

CHAPTER 2

WAYS OF INTERPRETING MYTH

MAIN POINTS

1. Most ancient Greeks seem to have accepted their myths without undue criticism. They apparently thought of them as old, respected stories that reliably recounted events and ways of the very distant past.
2. The Greek philosophical movement (after the sixth century B.C.) introduced some skepticism but was mainly used to rationalize certain “impossible” aspects of Greek myth.
3. Xenophanes of Colophon complained about the gods’ lack of moral values, which he understood as mirroring the sad behaviors of human society.
4. Theagenes of Rhegion is reported to have stated that when Homer tells of gods fighting each other, he is really creating allegories about natural processes in which the elements (hot, dry, wet, cold) are in perpetual conflict. Likewise, the gods can signify human dispositions.
5. Anaxagoras interpreted Homeric hymn as exposing the evil results of unethical conduct and promoting virtue.
6. Euripides describes the myth of the birth of Dionysus from Zeus’s thigh on the basis of linguistic confusion.

NOTE: Some of Plato’s best-known myths or fables include the “Myth (Allegory) of the Cave” and the “Myth of Er,” both from the Republic, and the “Myth of the Charioteer,” from Phaedrus. The term myth is used here to signify a symbolic story rather than a traditional narrative about gods and heroes. See Chapter 9.

7. Socrates and Plato, believing that gods should be perfect and free of passion, resented the poor moral example set by the Olympians in popular stories. They were, nonetheless, unable to dispense with them altogether: Plato used myths to illustrate his teachings about the spirit and its existence after death.
8. During the Hellenistic period, when successors of Alexander the Great were establishing kingdoms and claiming divine honors, Euhemerus of Messene claimed to have found written evidence that the Greek gods were once mortal, ancient kings. This theory is now known as Euhemerism.
9. In spite of criticism, myth remained a cultural factor until the legitimization of Christianity in the fourth century A.D. Classical myth was banned from Western culture through the Middle Ages; the European Renaissance reintroduced myth to the world of art and literature. The Enlightenment inspired new scholarly interest in the interpretation of myth.
10. Mythology has two general meanings: (1) a set or system of myths and (2) a methodological analysis of myths.
11. There have been numerous scholarly attempts to analyze myths into their component elements and then find a unifying element among them. Although none has succeeded to universal satisfaction, applications of various analytical theories have taught us a great deal about the nature and function of myth.
12. Scholarly theories of myth generally fall into one of two groups: those that assume an external basis of myth, and those that see mythmaking as an expression of the human mind.

13. The nature-myth theory is externalistic: myth is a reaction to the awe-inspiring powers of physical nature as they affect human experience—the cycles of day and night, summer and winter, plant life and death. Often the gods personify meteorological forces and astronomical functions or objects.
14. Example: Zeus is a weather god.
15. Criticism: the nature-myth theory fails to account for the full content of most myths: for example, Zeus's ethical, social, or political functions. Zeus defends justice, hospitality, and legitimate kingship.
16. The ritual theory of myth is externalistic: myths are stories invented to explain rituals and ceremonies. Proponent: Sir James Frazer.
17. Example: The myths of Demeter and Persephone and of the Lemnian women reflect elements of rituals intended to move the communities from a situation of danger to one of reassurance and continued life.
18. Criticism: the ritual theory does not explain why rituals develop in the first place.
19. The charter theory is externalistic: a myth is a narrative that supplies the foundation document (charter) for some ritual or custom in order to help maintain social stability. Proponent: Bronislaw Malinowski.
20. Example: Hesiod explains why the Greeks sacrifice the least desirable parts of animals to the gods: Prometheus tricks Zeus into choosing the bones and fat rather than the meat, saving the edible parts for humans to eat.

NOTE: Many myth systems contain a trickster god, who helps humans but also challenges or tests them. The popular Native American figure of Raven, who assumes various roles as creator or fertility god, is also an example of a trickster god in Haida, Tsumshian, and Tlingit mythology. Raven brings humans the gift of light by deceiving the old Grandfather/Chief who had hidden the sun in a box. In return for the light, Raven challenges humans to provide him with fish as a form of sacrifice. Similarly, Prometheus's trick helps humans survive but challenges them to cope with Zeus's anger.

21. Criticism: the charter theory fails to explain why in Hesiod's story of the origin of sacrifice human welfare is favored over divine prerogative.
22. The etiological theory is externalistic: (1) myth is primitive science, which attempts to explain natural phenomena; (2) myth can also give theological or metaphysical interpretations of the human condition.
23. Example: Hesiod explains how earth and sky and night and day originated; he also explains why the human possession of fire led to alienation between men and gods and why the presence of woman is part of a difficult human existence.
24. Criticism: many myths and heroic tales have little to do with etiology.
25. Freudian theory is an internalist theory, emphasizing the psychological character of myth: like dreams, myths allow humans to violate taboos safely through displacement, as a form of wish fulfillment. Proponent: Sigmund Freud.
26. Example: the story of Oedipus, who defeats the Sphinx (a displaced image of the evil mother), and then kills his father and marries his mother, acting out the unconscious drives of the id.
27. Freudian theory helps to explain tragic myths in terms of the psychological drama of life in a family.
28. Criticism: Greek male hostility toward females may have some particular ancient cultural roots.

