Classical Mythology

Part I

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In 1998, Dr. Vandiver received the American Philological Association’s Excellence in Teaching Award, the most prestigious teaching award available to American classicists. Other awards include the Northwestern University Department of Classics Excellence in Teaching award for 1998 and the University of Georgia’s Outstanding Honors Professor award in 1993 and 1994.

Dr. Vandiver has published a book, *Heroes in Herodotus: The Interaction of Myth and History*, and several articles, as well as delivering numerous papers at national and international conferences. She is currently working on a second book that examines the influence of the classical tradition on the British poets of World War I. Her previous Teaching Company courses include *The Iliad of Homer*, *The Odyssey of Homer*, and *Virgil’s Aeneid*.

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Classical Mythology

Scope:

This set of twenty-four lectures introduces the student to the primary characters and most important stories of classical Greek and Roman mythology and surveys some of the leading theoretical approaches to understanding myth in general and classical myth in particular.

The first lecture introduces students to the overall plan of the lectures and identifies key issues of definition and terminology. This lecture begins a discussion of the definition of “myth” that will continue through the next two lectures. The lecture also discusses some of the problems inherent in studying classical mythology, which is preserved in literary form.

Lectures Two and Three examine some of the most influential nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories about myth’s nature and function. Lecture Two discusses the theories of Müller, Lang, Frazer, Harrison, and Malinowski; Lecture Three looks at the psychological theories of Freud and Jung; the structuralist methodologies of Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and Burkert; and the metaphysical approach of Campbell.

Lectures Four through Six concentrate on the account of the creation of the world given in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and in the much later Roman author Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Lecture Four examines the three-generation struggle for power in *Theogony*, which ends with Zeus’s rise to power as the ruling god. This lecture discusses the implications of a creation story in which the gods are not transcendent but are part of the physical universe and come into being with it. The lecture ends by briefly comparing Ovid’s creation story to Hesiod’s. Lecture Five continues the discussion of Zeus, focusing on his role as the protector of abstract concepts (such as justice) that concern the orderly functioning of human society. The lecture also examines Zeus’s early marriages and the birth of Athena from his head and suggests possible interpretations of these episodes. Lecture Six looks at Hesiod’s depiction of humans in the myth of Prometheus and Pandora. We consider the implications of this myth for the Greek view of society and particularly of women and gender roles. The lecture then discusses the nature of the gods, as reflected in *Theogony*, and delineates the essential differences between gods and humans.

Lectures Seven through Eleven focus on individual gods and their interactions with human beings. Lecture Seven examines the crucial myth of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades as it is recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. The lecture discusses the myth’s implications for the Greek view of life and death, marriage, and gender roles. Lecture Eight continues our discussion of Demeter by examining the Eleusinian Mysteries, one of the most important ancient religious cults, which honored her and promised a happy afterlife to initiates. The lecture then compares the afterlife implied by the Eleusinian Mysteries with
contrasting views of the afterlife found elsewhere in Greek myth and religion. Lecture Nine discusses Apollo and Artemis and examines their characteristic functions and associations, including Apollo’s famous oracle at Delphi. Lecture Ten examines Zeus’s two youngest sons, Hermes and Dionysos, and offers interpretations of the very disparate areas of influence of each of these gods. In Lecture Eleven, we examine Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual passion. The lecture focuses on the account in the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite of her affair with the human Anchises and discusses the implications of that affair for our understanding of the Greek view of sexual passion and the relationship between the sexes.

Lecture Twelve turns to the cultural and historical background of Greek myth. We examine the similarities between Hesiod’s creation account and Mesopotamian myth; then we look at the two great prehistoric cultures of Greece, the Minoans and the Mycenaeans, and discuss the origins of classical mythology in those two cultures. The lecture takes the modern theory of a prehistoric “great mother goddess” as a test case for the difficulties of reconstructing prehistoric religious beliefs.

In Lectures Thirteen through Twenty-One, we shift our focus from the gods to the heroes. Lecture Thirteen discusses Hesiod’s story of the Five Ages or Races of human beings (in Works and Days) and contrasts it with Ovid’s reworking of the same myth. The main difference is that Hesiod includes a Race of Heroes; the lecture examines what is meant by the term “hero” in Greek myth and discusses the possibility that the heroes reflect memories of the Mycenaean Age. Lecture Fourteen gives a detailed synopsis of the adventures of one such hero, the Athenian Theseus. We pay special attention to his adventure with the Minotaur, his marriage to an Amazon, and his killing of his son Hippolytos. Lecture Fifteen continues our examination of Theseus by discussing possible theoretical interpretations of his adventure with the Minotaur, then looks at the possibility that this myth is based in memories of Minoan civilization. In Lecture Sixteen, we consider the greatest and most complicated hero of all, Heracles. We see how this hero embodies contradictions. We discuss Hera’s special hatred for Heracles, consider Heracles’s tendency toward excess, and examine his famous twelve labors. The lecture describes Heracles’s death and subsequent immortality and concludes by discussing some of the implications of this hero’s many contradictory characteristics.

Lecture Seventeen summarizes the most famous event of classical myth, the Trojan War. The Trojan War is the most frequently drawn on by authors in various genres, possibly because it functioned as the dividing line between the heroic age and the age of normal human history. The lecture includes a brief summary of the basic story of the Trojan War, from its beginnings in the marriage of Peleus and Thetis through the ill-fated sack of Troy. Lecture Eighteen moves from the Trojan War to one of the primary families involved in it, the House of Atreus. The lecture discusses the hereditary curse of that unhappy family and
considers the implications of that curse for the concepts of fate and individual responsibility. Lecture Nineteen continues our examination of the cursed House of Atreus by looking closely at the use Aeschylus made of that myth in his great trilogy *The Oresteia*. The lecture discusses Aeschylus’s shaping of the myth to focus on issues of justice and considers the difficulty of separating the myth itself from the literary treatment of the myth. Lecture Twenty addresses similar issues in its examination of Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*. The lecture briefly reviews Freud’s and Lévi-Strauss’s readings of the myth, considers the standard interpretation that the play’s main focus is the conflict between fate and free will, and discusses another reading that sees Oedipus as a paradigm of the fifth-century Athenian rationalist. The lecture ends by examining the difficulties of discussing this myth apart from Sophocles’s play. Lecture Twenty-One pulls together several threads of earlier lectures by examining the threatening women and female monsters that many heroes must face. The lecture concentrates on the Amazons and Medea and includes a brief discussion of such monsters as Medusa and the Sphinx.

Lectures Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three focus on specifically Roman uses of classical myth. In Lecture Twenty-Two, we consider the Roman appropriation of the Greek story of the Trojan War and see how the Romans shaped the story to serve as their own foundation myth. We also discuss the purely Roman legend of Romulus and Remus. Lecture Twenty-Three sets Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in context by examining the cultural milieu in which Ovid wrote; the lecture also considers the difficulties of trying to recover “myth” from Ovid’s very literary, ironic retelling of it.

Finally, Lecture Twenty-Four concludes the course by examining the influence of Ovid in particular and classical myth in general on later European, English, and American culture. The lecture suggests that the narrative sequences, images, and characters of classical myth are still very much alive in modern culture.
Scope: This first lecture introduces students to the overall plan of the course. The lecture falls into three main sections. The first of these considers definitions of the terms “classical” and “mythology.” The second section discusses some of the problems inherent in studying classical mythology. The third section outlines and explains the course’s format and approach, which will include some synopsis of specific myths, discussion of the cultural background of the myths, and examination of larger issues implied by them.

Outline

I. This introductory lecture has three main objects.
   A. The lecture begins by defining the terms “classical” and “mythology.”
   B. The second section of the lecture considers some of the difficulties inherent in the study of classical mythology.
   C. The third section outlines the approach and format of the course.

II. What is meant by “classical mythology”? 
   A. “Classical” in this context refers to the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome.
      1. Ancient Greek culture’s highpoint occurred in Athens in the fifth century BC.
      2. Roman culture reached its zenith in the first centuries BC and AD.
      3. These two cultures shared the bulk of their mythology, because Rome simply adapted Greek mythology wholesale.
      4. In this course, I will use the terms “classical” and “Greek” mythology interchangeably.
   B. “Mythology” is an ambiguous term.
      1. Strictly speaking, the “-ology” ending means “the study of”; thus, “mythology” means “the study of myth.”
      2. However, the word “mythology” is frequently used to mean “a culture’s body of myths.”

III. “Myth” is a notoriously difficult concept to define, as we will see in the next two lectures.
   A. For this lecture, we need a basic, working definition to start with.
      1. I define myth as “traditional stories a society tells itself that encode or represent the world-view, beliefs, principles, and often fears of that society.”
2. We will look at definitions in much more detail in the next two lectures, but this definition is sufficient for now.

**B.** Many scholars subdivide traditional tales into three categories: myth, legend, and folktale.

1. In this scheme, myth refers only to stories that concern the gods and their rites. It is closely connected with religious ritual.
2. Legend refers to traditional stories rooted in historical fact, describing the (greatly exaggerated) adventures of people who actually lived, such as Robin Hood or George Washington.
3. Folktale refers to stories that are primarily entertaining and that often involve animals or ordinary but clever humans, such as Little Red Riding Hood or Goldilocks.
4. These subdivisions are useful, but in fact the categories overlap so much that the distinctions seem artificial.
5. This course will cover traditional stories that would count as “legend” according to this division; we will even see a few examples of “folktale.”

**IV.** If myths are traditional tales that a society tells itself about itself, then the next question must be: which societies use myth, and why?

**A.** All societies have myths; however, myth is most important in preliterate cultures.

1. Modern, literate cultures have many different forms of explanation available to them, including theology, psychology, philosophy, ethics, history, and so on.
2. All these depend on a sophisticated and long-lived literate tradition.
3. In a preliterate culture, myth is the only means available to explain and discuss a whole range of phenomena and concepts.

**B.** This idea is important for the question of what myth really means.

1. Modern Western culture makes a distinction between fact and fiction, true and false, actual and imaginary.
2. When myth is the only available form of explanation, these distinctions cannot be so clear cut. The question “What does it really mean?” is anything but simple.
3. In Greek myth, Gaia (Earth) and Ouranos (Sky) are good examples of this. As anthropomorphized deities, they are also physical “realities”—our usual distinction between metaphorical and literal doesn’t apply.

**V.** Greek mythology, like most other mythologies, developed in a preliterate culture. Trying to study Greek mythology, thus, is somewhat paradoxical, because literature is our main source of access to that mythology.

**A.** Many modern scholars of myth work with living cultures.
1. This anthropological approach means that scholars of living cultures can observe myth in its “native habitat.”

2. In studying classical mythology, we are, in effect, trying to “do” anthropology backward in time, on a culture without living representatives.

3. Our sources for this are literature and archaeological artifacts. Both present formidable problems.

B. Even in as well-documented and well-studied a society as classical Greece, the written versions of myths present difficulties for scholars.

1. Written versions of myths are “frozen,” as in the case of Oedipus, whose final fate was described differently by Sophocles and Homer.

2. Because myths were the “givens” of the society, literary works frequently refer to myths without giving a full synopsis of them.

3. Only a fraction of ancient Greek literature has survived, and it often does not tell us what we would most like to know about people’s religious beliefs and practices, daily lives, and so on.

4. One book that we will use a great deal in this course is *The Library of Greek Mythology*, by Apollodorus (who probably lived in the first or second century AD), which gives summaries of most of the myths we will discuss.

C. The archaeological record and the literature can sometimes shed light on one another.

1. Archaeological remains, such as buildings and artwork, are even more difficult to interpret than literature is.

2. References in literature can mislead us into thinking that we know what an object or building was for when we don’t.

VI. What are the implications for our study of classical mythology?

A. We are studying only particular variants of the myths.

1. Sometimes we can reconstruct a fairly full version of the myth as it underlies the written variants and as it must have existed in the living culture of ancient Greece.

2. Many times we cannot; references remain tantalizingly obscure.

3. Occasionally a work of art will preserve what is clearly a very different version from the ones preserved in literature, which reminds us that living myth is not fixed.

B. We cannot recover all the nuances of the myths’ functions in their original society, any more than we can recover all their variants.

C. Within these limitations, however, we can use what we know about the society to shed light on the myths and what we know about the myths to shed light on the society.
VII. These lectures will concentrate on several of the most famous and important myths of Greco-Roman culture. The course has three main points:

A. First, the lectures will familiarize students with the primary classical myths that are covered by the course.
   1. Most lectures will include some synopsis of the relevant myth’s storyline.
   2. We will frequently address the surviving variants of the myths and the implications of these variants for our understanding.
   3. The “Essential Readings” will usually be taken from classical literature, especially Apollodorus.

B. Second, the lectures will discuss the cultural aspects of the myths under consideration within their formative culture (i.e., ancient Greece).

C. Finally, we will consider how well (or poorly) these myths “match” various theories about myth and will discuss the usefulness of these theoretical approaches for our understanding of classical myth.

Supplementary Reading:
Bascom, “Forms of Folklore.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you think the division of traditional tales into myth, legend, and folktale is useful? Why or why not? How would you categorize Santa Claus (whose name derives from Saint Nicholas) under this system?
2. One problem of reconstructing Greek myth is that we have only a small amount of ancient Greek literature. Would the problem be solved if we had everything the Greeks ever wrote? Put another way, can we ever reconstruct the belief system of a society solely from its literature?
Lecture Two
What Is Myth?

Scope: In this lecture, we survey various characteristics of myth, then examine some of the most influential nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories about myth’s nature and function. These theories can be broadly divided into “what” and “why” theories; “what” theories tend to define myth as a subcategory of something else, and “why” theories tend toward universalist descriptions of how myth functions in the human psyche. We conclude with several important “what” theories, including those of Müller, Lang, Frazer, and Malinowski.

Outline

I. The question “What is myth?” has no easy or obvious answer.
   A. As used in popular speech, “myth” has several meanings that we can exclude right away. It is often used to mean a lie, a mistaken belief, or a misconception. These usages do not concern us here.
   B. Despite the difficulties of definition, most people have a sense that the category of myth exists and that they know it when they see it.

II. We can begin to supplement our working definition by identifying some characteristics of “myth”:
   A. Myths are traditional tales or stories.
      1. Myths are presented in narrative form.
      2. Myths are handed down in a society from one generation to the next. It is usually impossible to say who first “invented” a particular myth. In this regard, they are unlike most other forms of narrative, such as poems, novels, and plays.
   B. Myths are set in the past.
      1. A myth recounts events of long ago (usually very long ago).
      2. Myths often reflect the assumption that in the far past, things were different in many ways.
   C. Myths are ostensibly “true”; that is, they present themselves as giving an accurate narrative of “what really happened.”
      1. A culture rarely recognizes its own mythology as mythology.
      2. Judged from within a culture, myths are true accounts of the way things really are.
   D. Myths often explain, justify, instruct, or warn.
      1. An aetiological myth may explain why things are as they are or how certain events, entities, or conditions came into existence.
      2. A charter myth may offer a justification for a certain rite or social institution.
3. A myth may instruct its audience in how people ought or ought not to behave.
4. Such instruction frequently takes the form of a warning by showing the consequences of misbehavior.

E. Myths frequently concern gods and the supernatural.
   1. This area of myth overlaps with religion.
   2. One useful distinction is that “religion” refers to what people do to honor their gods—the rites, ceremonies, and so forth—whereas “myth” refers to the underlying narratives about those gods.
   3. Obviously, categorization of certain narratives about divinities as “myths” depends largely on whether the observer believes those narratives or not.

III. From antiquity onward, many scholars have come up with theories that attempt to define and explain myth. These theories fall into two main types, which could be called the “what” and the “why” types of theory.

A. “What” theories attempt to explain myth by identifying it as a subcategory, derivative, or forerunner of something else (such as history, ritual, or philosophy).
   1. At their worst, such theories are excessively reductive; they tend to say that myth “is only” misunderstood history, or primitive science, or some other thing.
   2. For example, Euhemerus (c. 300 BCE) suggested that myth was misremembered history; the gods of Greece had originally been great kings whose characteristics were exaggerated through time. Later versions of this theory are called euhemerism.
   3. Even at their best, such theories tend to ignore the distinctive qualities that make myth appealing; the theories can’t explain why transformations into myth occur in the first place.

B. “Why” theories look for wider explanations to identify the impetus in the human mind or human culture that motivates myth-making.
   1. Psychological and structuralist theories fall under this heading.
   2. “Why” theories assume that myth is an extra- or transcultural phenomenon; the same narrative elements serve the same functions in different cultures.

C. Some overlap exists, of course, between the two types of theories. As we shall see, “what” theories were more common in the nineteenth century and “why” theories, in the twentieth.

IV. One very popular theory that has been resurrected over and over since antiquity is that myths are a form of allegory.

A. Max Müller (1823–1900) developed the allegorical interpretation of myth into what is often called the “Solar Mythology” theory.
B. Müller thought that myths were misunderstood statements about the battle between light (specifically sunlight) and darkness.

C. In a phrase that has become infamous, Müller said that mythology is “a disease of language.” He meant that as terms changed meaning, people misinterpreted them. Thus, the “maiden dawn” came to be seen, much later, as a female deity.

V. The primary challenge to Müller’s theory was mounted by Andrew Lang (1844–1912), who saw explanation as the essential function of myth.

A. Myth, he thought, was driven by the same impulse that would later develop into science; in fact, myths were “primitive” science.

B. Thus, all myths were basically aetiological.

VI. One of the most influential theorists was Sir James Frazer (1854–1941).

A. For Frazer, myth was part of a continuum, running from magic through religion to science. He modified the idea of myth as explanation to argue that myth, in all societies, was specifically an explanation for ritual.

B. In *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1890), Frazer presented evidence collected from around the world to demonstrate myth’s origins in primordial religious beliefs common to most human societies. He argued that narratives of myth remain long after the rituals they are based on have disappeared.

1. The most important strand of Frazer’s argument was his claim about a “King of the Wood,” who represented grain and who had to be killed by a younger successor.

2. *The Golden Bough* was a pioneering work, but its methodology was flawed and few scholars today accept its premises. Frazer took examples out of context and claimed that details from myths in different societies performed the same function.

C. Frazer’s work inspired “The Cambridge School” of myth scholars, who saw ritual as the primary motivating force for myth.

VII. The next important school of myth theory to arise after Frazer was Functionalism, pioneered by Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942).

A. Malinowski studied myth as a living tradition among the Trobriand islanders and concluded that the defining characteristic of myth was its functionality.

1. Myth contributes to society by helping to maintain the social system. Its origin is less important than its function.

2. Malinowski rejected the idea that myth’s primary purpose is to explain, rather than to help justify and maintain the social system. Myths do not, in fact, refer to any culture outside of their own.

3. He called such justificatory myths “charters”; i.e., they provided validation for the social institutions they described.
B. Malinowski also posited a hard and fast distinction between myth as “sacred” narrative and folktale as “entertainment,” with a third category of historicizing legend in between these two poles.

VIII. Each of these theories has struck its critics as unsatisfactory in at least some regards.

A. Some seem too restrictive. The “Solar Myth” hypothesis of the nineteenth century is perhaps the most obvious example, but other theories, too, fall short in this regard:
   1. If myths must be tied to rituals, then how do we account for stories that seem to have no ritual associations whatsoever?
   2. If myths must concern the gods, then the stories of Oedipus, Theseus, Perseus, and many others are excluded by definition.
   3. If myths must provide charters for social institutions, how do we explain those that seem to perform no such function?

B. The most obvious answer in each case is to say that those tales that do not fit the definition are not *myths* at all but some other type of traditional tale. This sort of narrowing of the definition to make the theory work is not very satisfactory.

C. Another answer is to say that in each case, the myth has undergone change or corruption that has disguised its original character. But this is a form of special pleading, persuasive only to those who have already accepted the theory in question.

D. It seems better to admit that, so far, no “monolithic” theory has completely defined or explained myth.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Burkert, *Structure and History*, Ch. 1, sections 1–4, 6–8; Ch. 2.
———, *Myth: Meaning and Function*, Ch. 1.
Powell, *Classical Myth*, Ch. 22.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Do you find any of the overarching theories about the nature of myth satisfactory? Why or why not?
2. Do you have a sense that you “know myth when you see it”? If so, can you form a satisfactory definition of myth?
Lecture Three
Why Is Myth?

Scope: We now turn to the “why” theories of myth’s nature and function; we examine the psychological theories of Freud and Jung and the structuralist approaches of Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and Burkert. We will also discuss the work of Joseph Campbell, who could be considered both a psychological and a metaphysical theorist of myth; we look at some of the objections that most scholars have to his “universalizing” approach to the study of myth. The lecture concludes by suggesting that each theory explains some myths, but no one theory is sufficient to explain all myths; the best approach, therefore, is to use all the theories when and where they are helpful.

Outline

I. This century has seen the development of crucially important, extremely influential, and very complex “why” theories of myth, which assume that myths reflect the same underlying human realities in all cultures and, therefore, are somehow cross-cultural or transcultural. The most obvious instances of this type of theory are psychological.

A. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) proposed that myth reflects psychological forces present in the individual.
   1. His most famous theory for the study of myth was, of course, the Oedipus complex. The story of Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother, reflected the repressed desires of all male children.
   2. According to Freud, myths are the collective dreams of the human race; myths use the same kind of imagery, condensation, and displacement that are found in an individual’s dreams.
   3. This imagery is primarily sexual in nature.

