43 B.C.E - 17/18 C.E.

### **4.1 Zeus**

- Zeus has been referred as: *sky god*, sky father, weather god, storm god, cloud gatherer
- Connected with goats in mythology, and lived in the mountains like Mount Ida in Troad

- He's the established ruler of the gods, and nobody can defeat him
- He's a powerful god who wielded the thunderbolt, and a king seated on the throne
- Great military battle at Plataea in 479 B.C.E., also known as the god of victory
- He can also be seen as the most powerful through his sexual power
- He's the father of Apollo and Artemis by Leto, Hermes by Maia, Persephone by Demeter, Dionysos by Semele, and Athena from his own head

#### **4.1.1 Affairs**

1. Danae: Daughter of the king of Argos Acrisius, was locked up but Zeus entered as a shower of gold, child was the famous Argive hero Perseus
2. Europa: Disguised as a bull, gives birth to king Minos in Crete
3. Io: Hera became jealous and angry, turned Io into a white heifer, put under guard

#### **4.1.2 Traits**

- Although he's extremely powerful, he must also at times act in accordance with fate
- Sometimes seen as an impartial god who must give out what fate has determined
- Also known as: Zeus Boulaios, Zeus Polieus, Zeus Herkeios or Zeus Ktesios
- Also, a god of prophecy: Present at the sounds of a holy tree, where they were prophetic

### **4.2 Olympia**

- Olympia is a fertile plain in the northwest Peloponnese, part of a territory known as Elis
- Zeus's altar was made not out of stone, but out of the ash of the remains of sacrifices
- Surrounded by the facilities for the Olympic games, presided over the sanctuary of Kronos, Zeus's father
- There are two foundation myths: One involving the king of nearby Pisa, and one involving Heracles and one of his 12 labours
- Zeus was very much connected with Nike, a minor goddess of victory personified

#### **4.2.1 Olympic Games**

- The Olympic games were held every four years in Olympia during the festival to Zeus
- Before the festival began, there was a long period of preparation
- The festival lasted for six days, with five days of competitions in 13 different events

- All of the competitors, and even the spectators (except for Hera), were all men
- Events: Stadion race, double stadion race, long distance race, race in heavy armour, pentathlon, wrestling, boxing, chariot race, horse race, pankration, junior stadion, junior wrestling, and junior boxing
- Judges were known as “Judges of the Greeks” (Hellanodikes)
- Victors on the sixth day received a wreath of wild olive leaves from the sacred grove, made sacrifices to Zeus, and joined him for a great feast

## 5 APOLLO: DELOS, DELPHI, MUSIC AND REVENGE

### 5.1 Apollo

- **Apollo:** Child of Zeus and Leto, and the twin brother of Artemis
- Known as the “most Greek of the gods” by German scholar W.F. Otto
- Apollo is in the Greek pantheon a god connected with the sun, derived originally from Anatolia due to this connection
- His name is connected with the Greek Doric dialectal word *apella* which means assembly
- A type of hymn, called the paeon, was frequently connected with Apollo
- Paeon became an epithet of Apollo, himself a god closely connected to healing
- Apollo has a famous attribute of a bow and arrow
- He’s a god of healing, but also a god of revenge and pestilence
- Connected with healing, purification, destruction, prophecy, poetry, and music
- Two major cult centres in Greece: Delos and Delphi

### 5.2 Delos

- An island of the Dodecanese
- Birthplace of Apollo, treated as a major cult centre
- Became a large religious site, focus of an annual Ionian festival

### 5.3 Delphi

- Greatest and most prominent of his cults in the ancient world
- Apollo makes his way here to find an oracular shrine for humans

- He's convinced by the river Telphusa to find his cult at Parnassos instead, where he must first destroy a great snake, who nurses Typhaon
- A major Pan-Hellenic festival was held here every four years, which included athletic and musical contests
- The Delphic oracle was the most well-known oracle in the Greek world
- Temple of Apollo: two priests, five *Hosioi* (holy men), and Pythia (female priestess)
- Oracular pronouncement was a big business, constant stream of people
- Most significant oracular site around Greece

#### 5.4 Music, Revenge, and Healing

- One unsuccessful love affair is that between Apollo and **Marpesa**, a mortal from Ares
- However, she chose Idas over him due to mortal/immortal incompatibility
- The one successful love affair was with the nymph **Cyrene**, has a son named Aristaeus
- Other tragic affairs: Daphne (daughter of river Peneus), Coronis
- Also had affairs with men, most well-known is with **Hyacinthus**
- Story of Apollo and **Marsyas**, a Satyr, challenges Apollo to a musical contest, loses

