CLAS 104 COURSE NOTES
CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

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Table of Contents

1 WHAT IS MYTHOLOGY?

1.1 Introduction

- Mythology is derived from the Greek word "mythos", dating as far back as Homer in the 8th 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 Bronislav Malinoski
- 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 2nd century B.C.E.
- But it is in the late Republic, the 1st 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 8th or early 7th 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 Erebos 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