B. Carl Jung (1875–1961) saw myths as reflections of the “collective unconscious.”
   1. In Jung’s view, the collective unconscious contains archetypes, or recurrent images that exist cross-culturally and throughout time. Myths use these archetypes (such as the “Earth Mother” or the “Wise Old Man”).
   2. Because they reflect the collective unconscious and feature the archetypes, myths are crucially important.

II. Another “universal” approach to myth is Structuralism, “a system of definable relations between the parts or elements of a whole which admit predictable transformations,” according to Walter Burkert (1931– ). There are two primary varieties of structuralist theory.
A. The first, often called the “Formalist” school, was developed by the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp. It analyzes traditional tales based on their surface elements.
   1. In analyzing Russian folktales, Propp found one basic pattern, the “quest pattern,” which he further analyzed into thirty-one separate “functions.”
   2. Although not all of these functions are present in any given tale, they are constant elements in the tales, and they appear in fixed sequence.
   3. Thus, the sequence of functions creates (or defines) the tale; the characters who happen to appear in the tale are not its defining characteristic.

B. The second main category of structuralism looks at the underlying structure of the myths, rather than at their surface narratives. Claude Lévi-Strauss developed this approach.
   1. Lévi-Strauss’s theory claims that myth provides a mediation of contradictions, a way of dealing with binary oppositions that underlie the human mind.
   2. Myth is analogous to language; just as the individual components of language (phonemes) have no inherent meaning in themselves but gain meaning only in relationship to one another, so too are the components of myth (sometimes called “mythemes”) significant only as part of a structure.
   3. Lévi-Strauss held that “a myth is made up of all its variants”; thus, even Freud’s interpretation is part of the Oedipus myth.

C. The scholar Walter Burkert has developed a structuralist approach that differs from both Propp’s and Lévi-Strauss’s in assigning the basic impetus for certain myths to biological “programs of action.”
   1. Burkert’s theory resembles Propp’s in that he isolates narrative elements that recur in different myths; an example of this is his description of “the girl’s tragedy.”
   2. Burkert’s thesis that these narrative elements can be traced to early human or even pre-human biological necessities—from menarche to deflowering to bearing a first child—is controversial.
   3. Burkert also assigns great importance to ritual; thus, he is sometimes called a “neo-ritualist.”

III. The best-known theorist of myth to appear in recent decades is Joseph Campbell (1904–1987). Though he is often called a Jungian, a better term to describe his approach to myth might be “metaphysical.”
   A. Campbell takes as a given that all myth is the same cross-culturally.
   B. His method, like Frazer’s, depends largely on gathering examples of narrative similarities from different cultures.
   C. Campbell assumes that myth is “true” in a metaphysical sense.
1. He imputes a spiritual meaning to myth that he thinks is both constant across societies and crucial for individual psychological and spiritual health.
2. He separates this meaning from the specific religious doctrines held by the societies that formed the particular myths.

D. Most scholars do not have a high opinion of Campbell’s work.
1. He never attempts to demonstrate the validity of his interpretations of myth; instead, he asserts his interpretation—for instance, that the human mind has a spiritual cast—as a given.
2. He claims to be discussing narratives (“monomyths”) that occur worldwide, but, in fact, he takes elements from many narratives to make a composite that does not actually occur anywhere.
3. He assumes that the multiplication of examples amounts to proof of his interpretation.
4. He assumes that similar narrative elements must have the same meanings in different cultures. But Amazons or snakes, for example, have different functions in different times and places.

IV. These universalist “why” theories, no less than the “what” theories of the previous lecture, have struck many critics as unsatisfactory, mainly because they tend to rest on unproven and unprovable assumptions.
A. The psychological theories of Freud and Jung both espouse the idea that myths are in some sense the “dreams of the people.”
   1. This idea implies that a “people” or a society has a collective mind that is capable of dreaming.
   2. Freud further assumes that dreams have the same significance cross-culturally. But the interpretation of dream symbols changes according to time and place.
   3. Jung posits the “collective unconscious” as an entity and assumes that it produces the archetypes.
B. Lévi-Strauss assumes that the mediation of oppositions is a driving force of all cultures.
C. Burkert’s assumption that myth is rooted in pre-cultural biological realities, while fascinating, can only be asserted, not demonstrated.

V. The best approach may be to recognize that myth is a varied but recognizable category that can include all these theories (and more).
A. No one theory seems adequate to explain “myth” overall.
B. Theories can be useful for elucidating individual myths.
C. The theories we have discussed cannot be proven, but they cannot be disproven either; we will use these theories as tools when and where they are helpful.
VI. Where does this leave us? My own working definition combines elements from several of these approaches.

A. Again, I define myths as “traditional stories a society tells itself that encode or represent the world-view, beliefs, principles, and often fears of that society.”

B. As such, myths offer insight into what a specific culture thinks about the nature of the world in general and about key questions, such as:
   1. The nature and function of the gods
   2. Humans’ relationship to the gods
   3. What it means to be human
   4. The two sexes’ relationship to one another.

C. I find the universalizing “why” theories of myth less useful than an approach that examines myth in the context of the culture that developed it. However, I will refer to the “why” theories at key points throughout these lectures.

Essential Reading:
Kirk, Nature of Greek Myths, Ch. 4.
Segal, “Joseph Campbell’s Theory of Myth.”

Supplementary Reading:
Bremmer, “What Is a Greek Myth?”
Burkert, Creation of the Sacred, Ch. 3.
Caldwell, “Psychoanalytic Interpretation.”
Jung, “Psychology of the Child Archetype.”
Kirk, Myth: Meaning and Function, Ch. 2 and 6.
Leach, Claude Lévi-Strauss.
Lévi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked.
Propp, Morphology of the Folktale.
Segal, Joseph Campbell.
Wender, “The Myth of Washington.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you find specific (“what”) theories or universalist (“why”) theories of myth more helpful? What are some of the advantages and limitations of each approach?
2. It has sometimes been suggested that Jung, Campbell, and even Freud are closer to mystics whose doctrines are based on faith than to theorists whose arguments are based on demonstrable facts. Do you agree?
Lecture Four
“First Was Chaos”

Scope: In this lecture, we look at the account of creation given in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. We discuss the way in which *Theogony* describes the creation of the universe through the creation of the gods and the implications that the gods and the universe are, in some sense, the same thing. We then follow the story of a three-generation struggle for power, in which sons overthrow their fathers with the help of their mothers. The lecture also compares Hesiod’s creation story with the much later Roman version preserved in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

Outline

I. The most complete surviving Greek account of the creation of the universe is Hesiod’s *Theogony*.
   A. Hesiod probably composed the poem sometime in the eighth century BC, around the same time as the composition of the *Iliad*.
   B. Like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *Theogony* is a transcription of orally transmitted material; Hesiod did not make *Theogony* up.
   C. However, Hesiod does shape his traditional material; other *Theogonies* differed in detail from his.
   D. Hesiod’s *Theogony* was never an orthodoxy; it was not a “sacred text” in the way that the Bible and the Koran are.

II. *Theogony* is both a description of how the material universe came into being and a description of the birth of the gods. In this view, the gods are not separate from the universe itself.
   A. This is an excellent example of the multivalent explanatory nature of myth. *Theogony* uses the narrative of the gods’ birth to describe events that we would approach through science, philosophy, and psychology.
   B. This aspect of *Theogony* means that a character can be both a natural force or element and an anthropomorphic entity with volition, emotion, and bodily functions.
   C. This creation story reveals much about the nature of the gods.
      1. The gods do not create the universe; they are part of it. This implies, among other things, that the gods are not omnipotent within the universe.
      2. No external creator exists outside and beyond the universe itself. These gods are not transcendent.
      3. The gods are immortal for at least so long as the universe lasts.
4. The gods are highly anthropomorphic: they eat, drink, sleep, mate, and feel emotions.

III. *Theogony* posits several primordial entities: Chaos, Gaia, Tartaros, and Eros.
   A. “Chaos” in ancient Greek meant a gap or yawning, not a state of disorder. Hesiod says that Chaos came first, then Gaia; it is unclear whether Gaia and the other original entities were born from Chaos or simply appeared after Chaos.
   B. Gaia (or Ge) is the earth. Because Hesiod’s universe was geocentric, she is pictured as the first natural entity to exist.
   C. Tartaros is the Underworld, the land that will eventually be inhabited by the souls of dead humans.
   D. Eros means “sexual desire.” In later versions of myth, he is the son of Aphrodite; but in this account, almost all creation takes place through sexual reproduction. For Hesiod, Eros must be a primary deity.

IV. After the appearance of the primordial deities, birth and sexual reproduction become the standard means of reproduction.
   A. Chaos gives birth to Night and Erebos (the gloomy darkness of Tartaros). The latter mate and produce Ether and Day.
   B. Gaia gives birth to Ouranos (Sky), Pontos (Sea), and Mountains. In other words, the earth is taking recognizable shape, creating the Mediterranean Sea and the important mountains known to Hesiod.

V. Gaia mates with Ouranos and produces twelve children, who are called the Titans. These include important natural elements, such as the Sun, the Moon, and the River Oceanos, which flows around the edges of Gaia.
   A. Ouranos does not allow the children to be born, but pushes them back into Gaia’s womb.
   B. With the help of her youngest son, Cronos, Gaia disables Ouranos.
      1. Cronos hides inside his mother’s body and castrates his father.
      2. Cronos throws the severed genitals into Pontos; Aphrodite (goddess of sexual passion) is born from the foam that springs up around them.
      3. Ouranos retreats from Gaia and becomes the dome of the sky, leaving room for his children to be born and for other entities to develop.
   C. This story shows how myth can work on several levels at once.
      1. Gaia is the Earth and Ouranos is the Sky; at the same time, Gaia is a female entity with a womb, who can feel both pain and anger when her husband pushes her babies back into her.
      2. We also see the Sky pressing down on Earth so that there is no space for anything to develop between them. With the freeing of
Gaia’s children, the world enters a new stage of development, represented in the text by a whole flurry of reproduction.

D. This story also lends itself to allegorical interpretation, because Cronos’s name resembles the Greek word for “time,” chronos.
   1. According to this interpretation, when Cronos was freed from Gaia’s womb, Time came into being.
   2. The two words Cronos and chronos are not actually related, but this does not necessarily invalidate the allegorical interpretation, if Hesiod or his contemporaries thought that they were related.

VI. The same basic pattern is repeated in the next generation, when Cronos in his turn tries to prevent the birth of his children.

A. Cronos marries his sister Rheia, and they produce six children: Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, Poseidon, and Zeus.
   1. Unlike his father, Cronos does not leave his children in his mother’s body and, thus, to some extent under her control.
   2. He swallows each child as it is born.
   3. Rheia tricks him by giving him a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes in place of the youngest child, Zeus.
   4. Zeus is sent to the island of Crete to be reared in secret.

B. Zeus reaches maturity and overthrows his father.
   1. Cronos spits out the children in reverse order. Thus, Zeus is, in a sense, both the youngest and the oldest of his siblings. Zeus and his five siblings, together with several of Zeus’s children, come to be called the Olympians.
   2. A ten-year war ensues between the Titans (Cronos) and the Olympians (Zeus). Finally, Zeus and his siblings triumph.
   3. At this point, the struggle for power ends and the order of rule in the universe is set; Zeus will remain the head god forever. As such, he is often called simply “The Olympian.”

VII. One immediately noticeable and intriguing point about this narrative is that it portrays the struggle for power as one involving older female deities opposed by younger male deities.

A. Many scholars argue that this reflects the psychological anxieties of males about their parents’ sexuality, about displacing their fathers, and about having to hand power over to their sons in turn.

B. Others see the increased anthropomorphism of each generation and the decreased identification of gods and natural forces as representing the development of civilization.

C. Others point to the apparent anxiety in Greek culture about the power of women, the fear that women would exert control if they could.

D. Other explanations exist. Any effort to find just one “decoding” of the Ouranos-Cronos-Zeus story is probably doomed to failure.
VIII. *Theogony* presents sophisticated and difficult concepts in the guise of genealogies. Compare the creation story as retold by the Roman poet Ovid some 700 years later, in a culture in which literacy was established.

A. Ovid’s creation story differs from Hesiod’s, both in tone and emphasis. Rather than describing the creation of the universe through the creation of the gods, Ovid assumes the gods and offers alternatives for how the physical universe may have come to be.
   1. He runs through scientific theories of his day, suggesting that the universe was composed of discordant atoms, or perhaps of the four elements.
   2. He also glances at different theologies, suggesting that a creator god existed or that Nature simply took it upon herself to order the discordant elements of Chaos.

B. Ovid is working in a literate tradition and showing his erudition by glancing at various theories of creation while endorsing none of them.

C. These differences illustrate the problems in discussing “classical” mythology; the same myths are presented in different ways with different emphases.
   1. In Hesiod, we can feel fairly confident that we are dealing with a recounting of the myths that remains close to their oral form.
   2. In Ovid, we are dealing with a self-consciously literary reworking of the myths, in ways that sometimes may work against their traditional import.

D. Ironically, Ovid is our main source for several very famous myths.

**Essential Reading:**

Apollodorus, *Library*, pp. 27–31 (up to “Artemis and Apollo”).

Hesiod, *Theogony*.


**Supplementary Reading:**

Burkert, *Structure and History*, Ch. 1, Section 5.


**Questions to Consider:**

1. What are the implications for a culture of believing in gods who are neither transcendent nor omnipotent?

2. I suggested several possible interpretations for the pattern of “younger male overcomes older female” that we see in *Theogony*. Which interpretation makes the most sense to you? Can you think of any others?
Lecture Five  
The Reign of the Olympians

Scope: In this lecture, we continue our discussion of *Theogony*. We focus on Zeus’s rise to power and his consolidation of that power through allocating spheres of influence to his brothers. We consider Zeus’s role as the god of Justice and of *xenia* (the guest-host relationship). We also discuss Zeus’s marriages and consider the possible implications of his first marriage to Metis and the subsequent birth of Athena from Zeus’s head. The lecture concludes by drawing together some of the implications of *Theogony* for our understanding of these anthropomorphic gods.

Outline

I. After overthrowing the Titans, Zeus consolidated his power and became the primary ruler of the gods, which he will continue to be for as long as the universe lasts.
   A. There will be no further struggles of sons to overthrow their fathers and no further shift of power down the generations.
   B. Hesiod does not explicitly state that the universe became fixed with Zeus’s ascendancy to power. This omission is justified by reasons that are important to remember throughout the study of myth.
      1. Hesiod and his audience assume the reality of Zeus and the other gods.
      2. Therefore, “everyone knows” that Zeus will remain in power and that the point of the whole story was Zeus’s rise to power.
      3. This is an important point to remember in reading any myth. Narrative points that may seem arbitrary from outside the culture that created the myth seem necessary from inside that culture.
   C. Zeus divides power among himself and his brothers, in what is often called the “triple division.”
      1. Hades becomes the ruler of Tartaros and lord over the souls of the dead.
      2. Poseidon becomes the ruler of the sea and waters in general.
      3. Zeus becomes ruler of the sky.
      4. Theoretically, all three brothers have power over the earth. In practice, the earth too is Zeus’s domain, and the division of power is far from equal.
   D. Zeus’s sisters also have their particular roles.
      1. Hera is the patron goddess of marriage.
      2. Hestia is the goddess of the hearth.
      3. Demeter is the goddess of grain and agriculture.
II. As ruler, Zeus not only gains physical control over the sky and the earth, but his domain also includes various abstract concepts that concern the orderly functioning of human society.

A. Zeus oversees Justice; in this aspect, he is the patron of oaths and punishes oath-breakers.

B. He also is the god of *xenia*, a very important concept usually translated as the “guest-host relationship.”

C. He oversees prophecy, particularly at his shrine at Dodona.
   1. Zeus’s son Apollo is also a god of prophecy, but it is quite clear that Apollo derives his control of prophecy from Zeus.
   2. Zeus’s connection with prophecy emphasizes both his wisdom and his power; prophets often say that they foretell “the will of Zeus.”

III. Once he is established as the ruler of the gods, Zeus marries his first wife, the minor goddess Metis.

A. Metis is fated to bear a son who will overthrow his father, thus repeating the pattern seen in the earlier generations.

B. On the advice of Gaia and Ouranos, Zeus prevents this by swallowing Metis.
   1. Metis is already pregnant with a daughter, Athena, who is eventually born from Zeus’s head.
   2. The son who was destined to overthrow his father is never conceived and never born.
   3. This is one of the very few times that anyone successfully circumvents fate.

IV. Like so much else in *Theogony*, the story of Metis and Athena offers several interesting interpretative points.

A. It highlights the concept of fate, which affects gods as well as humans.
   1. Fate, or destiny, plays a crucial role in many classical myths.
   2. Fate works independently of Zeus, a reminder that even Zeus is not omnipotent.
   3. Fate is sometimes personified as three goddesses, the Fates or *Moirai*.

B. The swallowing of Metis can be seen as the moment at which the male gods assert final power over the goddesses; from now on, the dominance of male over female will be firmly established.

C. This act is also important as the point at which Zeus matures. In this regard, an allegorical interpretation works particularly well.
   1. Zeus is a young ruler who has power and dominance; what does he need to rule well?
   2. He needs *wisdom*, which is what the Greek word *metis* means.
3. When Zeus swallows Metis, he is literally incorporating wisdom. Hesiod and his contemporaries believed that thought took place in our torsos, not our heads.

4. Despite the very popular modern interpretation, the birth of Athena from Zeus’s head is not emblematic of wisdom, because the Greeks didn’t consider the head to be the seat of thought.

V. Zeus then mates with various other goddesses and produces several children before marrying his permanent wife, Hera.
   A. Hera is the patron of marriage and of married women, yet she and Zeus have difficulties producing acceptable sons.
      1. They have two daughters, Hebe (“Bloom of Youth”) and Eileithyia, the goddess of childbirth.
      2. Despite Zeus’s fecundity with other females, he and Hera produce only one son, Ares, the god of war.
      3. Hera’s other son, Hephaistos, was probably born parthenogenically, because of Hera’s jealousy over Athena.
   B. Along with these and other goddesses, Zeus also mates with various mortal women, such as Alcmene, the mother of Heracles.
      1. Hera is particularly disposed to hate Zeus’s sons by mortal women.
      2. This hatred is a motivating force behind Heracles’s adventures.

VI. Zeus’s amatory exploits are not just a matter of a god behaving badly.
   A. Many of Zeus’s matings are with “conceptual” gods, such as Themis (“right order”), and produce offspring, such as Justice. These unions express his attributes as ruler.
   B. His multiple matings also repeat a pattern we saw in the earlier generations.
      1. Hesiod is describing the coming-into-existence of everything, including such abstractions as Justice, through the medium of anthropomorphic gods.
      2. It is reasonable in this context to describe the process through the sexual matings of different gods.
      3. Because Zeus is such an important god, this will necessarily result in his mating with various females.
   C. Another explanation for Zeus’s frequent matings with minor goddesses and mortal women is that it reflects the synthesis of various local gods and traditions, or syncretism.

VII. By the end of Theogony, what sort of picture of the gods do we have? Several important characteristics are worth enumerating.
   A. The gods are anthropomorphic, not theriomorphic or a combination of the two, sharing many of humanity’s characteristics.
1. They have bodies, though it is taken as a given that in their “natural” state, the bodies of the gods are both much larger and much more beautiful than human bodies.

2. They eat (ambrosia) and drink (nectar) and have a substance flowing through their veins (ichor).

3. They share human emotions and passions, both good and bad.

B. The gods are also very different from humans.

1. They have the ability to move vast distances, more or less at will; they can appear before a human when they want to.

2. Although their normal appearance is anthropomorphic, they can disguise themselves as other creatures or even as non-animate objects (such as a shower of gold).

C. The defining difference between gods and humans is that the gods are immortal. Humans must die, but gods cannot die.

1. One of the most frequent terms used to describe the gods in Greek is athanatoi, the deathless ones.

2. Humans, by contrast, are thnetoi, those who are liable to death.

3. An oath sworn on the River Styx was, for the gods, the most telling incarnation of their immortality.

Supplementary Reading:


Tyrrell and Brown, *Athenian Myths and Institutions*, Ch. 2.

Questions to Consider:

1. I have referred to “allegorical” interpretations of Zeus’s swallowing of Metis and marriage to Themis. Is this anachronistic? Put another way, could Hesiod’s original audience have separated out the literal and allegorical senses of these stories?

2. Greek society was strongly patriarchal; marriages were arranged, not based on romantic love. What are the implications of this for our understanding of Hera and her jealousy over Zeus’s affairs?
Lecture Six

Immortals and Mortals

Scope: In this lecture, we turn to Hesiod’s depiction of humans. We begin by looking at the myth of Prometheus and Pandora as it appears in Theogony and in Hesiod’s other poem, Works and Days. We consider the implications of this myth for the Greek view of society and particularly of women and gender roles. The lecture then discusses the nature of the gods as we have seen it reflected in Theogony and delineates the essential differences between gods and humans.