### 6 ARTEMIS AND VIRGINITY

#### 6.1 Artemis

- **Artemis:** The daughter of Zeus and Leto, and famously the twin sister of Apollo
- Associated with the wilderness and the hunt, also carried a bow and arrow, huntress
- Prizes her virginity, contrast with Aphrodite, antithesis of erotic love
- She can bring sudden death to women, killed Niobe's daughters for god competing
- Myth of Actaeon, walks in on her bathing, turns him into a stag, hunted and killed
- Punishes Callisto even though she did nothing wrong, by shooting her with an arrow

#### 6.2 Virginity

- Misandry, hatred of men, she avoids sexuality
- Myth of Orion, tries to seduce Artemis, spawns a scorpion, stings him to death
- Myth of Arethusa, she flees the love of the river Alpheus, prays to Artemis, she saves her
- Paradoxically linked with childbirth, she's born first and helped with her brother's birth

- Also, a goddess of the moon, cycle perhaps connected to the menstrual period of women
- Closely linked with Selene (the moon in the heavens), and her cousin Hecate
- One of her most famous religious sites is Brauron, a festival for women of Athens

## **7 APHRODITE, ADONIS, PYGMALION, AND EROS/CUPID**

### **7.1 Aphrodite**

- Daughter of Zeus and Dione
- Combines seductive charm, fertility, and deception
- Three exceptions to her domination: Athena, Artemis, and Hestia
- Constantly juxtaposes Artemis, deception and desire vs. virginity and purity
- Her power can conquer all is ratified by the very fact that not even she can resist herself
- Her major religious centre in the Greek world was in Cyprus
- She had beef with Zeus but was humbled and shamed by the end due to his power
- She's deceived many other gods, but has also been tricked herself
- Affairs between mortals and gods never work out and end well

### **7.2 Adonis**

- The second mortal with whom Aphrodite falls in love
- He represents the seasons of death and birth
- Killed while hunting, changed by Aphrodite into a flower, death and rebirth

### **7.3 Pygmalion**

- Pygmalion doesn't take a wife but instead fashions an ivory statue of a woman
- This wife later known as Galatea, who gives birth to a son Paphos

### **7.4 Eros/Cupid**

- Son of Aphrodite
- Not a god, but somewhere between a god and mortal, good and bad, beautiful and ugly
- A spiritual being who facilitates communication between men and gods
- Most known as a person who instils love in people by shooting them with arrows
- Relationship with Psyche (soul)

- Myth: Psyche compared to Venus (Aphrodite), Venus becomes enraged and puts Psyche through impossible tasks, Cupid saves Psyche and Venus accepts their love
- Aphrodite/Venus and her son Eros/Cupid are deities who profoundly impact both gods and mortals

## 8 DEMETER – AGRARIAN MOTHER AND HER FESTIVALS

### 8.1 Demeter

- Function as a mother through her very close association with her daughter Persephone
- A goddess of corn and wheat, controls vegetation and growth of crops
- *Leitmotiv*: Never as a young Greek girl go gathering flowers in a meadow, for you are bound to be abducted by a god
- Myth: Her daughter is abducted by Hades, angry at the gods for doing nothing, brings a dreadful famine on the earth, so given back but must see him one-thirds every year since she ate the pomegranate
- Persephone's stay in the underworld is a mythological *aition* for winter, and her return an explanation for the renewed fertility of spring

### 8.2 Festivals

Two major festivals: *Thesmophoria* and the *Mysteries* at Eleusis

#### 8.2.1 Thesmophoria

- Celebrations in honour of Demeter held in Athens and throughout the Greek world
- Celebrated only by married women
- Feasted on the first day, fasted on the second day
- On the third day, celebrated *Kalligeneia*, or the “beautiful birth”
- Rites involved digging up the rotted remains of pigs which had been sacrificed previously, mixed with seeds and put on the altar of Demeter
- Also, a sexual aspect to the festival, phallic symbols and rituals

#### 8.2.2 Mysteries at Eleusis

- Connected with death, had a special fate in the underworld

- It was considered to divulge mysteries, secret rites into which one had to be initiated
- Celebrated for seven days in the autumn, between August and September
- Not exclusive to women, most important priest was the *Hierophant*, who revealed the mysteries to the initiates
- The festival began each year with a procession along the sacred way from Athens
- The secret rites were performed in the *Telesterion* (initiation hall)