

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 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 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 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 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)

9 HERMES

- Son of Zeus and Maia, Maia being a nymph and daughter of Atlas
- He's a messenger god, who has a particularly close connection to Zeus
- Comes down to earth to give messages to both mortals and gods from Zeus
- Also, extremely clever, a trickster, very funny, inventor of the lyre
- Steals the cattle of Apollo on his first day of life
- Related to Stewie from Family Guy, a child but a clever and capable character
- As he grows up, becomes more responsible and respectable, like a conductor
- Trickiness and lies are actually not seen as negative qualities
- Conducts people to the underworld, in his role as *psychopompos* or "conductor of souls"
- Sometimes worshipped as a fertility god
- Best summed up as a god who crosses boundaries, crosses divide between mortal and immortal, also a bridge between the gods themselves, crosses between male and female

10 ATHENA, ARES, HEPHAESTUS, AND POSEIDON

10.1 Athena

- One of the younger of the Olympian deities and the daughter of Zeus
- She's born only of her father, out of his head, after Zeus swallowed his wife Metis
- Feminine deity who is divided from her maternal side, a very masculine woman
- Most well known as a goddess of war, represented in art with helmet and spear
- Presented as a feminine counterpart to the male war god Ares
- She is also the teacher of crafts to men and women, patron goddess of carpenters
- Furthermore, a goddess of civilization, victory and good council

- Myth: Athena vs. Arachne, Arachne more skilled at wool making and wins a competition, Athena turns her into a spider as punishment
- She's the patron of the male Odysseus
- Most famous cult of Athena is that of Athena Polias (or Athena Protectress of the City)

10.2 Ares

- Ares, or Mars in Latin, is a male counterpart to Athena as a god of war
- When he's wounded by the mortal Greek hero Diomedes, Zeus rebukes him for being a destructive god
- He's the adulterous lover of Aphrodite
- Ares is a destructive god, while Athena takes a more thoughtful approach to battle

10.3 Hephaestus

- Along with Athena, first to teach craftsmanship skills to humans
- They also play an important role in the creation of woman (Pandora) together
- In Pindar's seventh Olympian *Ode* we hear the following that Hephaestus strikes Zeus' head with a brass axe, upon which Athena leaps from his head

10.4 Poseidon

- Known in Latin as Neptune, a significant god in the pantheon, the brother of Zeus, and one of the older of the 12 Olympian gods
- Depicted as carrying a trident, associated with fish and other animals
- Also connected with the earth, and can be responsible for earthquakes
- Zeus is the god of the heavens and supreme above all, while Hades is of the underworld, and Poseidon the seas and also the land
- Often presented as an angry god, and was a deity whom the Greeks worshipped
- Married to Amphitrite, one of the Nereids, the daughters of Nereus, son of the Sea (Pontus) and Earth (Gaia); they have a son together who is named Triton, a merman
- Descended from Poseidon are also the Geryon, the Theban Sphinx, and the Nemean Lion
- His association with beasts is representative of his role as a formidable and angry god

11 DIONYSUS

- Bacchus, his Roman name, is still frequently associated with wine, and alcohol
- He's much more than a wine god to the Greeks, he's connected profoundly with the Greek psyche in a much deeper sense than as a god of celebration
- He's the son of Zeus and Semele, who is the daughter of king Cadmus in Thebes
- Zeus causes the death of Semele, but Dionysus doesn't die due to his immortality
- He's also a god connected with life force, and a male fertility god of crops and vines
- Myth: He's abducted by pirates, defeats them easily and frees himself with his powers
- The major festival at which drama was performed in Athens, the City Dionysia, was not just a theatrical festival but also a religious festival of the god Dionysus
- Dionysiac ritual *omofagia* which is "the eating of raw flesh", in the *Bacchae* the women first rip apart the cattle of Thebes and eat them, and then later they rip apart Pentheus
- In summary, he's a god who is responsible for "life force," but also a god who allows us to explore aspects of our inner selves (both positive and negative)

12 ORPHEUS

- A semi-divine who goes down into the realm of the dead in search of his wife Eurydice
- He's a singer, a poet, a prophet, and a mythological figure connected to religious worship
- He's the son of one of the Muses, supposed to have come from Thrace
- Well known for the charm of his music, able to charm terrible monsters
- Myth: His wife Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies, he goes in search of her, but fails
- As a result, leaves aside women altogether, a mob of women kill him due to this
- He's also a famous priest and spiritual leader in Greece and was connected to both Apollo and Dionysus
- He was not a god, but a semi-divine hero who lived and died