Outline

I. Theogony concentrates on the coming-into-being of the gods; it does not contain a creation story for humans at all.
   A. The subject of Theogony is the gods, and its purpose is to describe how they arranged and developed their society. Humans are largely irrelevant in this context.
   B. Humans are mentioned in Theogony, but the creation of men (as opposed to women) is not described; they are simply there.
   C. Men appear in Theogony when Hesiod describes the first sacrifice at a place called Mekone. This leads into the story of Prometheus and of Pandora, the first woman.

II. Prometheus is a Titan, the son of Iapetos (brother of Cronos). In Hesiod’s account, Prometheus tries to trick Zeus into taking the less desirable portion of the first sacrifice so that men will have the better portion. In retaliation, Zeus punishes humans.
   A. Zeus’s first reaction to Prometheus’s deceit is to hide fire from man.
      1. Because Zeus is the god of justice, it is striking that he acts here in what seems to be a very unjust way, punishing humans for Prometheus’s transgressions.
      2. This is our first view of the relationship between gods and humans in Greek myth. The gods do not love humans or feel compelled to treat them fairly; rather, humans are useful but expendable.
      3. In his role as god of justice, Zeus supervises justice between humans; this does not necessarily imply that a comparable form of justice exists between gods and humans.
   B. Prometheus steals the fire back for humanity, which brings down further punishment.
      1. Prometheus is chained to a pillar to have his liver eaten daily by an eagle, Zeus’s sacred bird. The liver regenerates and is eaten again the next day.
2. Men are punished by the creation of the first woman, Pandora.

C. The Prometheus story highlights several of the problems of studying myth through literature that I mentioned in the first lecture.
   1. The story includes unexplained elements. Zeus seems to have a particular grudge against Prometheus’s entire family, but Hesiod does not say why.
   2. Nor does Hesiod say why Prometheus wants to help humans. According to some later authors, Prometheus created humans, but Hesiod does not say so.

III. Prometheus’s story is obviously very important.
   A. Notice that fire equals civilization, or “culture.”
   B. What Prometheus brings men is culture. Later authors specifically make this equation.
   C. The impetus for his story—the first sacrifice—is very important in this context. Sacrifice can be seen as representing the transition from pre-civilization to civilization.
      1. Burkert believes that sacrifice is a means to displace the guilt felt over hunting and killing animals.
      2. The “first sacrifice” would be the moment at which hominids made the transition from guilt-free animals to guilt-feeling humans, the moment at which civilization, or society in general, comes into being.
      3. If the myth is read in this way, it is probably no surprise that sex appears at just this point, because one function of society is to regulate the relationship between the sexes.
   D. Guilt over killing animals is not the only possible guilt men might feel over sacrifice.
      1. When we look at the myth from outside its original culture, we understand why humans eat the sacrificed animal.
      2. Within the culture that developed this myth, the fact that the gods receive the inferior portion of the sacrifice would be troubling.
      3. Thus, the idea that the establishment of sacrifice somehow entailed punishment makes sense.

IV. The story of Pandora also occurs in Hesiod’s other great work, *Works and Days*. In *Theogony* the emphasis is on Prometheus’s wrongdoing and his punishment, but in *Works and Days* the emphasis is on Pandora herself.
   A. In *Works and Days*, the first woman is named; in *Theogony*, she is nameless. The name Pandora is ambiguous; it may mean “gift of all” or “all-giver.”
   B. In *Works and Days*, Pandora’s creation is described in more detail.
   C. She is sent not to men in general but to Prometheus’s brother Epimetheus.
D. She has a jar that contains all the evils of the world, as well as Hope. When Pandora opens the jar, the evils fly out, but Hope remains just under the lid of the jar.

V. Pandora’s story is often compared to that of the biblical Eve. The differences seem more striking than the similarities, however, and have several important implications for our understanding of the relationship between the sexes in Greek mythology.

A. Both Pandora and Eve are responsible for the advent of evil into the world.
   1. Eve was created in the first place as a helper for Adam.
   2. Pandora is evil from her very creation.

B. Eve is created out of Adam’s body, but Pandora is a different type of creature. This seems to imply that women are seen as different in kind from men, rather than as simply the female sex of the human species.

C. This is our first example of the deep-seated misogyny that runs through much of classical myth.

VI. The presence of Hope in Pandora’s jar is both striking and difficult to interpret.

A. The most common modern interpretation is that no matter how bad things get, “we still have hope.” This view ignores two points:
   1. Hope is still *in* the jar, not out in the world the way the evils are.
   2. If Hope is a good thing, why is it in the jar of evils to begin with?

B. Another interpretation is that Hope’s retention in the jar is meant to indicate that there is no Hope, that even that small relief of evil is absent for mankind.

C. The key may be that the word translated as Hope, *elpis*, is in fact ambiguous, both good and evil, more like *expectation*. Its being caught under the lip of the jar may indicate the two-edged nature of *elpis*.

VII. The myth of Pandora lends itself especially well to psychological interpretations.

A. The jar can be read as representing Pandora’s womb.
   1. Pandora—and all women—are responsible for evil in that they are responsible for life itself, by giving birth.
   2. At the same time that birth inflicts all the evils of life on the one born, it is also the only hope for continuity available to humans.
   3. Thus, the jar/womb contains both evil and hope.

B. On a deeper level, the description of Pandora can be seen as reflecting male anxieties about and resentments of sexual reproduction.
   1. In a strongly patriarchal society, it is all-important for men to have sons.
   2. The only way to achieve sons is through women.
3. The woman can be seen as controlling the man’s ultimate destiny.
4. The jar, which Pandora can choose to open, could represent this fear/resentment of female power.

C. We will see other examples of this anxiety and resentment about women, along with fears of what they would do if they gained power.

VIII. At this point, we need to pull together several threads and consider the overall relationship of gods and humans. First, we will recap the essential nature of the gods.

A. The term “god” is regularly used to translate the Greek *theos*, but for modern readers this translation can bring serious misconceptions.
1. Modern Western readers tend to assume that a god must by definition be good, merciful, and just.
2. We tend to assume that a god must by definition be omniscient and omnipotent.
3. We tend to assume that a god must by definition have created the universe and must feel love toward human beings.
4. Despite the anthropomorphic language often used to describe God, we tend to assume that a god does not really have a body or human-like appetites and passions.

B. All these assumptions are false for the gods of classical mythology.
1. They are not consistently good, or merciful, or even (apparently) just. Their anthropomorphism means that they share in humanity’s less appealing attributes and emotions; they can be jealous, spiteful, and cruel.
2. Though they know a great deal, they are not omniscient; though very powerful, they are not omnipotent.
3. They are not transcendent. In other words, they did not create the universe but are part of it. According to the earliest traditions, they did not even create human beings.
4. They are not loving, devoted caretakers of humanity. They do not care about us as a species and rarely even as individuals.

C. Although they are more than personifications of natural forces, emotions, or processes, such personification is an important element of their characters. This helps to explain their emotional detachment from humans and their mercilessness.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Burkert, *Structure and History*, Ch. 2, Sections 4–6, pp. 52–58.
Questions to Consider:

1. Why do you think Hope is present in Pandora’s jar? Remember that the term *elpis* can mean “false expectation,” as well as “hope.”

2. I suggested a psychological explanation for identifying Pandora (and women in general) as the source or cause of evil. Can you think of any other explanation?
Scope: This lecture examines one of the most famous classical myths, the story of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades, as it is told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. After explaining what the *Homeric Hymns* are, the lecture summarizes the plot of the myth, then discusses the myth’s aetiological aspects and its importance for understanding gender roles and marriage practices in Athens. We discuss the implications of this myth for our understanding of human-god relationships. The lecture concludes by discussing some possible interpretations of this myth.

Outline

I. The myth of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades is recounted in one of the richest works of classical antiquity, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.
   
   A. *The Homeric Hymns* is a series of poems, ranging from only a few lines to several hundred lines, in honor of various gods.
      1. The poems are called “Homeric” because they are written in the same dialect of Greek and using the same meter (dactylic hexameter) as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.
      2. They were composed at different times; the *Hymn to Demeter* is one of the oldest, dating from sometime between 650 and 550 BC.
   
   B. This myth lends itself to a variety of interpretations and viewpoints, because it deals with questions of gender roles, sexuality, marriage customs, the relative power of different deities, and human mortality.
   
   C. This myth is one of the few that has a clear connection with a specific ritual, the Eleusinian Mysteries, held at Eleusis, near Athens.
   
   D. It is also one of the most transparently aetiological of surviving myths, because it provides an explanation for the existence of the seasons.
   
II. The basic story of the abduction of Persephone by Hades is fairly simple.
   
   A. Demeter, goddess of grain and agriculture, had a daughter, Persephone. Persephone’s father was Zeus.
   
   B. With Zeus’s permission, Hades seized Persephone one day as she was gathering flowers and took her to the Underworld to be his wife.
   
   C. Demeter wandered the world looking for her daughter. During her wanderings, she visited the town of Eleusis, near Athens.
   
   D. Eventually, Demeter caused a famine by refusing to let grain grow. Zeus ordered Hades to return Persephone so that humankind would not starve to death.
1. Persephone had eaten a pomegranate seed while she was in Tartaros, which meant that she could not leave Hades permanently. This apparently reflects the idea that eating in the Underworld meant one had to stay there.

2. Under Zeus’s mediation, Demeter agreed to a compromise whereby Persephone spends one-third of the year in Hades and two-thirds with her mother on Olympus.

III. There is more to this story than meets the eye. As told in the Homeric Hymns, Demeter’s search for her missing daughter and its aftermath give us a window onto many aspects of ancient Greek (or at least Athenian) life.

A. First, the story reflects marriage practices.
   1. A marriage was a contract between the husband and the bride’s father. Zeus gives Hades permission to take Persephone.
   2. Marriage of an only daughter with no brothers to her uncle was perfectly acceptable. Such a girl was called an epikleros.
   3. Human marriages were patrilocal.
   4. Human mothers and daughters would have greatly restricted contact after marriage. Thus, sorrow was a natural reaction to such an arrangement.

B. The story reflects the human experience of death and separation.
   1. Olympians can’t or don’t go to Tartaros. Hades and Hermes are exceptions to this rule.
   2. Demeter’s anguish is very close to what a human feels at a loved one’s death.
   3. This is the only time a god or goddess feels this sort of mourning for another deity.
   4. A symbolic connection between death and marriage is common in Greek literature, in part a reflection of high rates of maternal mortality.

C. The story paints a picture of the gods’ attitude toward and relationship with humans.
   1. Humans are useful to the gods but are not objects of affection.
   2. Zeus does not persuade Demeter to lift the famine because he loves humans, or because humans are innocent, or for any other such compassionate reason.
   3. He wants the famine lifted because without humans, there will be no one to give the gods sacrifices.

IV. Along with the account of Persephone’s abduction, the Homeric Hymn to Demeter also contains the story of Demeter’s visit to Metaneira, the queen of Eleusis.

A. Demeter wandered to Eleusis, where she met the daughters of Queen Metaneira. Demeter was disguised as an old woman and was pitied.
B. She offered her services to the queen’s daughters as a nanny for their baby brother, Demophoön.
   1. Demophoön is described as a late-born and much desired son; in a male-centered culture, such a baby would be doubly precious.
   2. Infant mortality was high; an old woman who had many years of experience in caring for infants and children would be a logical choice as a nanny.

C. Demeter sets out to make Demophoön immortal by anointing him with ambrosia and laying him in the fire each night.
   1. When Metaneira observes what Demeter is doing, she is horrified and cries out in anguish.
   2. Demeter becomes angry and throws the child to the ground, declaring that she will no longer make him immortal.

D. The Hymn does not recount Demophoön’s fate, but Apollodorus and other authors say that he died.

V. Like the story of Persephone, the Demophoön story offers a window into the nature of the gods it describes and the society that created them.

A. Demeter seems to be using Demophoön as a Persephone-substitute. It is noteworthy that she picks a male child.
   1. Demeter is following the same pattern as Gaia and Rheia before her, trying to enlist the help of an infant male son against an oppressive adult father.
   2. A male child will not be taken away from her through marriage.
   3. Demeter’s attempt does not work. This is consistent with the picture given by Hesiod that the order of the universe under Zeus is fixed. Where Gaia and Rheia could succeed, Demeter fails.

B. By trying to immortalize a human child, Demeter is not only providing a substitute child for herself; she is also redressing the balance against Hades.

C. Finally, we again see the gods’ unconcern with human emotion and their tendency to see humans as useful, rather than as objects of affection.
   1. Demeter does not seem to realize that if she succeeds, she will inflict the same anguish on Metaneira as Zeus inflicted on her.
   2. After Metaneira’s interference, Demeter has no further interest in Demophoön.
   3. Demeter apparently cannot simply start again; once the immortalization process has been interrupted, it is over.

VI. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter is an almost perfect example of the complex and multivalent nature of myth. As such, it can be analyzed according to various theories.
A. Those who espouse Jungian psychology can see the archetypes of Mother, Maiden, and Crone very clearly in the *Hymn*.

B. The *Hymn* can be read, in a more Freudian way, as a wish-fulfillment fantasy for women or for humans in general.
   1. Women must often have wished to regain their married daughters, and daughters, to return to their mothers. Human mothers couldn’t “unmarry” daughters, but Demeter (almost) can.
   2. All human beings wish that death could be reversed. In this case, it is; Persephone returns.

C. Structuralists can find many contradictions to be mediated: acceptance of death, desire to retain childhood, and so on.

D. Adherents of the ritual theory can point to the Eleusinian Mysteries (for which the *Hymn* provides both an aetiology and a charter).

E. Even Frazer’s dying god is not too far a stretch, because Persephone can easily be read as representing the grain.

F. None of these theories—or others—seems to account for the entire appeal of the *Hymn*. Each can be used to elucidate a portion of the myth but not its entirety.

**Essential Reading:**

*Homeric Hymn to Demeter.*


**Supplementary Reading:**


[Katz], Marilyn Arthur, “Politics and Pomegranates.”

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Does the idea of the Demeter/Persephone myth as a kind of “wish fulfillment” make sense to you? Can you think of similar “wish fulfillment” stories in modern American society?

2. If the gods have no experience of grieving over death, what are the implications for the human/god relationship?
Lecture Eight
The Eleusinian Mysteries and the Afterlife

Scope: This lecture considers the religious ritual held in honor of Demeter and Persephone, the Eleusinian Mysteries. We describe what is known about the mysteries and the promise they apparently extended for a happy afterlife. The lecture examines contrasting views of the afterlife found elsewhere in Greek myth and religion, looking at depictions of the underworld in Homer, at suggestions of reincarnation, and at the myth of Orpheus and its associated cult, Orphism.

Outline

I. Demeter’s visit to Eleusis is a crucial narrative element in the Homeric Hymn; it also has important connections to ritual outside the storyline.
   A. Eleusis is a town near Athens, where the great “Mysteries” in honor of Demeter and Persephone were celebrated for over 1000 and perhaps nearly 2000 years. They fell into disuse about 400 AD.
      1. “Mysteries” in this context means “secrets”; the ceremonies were open only to initiates.
      2. The initiates were forbidden to tell non-initiates about the rites.
      3. Initiation was available to men and women, to free people and to slaves; the only requirements were that one must not be a murderer and that one must speak Greek. One had to make the journey to Eleusis—and make a sacrifice—to be initiated.
   B. The requirement of secrecy means that our knowledge of the Mysteries is both limited and quite possibly biased.
      1. Although certainly some initiates must have told the secret, the surviving written references observe the prohibition. They allude to details of the Mysteries but do not describe them.
      2. The only writers who do describe the Mysteries are early Christian authors. Because they wrote with the desire to prove the Mysteries false, their testimony may not be accurate.
   C. The sources seem to agree that the high point of the Mysteries was the showing or revealing of something to the initiates.
      1. Some sources imply that whatever was revealed was obscene.
      2. Other sources say that the revelation consisted of an ear of wheat being cut in silence.
   D. Although the details of the Mysteries will probably remain unknown, we know enough to recognize many details in the Homeric Hymn as aetiologies for parts of the ritual of the Mysteries.
      1. Demeter’s visit to Eleusis explains why the Mysteries are celebrated there.
2. On a conceptual level, the connection with death and the afterlife is aetiological, because initiation promised a happy afterlife.
3. If we had more information, we might recognize other details as aetiological.

II. The Eleusinian Mysteries apparently promised a happy afterlife. Elsewhere in surviving literature, we find less pleasant views of the afterlife.

A. The standard view seems to be that the Underworld is a place of dim, shadowy existence, much less desirable than life in this world.
   1. The ghost is sometimes called an *eidolon*, or “image”; it is less real than the living person.
   2. The word for soul, *psyche*, originally seems to have meant “breath”—that which visibly leaves the body at the time of death.
   3. In the *Odyssey*, the spirits in Tartaros are described as being witless, not even knowing themselves.

B. Some exceptionally noteworthy souls are picked out for reward or punishment, but overall there seems to be little sense that one’s state in the afterlife was determined by one’s actions in this life.
   1. The conception of the Elysian Fields, reserved for a very few especially good souls, is alluded to in the *Odyssey* and elsewhere.
   2. The idea of punishment for the wicked is more clearly developed, but even it does not apply to the majority of humanity; punishment is restricted to a few famous wrongdoers, such as the “cardinal sinners” Tantalos, Tityos, and Sisyphus.

III. We also have some evidence of a belief in reincarnation.

A. Pythagoras (in the sixth century BC) apparently taught a doctrine that included reincarnation (along with vegetarianism).

B. Plato discusses reincarnation in the so-called “Myth of Er” (in *The Republic*).
   1. One difficulty in using this as evidence for fourth-century belief is that Plato may have invented this “myth” for use in *The Republic*.
   2. Elsewhere, for instance in the *Apology of Socrates*, Plato describes a view of the afterlife that is much closer to the traditional one.

C. Virgil, writing in the first century BC, combined the ideas of reward and punishment and the idea of reincarnation in Book VI of *The Aeneid*. Again, as with Plato, it is difficult to determine to what extent Virgil used the idea of reincarnation purely as a literary device and to what extent it mirrors actual belief.

IV. One of the most important myths concerning the afterlife is the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus, a son of Apollo and one of the Muses, was the greatest poet who ever lived.

A. Orpheus, a human, supposedly had the power to charm animals and even stones and trees with his music.
B. When his wife, Eurydice, died, Orpheus made his way to the Underworld to plead for her release.
   1. His music was so moving that Hades and Persephone agreed to release Eurydice if Orpheus not look back at her.
   2. Orpheus did look back, and Eurydice returned to Tartaros.

C. This purely mythical Orpheus was associated with a body of writings and a set of religious beliefs called “Orphism.”
   1. Orphism began to be taught in the sixth century BC.
   2. The Orphic writings (few of which survive) supposedly contain knowledge that Orpheus gained while in the Underworld.
   3. Reincarnation is central to the doctrine; only by following the teachings of Orpheus to lead an ascetic life can the soul eventually be freed from rebirth. As in Buddhism, incarnation is a bad thing from which one seeks release.
   4. Some Orphic writings contained precise instructions about what one should say and do in the Underworld to avoid reincarnation.

D. Thus Orphism, like the Eleusinian Mysteries, held out the promise of a happy, or at least happier, afterlife.

V. As in so many other areas of Greek religion, no orthodoxy about the afterlife exists. It seems safe to say that it was generally considered both less important and less pleasant than this life. Greek mythology contains no aetiology for death through, for example, human sin or mistake.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Bremmer, *Early Greek Concept of the Soul*, Ch. 3.
Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*.
Vermeule, *Aspects of Death*.

Questions to Consider:
1. Modern students often find it strange that Greek religion and mythology had no set doctrine about the afterlife and that the different descriptions diverged from one another so greatly. To what extent do you think this lack of unified doctrine can be attributed to the lack of a “sacred book”?
2. The Greeks’ relative lack of agreement about the afterlife is often cited as proof that their interest was mainly focused on this world and this life. Do you think this conclusion is valid?
Lecture Nine
Apollo and Artemis

Scope: In this lecture, we examine two of Zeus’s most important offspring, the twins Apollo and Artemis, including their characteristic functions and associations, beginning with Apollo. We see how Apollo, the god of reason and moderation, is also the god of disease, plague, and sudden death for men, but is perhaps most important in his role as god of prophecy. We discuss his famous shrine at Delphi, where oracles are given by a priestess called the Pythia, the two crucial maxims (“Know yourself” and “Nothing in excess”) that were carved on his temple there, and how the story of Niobe illustrates the importance of those maxims. The lecture also examines the many-sided role of Artemis as a goddess of wildness and wild things, the patron of the hunt, the young of all creatures, and women in childbirth, who is herself a virgin. The lecture suggests an interpretation of Artemis that unifies these apparently disparate characteristics. Finally, we see how the story of Actaeon illustrates the danger of crossing a god and the irrelevance of intentions compared to actions.

Outline

I. Two of the most important younger Olympians are Artemis and Apollo, twin children of Zeus and the goddess Leto.
   A. These deities play essential roles both in reference to the other gods and for the Greek construction of human experience.
   B. Many dictionaries of classical mythology will say that Apollo is the sun god and his sister Artemis is the moon. Although both did come to have these associations eventually, they are much more complex than these identifications would indicate.

