

LLEA 122 Greek and Roman Myth

DEFINITION OF MYTH

1. AESTHETIC DEVICE; NARRATIVE LITERARY FORM

RICHARD CHASE "Myth is an aesthetic device for bringing the imaginary but powerful world of preternatural focus into a manageable collaboration with the objective/i.e. experienced/facts of life in such a way as to excite a sense of reality amenable to both the unconscious passions and the conscious mind.

2. HAS TO DO WITH THE GODS, THE "OTHER WORLD"

STITH THOMPSON Consensus "that myth has to do with the gods and their actions, with creation, and with the general nature of the universe and of the earth." Broader sense in European literature" "myth sometimes applied also to the hero tales, whether those hero tales deal with demigods or not."

RUDOLF BULTMANN "Mythology is the use of imagery to express the other-worldly in terms of this world and the divine in terms of human life, the other side in terms of this side." "Myth is the report of an event or occurrence in which supernatural, superhuman powers or persons are at work (thereby often simply defines as a narrative of the gods).

3. EXPLAINS ORIGINS

ROBERT A. GEORGES consensus of articles in the volume: "So myth retained its basic meaning as a narrative, well known among members of a particular society or a group or groups within that society, which explained the origins of natural and social phenomena and the interrelationships among man, his deities and his universe.

E.B. TYLOR (*The Golden Bough* IV p. 153) Myth-"a fiction devised to explain an old custom of which the real meaning and origin had been forgotten."

LESSA AND VOGT (*Reader in Compar. Rel.: An Anthropological Approach* p. 142) (Myths) "...are sacred stories handed down through the generations, either by word of mouth or through books. Such stories are usually of crucial importance in providing explanations of how human life came to be as it is, and in providing justifications for the efficacy of ceremonials and rituals. On the other hand, there are always prescribed ways of carrying on religious acts and procedures, ways of worshipping, praying, changing, sacrificing, making offerings, and so on, that are called 'rituals' (Ceremonials may be looked upon as simple dramatized rituals). In brief, the beliefs are found in myths; the practices are prescribed in rituals."

4. ENFORCE SOCIAL ORDER

BRONISLAW MALINOWSKI "Thus, through the operation of what might be called the elementary law of sociology, myth possesses the normative power of fixing custom, of sanctioning modes of behavior, of giving dignity and importance to an institution."

H.BUCK (*People of the Lord* p. 348) "History functions as social control only when it functions as myth. It need not be truly a myth, but it must function as one."

ROBERT A. GEORGES (in Georges, Epilogue p. 230) Finds tendency to use myth to support social theory of the mythographer; this seen when myth is held to be "a charter of belief, a storehouse of adjustive responses, a kind of cultural furniture, and a language of argument..."

5. AS MISTAKEN/PRIMITIVE SCIENCE

FRAZER (q. in Murray 309) "By myths I understand mistaken explanations of phenomena...Such explanations originate in that instinctive curiosity concerning the causes of things which at a more advanced stage of knowledge seeks satisfaction in philosophy and science, but being founded on ignorance and misapprehension they are always false, for were they true, they would cease to be myths."

DAVID BIDNEY (Seboek 22 and 23) "Myth originates wherever thought and imagination are employed uncritically or deliberately used to promote social delusion." "Myth must be taken seriously as a cultural force but it must be taken seriously precisely in order that it may be gradually superseded in the interests of the advancement of truth and the growth of human intelligence."

6. THE WORDS TO A RITUAL

JANE HARRISON (*Themis* 1912 p. 328) "...the spoken correlative of the acted rite, the thing done; it is *to legomenon*/ the thing said/ as contrasted with or rather as related to *dromenon*/ the ritual act?" cf. Greek definition of myth as *ta legomena epi tois dromenois* (See Hyman p. 138 in Seboek).

NORTHRUP FRYE ("New Directions from Old," in Murray p. 117) "The Verbal imitation of ritual is myth, and the typical action of poetry is the plot, or what Aristotle calls *mythos*, so that for the literary critic and Aristotelian term *mythos* and the English word myth are much the same thing."