29. The theory of archetypes is psychological: myths, like dreams, contain universal archetypes that spring from the collective unconscious. Proponent: Carl Jung.
30. The collective unconscious is the pool of memories, mental images, cognitive patterns, symbols, and basic assumptions shared by all members of a given society—or even of the entire human race.
31. An archetype is the primal form or original pattern of which all other things of the same kind (characters, situations, events) are representatives or copies.
32. Example: the anima, an internal expression of female wisdom and creativity, is found in the minds of humans of both sexes; likewise, the animus, which represents essential masculine qualities. In a healthy personality, the anima and the animus have a harmonious relationship.
33. Example: the myth of Icarus combines a form of Freudian wish fulfillment with the archetypal human desire to break through barriers and experience the unknown and forbidden.
34. Example: the shadow, Jung's term for unacknowledged negative elements of the psyche, contains repressed or undervalued aspects of the personality. The shadow exists in gods and heroes as well as in humans.
35. Scholars associated with psychological analysis of myth: Philip Slater, Joseph Campbell, Ernst Cassirer, Mircea Eliade, and Victor Turner. Myth and ritual are interpreted as structuring the human world and easing transitions in life.
36. Example: the rite of passage, in which a hero is separated from his environment, goes on a journey, is initiated into previously unknown experiences, and returns to his starting point. The journeys of Odysseus, Perseus, and Heracles allow the heroes to mature and fulfill their extraordinary potential.
37. The theory of structuralism views myth as a reflection of the mind's binary organization. Humans project a binary significance onto experience, dividing everything into polar opposites. Myth deals with and reconciles these opposites. Proponent: Claude Lévi-Strauss.
38. Example: myth mediates the conflict between the savage and the civilized, or the "raw" and the "cooked," or—particularly important in Greek society—individuality and community obligation.

NOTE: Whereas animals eat their meat raw, Prometheus's gift of fire enables humans to cook their food. Cooking removes the signs of blood and thus disguises the savage act of butchery that eating meat requires humans to commit. The transformation of dead cow to roasted beef fit for human feasts "civilizes" the human community. By sacrificing some of the cooked food to the gods, the humans remove the taint of murder and, in the same act, simultaneously remind themselves of and transcend their animal nature. Sacrifice thus reconciles the animal and the human as well as the human and the divine.

39. Scholars associated with the structural theory of myth: Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Nanquet.
40. Criticism: not all myths present a quantitative division of opposites.
41. Example: Odysseus and Penelope; their partnership is complementary, not competitive.
42. The theory of narratology anticipated some aspects of structuralism: traditional narratives employ distinctive, universal patterns. Proponent: Vladimar Propp.
43. Example: the typical hero's adventures include common events. The hero is born from a union of a mortal and a deity; he goes on a quest and defeats supernatural adversaries; he battles a dragon or rescues a princess; he marries a princess and gains riches or receives a crown.

44. Criticism: the order is not universal. The tragic hero may face his greatest obstacle after obtaining his rewards. And Greek tales rarely show heroes living happily ever after: most Greek hero myths end with the hero's death and descent to Hades.
45. Example: Oedipus, who acquired a wife, a crown, and a heroic reputation, only to lose it all in a fateful quest for his true identity. His narrative, like that of most Greek heroes, leads toward death.
46. Feminist scholars have applied many scholarly approaches to their study of myth. Feminist analysts have added a great deal to our understanding, particularly of goddess-worship as a widespread phenomenon in the ancient world.
47. Because myth speaks in a rich and varied voice and has its own peculiar internal logic, application of various theories to a single story often proves useful. One example is the myth of Athene's birth.
48. Procrustes was a cruel character of Greek tradition who tortured his victims to make them fit a certain bed. A frame into which all data are inappropriately forced is therefore called a "Procrustean bed."
49. In a sense, myth and ritual have a common function. Each assumes a threat to the continuation of life and/or society and offers some reassurance that disaster can be averted and life sustained.

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Athene, goddess of wisdom

Apollo, god of health, mental discipline, and artistic creativity

Artemis, Apollo's twin sister, patron of wildlife and the hunt

Poseidon, Zeus's brother, lord of the sea and earthquakes

Ares, god of bloodshed and war

Demeter, sister of Zeus and Poseidon, goddess of earth's fertility

Hermes, trickster god of thieves, gamblers, and businessmen

Dionysus, god of wine

Oedipus, king of Thebes, who killed his father and married his mother

Jocasta, mother/wife of Oedipus

Heracles, son of Zeus and Alcmene, who performed the famous Labors

Jason, leader of the Argonauts, who obtained the Golden Fleece with the help of the princess Medea

Theseus, slayer of the Minotaur

Prometheus, god of forethought, who provided the sacrificial ritual and the gift of fire to humankind

Perseus, slayer of the Gorgon Medusa

Procrustes, a cruel kidnapper who tried to fit each of his victims into a single bed

Sphinx, the monster (female) who devoured all travelers who failed to answer her riddle

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Euripides, Greek tragic dramatist (480–406 B.C.)

Theagenes of Rhegion (c. 525 B.C.)

Anaxagoras, Greek philosopher (500–428 B.C.)

Xenophanes of Colophon, Greek philosopher (sixth century B.C.)

Socrates, Greek philosopher (c. 469–399 B.C.)

Plato, Greek philosopher (c. 427–349 B.C.)

Euhemerus of Messene, Sicilian philosopher (fourth century B.C.)

F. Max Müller, German philologist (1823–1900)

Sir James Frazer, English anthropologist (1854–1941)

Vladimar Propp, twentieth-century folklorist

Bronislaw Malinowski, Polish anthropologist (1884–1942)

Sigmund Freud, Austrian psychoanalyst (1856–1939)

Carl Jung, Swiss analytical psychologist (1875–1961)

Claude Lévi-Strauss, French anthropologist (1908–)

Marija Gimbutas (1921-1994)