II. Apollo is a god of youth, medicine, healing, music, prophecy, and, in general, moderation and rationality; however, he is also associated with sudden death for men and with plague.
   A. Most of the younger generation of Olympians are depicted in art as young adults in their twenties, but Apollo is represented as the youth par excellence, the ideal of manly beauty. Each generation of Olympians matures to its proper age and remains at that age.
   B. He is associated both with medicine and healing and with sudden death and death through disease.
      1. The double association of healer and plague-bringer gives a complete and rounded image of Apollo; he is not entirely beneficent towards humans, despite his positive qualities.
2. He is described as wearing a quiver and carrying a bow; when he shoots men with these arrows, they die suddenly. His sister Artemis performs the same function for women.

C. As the patron of music and the arts, Apollo presides over the Muses.

D. Perhaps his most important role is as the main god of prophecy. He passes on prophecy from Zeus to selected humans.
   1. Zeus, too, controls prophecy, but the most famous and important oracle of ancient Greece was in Delphi, sacred to Apollo.
   2. Questioners could ask the god anything they wanted and would receive answers through the Pythia, his priestess at Delphi, inspired by Apollo himself.
   3. Many of the oracles that we know of are so ambiguous as to be impossible to refute; however, the oracle of Delphi was taken extremely seriously by the Greeks and their neighbors. A priestess could be corrupted, but faith in Apollo was profound.

E. Apollo’s role as patron of prophecy at Delphi reflects his overall association with reason and moderation.
   1. Greek religion had no prescriptive commandments, but two sayings carved on the temple at Delphi are crucial for understanding the underlying presumptions of the religion. These sayings are gnothi sauton and meden agan: “Know yourself” and “Nothing in excess.”
   2. “Know yourself” means know what kind of creature you are, remember your limitations, remember that you are not a god.

III. These two maxims encapsulate a theme that runs throughout Greek myth: that humans are liable to transgress the boundaries that separate them from the gods, which inevitably brings suffering.

A. Humans must remember their status and not seek to exceed it.

B. In particular, humans should avoid hubris, a word that is often translated as “excessive pride” but basically means insolence or wantonness; hubris is the kind of excessiveness that leads one to claim more than is one’s due.

C. The story of Niobe is a particularly good example of the importance of Apollo’s maxims and of the dangers of hubris.
   1. Niobe, queen of Thebes and sister of Tantalos, boasted that she was more worthy of worship than Leto, mother of Artemis and Apollo, because Leto had only two children but she, Niobe, had fourteen.
   2. Apollo and Artemis kill all Niobe’s children. When only one remains, Niobe begs for mercy, but even the last is killed.
   3. Niobe has failed to remember both maxims; she has not known herself—the vulnerability of her humanity—and she has been misled by the excess of her good fortune.
IV. Like her brother Apollo, Artemis brings sudden death, but in other ways, she is her twin’s polar opposite.

A. She is associated with wildness and wild things, where he is associated with reason and civilization. She is a huntress, the patron of wild beasts, and the protector of the young of all species.
   1. Artemis’s association with wild animals in various aspects dates back to very early times.
   2. Homer calls Artemis *potnia theron*, or “Mistress of Wild Beasts”; many artistic representations recall this title.
   3. One of her most important sites of worship was at Ephesus, in modern Turkey, where her role as *potnia theron* seems to have predominated.
   4. As a huntress, she carries a bow and wears a quiver; she is often shown in a short robe that would allow for running.

B. Artemis is also associated with women in several ways.
   1. She is the protector of women in childbirth.
   2. She is a virgin and is particularly associated with young girls before and up to the time of their marriages.
   3. She brings sudden death to women.

C. Artemis’s status as a virgin and her role as protector of women in childbirth may at first sight seem contradictory; however, both aspects of the goddess tie in to her essential wildness.
   1. Women in childbirth are most vulnerable to and most caught up in their animal natures; only in the instant of death are humans so clearly allied to the rest of the animal kingdom. Ancient Greek society associates women with nature and men with culture.
   2. Artemis’s virginity is not a rejection of sexuality per se; rather, it is a rejection of male domination in sexual intercourse.

V. Artemis’s rejection of sexuality is the impetus for the story of Actaeon, which illustrates the danger of crossing a god. Even unintentional violations of the boundaries between gods and humans can lead to disaster.

A. Actaeon inadvertently saw Artemis nude while he was out hunting.
   1. Artemis turned him into a stag, but left his mind cognizant of what had happened to him.
   2. Actaeon was torn to shreds by his own hunting hounds.

B. In the worldview represented by classical mythology, intentions are often irrelevant; what matters is actions. Our culture tends to make a strong distinction between actions according to their intent, but the ancient Greeks considered motives much less important.

**Essential Reading:**

Homer’s Hymn to Apollo.
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 61–64 (Actaeon); 133–139 (Niobe).

**Supplementary Reading:**
Fontenrose, *Delphic Oracle*.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. The concept that intentions are unimportant and actions are all that matter strikes many modern readers as disturbing. Is there anything in the nature of the classical gods that makes such a worldview comprehensible? What does Actaeon’s story tell us about Artemis?
2. I argue that Artemis’s virginity is a rejection of male domination, not of sexuality per se. Does this interpretation make sense for Athena as well?
Lecture Ten
Hermes and Dionysos

Scope: This lecture examines Zeus’s two youngest sons, Hermes and Dionysos. We begin by discussing Hermes’s apparently disparate areas of influence as a god of messengers, merchants, thieves, cattle-herders, tricksters, and beggars, who also guides the souls of the dead to Tartaros. We discuss interpretations of Hermes that account for his different attributes by seeing him as a god of boundaries and transitions, or as a god of exchange and commerce. The lecture also discusses Hermes’s connection with herms, or boundary pillars. We then turn to Dionysos and consider his role as a god of wine, intoxication, and frenzy, who is also the patron of drama. The lecture concludes by considering the difference between Dionysos and other Olympian gods and possible reasons for that difference.

Outline

I. Zeus’s two youngest sons are Hermes and Dionysos. Hermes is the son of a minor goddess, Maia, and Dionysos is the son of a human woman, Semele.
   A. Hermes is often identified simply as the “messenger of the gods,” a description that does not do him justice.
   B. Like his siblings Apollo and Artemis, Hermes presides over a group of characteristics that at first glance seem unconnected. He is the patron god of messengers, heralds, merchants, thieves, beggars, travelers, and roads; cattle and cattle-herders; liars and tricksters. In addition, he is the god who conducts the souls of the dead to Tartaros.
      1. Hermes is often described as a god of boundaries and transitions.
      2. Another way of looking at him is to see him as the god of exchange and commerce.

II. The Homeric Hymn to Hermes, which narrates his birth story, supports the idea that Hermes is a god of exchange.
   A. The first thing the newborn god does is create a lyre out of a tortoise shell. This he later barters to Apollo in exchange for Apollo’s cattle.
   B. If we view Hermes as primarily a god of exchange, then the association with both merchants and thieves makes sense.
   C. His association with cattle also makes sense, because cattle are a primary means of determining wealth.
   D. His association with messengers and heralds can be explained in two ways.
      1. Messengers and heralds preside over the exchange of information, which is a logical development from the exchange of goods.
2. Messengers and heralds often perform other tasks having to do with the exchange of goods.

E. Even his role as *Psychopompos*, or Guide of Souls, makes sense under the rubric of exchange. The souls of the dead belong to Hades and are often described as his wealth; thus, Hermes presides over another sort of exchange, from the realm of Zeus to that of Hades.

F. In the *Hymn*, Hermes is clearly a trickster figure, who is clever, manipulative, and very good at speech. These traits, too, fit well with his role as god of exchange.

III. Hermes was also associated with *herms*, pillars that stood in the marketplace, in front of private houses, and at crossroads. This reflects his aspect as a god of boundaries.

A. Hermes’s association with the herm is probably the oldest element of this god’s essential character.
   1. “Herm” originally meant simply “pile of stones”; the pillar gave its name to the god, not the other way around.
   2. Hermes very likely began as a personification of these marker-stones.

B. Herm was pillars topped with a head and featuring an erect phallus.
   1. This is unique among Greek statues of their gods, which were usually fully anthropomorphic.
   2. The erect phallus is something of a puzzle. Its most obvious function would be to symbolize fertility, but this is not an aspect of Hermes.
   3. The pillars are often described as *apotropaic*, or frightening away evil spirits, but this leaves unanswered the question of why the phallus should serve that function.
   4. Burkert suggests that this representation of Hermes has its origin in primate behavior; in certain monkey species, males who guard the group sit facing outward, with erect phallicus.
   5. Whatever the origin of the herms, they were important elements of public (and private) religion; defacing a herm was a serious offense in Athens.

IV. Zeus had one more important son, Dionysos. He is a complex god whose domains include fertility of plants, wine, frenzy, irrationality, and drama.

A. As a god of plant fertility, Dionysos complements Demeter.
   1. Demeter’s domain is grain, specifically the controlled growth of grain in agriculture.
   2. Dionysos’s domain is the growth of fruitful, moist plants, such as grapes and figs, and of rapidly growing, luxuriant plants, such as ivy.

B. Dionysos is associated with madness, frenzy, and irrationality.
1. In this aspect, he is directly opposed to Apollo. This opposition is shown in myth by the fact that Apollo leaves Delphi during the winter months each year and Dionysos takes up residence there.

2. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche identified the “Dionysian” and the “Apollonian” as the two main strands of Greek thought, constantly in tension with one another.

C. Dionysos’s connection with frenzy is represented in myth as his possession of his followers; under his influence, they do things completely at odds with their usual personalities.

   1. In myth, Dionysos’s male followers are Satyrs, creatures who blend human and animal characteristics.

   2. His mythic female followers are the Maenads, women constantly under his influence and gifted with exceptional abilities, who rip animals apart and eat their flesh raw. Actual worship of Dionysos, so far as we know, did not include such behavior.

D. The most common definition of Dionysos is “god of wine.” His association with wine unites his associations with growing plants and with irrationality and frenzy.

E. Dionysos is also the patron god of theatre, though the exact reason for his connection with drama is still a matter of scholarly debate.

   1. Tragedy and comedy were both performed at festivals in honor of Dionysos.

   2. One theory is that tragedy and comedy both developed out of rituals in honor of Dionysos. However, the surviving plays contain little evidence of such ritual origin.

   3. We can say that a god whose domains include possession and behavior inconsistent with one’s normal character is appropriate for a theatrical tradition in which actors were masked.

V. Many aspects of Dionysos are unusual or even unique among the Olympian gods. The first such aspect is his birth from a human mother.

   A. Dionysos’s mother was Semele, princess of Thebes, who had an affair with Zeus.

   B. Hera was jealous and decided to destroy Semele.

   C. Hera visits Semele disguised as her old nanny.

      1. Hera suggests that Semele’s lover is simply a man claiming to be Zeus.

      2. She suggests that Semele should induce him to promise to do whatever she asks, then ask to see him as he appears to Hera.

   D. Semele follows Hera’s advice, Zeus reveals his true form to her, and Semele is incinerated.

   E. Zeus snatches the infant Dionysos from Semele’s womb and implants him in his own thigh.
1. Dionysos is later born from Zeus’s thigh, thus receiving his epithet “twice-born.”
2. Dionysos apparently gains his immortal status from his incubation in Zeus’s body.

VI. Dionysos and his worship seem somehow less “given” in Greek myth than those of any other god; there are several stories of people resisting his worship and denying his divinity. The most important of these concerns his cousin Pentheus, king of Thebes.

A. Semele’s sisters did not believe that their sister could have been the mother of a god.
B. In Euripides’s *Bacchae*, Dionysos returned to Thebes as an adult, disguised as a human priest. He had two purposes to accomplish there.
   1. He wanted to punish his disbelieving relatives.
   2. He wanted to establish his religion in Greece.
   3. His first step is to drive the Theban women mad.
C. Pentheus, king of Thebes and Dionysos’s first cousin, refuses to accept this new god.
D. His punishment is to be torn to pieces by his own mother and aunts, who think that he is a mountain lion.
E. Dionysos thus proves both his power and his divinity.

VII. Scholars used to believe that all these aspects of Dionysos’s myth—his unusual ancestry, the resistance to his worship, his general unruliness—were evidence that he was, in fact, a late importation into Greece from Asia Minor.

A. Evidence now shows that Dionysos was worshipped in Greece as early as most of the other Olympic gods; he is not a late arrival.
B. The questions of why Dionysos is so different and why he is represented in myth as a latecomer to the pantheon are left open.
   1. Some scholars think that the representation of Dionysos as a latecomer reflects the Greeks’ own discomfort with and distrust of irrationality and frenzy.
   2. Another possibility is that Dionysos’s association with young, verdant, growing things carries over into his myths as the idea that he himself is young, i.e., recent.
   3. No definitive answer exists.

Essential Reading:
Apollodorus, pp. 101–103 (“Semele and Dionysos”).
*Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.

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Supplementary Reading:
Euripides, Bacchae.
Burkert, Greek Religion, pp. 222–225 (“Dionysos”).
Burkert, Structure and History, pp. 39–41, on herms.
Sale, “The Psychoanalysis of Pentheus.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Does Burkert’s suggestion that primate behavior may help us understand herms strike you as plausible? Could it ever be disproven?
2. Can you think of any explanation (other than the ones I suggested) for Dionysos’s “difference” from the other Greek gods? Why is this god a latecomer whose worship is often resisted?
Lecture Eleven
Laughter-Loving Aphrodite

Scope: In this lecture, we examine Aphrodite, goddess of sexual desire. The lecture concentrates on the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, which tells the story of Aphrodite’s affair with the mortal Anchises. We discuss the implications of this myth for our understanding of the Greek view of sexuality and for the appropriate interactions between humans and gods. We then consider how the Roman view of passion, as seen in Ovid, differed from the view presented in the *Homeric Hymn* and in Sappho. Finally, we use Aphrodite to discuss some of the characteristics of gods that are anthropomorphized natural forces.

Outline

I. Our last key deity is Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual passion and desire.
   A. According to *Theogony*, Aphrodite was born from the foam that appeared around the severed genitals of Ouranos when Cronos tossed them into the sea.
   B. In the *Iliad*, she is the daughter of Zeus and a goddess named Dione.
   C. In either case, she is usually depicted as among the younger Olympians, in the same generation as Athena and Artemis, rather than Hestia, Hera, and Demeter.
   D. As the goddess of sexual desire, she is extremely powerful.
      1. She can and does subdue even Zeus to her will.
      2. The only beings she cannot touch are the three virgin goddesses, Hestia, Artemis, and Athena.
      3. She is the goddess of sexual passion, not love or companionship.

II. Aphrodite appears in many works of literature. However, for understanding of her essential nature, once again a *Homeric Hymn* is our starting point.
   A. The *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* tells the story of her sexual encounter with the human Anchises.
      1. This affair is attested elsewhere in literature, because it resulted in a son, Aeneas, the title character of Virgil’s epic *The Aeneid*.
      2. Aphrodite’s maternal relation to Aeneas also appears in the *Iliad*.
   B. The *Homeric Hymn*, however, concentrates on the relationship between Aphrodite and Anchises; the birth of Aeneas is predicted but is not the focus of the work.

III. The *Homeric Hymn* begins by stating that Zeus was angry at Aphrodite for causing him and other gods to become sexually involved with humans; therefore, he decided to give her a taste of her own medicine.
A. Zeus’s reaction implies that sexual involvement with humans is beneath the gods’ dignity, something that they regret afterward.

B. Another implication involves the separate spheres of influence of the gods and Zeus’s relationship to them.
   1. Usually, one god either cannot or does not trespass on another god’s sphere of influence. Aphrodite does not cause earthquakes, Poseidon does not inspire people with sexual passion, and so on.
   2. This respect for the boundaries of one another’s spheres probably stems from the fact that these gods embody the emotions and activities they govern. Aphrodite, in a sense, is sexual passion.
   3. However, Zeus is able to inflict Aphrodite with her own essence.

IV. Zeus inspires Aphrodite with passion for the young Trojan prince Anchises, whom she seduces.
   A. Aphrodite appears before Anchises in disguise as a young girl and tells him that she is destined to be his bride.
   B. Anchises recognizes that she is a goddess and asks her for appropriate and proper blessings, but he believes her when she says she is human and agrees to go to bed with her immediately.
      1. Anchises’s words embody the maxims of Delphi; he remembers his own status and is careful not to ask for excessive blessings.
      2. His adherence to these maxims does not protect him; Aphrodite lies to him to get her way.
   C. After the two have sex, Aphrodite reveals herself to Anchises and admits that she is a goddess. Anchises is terrified and begs for mercy.

V. Anchises’s statement that men who have sex with goddesses are never left unharmed has several implications for our understanding of the narrative and of Greek society.
   A. Gods and mortals can interbreed; their offspring are human but usually exceptional.
   B. Although mating with a god often has disastrous consequences for a woman, these consequences are not inevitable, and some women who mate with gods live normal lives afterward.
   C. Anchises articulates the idea that men who mate with goddesses have committed a great transgression.

VI. The reason for this imbalance has to do with views of sexuality and gender roles and with the nature of the relationship between gods and humans.
   A. Sex is seen in Greek culture as a process of domination. The male penetrator dominates his partner.
   B. Because Greek culture was strongly patriarchal and women were supposed to be subservient, this paradigm of sexuality was considered
appropriate for male-female relationships. During sex, the man was dominant and the woman submissive, which was “how it should be.”

C. When sex occurs between a god and a human, the gender of each partner becomes very important.
   1. If a male god has sex with a mortal woman, there is no imbalance; a more powerful being (god, male) is dominating a less powerful one (human, female).
   2. When the male is human and the female is a goddess, the relationship is contradictory, because a less powerful human is dominating a more powerful goddess.

D. Furthermore, when a god and human mate, a child always results.
   1. Again, if the female is the human, this causes no discomfort to the gods. Her child is still human but greater, more beautiful, more excellent than would otherwise have been the case.
   2. For a goddess to bear a human child to a mortal father is disgraceful, even (one senses from Aphrodite’s words) disgusting.

VII. Aphrodite’s attempt to reassure Anchises falls flat, because she tells him about Tithonos.

A. Tithonos was the lover of the dawn goddess Eos, who wanted to keep him forever.
   1. Eos gave Tithonos eternal life but forgot eternal youth.
   2. Thus, Tithonos grows older forever, until finally Eos shuts him away into a room and only his voice is left.

B. This story is a chilling example of a recurring theme in Greek myth—humans may desire immortality, but it is not appropriate for us.

C. The Hymn does not tell us whether Anchises was harmed.
   1. Other sources tell us that Anchises revealed who his son’s mother was and was lamed as a result.
   2. Aphrodite’s other human lover, the beautiful youth Adonis, died as a result of their affair.

VIII. We can isolate the following characteristics of sexual passion as delineated in the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite:

A. Sexual passion is seen as an external force, imposed on humans (or gods, or animals).

B. Passion is, by its nature, transitory.
   1. You may feel passion for one person today, but another person next year or next week or even tomorrow.
   2. Sexual passion is not, in itself, emotionally significant; this is far different from our own conception.

C. Sappho’s one extant complete poem asks for help from Aphrodite, a compelling image of sexuality as an outside force.
D. Later authors give an emotional significance to sexual passion that is absent in the earlier works.
   1. Ovid’s story of Pyramus and Thisbe, a pair of suicidal lovers, is a good example.
   2. Aphrodite remains a capricious goddess of passion rather than one of devoted, long-lasting love.

IX. Aphrodite is an excellent goddess through whom to contemplate some of the implications of gods who are personifications of natural forces.

A. With this type of god, “belief” is not a matter of debate the way it is in a monotheistic religion.
   1. To ask, “Do you believe in Aphrodite?” is, on one level, as absurd as asking, “Do you believe that sexual attraction exists?”
   2. The question of whether personification is an appropriate way to represent these forces remains, and some classical authors would answer that it is not.

B. Aphrodite also illustrates the irrelevance of expecting compassion, mercy, or pity from personified natural forces.
   1. Inappropriate sexual desire can devastate and destroy innocent lives, just as Aphrodite does.
   2. We can see a similar phenomenon in Dionysos; misuse of wine can destroy, and it is useless to ask the wine to feel pity.

C. The personification of these natural forces carries with it a certain contradiction; as sentient beings, the gods should be able to act compassionately, but as natural forces, they cannot.

Essential Reading:
*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite.*

Supplementary Reading:
Sappho, *Hymn to Aphrodite*.

Questions to Consider:
1. We have seen that it is considered acceptable for a god to mate with a human woman and for her to bear his children, but it is inappropriate for a goddess to mate with a human man. Can you think of any analogs to this system, in which gender relationships are factored into a wider pattern of supposed superiority and inferiority?

2. In their aspect as personified natural forces, the Greek gods do not feel pity or show mercy. What are the implications of this for their “personalities”? Do they end up being *less* admirable than human beings, in some sense?
Lecture Twelve

Culture, Prehistory, and the “Great Goddess”

Scope: We now step back to consider the cultural and historic background of the gods and goddesses. We first examine the similarities between Mesopotamian myth and Hesiod’s *Theogony* and discuss the likelihood of cross-cultural influence. We then consider the influence of the two great prehistoric cultures of Greece itself, the Minoans and the Mycenaeans. Finally, we use the theory that a prehistoric “great goddess” existed as a test case to demonstrate the difficulty of any attempt to reconstruct prehistoric religious beliefs.

