CLAS 104 COURSE NOTES
CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

Paolo Torres

University of Waterloo
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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