

Word associations:

Myth

Are myths important, and why?

What would we consider a modern myth?

Greece/Greek

Western Civilization

Are we part of Western society?

Does it matter to us?

Topic 1: Introduction to Myth

Myth: A traditional story with collective importance

Ancient Greek:

Mythos, “authoritative speech” “story” “plot”

Epos, “story, plot”

Our “myth”

Not so in Homer; Hesiod a little bit;

by Plato (5th century BC)

—myth as pejorative

Story:

Plot:

beginning, middle, end

(Zeus is not a myth)

Characters:

gods, mortals, other

Traditional: “handed over”

Passed down, originally **oral / aural**

Pre-literate cultures

No “author” of an individual myth

authors of **versions** of myths, but not the creator of the myth

Myths are open to change

—often many versions of the same myth, with differing details

Beware of saying “that’s not how it is” or “what’s the real story”?

sometimes authors very consciously tell a different version

Know whose story you’re talking about

Collective importance:

it is important to the whole society, not just an individual

Types of Myths

- Divine Myths (true myth)
- Heroic Myth / Legends
- Folktales

Divine Myths:

Primary focus on gods

Mess with mortals, fight with each other etc.

Not to be confused with **religion**

Same characters, different functions

Even (some) ancient Greeks objected to the behavior of the gods

ACM 363–367 (from Plato’s *Republic*)

Divine myths are often explanatory:

Etiological they explain *why* something is the way it is

Zeus causes thunder

Typhoeus

“acts of God”

It oversimplifies myth to try and squeeze everyone into this category

Euhemerus (c. 300 BC)

the gods were great men who have been deified:

hence “**Euhemerism**”

Legends / Heroic Myths:

(< Latin, “something to be read”; a Saint’s Life)

Stories about individuals, though gods may play a part
set in the distant (but human) past

Heroes and Heroines

Noble, aristocratic

Extraordinary strength, beauty, ability

Versions of legends often tell us more about the transmitter’s cultures,
than the real time being described

Limited understanding of history

Cf. Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*

There may be truth elements contained within legends, but this is a slippery
business

Troy and archeology

Folktales

About humans, but usually regular ones

—poor cottagers, and the like

Not many Greek folktales survive, but folktale scholarship is often helpful in
explaining and understanding Divine Myths and Legends

Study of myth

- Collecting the Stories (What were they?)

Very different for different cultures

- cf. collecting Inuit myths with collecting Greek

Two main sources for Classical Myth:

- literary evidence
 - archaeological evidence
- Cultural Significance of the stories

What did they mean to their original audience?

Why were they told, by whom and why?

Function?

- Comparative Approach

Are the classical myths like myths that operate in other cultures?

How did the Greeks change the myths they inherited from the Near East?

How do classical myths cf. to the stories of the Bible?

- Assessment of Myth

Do they have deeper human meaning for all human beings?

On the pronunciation of names

“The value of the sounds of names in classical myth as pronounced in English ... is a topic on which people agree to disagree”

Really?

No. Ovid, Vergil