Outline

I. At this point, we can consider the backgrounds of the Greek gods and goddesses.
   A. No culture exists in a vacuum; Greek religion and mythology must have been influenced by other cultures with which the Greeks came in contact. In polytheism, new gods and myths are easily accommodated.
   B. A culture’s mythology does not simply appear all at once; the myths must have been influenced by events in Greece’s prehistory.
   C. Determining the exact nature of such influences, across cultures or through time, is extremely difficult. We will take the question of a prehistoric “great goddess” as a test case.

II. The Greek creation myths recounted by Hesiod share many points in common with Mesopotamian creation myths.
   A. To take just one example, the Hesiodic story of Cronos shows strong parallels with the Mesopotamian story of Kumarbi.
      1. Cronos and Kumarbi are both sons of a god whose name means “sky” (Ouranos, Anush).
      2. Each gains power by castrating his father.
      3. Each is in turn overthrown by a younger god who is associated with storms (Zeus, Teshub).
   B. This parallel demonstrates a relationship between the myths of these two cultures, through direct influence or through derivation from a common source. However, the details differ from culture to culture.
      1. Kumarbi castrates Anush by biting off his genitals; Cronos castrates Ouranos with a sickle provided by Gaia.
      2. Kumarbi swallows Anush’s genitals and becomes pregnant; he bears Teshub through his penis. Kronos swallows his children (who have been conceived and born normally), then spits them out.
III. The other important formative influences behind Greek myth were the prehistoric cultures of Greece itself, the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures. Minoan culture was located on Crete and the nearby island of Santorini.

A. One of the great archaeological discoveries of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the uncovering of Minoan civilization, which reached its high point from about 2000 to about 1470 BC.
   1. Sir Arthur Evans set out to demonstrate that the myths that recalled a great thalossocracy (“sea-based kingdom”) on Crete had some basis in fact.
   2. At Knossos, Evans found extensive ruins of a huge palace, which he associated with King Minos of myth. From this, the culture he uncovered came to be called “Minoan.”

B. Evans had found evidence that there had indeed been a great seafaring culture based on Crete, just as the myths said.

IV. Minoan culture is still a puzzle in many ways, mainly because the Minoans left little behind them in the way of written records. They did have two writing systems, Linear A and Linear B.

A. Linear A has never been deciphered.

B. Linear B was deciphered in the 1950s and turns out to be an ancient form of Greek.
   1. The records in this writing are inventories of palace supplies, which tell us little about the culture of the Minoan people.
   2. Furthermore, Linear B only came into use after the Minoans had come under the domination of the Greek-speaking Mycenaeans.

C. Historians have to try to interpret the architecture, artifacts, and especially the art of Minoan Crete without the context that written works usually provide.
   1. Minoan culture is not known to be related to any other culture; thus, we cannot turn to the written records of other cultures to try to reconstruct Minoan myth.
   2. Minoan art shows many scenes that may be religious, but it is difficult to interpret these without any context to guide us.

V. The other great pre-classical civilization of Greece was the Mycenaean civilization, the direct ancestor of later Greek culture.

A. Mycenaean civilization, which flourished from about 1600 to about 1050 BC, was discovered by Heinrich Schliemann, who also excavated the site of Troy.
   1. He excavated Mycenae, Agamemnon’s city, which had never been completely lost.
   2. He found other cities that clearly belonged to the same culture.
   3. These cities correspond astonishingly well geographically to the cities mentioned by Homer.
B. The Mycenaeans were descendants of Indo-European migrants who came into Greece probably around 2200–2000 BC. 
1. Their language was an early form of Greek.
2. They gained dominance over Minoan culture by the fifteenth century BC. The Minoan use of Linear B is one piece of evidence of this dominance.
3. Like the Minoans, the Mycenaeans used Linear B mainly to make lists of supplies.

C. After the fall of Mycenaean civilization during the eleventh century, Greece entered its Dark Ages. 
1. Writing was not reintroduced until the eighth century.
2. The fact that myths written down in the eighth century and later refer to Mycenaean cities must indicate cultural continuity through oral tradition.
3. Therefore, it seems likely that some of the myths associated with those cities have their origins in Mycenaean culture.
4. The Trojan War is the most obvious example.

VI. How much can we plausibly deduce about prehistoric Greek religion and myth from our knowledge of these cultures? As a demonstration of the difficulties, let us look at the theory of the great mother goddess.

A. There is a widespread modern belief that classical myth (and ancient European and Near Eastern myth in general) contains traces of a prehistoric, pre-Indo-European worship of the great mother goddess.

B. Although this belief has become almost an article of faith for many modern people, the evidence for it is not straightforward.
1. The primary problem is that of interpreting archaeological evidence without any written context to explain its use.
2. The literary evidence often brought to bolster the claim of a proto-goddess is ambiguous at best.
3. Many of the same objections can be made to the goddess theory as can be made to psychological explanations of myth.

C. Female figurines are widespread throughout ancient European and Near Eastern cultures, but their interpretation is not straightforward.
1. We have no compelling reason to assume that the figurines must represent goddesses.
2. Even if they are goddesses, we have no reason to assume that they must represent the same or a single goddess.

VII. Some of the widest-reaching claims about a great goddess are made for Minoan civilization, based largely on its art.

A. Minoan art features powerful female figures. The most famous of these is the so-called Snake-Goddess.
1. This arresting figure must have had some important significance in Minoan culture. But was she a goddess?
2. Other possibilities have been dismissed with little consideration.

B. Without knowing more about Minoan religion beyond the images preserved by art, we cannot know what the Snake-Goddess figurines represent.
   1. We cannot assume that every figurine must have been used for ritual or religious purposes; they may be decorative instead.
   2. We cannot deduce religious practice, let alone religious belief, from an image.
   3. Reasoning that tries to do so is often circular: “Because the Minoans worshipped a goddess, this must be her image. Because this is the image of a goddess, then Minoans must have worshipped her.”

VIII. Some scholars read Hesiod’s *Theogony* as providing evidence for a clash between Minoan religion, focused on a mother-goddess, and Indo-European religion, focused on a father-god, that was brought to Greece by the Mycenaeans.

A. The three-generation struggle for power can be seen as reflecting the slow process of the newer culture (represented by the younger male gods) gaining power over the older (represented by the female mother goddesses).

B. This reading of Hesiod is fascinating and can be very persuasive.
   1. It overlooks the fact that similar stories exist in Mesopotamian cultures in which no similar Indo-European invasion took place.
   2. One could just as persuasively explain the repeated pattern of a younger male gaining power from an older female in psychological terms, as reflecting the maturation of men and their rejection of their mothers’ control.

C. In short, if we assume that the Minoans worshipped a great mother goddess, *Theogony* can be seen as reflecting the ongoing process of her overthrow and assimilation. If we do not start from this assumption, *Theogony* will not lead us to it.

IX. In sum, we have little good evidentiary reason to believe in an original great mother goddess for ancient Europe and the ancient Near East.

A. The goddess hypothesis perhaps shows a monotheistic bias.
   1. Many modern Westerners find polytheism uncongenial and assume that it must be a later development out of a proto-monotheism. This assumption is ahistorical.
   2. We have no compelling reason to assume that all representations of a female divinity must be representations of the *same* female divinity, unless one starts from that assumption.
B. In fact, the goddess may well be a modern myth, not an ancient one.
1. She provides a “charter” for those women who find themselves dissatisfied with the patriarchal cast of much traditional religion.
2. She reflects the common mythic sense of a Golden Age, a time in the remote past when things were much better. Thus, her adherents assume that goddess worship implies high status for women in society (despite much evidence to the contrary).
3. The story of her defeat by the Indo-European sky-father-god provides an explanation, or aetiology, for how society came to be as it is.

X. The great goddess is just one example of the pitfalls involved in trying to reconstruct the origins and development of classical myth.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Fitton, *Discovery of the Greek Bronze Age*.
Goodison and Morris, “Beyond the Great Mother.”
Penglase, *Greek Myths and Mesopotamia*.
Tringham and Conkey, “Rethinking Figurines.”
Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War*.

Questions to Consider:
1. Can you think of any sort of evidence other than written material that could prove that the Minoans worshipped a great mother goddess?
2. I suggested that the modern belief that there was once a prehistoric great goddess functions in many of the ways that theorists have delineated for myth. Can you think of any other modern beliefs about ancient history or prehistory that work in the same way?
Timeline

c. 7000–c. 2000 BCE.............The “Pre-Palatial” period of Minoan civilization on Crete. Knossos was colonized around 7000, possibly by settlers from southwest Anatolia.

c. 3000–c. 1000 ......................Successive cities occupy Hisarlik in northwestern Turkey; one of them may have been “Homer’s Troy.”

c. 2200–c. 2000 ......................Probable timeframe for arrival in Greece of speakers of an Indo-European language, the ancestor of Greek.

c. 2000–c. 1470 ......................The “Palatial” period of Minoan civilization in Crete and Thera, which was the culture’s high point.

c. 1575–c. 1450 ......................The “formative period” of Mycenaean culture in Greece.

c. 1470–1100 ......................The “Post-Palatial” period of Minoan civilization. After 1100, the Minoans disappear as a cultural presence on Crete and Thera.

c. 1450–c. 1200 ......................The “Palatial” period of Mycenaean culture. The civilization’s highpoint, during which it gained control over Minoan culture.

c. 1200–c. 1050/1000 .............The “Post-Palatial” period of Mycenaean civilization in Greece, after which culture in Greece reverted to a pre-Mycenaean level.

c. 1184 ...............................The most commonly accepted traditional date for the Fall of Troy.

c. 1100–c. 776 ......................The “Dark Ages” in Greece; 776, the traditional ending date of the Dark Ages, is the traditional date of the first Olympic Games.

c. 800?–780 ............................The alphabet introduced into Greece.

753.....................................Traditional date of the founding of Rome.

c. 750?–700 ............................The Iliad and Odyssey are perhaps transcribed into writing.

c. 700? ..................................Hesiod writes Theogony and Works and Days.

c. 525 ..................................Birth of Aeschylus, author of The Oresteia and other works.

496.....................................Birth of Sophocles, author of Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, and other works.
480.................................Birth of Euripides, author of *Bacchae, Hippolytos, Medea*, and other works.

458.................................*The Oresteia* performed in Athens.

456.................................Death of Aeschylus.

431–405............................The Peloponnesian War (between Sparta and Athens and their respective allies).

429.................................Probable date of performance of *Oedipus the King*.

c. 420.................................Herodotus publishes his *Historia* (or “Inquiry”), which includes many references to the heroes of mythology.

406.................................Deaths of Sophocles and Euripides.

405.................................Posthumous performance of Euripides’s *The Bacchae*.

401.................................Posthumous performance of Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*.

399.................................The execution of Socrates.

c. 380.................................Plato writes *Republic*, which includes the “Myth of Er.”

264–241..............................First Punic War between Rome and Carthage; this war and the two succeeding Punic wars establish Rome’s hegemony over the Mediterranean.

218–202..............................Second Punic War.

151–146..............................Third Punic War; final defeat of Carthage. Corinth is captured this same year.

44 BC.................................Assassination of Julius Caesar on March 15.

43 BC.................................Birth of Ovid.

31 BC.................................Battle of Actium; Augustus’s victory here marks the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire.

29?–19 BC............................Virgil writes the *Aeneid*, modeled on the Homeric epics but taking the viewpoint of the Trojans (whom the Romans considered their ancestors). Book II of the *Aeneid* gives the fullest extant account of the Sack of Troy. The *Aeneid* was left incomplete when Virgil died in 19 BC.

c. AD 4?.............................Ovid writes *Metamorphoses*. 

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8..............................................Ovid exiled to Tomis on the Black Sea.
14.............................................Death of Augustus.
17.............................................Death of Ovid, still in exile.
First–second centuries ......Probable period of composition of Apollodorus’s *Library of Greek Mythology*.

312..........................................Constantine converts to Christianity after his victory at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

361–363 ..................................Reign of the Roman emperor Julian “the Apostate,” who briefly re-established paganism as the official religion of the Empire. Supposedly received the last oracle ever given by Delphi.

1054 AD................................Permanent break between Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches leads to rapid loss of knowledge concerning Greek language and literature in the West.

c. 1313–1321 .........................Dante writes *The Divine Comedy*.

1396.................................Manuel Chrysoloras offers classes in Greek in Florence. This begins the revival of interest in Greek literature in Europe.

Fourteenth century ........Publication of *Ovide moralisé*.

1453.................................The Sack of Constantinople by the Ottomans. A great many Greek scholars flee to Italy, bringing manuscripts with them. The study of Greek becomes important in Europe.

1480.................................William Caxton publishes *Ovyde Hys Booke of Methamorphose*, the first English translation of *Metamorphoses*.

1495.................................Aldus Manutius founds the Aldine Press in Venice and begins printing editions of Greek classics.

1498.................................Erasmus begins teaching Greek at Oxford. He becomes professor of Greek at Cambridge in 1511.

1567.................................Arthur Golding publishes his translation of *Metamorphoses*, which Shakespeare probably used.

1626.................................George Sandys publishes his *Ovid’s Metamorphoses Englished*.

1870–1873 .........................Heinrich Schliemann conducts his first excavations at Hisarlik. He finds the “Treasure of Priam” in 1873 and
continues to excavate sporadically until his death in 1890.

1890........................................Sir James Frazer publishes the first edition of *The Golden Bough* in two volumes.

1900........................................Freud publishes *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which includes his theory of the Oedipus complex.

1900........................................Sir Arthur Evans excavates at Knossos on Crete. He finds the remnants of a great prehistoric civilization that he calls “Minoan.”

1903........................................Jane Harrison publishes *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*.


1912........................................Jane Harrison publishes *Themis*.

1913........................................Freud publishes *Totem and Taboo*, which suggests that myths are the wish-dreams of a culture and defines the Oedipus myth as a memory of an actual occurrence in the “primal horde.”

1926........................................Bronislaw Malinowski publishes “Myth in Primitive Psychology.”

1928........................................Vladimir Propp publishes *Morfologija skaski* (*Morphology of the Folktale*); the first English translation was published in 1958.

1941........................................Carl Jung publishes *Einfuhrung in das Wesen der Mythologie* (translated into English in 1949 as *Essays on a Science of Mythology*), in collaboration with Karl Kerényi.

1949........................................Joseph Campbell publishes *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.


1964–1968.........................Claude Lévi-Strauss publishes *Mythologiques* (English: *Mythologies*); the first volume is *Le cru et le cuit* (*The Raw and the Cooked*).
I. Real People

**Aeschylus** (525–458 BC). The first and oldest of the three great Athenian tragedians. He wrote about ninety tragedies, of which seven are extant: *Persians, Prometheus Bound* (some scholars doubt that Aeschylus wrote this), *Seven Against Thebes, Suppliant Women*, and the trilogy *The Oresteia* (composed of the plays *Agamemnon, Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*).

**Augustus** (Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus; 63 BC–AD 14). Great-nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. After Caesar’s assassination, Octavian (as he was then called) became an obvious contender for power; his main rival was Mark Antony. Octavian defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC and became the uncontested head of the Roman state. In 27 BC, he was granted the title Augustus, under which name he is usually identified as the first emperor of Rome.

**Caesar, Gaius Julius** (100–44 BC). General, politician, and author. His assassination in 44 BC was motivated by the belief of many senators that he was planning to establish himself as king. The aftermath of his assassination led to the establishment of the Roman Empire or Principate by his adopted son and great-nephew, Augustus.

**Burkert, Walter** (1931– ). Great scholar of Greek religion and myth. Sometimes called a neo-ritualist. His work incorporates many of the strategies of structuralism; his main contribution is to trace ritual behaviors and mythic patterns to biological causes.

**Campbell, Joseph** (1904–1987). Popular author and lecturer on myth, who argued that all myth functions the same way in all cultures and is a necessary component of spiritual and psychological health.

**Euhemerus** (c. 300 BC). Ancient theorist of myth, who thought that all myths were misunderstood history. Zeus and the other gods had originally been great kings, whose stories were exaggerated and misremembered over time.

**Euripides** (480–06 BC). The third and youngest of the three great Athenian tragedians. His tragedies include *The Bacchae, Hippolytos*, and *Iphigeneia at Aulis*.

**Evans, Sir Arthur** (1851–1941). Excavator of Knossos on Crete; uncovered evidence of Minoan civilization (which he named after the mythical King Minos). He purchased the site of Knossos in 1899 and dug there for the next twenty-five years. His partial reconstructions of the palatial buildings at Knossos are criticized by modern archaeologists, but there is no doubt that he was a pioneer in his field and made discoveries of enormous value.
Frazer, Sir James George (1854–1941). Author of The Golden Bough; anthropological pioneer. His theory that myth is traceable to rituals in honor of the Dying Year God has fallen out of favor, but he is an important figure in the history of thought about myth.

Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939). The father of psychoanalysis. His Oedipus complex may be the most famous modern interpretation of any classical myth.

Gimbutas, Marija (1921–1994). Professor of European Archaeology, University of California, Los Angeles. Her publications argue for the existence of a “great mother goddess” in prehistoric European society and have been profoundly influential on the modern “Goddess movement.”

Harrison, Jane (1850–1928). Primary member of the “Cambridge Ritualist School.” Her most famous publication, Themis, argued for a ritual theory of myth’s function.

Hesiod (c. 700 BC?). Poet; author of Theogony and Works and Days, two of the oldest surviving works of Greek literature (the Iliad and the Odyssey are generally considered to be older, but even this is not certain). He was probably a farmer and shepherd, according to details he himself mentions in his poems.

Homer (c. 750 BC?). The name traditionally given to the bard of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Scholars do not agree about when or where such a person lived or even if it is reasonable to refer to one bard for the epics at all.

Jung, Carl (1875–1961). Founder of analytic psychology and theorist of myth. His most important contribution to the study of myth is his theory of the collective unconscious and the archetypes.

Lang, Andrew (1844–1912). Opponent of Müller’s solar mythology; he thought that all myths were aetiological, a form of proto-science.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1908– ) Founder and major proponent of structuralism. His theory holds that myths serve to mediate binary contradictions present in all human cultures and societies.

Livy (Titus Livius; 59 BC–AD 17). Roman historian whose great work Ab urbe condita libri (Books from the Foundation of the City) covered the history of Rome up to 9 BC. Of the 142 original volumes, only 35 survive. The first book includes the story of Romulus and Remus, as well as other legendary episodes of Roman history, such as the abduction of the Sabine women.

Malinowski, Bronislaw (1884–1942). Anthropologist whose work among the Trobriand islanders led him to formulate the “functionalist” theory of myth, according to which myth serves to justify, or provide “charters” for, societal institutions and customs.

Mark Antony (Marcus Antonius; 86 or 83–30 BC). Friend and supporter of Julius Caesar; main rival of Octavian for primary power after Caesar’s assassination. His
liaison with Cleopatra was very unpopular in Rome. Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium (31 BC), and they both committed suicide the next year. Antony’s suicide was motivated by a false rumor that Cleopatra was dead.

Müller, Max (1823–1900). Indo-European linguist and theorist of myth; proponent of the “Solar Myth” theory, in which all myths are viewed as stories about the battle between sunlight and darkness. He is famous for saying that mythology is a “disease of language.”

Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso; 43 BC–AD 17). Roman poet, author of Metamorphoses. His other works include Amores, Ars amatoria, and Remedia amoris, all of which are concerned with sex and love affairs. He was exiled from Rome by Augustus in AD 8, for carmen et error (“a poem and a mistake”). The poem was probably Ars amatoria; the “mistake” remains a mystery.


Protagoras (c. 490–c. 420 BC). The most famous of the Sophists; best known for his saying “Man is the measure of all things.”

Pythagoras (c. 550–? BC). A philosopher, mathematician, and mystic, Pythagoras founded a religious sect (Pythagoreanism) that believed in reincarnation. It is very difficult to determine which of the doctrines attributed to him were actually his and which were later developments from his teachings.

Pythia. The title of Apollo’s priestess at Delphi who spoke the god’s oracles. She was an unmarried woman over the age of fifty.

Schliemann, Heinrich (1822–1890). German archaeologist; the “discoverer of Troy” and excavator of Mycenae. He began excavations at Hisarlik in 1871 and discovered the “Treasure of Priam” in 1873. From 1874 to 1876, he ran excavations in Greece, notably at Mycenae and Orchomenos, and returned to Troy in April 1876. Though he did not understand the complexity or age of the ruins he excavated, misidentifying Troy II (c. 2200 BC) as Homer’s Troy, Schliemann deserves great credit for his pioneering work.

Sophocles (496–406 BC). Second of the great Athenian tragedians. He wrote perhaps as many as 120 plays, of which only 7 survive: Ajax, Antigone, Electra, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Philoctetes, and Trachiniae. There is a tradition, probably trustworthy, that after his death he was worshipped as a hero under the name “Dexion.”

Ventris, Michael (1922–1956). The decipherer of Linear B. In 1952, he discovered that the language of the Linear B tablets was a form of Greek.

Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro; 70–19 BC). Born near Mantua. Author of the Eclogues, the Georgics, and the Aeneid; generally recognized as the greatest
Roman poet. Friend of Horace and Maecenas. The *Aeneid* was incomplete when he died; supposedly, he asked on his deathbed for it to be burned.