7. MAKE UNIVERSALS CONCRETE, INTELLIGIBLE

THEODOR A. GASTER ("Myth, Mythology," *Interp.Dict.Bib* 3 (1962) 486): "Myth...is in the last analysis, the supreme vehicle of the Word, as indeed of all religions-the element which gives them life and pertinence." "...Events of the past ca, in general, be religiously significant and relevant in the present only insofar as they are lifted out of the specific contexts of their occurrence and taken as symbols of continuing, universal situations: And to effect such a translation from the punctual to the ideal is precisely the function of myth."

MARK SCHOERER (in Murray 355, 356). "Myths are the instruments by which we continually struggle to make our experience intelligible to ourselves. A myth is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is which has organizing value for experience. A mythology is a more or less articulated body of such images, a pantheon."

"Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitudes depend."

RUDOLF BULTMAN "The real intention of myth is not to provide an objective world view. Rather in it is expressed the way man understands himself in his world. Myth is not intended to be interpreted cosmologically, but rather anthropologically, or better still, existentialistically. Myth speaks of the power or powers that man thinks he experiences as ground and limit of his world, of his own action, and of what happens to him...It speaks of the unworldly in a worldly way, of the gods in a human way.:

8. EXPLICATE BELIEFS OR COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE; CONVEY VALUES

MARSHALL MCCLUHAN "Are we inclined to insist that myth be a reduction of collective experience to a visual and classifiable form?" Myth today seen as "a photograph of 'still' shot of a macromyth/=language/ in action...a means of static abstraction from live process..."Myth has been means of access to collective postures of mind/which now replaced by new electronic means of communication/. 293.. Compression or multilayering...myth is always a montage or transparency comprising several externals.

ALAN W. WATTS (in Sebeok 154). "Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories--some no doubt fact, and some fantasy--which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life."

ERICH DINKLER ("Myth in the NT," *InterpDictBib* 3 (1963)487. "Modern historians of religion use the word as a technical term for that literary form which tells about otherworldly things in this-worldly concepts. Thus myth expresses truth in a hidden or indirect language, not in an open and direct way. Therefore, it cannot be objectified. p. 488 "...all mythology expresses a truth, though in an absolute way."

H. DUMERY (*Philosophie de la religion*): "The world 'myth', as a technical term in the phenomenology of religion, no longer has the sense of 'fable'. It means 'an imaginative (not imaginary) representation used to convey symbols of value'."

9. SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION

ERNEST CASSIERER (in Sebeok 7). "Myth creates a world of its own in accordance with a spiritual principle, a world which discloses an immanent rule, a characteristic necessity. The objectivity of myth consists in its being a concrete and necessary mode of spiritual formation, a 'typical' mode of formation in which consciousness disengages itself from and confronts the mere receptivity of the sensory impression'." "Myth is not a reflection of an objective reality independent

of it, but is rather the product of true creative, spiritual actions, an independent image world of the spirit as well as an active force of expression."

WHALLEY (in Murray 135) A myth "...is a direct metaphysical statement beyond science...Myth has as its purpose, its source and end, revelation."

BERDYAEV (*Freedom and the Spirit*) "Myth is a reality immeasurably greater than concept. It is high time that we stopped identifying myth with invention, with the illusions of primitive mentality. ...Behind the myths are concealed the greatest realities, the original phenomena of the spiritual life...Myth is always concrete and expresses life better than abstract thought can do...Myth presents to us the supernatural in the natural-it brings two worlds together symbolically."

10. INCLUSIVE DEFINITIONS:

JOSEPH CAMPBELL-the four functions of mythology:

1. Mystical/Metaphysical--"the reconciliation of consciousness with the preconditions of its own existence"... "redeeming human consciousness from its sense of guilt in life."
2. Cosmological--"formulating and rendering an image of the universe"
3. Sociological-"validating and maintaining some specific social order, authorizing its moral code as a construct beyond criticism or human emendation."
4. Psychological-"shaping individuals to the aims and ideals of their various social groups"

HENRY MURRAY ("The Possible Nature of a 'Mythology' to Come," in Murray)

1. Formal, descriptive definition. A myth manifestly consists of the essential features of an important more or less natural/preternatural situation or event (that has a basic theme) in which at least one extraordinary, more or less natural/preternatural psychic entity is involved-all this as sensibly represented in one channel or another.

2. Referential definition.

Phenomenal reference. The manifest components of a myth-the represented situations, events and actors-may mean what they literally appear to mean or may stand for anything else that is conceivable by man.