CLAS 104 Course Notes

Classical Mythology

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# What is Mythology?

## 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

### 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

## 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

# The History Behind Classical Mythology

## 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

## 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

## 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

## 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

## 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

## 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

## 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

## 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

## 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

# Hesiod’s Theogony, the Titanomachy and Humans

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

## 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”

### 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

### 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

### 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

## 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

### 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

## 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

## 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

# Zeus and the Pantheon

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

## 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

### 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

### 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

## 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

### 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