II. Mythological Characters: Humans, Monsters, and Gods

Note on transliteration of names: There is no easy way to handle the question of how to transliterate Greek names into the Roman alphabet. The old Latinized system (in which Greek *kappa* becomes *c*, the ending -*os* becomes -*us*, *iota* on the end of diphthongs becomes *e*, and so on) is the most familiar, but it is inaccurate in many ways. The more accurate system is jarring to English readers’ eyes and often renders familiar names unrecognizable (*Oedipus* becomes *Oidipous*, *Ajax* becomes *Aias*, *Jocasta* becomes *Iokaste*, and so on).

For ease of reference, I have followed the intermediate system adopted in R. Hard’s translation of Apollodorus’s *Library*, because I recommend that text. This system uses *c* instead of *k*, but preserves the Greek vowels (*Cronos*, not *Kronos* or *Cronus*). Like Hard, I have departed from that system for names that are extremely familiar in their Latinized forms (e.g., *Oedipus*). Finally, for names that we encounter only in Ovid, I have used the Latin spellings (e.g., *Narcissus*, not *Narkissos*).

**Achilles**. Greatest Greek warrior in the Trojan War, main character of the *Iliad*. Son of the goddess *Thetis* and a human father, *Peleus*.

**Actaeon**. Man who inadvertently saw Artemis nude. As punishment, she turned him into a stag, but left his mind aware of who he was. He was torn apart by his own hounds.

**Adonis**. Beautiful youth beloved by *Aphrodite*. He was killed while hunting.

**Aerope**. Wife of *Atreus*, mother of *Agamemnon* and *Menelaos*. She gave the golden ram on which the kingship of *Mycenae* depended to *Atreus*’s brother *Thyestes*, with whom she was having an affair.

**Aeneas**. Son of the goddess *Aphrodite* (*Venus*) and the Trojan *Anchises*; husband of *Creusa* and later of *Lavinia*; father of *Iülus*. A member of a collateral branch of the Trojan royal family; the main character of the *Aeneid*.

**Agamemnon**. Commander-in-chief of the Greek forces at Troy. Brother of *Menelaos*; husband of *Clytemnestra*. He sacrifices his daughter *Iphigeneia* to receive a fair wind for Troy. On his return, *Clytemnestra* kills him; she is later killed by their son *Orestes* to avenge *Agamemnon*’s death. These events form the plot of Aeschylus’s trilogy *The Oresteia*.

**Aigeus**. King of Athens; father of *Theseus* by the Troezenian princess *Aithra*. Briefly married to Medea.

**Aigisthos**. Cousin of *Agamemnon* and *Menelaos*, who seduces *Clytemnestra* while *Agamemnon* is away at war. He murders *Agamemnon* upon his return from
Troy and is himself killed by Agamemnon’s son Orestes. This story is frequently cited in the *Odyssey* as a parallel to Odysseus’s family situation.

**Aithra.** Princess of Troezen; mother of Theseus, by either Aigeus or Poseidon.

**Alcestis.** Wife of Admetos; she agreed to die in his place so that he could continue to live. Heracles wrestled Death and defeated him, thus bringing Alcestis back from the dead.

**Alcmene.** Wife of Amphitryon; mother of Heracles and Iphicles. Heracles’s father was Zeus, while Iphicles’s father was Amphitryon.

**Amazons.** A race of warrior-women who lived at the edges of the world, commonly thought to be somewhere near the Black Sea. The theme of fighting an Amazon recurs in the stories of various heroes, including Heracles, Theseus, and Achilles.

**Amphitryon.** Alcmene’s husband; father of Iphicles; stepfather of Heracles.

**Anchises.** A member of the Trojan royal family who had an affair with Aphrodite. Their son was Aeneas, the title character of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

**Antiope.** See Hippolyta.

**Anush.** Hurrian god corresponding to Ouranos.

**Aphrodite (Roman Venus).** Goddess of sexual passion. According to *Theogony*, she was born from Ouranos’s severed genitals; according to the *Iliad*, she was the daughter of Zeus and Dione. Wife of Hephaistos; mother (by the mortal Anchises) of the Trojan Aeneas; lover of Ares.

**Apollo:** Son of Zeus and Leto, twin brother of Artemis. In the *Iliad*, he appears mainly as the god of prophecy and as the bringer of plague and sudden death. Later authors would stress his association with reason, healing, and music. His identification with the sun is much later than Homer. He is also called Phoebus.

**Apsyrts.** Medea’s younger brother, whom she kills, chops into pieces, and throws overboard to slow down her father’s pursuit of the Argo.

**Ares (Roman Mars).** Son of Zeus and Hera; god of war; particularly associated with the physical, bloody, distressing aspects of war (cf. *Athena*).

**Argo.** The ship on which Jason sailed to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. All the greatest heroes of his day sailed with him.

**Argonauts.** The sailors on the Argo.

**Ariadne.** Daughter of Minos and Pasiphae of Crete (and, thus, half-sister of the Minotaur). She helps Theseus to kill the Minotaur by giving him a ball of thread to guide him out of the Labyrinth. He takes her with him when he leaves Crete, but abandons her on the island of Naxos.
**Artemis** (Roman Diana). Daughter of Zeus and Leto; twin sister of Apollo. A virgin goddess. She is the patron of hunters, wild animals, and girls before their marriages. She brings sudden death to women. Her identification with the moon is later than Homer.

**Athena** (Roman Minerva). Daughter of Zeus, who sprang from his brow fully grown and wearing armor; according to *Theogony*, Zeus had previously swallowed her mother, Metis (“wisdom” or “cleverness”). Athena is the goddess of warfare in its nobler aspects (cf. **Ares**). A virgin goddess, she is associated with wisdom, cleverness, and weaving.

**Atlas**. Son of Iapetos, brother of Prometheus and Epimetheus. He holds the sky upon his shoulders.

**Atreus**. Grandson of Tantalos, son of Pelops, father of Agamemnon and Menelaos. After his brother Thyestes seduced Atreus’s wife, Aerope, Atreus took revenge by killing Thyestes’s sons and serving their flesh to him at a banquet.

**Augean Stables**. Heracles’s fifth labor involved cleaning these stables, which had never been cleaned. He accomplished the task by diverting two rivers to run through them.

**Calchas**. Agamemnon’s seer during the Trojan War. He interpreted the omens to tell Agamemnon that Artemis demanded the sacrifice of Iphigeneia.

**Cassandra**. Daughter of Priam and Hecabe; sister of Hector and Paris. During the Sack of Troy, Aias the Lesser rapes her in the temple of Athena. This outrage motivates the goddess’s anger at the Greeks.

**Centaur**. Creature with the body of a horse and the torso and head of a man. Centaurs are almost always violent, sexually aggressive, and dangerous.

**Cerberus**. The three-headed (or fifty-headed) hound of Tartaros. Heracles’s final labor was to capture him and lead him to the world of the living.

**Ceres**. See **Demeter**.

**Cerynian Hind**. Capturing this golden-horned deer was Heracles’s third labor.

**Chaos**. According to Hesiod, the primordial “gap” from which, or after which, Gaia, Tartaros, and Eros came into being.

**Clytemnestra/Clytaimestra**. Wife of Agamemnon, mother of Orestes, half-sister of Helen. She takes Aigisthos as her lover while Agamemnon is away at Troy and assists Aigisthos in murdering Agamemnon upon his return.

**Cronos** (Roman Saturn). Youngest son of Gaia and Ouranos, with whom Gaia plots against Ouranos. Cronos castrates his father with the help of a sickle that Gaia makes him, whereupon Ouranos retreats to his proper place as the sky and all of Gaia’s children can be born.
Cretan Bull. Capturing this ferocious Bull was Heracles’s sixth labor.

Cupid. See Eros.

Cybele. A Phrygian “great mother” goddess. Artemis at Ephesus has some characteristics in common with her, as does Demeter.

Daidalos. Great craftsman and artisan. He made the wooden cow that enabled Pasiphae to mate with the bull and conceive the Minotaur; he also, at Minos’s command, constructed the Labyrinth in which the Minotaur was kept.

Daphne. Nymph, sworn to chastity, whom Apollo desires and chases. She calls out for help to her father, a river god, and is turned into a laurel tree.

Deianeira. Heracles’s wife. Her use of the blood of the centaur Nessos, which she thinks is a love-charm, leads to Heracles’s death.

Demeter (Roman Ceres). One of Zeus’s five siblings; goddess of grain and agriculture. Her quest for her daughter Persephone, who was kidnapped by Hades, is recounted in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. The Eleusinian Mysteries, celebrated in her honor, were one of the most important religious festivals of ancient Greece.

Demophoën. Son of Metaneira. Demeter serves as his nanny and tries to immortalize him; Metaneira’s interference angers the goddess and ends the attempt. Demophoën probably dies shortly afterward.

Deucalion. With his wife, Pyrrha, the only survivor of the Great Flood (at least according to Ovid). They repopulate the world by throwing stones over their shoulders.

Diana. See Artemis.

Diomedes. King of Thrace, who had a pair of man-eating mares. Taming these mares and driving them back to Greece was Heracles’s seventh labor. According to some authors, he fed their master to the mares.

Dionysos (Roman Bacchus). Son of Zeus and the mortal woman Semele. After Semele’s incineration, Dionysos was incubated in Zeus’s thigh. He is the god of wine, intoxication, frenzy, and drama; also associated with rapidly growing plants, such as vine and ivy. Euripides’s Bacchae is our fullest extant description of him.

Echidna. One of the many female monsters of Greek mythology; her body is partly in the form of a snake.

Electra. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra’s daughter, who helped her brother Orestes avenge their father’s death.

Epimetheus. Son of Iapetos, brother of Prometheus. In Hesiod’s Works and Days, he receives the gift of Pandora.
**Erebos.** One of the earliest gods, according to *Theogony*; the child of Chaos. Erebos embodies the gloomy darkness of Tartaros.

**Eris.** Goddess of strife or discord. Angry over not being invited to the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis, she threw an apple marked “For the fairest” onto the banquet table. This Apple of Discord began a chain of events that led to the Trojan War.

**Eros.** God of sexual desire. Hesiod lists him as one of the three deities to appear first after Chaos; in other versions, he is the son of Aphrodite.

**Erymanthian Boar.** Heracles’s fourth labor was to bring this beast to Eurystheus.

**Eumenides.** A euphemistic term for the Furies; literally means “Kindly Ones.”

**Eurydice.** Wife of Orpheus; after her untimely death, he journeyed to Tartaros to beg for her return. His singing was so beautiful that Hades and Persephone agreed to let her return to life; however, Orpheus was ordered not to look back at her until they had reached the upper world. He did look back, and she vanished into Tartaros.

**Eurystheus.** King of Tiryns, whom Heracles served for twelve years, probably as expiation for killing his wife, Megara, and their children.

**Furies.** Spirits of blood vengeance who avenge violence against kin and especially violence of children against their parents. According to *Theogony*, they were born from the drops of blood that fell from Ouranos’s severed genitals. In Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, they torment Orestes for killing his mother, Clytemnestra.

**Gaia/Ge.** The earth; according to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, one of the three primordial deities who came after Chaos (the others are Tartaros and Eros).

**Geryon.** Triple-bodied monster who lives in the remote West. Stealing his cattle and driving them back to Greece was Heracles’s tenth labor.

**Gilgamesh.** One of the very few heroes who features in Mesopotamian myth. His adventures are recounted in the fragmentary “Epic of Gilgamesh.” He has some characteristics in common with both Heracles and Achilles.

**Gorgons.** Three monstrous sisters, mentioned in *Theogony* and elsewhere. They have snakes for hair and their gaze turns living creatures to stone. One of the sisters, Medusa, is mortal; the hero Perseus beheads her and uses her severed head as a weapon to petrify his enemies.

**Hades** (Roman Pluto). Brother of Zeus, husband of Persephone. Ruler of the Underworld (Tartaros), which comes to be called Hades after him.

**Hebe.** Daughter of Zeus and Hera; her name means “youthful bloom.” Wife of the deified Heracles.
**Hecabe.** Queen of Troy, wife of Priam, mother of Hector, Paris, and Cassandra. (May be more familiar in the Latinized spelling of her name, “Hecuba.”)

**Hector.** Crown prince of Troy, son of Priam and Hecabe, husband of Andromache, father of Astyanax. He was killed by Achilles.

**Helen.** Daughter of Zeus and Leda, sister of Clytemnestra, wife of Menelaos; the most beautiful woman in the world. Her seduction (or kidnapping?) by Paris was the cause of the Trojan War.

**Helios.** A Titan; god of the sun.

**Hephaistos** (Roman Vulcan). Son of Zeus and Hera or, perhaps, of Hera alone. In the *Iliad*, he is married to Charis; in the *Odyssey*, to Aphrodite. He is lame and ugly. The smith-god who, to some extent, represents fire itself.

**Hera** (Roman Juno). Wife and sister of Zeus, mother of Hephaistos and Ares. She is the patron goddess of marriage and married women. In the *Iliad*, she hates the Trojans and favors the Greeks.

**Heracles** (Roman Hercules). Greatest Greek hero, son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. He lived (probably) two generations before the Trojan War. He is cited as a paradigm of the hero throughout both epics; Odysseus speaks to his spirit in the Underworld (*Od. XI*).

**Hermes** (Roman Mercury). Often identified as the “messenger of the gods,” his role is actually far more complex. He is a god of boundaries and transitions and of exchange and commerce. He serves as the patron for travelers, merchants, thieves, heralds, and messengers. In his role as *Psychopompos*, he escorts the souls of the dead to Tartaros.

**Hesperides.** Three nymphs who live on an island in the far West. They guard a tree with three golden apples (a wedding present from Gaia to Hera). Heracles’s eleventh labor is to get these apples; he accomplishes this with the help of Atlas, for whom he holds the sky temporarily.

**Hestia** (Roman Vesta). Goddess of the hearth; sister of Zeus.

**Hippodameia.** Daughter of Oinamaos of Pisa; any suitor who wants to marry her must first defeat Oinamaos in a chariot race. Pelops does so by treachery, bribing Oinamaos’s slave Myrtilos to remove the linchpins from Oinamaos’s chariot. Oinamaos is killed, and Pelops marries Hippodameia. Their children include Atreus and Thyestes.

**Hippolyta.** Amazon queen; Heracles’s ninth labor was to fetch her belt (or “girdle”). She may be the same queen (often called Antiope) whom Theseus married.

**Hippolytos.** Son of Theseus and Hippolyta (or Antiope), the Amazon queen. His devotion to Artemis and scorn for Aphrodite and its consequences are the subject of Euripides’s play *Hippolytos*.  

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Hydra. See Lernaian Hydra.

Iapetos. A Titan; father of Prometheus and Epimetheus.

Iolaos. Heracles’s nephew who served as his charioteer and helped him in some of his labors.

Iphicles. Heracles’s twin and half-brother; Heracles was fathered by Zeus, and Iphicles was fathered the next night by Alcmené’s husband, Amphitryon.

Iphigeneia. Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Agamemnon sacrificed her to gain a fair wind to sail to Troy.

Jason. Leader of the Argonauts who sailed to Colchis on the Black Sea in search of the Golden Fleece. He married the Colchian princess Medea, whose magic helped him get the Fleece. Years later, when he wanted to divorce her to marry a Greek princess, Medea retaliated by killing their sons.

Jocasta. Wife of Laios; wife and mother of Oedipus; mother (and grandmother) of Antigone, Ismene, Polyneices, and Eteocles.

Juno. See Hera.

Jupiter. See Zeus.

Kumarbi. Hurrian god, equivalent to Cronos.

Laios. King of Thebes, husband of Jocasta, father of Oedipus. Because he received an oracle telling him that any son he had with Jocasta would kill him, Laios exposed the baby Oedipus on a mountain. Years later, Laios was indeed killed by Oedipus, who did not know that Laios was his father.

Leda. Wife of Tyndareus, mother of Clytemnestra and Helen (as well as of two sons, Castor and Pollux). Zeus appeared to Leda in the form of a swan, and Helen was hatched from an egg.

Lernaian Hydra. Snake-like creature with nine heads, one of which was immortal. Killing it was Heracles’s second labor, which he accomplished with Iolaos’s help. Whenever a head was cut off, two grew in its place; Iolaos cauterized the stumps as Heracles cut off the heads. Heracles buried the immortal head under a boulder.

Leto (Roman Latona). Mother of Apollo and Artemis.

Maenads. Female followers of Dionysos; in myth, they have extraordinary powers, such as the abilities to make wine or milk flow from the ground, to handle snakes, and to tear animals apart with their bare hands.

Mars. See Ares.

Medea. Princess of Colchis, daughter of Aiētes, and granddaughter of the sun god Helios. She was skilled in sorcery and magic. She helped Jason obtain the Golden Fleece and returned with him as his wife to Greece, where she bore him two sons. When Jason wanted to divorce her to marry the princess of Corinth,
Medea retaliated by killing her own children. She then escaped on a dragon-drawn chariot sent to her by Helios and went to Athens, where she married Aigeus and bore him a son. However, she was exiled from Athens for trying to kill Aigeus’s son Theseus.

**Medusa.** A Gorgon; the only mortal one of the three sisters. According to Ovid, she was originally very beautiful; Poseidon raped her in Athena’s temple, and Athena cursed Medusa with snakes for hair. Most other authors say that all three Gorgons had snakes instead of hair.

**Megara.** Heracles’s first wife. In a fit of madness sent by Hera, he killed their children (varying in number from three to eight, depending on the source) and perhaps Megara as well. Those versions in which he does not kill Megara say that he gave her to Iolaos after killing the children.

**Metis.** Zeus’s first wife, whom he swallowed when she was pregnant with Athena. Her name means “wisdom” or “cleverness.”

**Menelaos.** Brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen.

**Metaneira.** Queen of Eleusis; hired the disguised Demeter to be a nanny for her baby son, Demophoön. When Demeter tried to immortalize Demophoön, Metaneira’s horrified interference stopped the process.

**Minerva.** See **Athena**.

**Minos.** King of Crete; husband of Pasiphae, father of Ariadne and Phaedra. He hired Daedalos to construct the Labyrinth in which the Minotaur was confined.

**Minotaur.** Man-eating monster, half-human and half-bull. He was conceived when Pasiphae mated with a bull. Kept in the Labyrinth; each year seven young men and seven young women from Athens were fed to him. He was killed by Theseus with the help of Ariadne.

**Myrtilos.** Charioteer whom Pelops bribed to help him win Hippodameia. Myrtilos removed the linchpins from Oinomaos’s chariot wheels, so that the wheels fell off and Oinomaos was killed. Myrtilos was later killed by Pelops for trying to rape Hippodameia.

**Narcissus.** Beautiful youth who fell in love with his own reflection and pined away.

**Nemean Lion.** Heracles’s first labor was to kill this beast. He wore its skin as a cloak forever after.

**Nessos.** Centaur who tried to rape Heracles’s wife, Deianeira. Heracles shot him; as he was dying, Nessos told Deianeira to save some of his blood as a love-charm in case Heracles ever lost interest in her. She did so, but when she used the “charm” years later, it burned Heracles’s flesh and caused him such agony that he killed himself.
Niobe. Queen of Thebes, sister of Tantalos. She boasted that she was better than Leto, because Leto had only two children but she, Niobe, had fourteen. Apollo and Artemis killed all Niobe’s children. Some authors say she turned into a cliff with water running down it continually to represent her tears.

Oceanos. Titan; the river that flows around the edges of Gaia (the earth).

Odysseus. Cleverest and craftiest of the Greeks; the Trojan Horse was his idea. Main character of the Odyssey.

Oedipus. Son of Laios and Jocasta. Exposed on a mountain as an infant, because Laios had received an oracle that any child of his and Jocasta’s would grow up to kill him. Not knowing who his true parents were, Oedipus did indeed kill Laios and marry Jocasta. Sophocles’s Oedipus the King is the most famous account of this myth.

Olympians. These originally included Zeus, his five siblings, and eight of his children: Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Hephastos, Aphrodite, Hermes, and Dionysos. Later, the number twelve became canonical, and Hades and Hestia were omitted.

Orestes. Son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. He avenges his father’s murder by killing Aigisthos and Clytemnestra. This story is frequently cited in the Odyssey as a parallel to Odysseus’s family situation.

Orpheus. The greatest bard who ever lived. When his wife, Eurydice, was killed, he journeyed to Tartaros to beg for her return. His singing was so beautiful that Hades and Persephone agreed to let her return to life; however, Orpheus was ordered not to look back at Eurydice until they had reached the upper world. He did look back, and she vanished into Tartaros.

Ouranos. Son and husband of Gaia; his name means “Sky.” When he would not allow Gaia’s children to be born, she enlisted the help of her youngest son, Cronos, who castrated Ouranos with a sickle. Ouranos retreated to his position as sky, Gaia’s children were freed, and Cronos took over the rule.

Pandora. The first woman. Unnamed in Theogony, in Works and Days she is sent as a gift from the gods to Epimetheus. Her jar contained all the evils of the world, plus hope; she opened the jar and released the evils.

Paris. Son of Priam and Hecabe, brother of Hector; prince of Troy. His abduction or, perhaps, seduction of Helen from her husband, Menelaos, motivated the Trojan War.

Pasiphaë. Wife of Minos; mother of Ariadne, Phaidra, and the Minotaur. She conceived the latter child through an unnatural passion for a bull; Daidalos built a wooden cow into which Pasiphaë crawled to mate with the bull.

Peleus. Achilles’s father; mortal husband of Thetis.
Pelops. Son of Tantalos, whom Tantalos butchered to feed to the gods. He was resurrected and given an ivory shoulder to replace the shoulder Demeter ate. His sons were Atreus and Thyestes.

Pentheus. Young king of Thebes; his refusal to believe in the divinity of Dionysos led to his terrible death at the hands of his own mother and aunts. Euripides’s Bacchae tells the story of these events.

Persephone (Roman Proserpina). Wife of Hades; daughter of Demeter; queen of the Underworld. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter recounts the story of her abduction by Hades and Demeter’s search for her.

Phaethon. Mortal son of the Sun God, who begs the favor of driving the chariot of the sun for a single day. He is killed in the attempt.

Phaidra. Daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë; sister of Ariadne and the Minotaur; wife of Theseus. Her passion for her stepson Hippolytos leads to her own and Hippolytos’s death. Euripides’s Hippolytos tells the story.

Phoebus. See Apollo.

Pirithous. Friend of Theseus; they went together to Tartaros to try to kidnap Persephone to be Pirithous’s wife. Theseus was trapped there for many years until he was freed by Heracles; Pirithous was trapped forever.

Polyxena. Young daughter of Priam and Hecabe, whom the Greeks sacrificed to the ghost of Achilles as they left Troy.

Pontos. Son of Gaia; the personification of the Mediterranean Sea.

Poseidon (Roman Neptune). Brother of Zeus, god of the sea. One of the twelve Olympians.

Priam. King of Troy. During the Sack of Troy, he was slain at his own household altar.

Procrustes. One of the brigands whom Theseus met and killed on his way from Troezen to Athens. Famous for his bed, which he made every traveler fit.

Prometheus. Son of Iapetos; benefactor of mankind. In Theogony, he tried to trick Zeus into accepting the worse portion of the first sacrifice. Zeus responded by hiding fire, which Prometheus then stole for humans. His punishment was to be tied to a crag in the Caucasus and have his liver eaten every day by an eagle. He was eventually freed by Heracles.

Pyramus. In Ovid’s Metamorphoses, a young man who commits suicide when he thinks his beloved Thisbe is dead.

Pyrrha. Wife of Deucalion. After the Great Flood, she and Deucalion repopulated the world by throwing stones over their shoulders.

Remus. Twin brother of Romulus.
**Rheia.** Titan; daughter of Ouranos and Gaia; wife of Cronos; mother of Zeus and his five siblings.

**Romulus.** Founder of Rome. He and his brother Remus were set afloat on the Tiber River in a basket; they were found and nursed by a she-wolf. After they grew up and decided to found their own city, Romulus killed Remus in a quarrel over the naming of the city.

**Satyrs.** Mythical male followers of Dionysos. Usually shown in art as snub-nosed men with animal-like ears and horses’ tails. Extremely sexually aggressive.

**Scylla.** A female monster, with snakes for legs and six heads and torsos. She eats men.

**Semele.** Princess of Thebes; mother of Dionysos. Hera tricked Semele into making Zeus promise to show himself to her in his full glory. When he did so, Semele was incinerated; Zeus rescued her son Dionysos from her womb and sewed him into his own thigh.

**Sinis.** One of the brigands Theseus killed on his way to Athens; he tied travelers to two bent-over pine trees, then released the trees.

**Sisyphos.** One of the “cardinal sinners” in Tartaros; he had tried to avoid dying by imprisoning Death in chains. His punishment is to roll a stone uphill continuously, only to have it roll back down as he reaches the summit.

**Sphinx.** A female monster that was devastating Thebes by eating anyone who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus solved the riddle and the Sphinx killed herself.

**Stymphalian Birds.** These birds had arrow-tipped feathers that they could shoot at will. Heracles’s sixth labor was to kill them.

**Tantalos.** One of the “cardinal sinners” in Tartaros. He tried to trick the gods into eating the flesh of his own son, Pelops. His punishment is to stand forever in a river of water with fruit trees over his head; he is eternally hungry and thirsty, but when he tries to drink, the water flows away and when he tries to eat, the fruit blows out of his reach.

**Tartaros.** The Underworld, the land of the dead; the realm of Hades. According to Hesiod, one of the three primordial gods (with Gaia and Eros).

**Teiresias.** Great Theban seer; a character in Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone* and in Euripides’s *Bacchae*.

**Teshub.** Hurrian storm-god; equivalent of Zeus.

**Theseus.** Athenian hero and legendary king of Athens. His most famous exploit was fighting and killing the Cretan Minotaur.

**Themis.** Goddess whose name means “right order.” She was Zeus’s second wife, after Metis; her children included Justice and Peace.
Thetis. Sea-goddess; mother of Achilles; wife of Peleus.

Thisbe. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a young girl who commits suicide in despair over the death of her beloved Pyramus.

Thyestes. Grandson of Tantalos, son of Pelops, father of Aigisthos, brother of Atreus. After Thyestes seduced Atreus’s wife, Aerope, Atreus took revenge by killing Thyestes’s sons and serving their flesh to him at a banquet.

Titans. The children of Gaia and Ouranos; Cronos and his siblings. After Zeus overthrew Cronos, the two generations engaged in a “Battle of the Gods and Titans,” which ended in victory for Zeus and his fellow Olympians.

Tithonos. Trojan man, beloved of the dawn goddess Eos. She gives him eternal life, but forgets to ask for eternal youth. Thus, Tithonos is doomed to grow older and older forever.

Tityos. One of the “cardinal sinners” in Tartaros. His crime was the attempted rape of Leto; his punishment is to have his liver continuously devoured by a vulture.

Tyndareus. King of Sparta; husband of Leda; father of Clytemnestra; stepfather of Helen.

Venus. See *Aphrodite*.

Zeus (Roman Jupiter). The ruler of the Olympian gods. Brother and husband of Hera; brother of Hades and Poseidon; father of Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Artemis, Athena, and perhaps Hephaistos. Originally a sky-god, he controls thunder and lightning. The patron of justice, suppliants, and *xenia*. 
Classical Mythology

Part II

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Dr. Vandiver has published a book, *Heroes in Herodotus: The Interaction of Myth and History*, and several articles, as well as delivering numerous papers at national and international conferences. She is currently working on a second book that examines the influence of the classical tradition on the British poets of World War I. Her previous Teaching Company courses include *The Iliad of Homer*, *The Odyssey of Homer*, and *Virgil’s Aeneid*.

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Classical Mythology

Scope:

This set of twenty-four lectures introduces the student to the primary characters and most important stories of classical Greek and Roman mythology and surveys some of the leading theoretical approaches to understanding myth in general and classical myth in particular.

The first lecture introduces students to the overall plan of the lectures and identifies key issues of definition and terminology. This lecture begins a discussion of the definition of “myth” that will continue through the next two lectures. The lecture also discusses some of the problems inherent in studying classical mythology, which is preserved in literary form.

Lectures Two and Three examine some of the most influential nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories about myth’s nature and function. Lecture Two discusses the theories of Müller, Lang, Frazer, Harrison, and Malinowski; Lecture Three looks at the psychological theories of Freud and Jung; the structuralist methodologies of Propp, Lévi-Strauss, and Burkert; and the metaphysical approach of Campbell.

Lectures Four through Six concentrate on the account of the creation of the world given in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and in the much later Roman author Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Lecture Four examines the three-generation struggle for power in *Theogony*, which ends with Zeus’s rise to power as the ruling god. This lecture discusses the implications of a creation story in which the gods are not transcendent but are part of the physical universe and come into being with it. The lecture ends by briefly comparing Ovid’s creation story to Hesiod’s. Lecture Five continues the discussion of Zeus, focusing on his role as the protector of abstract concepts (such as justice) that concern the orderly functioning of human society. The lecture also examines Zeus’s early marriages and the birth of Athena from his head and suggests possible interpretations of these episodes. Lecture Six looks at Hesiod’s depiction of humans in the myth of Prometheus and Pandora. We consider the implications of this myth for the Greek view of society and particularly of women and gender roles. The lecture then discusses the nature of the gods, as reflected in *Theogony*, and delineates the essential differences between gods and humans.

Lectures Seven through Eleven focus on individual gods and their interactions with human beings. Lecture Seven examines the crucial myth of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades as it is recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. The lecture discusses the myth’s implications for the Greek view of life and death, marriage, and gender roles. Lecture Eight continues our discussion of Demeter by examining the Eleusinian Mysteries, one of the most important ancient religious cults, which honored her and promised a happy afterlife to initiates. The lecture then compares the afterlife implied by the Eleusinian Mysteries with
contrasting views of the afterlife found elsewhere in Greek myth and religion. Lecture Nine discusses Apollo and Artemis and examines their characteristic functions and associations, including Apollo’s famous oracle at Delphi. Lecture Ten examines Zeus’s two youngest sons, Hermes and Dionysos, and offers interpretations of the very disparate areas of influence of each of these gods. In Lecture Eleven, we examine Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual passion. The lecture focuses on the account in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* of her affair with the human Anchises and discusses the implications of that affair for our understanding of the Greek view of sexual passion and the relationship between the sexes.

Lecture Twelve turns to the cultural and historical background of Greek myth. We examine the similarities between Hesiod’s creation account and Mesopotamian myth; then we look at the two great prehistoric cultures of Greece, the Minoans and the Mycenaeans, and discuss the origins of classical mythology in those two cultures. The lecture takes the modern theory of a prehistoric “great mother goddess” as a test case for the difficulties of reconstructing prehistoric religious beliefs.

In Lectures Thirteen through Twenty-One, we shift our focus from the gods to the heroes. Lecture Thirteen discusses Hesiod’s story of the Five Ages or Races of human beings (in *Works and Days*) and contrasts it with Ovid’s reworking of the same myth. The main difference is that Hesiod includes a Race of Heroes; the lecture examines what is meant by the term “hero” in Greek myth and discusses the possibility that the heroes reflect memories of the Mycenaean Age. Lecture Fourteen gives a detailed synopsis of the adventures of one such hero, the Athenian Theseus. We pay special attention to his adventure with the Minotaur, his marriage to an Amazon, and his killing of his son Hippolytos. Lecture Fifteen continues our examination of Theseus by discussing possible theoretical interpretations of his adventure with the Minotaur, then looks at the possibility that this myth is based in memories of Minoan civilization. In Lecture Sixteen, we consider the greatest and most complicated hero of all, Heracles. We see how this hero embodies contradictions. We discuss Hera’s special hatred for Heracles, consider Heracles’s tendency toward excess, and examine his famous twelve labors. The lecture describes Heracles’s death and subsequent immortality and concludes by discussing some of the implications of this hero’s many contradictory characteristics.

Lecture Seventeen summarizes the most famous event of classical myth, the Trojan War. The Trojan War is the most frequently drawn on by authors in various genres, possibly because it functioned as the dividing line between the heroic age and the age of normal human history. The lecture includes a brief summary of the basic story of the Trojan War, from its beginnings in the marriage of Peleus and Thetis through the ill-fated sack of Troy. Lecture Eighteen moves from the Trojan War to one of the primary families involved in it, the House of Atreus. The lecture discusses the hereditary curse of that unhappy family and
consider the implications of that curse for the concepts of fate and individual responsibility. Lecture Nineteen continues our examination of the cursed House of Atreus by looking closely at the use Aeschylus made of that myth in his great trilogy *The Oresteia*. The lecture discusses Aeschylus’s shaping of the myth to focus on issues of justice and considers the difficulty of separating the myth itself from the literary treatment of the myth. Lecture Twenty addresses similar issues in its examination of Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*. The lecture briefly reviews Freud’s and Lévi-Strauss’s readings of the myth, considers the standard interpretation that the play’s main focus is the conflict between fate and free will, and discusses another reading that sees Oedipus as a paradigm of the fifth-century Athenian rationalist. The lecture ends by examining the difficulties of discussing this myth apart from Sophocles’s play. Lecture Twenty-One pulls together several threads of earlier lectures by examining the threatening women and female monsters that many heroes must face. The lecture concentrates on the Amazons and Medea and includes a brief discussion of such monsters as Medusa and the Sphinx.

Lectures Twenty-Two and Twenty-Three focus on specifically Roman uses of classical myth. In Lecture Twenty-Two, we consider the Roman appropriation of the Greek story of the Trojan War and see how the Romans shaped the story to serve as their own foundation myth. We also discuss the purely Roman legend of Romulus and Remus. Lecture Twenty-Three sets Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in context by examining the cultural milieu in which Ovid wrote; the lecture also considers the difficulties of trying to recover “myth” from Ovid’s very literary, ironic retelling of it.

Finally, Lecture Twenty-Four concludes the course by examining the influence of Ovid in particular and classical myth in general on later European, English, and American culture. The lecture suggests that the narrative sequences, images, and characters of classical myth are still very much alive in modern culture.
Lecture Thirteen
Humans, Heroes, and Half-Gods

Scope: In this lecture, we look at the creation of human beings. We discuss the “Myth of the Five Races” in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, which depicts a deterioration of humanity’s lot from the earliest Golden Race down to our own Race of Iron. We then contrast Hesiod’s description with Ovid’s in *Metamorphoses* and consider the implications of the differences in tone and content of the two authors. One crucial difference is that Hesiod includes a “Race of Heroes,” which Ovid omits. The lecture concludes by discussing the heroes of Greek mythology and the possibility that they reflect a memory of the Mycenaean Age.

Outline

I. We have seen that Hesiod’s *Theogony* does not recount the origins of humans. *Works and Days*, however, does contain an account of the creation of humans. This account is often referred to as the “Myth of the Five Ages” or “Myth of the Five Races.”

II. Hesiod describes five successive races of humans, starting with the Golden Race and ending with our own race. The overall pattern is one of degeneration and increased hardship.

A. The first race, the Golden Race, was created by the immortals who dwelt on Olympus during Cronos’s reign.
   1. They had no cares or troubles, and old age did not exist.
   2. They did not have to work for food.
   3. They died out but became benign spirits.

B. The Silver Race, also made by the Olympians, was greatly inferior to the Golden.
   1. They lived as children, nourished by their mothers, for one hundred years.
   2. On reaching adulthood, they lived a short while but were violent and irreverent. Zeus destroyed them.

C. The Bronze Race was made by Zeus from ash trees. They were warlike and violent and used bronze for everything, including their homes. They too died out.

D. The fourth race was the Race of Heroes, which was better and more just than the Bronze Race.
   1. Zeus created the heroes.
   2. Hesiod calls them “demigods” and says that they were the men who fought around Thebes and Troy.
E. The fifth and worst race, Hesiod’s own and, by implication, ours as well, is the Race of Iron.
   1. No creator is mentioned.
   2. Hesiod describes the Iron Race’s lot as one of increasing hardship and toil.
   3. The only end in sight is that conditions will get worse and worse, until finally Shame and Retribution flee the earth, and society breaks down entirely.

III. This account apparently contradicts the “Pandora” story, told only a few lines before it in Works and Days, in several ways. This is a reminder that Hesiod was not attempting to provide an orthodoxy.

   A. The question of where humans came from is not the most pressing issue in Greek mythology.
   B. These myths are, by and large, more concerned with how humans should act and how society should function than with our origins.

IV. Hesiod’s story of the Five Races paints a very pessimistic view of the human condition. Ovid, writing in Rome in the first century BC, used the same basic myth but gave it a very different emphasis.

   A. In discussing the creation of humans, Ovid recaps Hesiod’s Myth of the Ages but with significant differences.
      1. Ovid’s account has no Race of Heroes between the Bronze and Iron Races.
      2. We are not the Iron Race; rather, the Iron Race was destroyed by a great flood.
      3. We are the offspring of Deucalion and Pyrrha, who survived the flood and threw stones over their shoulders to repeople the earth. Thus, Ovid says, we are a hardy race, showing our ancestry.
   B. As we saw in Ovid’s account of the creation of the world, we see here myth used as a self-conscious literary device, rather than recorded as a still-dynamic living force. Because we are separated from the earlier races, we can be more optimistic about our future than Hesiod was.

V. Who are these “heroes” whom Hesiod places right before our own day and Ovid leaves out of his picture of the races?

   A. Just as “god” is a misleading translation of the term theos, so too “hero” is a misleading translation of heros.
      1. The heroes of classical myth are not necessarily noble, good, or morally exemplary; sometimes they are quite the opposite.
      2. This is one reason that many scholars find fault with Campbell’s discussion of heroes. He takes it as a given that “the hero” is motivated by a desire to provide a “boon” for his fellows, but this is not the case in many, if not most, Greek hero-tales.
   B. The word heros had three basic meanings in ancient Greek:
1. *Hero* could refer to a dead person who was revered and to whom sacrifices were offered and who was considered protective of a particular site or city (often because he had founded it). This status by no means implied that he had been a good man, simply an extraordinary one.

2. *Hero* could refer to someone who lived in the past, particularly up to the time of the Trojan War. Again, moral qualities were not decisive.

3. *Hero* could refer to a human with one divine parent. Achilles, Heracles, and Perseus are all heroes in this sense.

4. A fourth sense, *hero* as the main character of a tragedy, is post-classical and need not concern us here.

C. The three main senses of the term have a great deal of overlap.

1. Hesiod refers to his Race of Heroes as both demigods and men who fought around Thebes and Troy.

2. These same legendary heroes were often claimed as ancestors and as the founders or protectors of cities.

3. Remember, however, that some of the most famous heroes of Greek mythology, such as Oedipus and Agamemnon, do not have divine parents.

VI. The stories of heroes involve the sense, often found in myth, that things were different in the past.

A. This “difference” often implies that, at one time, humans had more power or greater powers than they now have.

B. The difference also involves the idea that gods and humans once interacted much more freely than they do now.

VII. Classical mythology’s emphasis on heroes is unusual.

A. Most cultures do not have nearly as many heroes in their mythology as Greece does, nor are those that they do have nearly so important. Mesopotamian myth, for instance, includes almost no heroes at all (with the notable exception of Gilgamesh).

B. It is possible that because Greek culture placed so much emphasis on the opposition of mortal and immortal, the heroes were a means of mediating that opposition. The idea that gods and humans could interact was limited to the remote past.

C. Another possibility is that a kernel of historical truth may lie in the Greek stories of greater ancestors and a lost Golden Age.

1. Mycenaean civilization waned after c. 1100 BC; it did not suddenly disappear entirely.

2. Mycenaean cities, including some quite impressive architecture, would have remained more or less intact for some time.
3. Mycenaean artifacts, such as pottery and jewelry, would have continued to be used.

D. The skills needed to construct such buildings or to create such artwork, however, would have been lost within one or two generations.

E. Memories of Mycenaean culture could be preserved in oral poetry, which is what seems to have happened to some extent with the Trojan War.

F. Thus, the Greeks of Hesiod’s time might well have the sense that their own culture had been preceded by a greater, more accomplished one, whose people were in some sense their ancestors.

Essential Reading:
Hesiod, *Works and Days*, pp. 70–72, line 201.
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 5–16 (up to “Apollo and Daphne”).

Supplementary Reading:
———, *Nature of Greek Myths*, Ch. 7 and 9.

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you think the Greek view of the human condition is overly pessimistic? Does Ovid’s treatment of the Ages strike you as less pessimistic than Hesiod’s?

2. The myth of a lost Golden Age is common in many cultures. Why do you think this is? What desire or experience may that myth reflect?
Lecture Fourteen  
Theseus and the “Test-and-Quest” Myth

Scope: This lecture focuses on the exploits of one particular hero, Theseus. We discuss his birth, childhood, and maturation story, which is a typical example of the “test-and-quest” pattern. We then examine his adventures as an adult; the most famous of these is his encounter with the Minotaur in Crete. We will also consider his marriage to an Amazon and his later fateful marriage to Phaidra, which results in Theseus’s killing of his own son Hippolytos. The lecture concludes by discussing the difficulty of fitting all the adventures attributed to Theseus into a coherent chronological pattern and discusses some of the possible reasons for this difficulty.

Outline

I. The stories of several heroes fit what has been called the “quest” pattern. Among these, Theseus’s story is particularly rich for investigating mythic themes and presenting possibilities for interpretation.
   A. Theseus is less well known to modern readers than Heracles or Jason is, but as the legendary synoikistes (“unifier”) of Attica, he was an important figure in Athenian myth. In Theseus’s case, myth became a charter for Athenian hegemonic control of Attica.
   B. Perhaps because of his important role in Athens, various stories accrued around Theseus, and it is difficult to work out a consistent chronology for his adventures.

II. His birth, childhood, and young adulthood show typical “hero” elements, reminiscent of folktale.
   A. Oddities and ambiguities surround his conception, not the least of which is an apparent double-fatherhood.
      1. His human father was Aigeus, king of Athens.
      2. His mother, Aithra, was raped by Poseidon on the same night that she slept with Aigeus; thus, Theseus’s parentage was uncertain. This explains how he was a top-notch hero who, at the same time, inherited his father’s throne.
   B. Aigeus left sandals and a sword under a boulder, with instructions that his son should come to him in Athens when he was strong enough to lift the boulder and retrieve the tokens. Theseus does so and sets off for Athens.
   C. Theseus’s journey to Athens to claim his patrimony involves a series of encounters with monsters.
1. The most famous of these was Procrustes, who had a bed that he forced all visitors to fit. This is the origin of the term *procrustean*.

2. Others included the giant Sinis the “pinebender” and a monstrous boar. Theseus “unifies” the countryside by eliminating these dangers.

D. When Theseus reached Athens, he was received as a guest by Aigeus and Aigeus’s current wife, Medea.

1. Medea, better known for her previous involvement with Jason, was a sorceress.

2. She was pregnant and feared that Theseus (whom she recognized as Aigeus’s son) would displace her own child.

3. She persuaded Aigeus that the young guest planned to kill him, and Aigeus agreed to poison the youth.

E. At the dinner table, Theseus drew his sword to cut his meat. Aigeus recognized the sword and stopped Theseus from drinking his poisoned wine, just in time.

III. After his recognition by his father, Theseus embarked on a dangerous journey to Crete to try to free Athens from its tribute to the Minotaur.

A. The Minotaur was a man-eating half-man and half-bull that belonged to Minos, king of Crete.

B. Athens was obligated by a treaty to send seven young men and seven young women to Crete every year to be eaten by the Minotaur.

1. Athens and Crete had gone to war after Minos’s son Androgeos was killed in Attica, either by a great bull whom Aigeus sent him to fight or by other young men who were jealous of his athletic prowess.

2. Minos declared war on Athens, and the war ceased only when Athens agreed to let Minos name whatever recompense he wanted.

3. Minos instated the annual tribute to the Minotaur.

C. Theseus volunteered to be a member of this delegation.

IV. Theseus’s adventures in Crete are the most famous part of his story.

A. He was helped by Ariadne, the daughter of Minos. As in other “test-and-quest” stories, the young man is helped by a young woman.

1. Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of thread so that he could find his way out of the Minotaur’s labyrinth.

2. In return, he agreed to take her with him when he left Crete.

B. Theseus killed the Minotaur in the labyrinth, then found his way out with the aid of Ariadne’s thread. He and Ariadne fled Crete.

1. They stopped for the night on the island of Naxos.

2. When Theseus set sail in the morning, he left Ariadne behind, apparently forgetting her. Dionysos rescued her and married her, and she became a goddess.
C. Before leaving Athens, Theseus had promised Aigeus that if he succeeded in killing the Minotaur, he would change the black sails of his ship for white. He forgot to do so.
   1. Aigeus watched daily for the returning ship; when he saw the black sails, he leapt to his death.
   2. Theseus thus became king of Athens.

V. After the loss of Ariadne, Theseus married at least two more times.
   A. Theseus and his friend Pirithous agreed that they should both marry daughters of Zeus.
      1. For Theseus, they kidnapped Helen (later of Troy) who was too young for marriage but already extraordinarily beautiful. The plan was to keep her until she was old enough to marry.
      2. For Pirithous, the two men journeyed to the Underworld to kidnap Persephone.
      3. At the invitation of Hades, they sat down on stone chairs and became stuck there.
      4. Theseus remained stuck in the Underworld for some years until Heracles rescued him. Pirithous remained there forever.

   B. Theseus also married an Amazon named Antiope or Hippolyta.
      1. He traveled to the Amazons’ land and abducted their queen.
      2. The Amazons responded by besieging Athens, but they were defeated.
      3. The son of this marriage was Hippolytos.

   C. Finally, Theseus married Phaedra, daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë of Crete.
      1. This marriage produced two sons but ended unhappily.
      2. Phaedra was smitten by Aphrodite with passion for her stepson, Hippolytos.
      3. When he rebuffed her, she committed suicide and left a note saying that Hippolytos had raped her.
      4. Theseus cursed his son, who was dragged to death by his own horses.
      5. Only too late did Theseus discover that Hippolytos had been innocent.

VI. These later adventures of Theseus demonstrate a common problem in studying classical myth, that is, chronological inconsistencies.
   A. According to most accounts, Minos lived generations before Heracles, and Heracles lived at least one generation before the Trojan War.
      1. But Theseus is involved with two daughters of Minos, kidnaps Helen, and is rescued by Heracles.
      2. The Trojan War was fought because a Trojan prince abducted Helen when she was already the wife of the Greek Menelaos.
3. How, then, can Heracles have rescued Theseus after Theseus kidnapped the child Helen?

4. How can Theseus live at the same time as Minos and Helen?

B. This sort of inconsistency is probably the result of attempts to gather diverse strands of myth from different times and places into one coherent narrative.

VII. Theseus’s story is worth going through in detail because, as we shall see in the next lecture, it offers scope for many different interpretations.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Graf, *Greek Mythology*, pp. 50–53.

Questions to Consider:
1. Theseus’s “forgetfulness” is rather surprising, even in the logic of myth. Can you think of any explanation for why he forgets Ariadne and forgets to change the sails?

2. Modern readers are often troubled by chronological inconsistencies, such as the ones I have outlined here. Is this an anachronistic concern? In other words, are we expecting a kind of logical and chronological consistency in these myths that would not have occurred to their original audience?
Lecture Fifteen
From Myth to History and Back Again

Scope: This lecture continues our examination of the myths of Theseus by looking at some of the theoretical and interpretative issues raised by his encounter with the Minotaur. We begin with the story of the Minotaur’s conception and birth and his imprisonment in the labyrinth, then discuss possible psychological and ritual interpretations of this story of a monster in a maze. We also examine the possibility that this strange story of a man-eating half-bull has some basis in history, as represented by the famous “bull-leaping” fresco of Knossos.

Outline

I. At first sight, the myth of the Minotaur in the Cretan labyrinth seems to be one of the most purely imaginary among Greek myths and one of the least likely to have any historical connection.

A. The Minotaur is a monster that is half-man and half-beast.

B. He is conceived in a particularly improbable way.
   1. Pasiphae, queen of Crete, develops a passion for a bull.
   2. At her request, Daidalos, the great artisan, builds a wooden cow.
   3. Pasiphae hides in the cow and mates with the bull.
   4. When the Minotaur is born, at Minos’s command, Daidalos builds the labyrinth to contain him.

C. The Minotaur is not only a monster but also a man-eating monster.

D. The fact that the story shows many folktale elements, such as Theseus’s reliance on Ariadne’s help, makes it seem unlikely that it could have any kernel of history in it.

II. Theseus’s encounter with the Minotaur offers a great deal of scope for differing interpretations of myth in general and of his story in particular. Neo-ritualist theorists see it as a paradigm for male initiation rituals.

A. Theseus arrives in Athens wearing women’s clothing, according to one tradition; initiates arrive at their initiation as less-than-males.

B. Theseus journeys to Crete; male initiates are removed from their villages.

C. Theseus is doomed to be killed by the Minotaur but kills it instead; the initiates are in some sense “dead” while away from their homes and often encounter demons during their sequestration.

D. Theseus meets Ariadne and “marries” her; the initiates are prepared for sexuality by their initiation.
E. Theseus returns home and (when his father dies) becomes the king; initiates are fully adult males upon their return from initiation.

III. This story lends itself so well to psychological interpretations that it seems almost a test case for the theory that myth arises from the human psyche.

A. The Minotaur imprisoned in the heart of the labyrinth has been interpreted as representing the hidden, inadmissible desires of the human subconscious.
   1. This monster was born from sexual transgression.
   2. The labyrinth was fashioned by the greatest artisan of all time; culture imprisons our more bestial desires.
   3. The labyrinth itself is susceptible to interpretation; Campbell sees it as the tortuous path to enlightenment.

B. Theseus’s encounter with the Minotaur leads to the death of his father. This can be seen as a variation of the Oedipal desire.

C. Theseus’s later destruction of his son Hippolytos repeats the Oedipal pattern but reverses it.

IV. Given the fecundity of this myth for interpretations, it comes as something of a surprise that archaeology gives us reason to suppose that some remembered history is hidden beneath its fantastic elements.

A. Sir Arthur Evans’s discovery of the palace at Knossos was the first indication that the society of King Minos might have existed.

B. Among the frescoes Evans found at Knossos was one that has become world-famous, often called the “bull-leaping” fresco. This painting shows three young humans and a bull.
   1. The bull is shown with all four legs extended in what appears to represent charging or running.
   2. One human, painted with white skin, seems to be dangling from the bull’s horns, holding the horns with her arms.
   3. A red-skinned youth is somersaulting over the bull’s back.
   4. The third figure, white-skinned, is standing behind the bull, arms extended, apparently having just landed on the tips of her toes.

B. The most common interpretation of this scene is that it shows an athletic event, in which athletes of both sexes seized the bull by the horns, somersaulted over its back, and landed gracefully behind it.

C. Without any written context for the scene, however, it is impossible to know just what is being portrayed here.
   1. If it is a sport, it is an extraordinarily dangerous one.
   2. It might also be a form of punishment, even execution; the figure who is dangling from the bull’s horns appears to have been gored by one of those horns.
   3. It could be a representation of some religious ritual.
4. It could be purely symbolic. The mere fact that an activity is shown in a work of art doesn’t mean it necessarily happened.

D. Whatever the exact reference of the scene, bulls and young men and women leaping (or being tossed by) bulls appear over and over in Minoan art, in statuary as well as frescoes. Even the Minotaur shows up on some Minoan seals.

V. What is the connection with the myth of the Minotaur?

A. The myth recounts a dangerous encounter between youths and maidens, in a labyrinth, with a bull-like creature that kills the young people.

B. Archaeologists found a labyrinthine palace that contained a representation of youths and maidens encountering a bull in a manner that would undoubtedly have led to the deaths of some of them. The story may have been transformed through repeated telling.

C. Thus, one of the strangest of all Greek myths appears to have a kernel of remembered history at its core.

D. Even the tribute paid by Athens to Crete could have some basis in fact. After all, Minoan civilization was predominant during the early development of Mycenean culture.

VI. To say that the myth of the Minotaur may reflect dimly remembered history is not, of course, to invalidate other interpretations.

A. The myth may well have developed as it did because of the connection with male initiation, or because of psychological imperatives, or for other reasons.

B. The ruins of Knossos serve as a warning against assuming that even the most “obvious” symbols in myths are only symbols.

Supplementary Reading:
Fitton, Discovery of the Greek Bronze Age, Ch. 5.
Walker, Theseus and Athens, Ch. 1–5.

Questions to Consider:
1. Is tracing the myth of the Minotaur back to the bull-leaping at Knossos merely an updated form of Euhemerism? Put differently, while the ruins of Knossos are fascinating historically, can they and their frescoes tell us anything useful about the myth of the Minotaur?

2. I sketched out one possible psychological interpretation of the Minotaur and the labyrinth. Can you think of others or of other theoretical approaches to this myth?
Lecture Sixteen
The Greatest Hero of All

Scope: This lecture examines Heracles, the greatest of all Greek heroes. We begin by looking at the stories of his birth and childhood, which like those of Theseus, exhibit many conventional elements. We discuss Hera’s special hatred for Heracles, which began even before his birth. The lecture also considers Heracles’s tendency toward excess and examines how this led to the necessity for his famous Twelve Labors. After discussing the labors, the lecture describes Heracles’s death and subsequent immortality. Finally, the lecture concludes by looking at the many contradictory characteristics of this most famous hero and discussing some of their implications.

Outline

I. The greatest and most famous Greek hero of all is Heracles (Latin Hercules), son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. Unlike many heroes who are associated with only one city, Heracles was a pan-Hellenic hero, claimed by all of Greece.
   A. Heracles is mentioned in epic, tragedy, history, and most other genres of Greek and Roman literature, but none of them tells his complete story.
   B. Fortunately for us, Apollodorus gives an account of Heracles’s life, as he does for Theseus, which allows us to understand the more illusive references to him in other authors.

II. Like those of many other heroes, Heracles’s conception and babyhood were unusual.
   A. Heracles is the son of Zeus and Alcmene, wife of Amphitryon.
      1. Zeus tricked Alcmene into sleeping with him by disguising himself as Amphitryon, who was actually away at war.
      2. Amphitryon returned the next day, much to Alcmene’s surprise.
      3. Alcmene conceived Heracles by Zeus and his twin, Iphicles, by Amphitryon.
      4. This story clearly recalls Theseus’s dual parentage by Aigeus and Poseidon.
   B. Hera always hated Zeus’s sons by other females, and she particularly detested Heracles.
      1. Her hatred reflects the fact that Heracles was destined to be the greatest of all heroes.
      2. She sabotaged him from the day of his birth. Zeus declared that a descendant of Perseus who was about to be born would rule over Mycenae; knowing that Zeus meant Heracles, Hera persuaded the
goddess of childbirth to extend Alcmene’s labor and to hasten the birth of a cousin of Heracles, Eurystheus.

3. Heracles’s name apparently means “glorious through Hera.”

C. Even as a baby, Heracles showed strength and courage. When Hera sent snakes to kill him in his cradle, the baby Heracles strangled them.

III. When Heracles reached maturity, he was characterized not only by extreme strength and courage, but also by other extremes: of sexual appetite, of hunger and thirst, and of rage.

A. Among the first of Heracles’s adventures was his encounter with the fifty daughters of Thespios, when he was only eighteen. He slept with all fifty of them.

B. His appetite for food and drink was no less voracious.

C. He was given to excessive rage, even madness (perhaps sent by Hera).
   1. In one such episode of madness, he killed his own children by his first wife, Megara.
   2. This act led directly to his famous labors. On the advice of the Pythia, he served Eurystheus for twelve years and performed the labors that Eurystheus ordered.
   3. The Pythia promised that the reward for accomplishing the labors would be immortality.

IV. Heracles’s Twelve Labors are examples of the “test-and-quest” type of hero tale. The labors involve an ascending degree of difficulty and of distance that Heracles must travel, and each of the labors would have been impossible or fatal for a lesser man.

A. The first six labors all take place in the Peloponnesus and involve animals. With the exception of the Hydra, these animals are not imaginary monsters, but each of them has some extraordinary attribute that makes it exceptionally dangerous.
   1. The Nemean Lion. Heracles killed and skinned it.
   2. The Lernaean Hydra. This was a snake with nine heads, one of which was immortal. When a head was cut off, two grew in its place. Heracles finally vanquished it with the help of his nephew Iolaus.
   3. The Cerynian Hind. This golden-horned deer was not dangerous in itself but was sacred to Artemis. Heracles captured it.
   4. The Erymanthian Boar. Eurystheus demanded that Heracles capture this savage beast and bring it to him alive.
   5. The Augean Stables. This labor differs from the rest in that it was difficult but not particularly dangerous. The stables had never been cleaned; Heracles diverted two rivers to flow through them.
6. The Stymphalian Birds. These birds, which lived in a swamp, could shoot their arrow-sharp feathers from their wings. Heracles killed them all.

B. The next three labors take place outside of the Peloponnese, moving steadily further away and becoming steadily stranger.
   1. The Cretan Bull. This may be the same bull that sired the Minotaur; Heracles caught it and brought it to Eurystheus.
   2. The Mares of Diomedes. Heracles tamed these man-eating mares and fed their master, Diomedes, to them.
   3. The Belt of Hippolyta. Hippolyta was an Amazon queen, and Heracles had to take her belt away from her.

C. The final three labors take Heracles to the very edges of the world and pit him against emblems of mortality and immortality. (The order of the last two labors is sometimes reversed.)
   1. The Cattle of Geryon. Geryon was a triple-bodied monster who lived in the far west. Heracles drove his cattle back to Eurystheus.
   2. The Apples of the Hesperides. These daughters of Night had a tree with golden apples, also in the far west, guarded by a dragon. With Atlas’s help, Heracles got the apples.
   3. Cerberus. Heracles descended to Tartaros to fetch back this guard dog of the Underworld. Eurystheus didn’t know what to do with him, and Cerberus found his way back to Hades.

V. Heracles has various other adventures beyond the labors, in what are sometimes called the parerga, or “side works.”
   A. Heracles is unlike most other heroes in that he is neither a king nor primarily a warrior.
   B. It is clear from his labors and parerga that his primary role is as a fighter of animals, particularly extraordinary or dangerous animals, and monsters.
   C. One interpretation of this role is that it represents the spread of Greek culture; Heracles takes Greek civilization with him wherever he goes.
      1. He traveled widely in his labors.
      2. The killing of monsters can be read as representing the “humanizing” of unknown lands.

VI. Heracles is one of very few humans in Greek myth to become a god. His road to immortality was caused not by exceptional goodness, but by exceptional wrongdoing and suffering.
   A. Heracles’s second wife was Deianira. His marriage to her was beset with difficulties that included two encounters with semi-animal beings.
      1. Before he could marry Deianira, Heracles had to wrestle the river god Achelous, who had the head of a bull.
2. As Heracles was returning home with Deianira, the centaur Nessos tried to rape her. Heracles shot him with an arrow that had been dipped in the Hydra’s venom.

B. As Nessos was dying, he told Deianira to gather some of his blood as a love-charm.

C. Years later, when Heracles fell in love with another woman, Deianira gave him a robe dipped in Nessos’s blood.
   1. The robe burned Heracles’s flesh but did not kill him.
   2. In agony, he mounted a funeral pyre and burned himself to death.
   3. Only his body died, however; he became immortal and took his place on Olympus, where he married Hebe.
   4. This reiterates the idea, seen in the stories of Demophoön and Dionysos, that passing through fire is a necessary step for immortality.

VII. So many stories cluster around Heracles that it is very difficult to construct a unified, coherent picture. He can best be analyzed by identifying a series of polar oppositions that seem to underlie his myth.

A. He is both admirable and horrifying, powerful and powerless.
   1. The hero who overcomes monsters and marks out the civilized world is also the madman who kills his wife and children.
   2. The greatest of Zeus’s human sons is twice a slave.

B. He is supremely ill-fated and supremely fortunate.
   1. He is persecuted by Hera from before his birth, and he dies shamefully, in agony.
   2. This all-too-human hero is also the one human to achieve immortality and become a god; yet he continued to receive sacrifices as both a hero and a god.
   3. His persecutor, Hera, allows him to marry her own daughter, Hebe.

C. He both resists Death and intentionally embraces it.
   1. His last three labors are all in some sense conquests of Death.
   2. In another story, he wrestled with and defeated Death himself.
   3. Yet his own death comes through voluntary self-cremation.

D. He is both a serious, even tragic, figure and a comic figure of excess.

E. He is both masculine and feminine; in one of his parerga, the ultra-masculine strongman wears women’s clothes and is the slave of a queen.

F. Syncretism may account for some of these differences but seems inadequate to explain them all. Theoretical interpretations may be more satisfactory; for example:
   1. Heracles can be read as a kind of “everyman” figure who clearly displays a Jungian “shadow” side.
2. He can also be seen as embodying (and thus mediating between?) both Nature and Culture.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Burkert, *Structure and History*, Ch. 4, pp. 78–98.
Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme*.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Heracles clearly violates at least one of the Delphic maxims, “nothing in excess.” What is the implication of this, given that Heracles is the great pan-Hellenic hero?
2. Does the idea of Heracles as a projection of “everyman,” with exaggerated virtues and exaggerated faults, make sense to you? How else could we account for the many contradictions in this hero?
Lecture Seventeen
The Trojan War

Scope: This lecture examines the most famous episode of classical myth, the Trojan War. The Trojan War functioned as the dividing line between the “heroic” age and the age of normal human history; perhaps because of this function, the episode is frequently drawn on by authors in various genres. The lecture summarizes the basic story of the Trojan War, from its beginnings in the marriage of Peleus and Thetis through the ill-fated sack of Troy. The lecture then notes the Trojan War myth’s importance for understanding the myth of the House of Atreus and ends by discussing how complicated a picture the myth draws of the relationships between fate, the gods’ orders, and individual responsibility.

Outline

I. The Trojan War is the most famous episode of classical myth. This fame results from the fact that it was considered an especially important event by the Greeks and Romans themselves and, thus, became especially productive in classical literature.

A. The Greeks of the classical age saw the Trojan War as the episode that marked the end of the “heroic” age and the beginning of purely human history.
   1. Heroic myth ends about a generation after the Trojan War. Some myths exist about the sons of Trojan War heroes but none about their grandchildren or great-grandchildren.
   2. The heroes of the Trojan War were seen as the last of the great race of heroes; they were also often claimed as ancestors by families living in the classical age.
   3. Thus, the Trojan War is a “liminal” (mediating) episode; it looks back to myth but at the same time looks forward to human history.

B. Probably because of this liminal nature of the Trojan War myth, it became the most fruitful episode of all Greek mythology for literature.
   1. The most obvious example of this importance is that the two great Greek epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, deal with events during and after the Trojan War.
   2. The greatest surviving Latin epic, *The Aeneid*, also takes the aftermath of the Trojan War as its subject.
   3. Many of the most famous Greek tragedies also deal with either the Trojan War or its aftermath.
4. The Trojan War is exceptionally well represented in literature, which means that it has continued to be, in some regards, the primary classical myth for later Western culture as well.

II. Despite its importance for Greek culture, no major surviving ancient work tells the entire story of the Trojan War.

A. The great epics narrate only episodes from before and after the war.
   1. The *Iliad* focuses on events that happened during the last year of the war, and the *Odyssey* deals with Odysseus’s further adventures after the war.
   2. Other Greek epic poems, now lost, told the rest of the story of the Trojan War.
   3. The *Aeneid* recounts the wanderings of the Trojan prince Aeneas after the defeat of Troy and his eventual arrival in Italy, where he became the ancestor of the Romans. It includes the fullest extant description of the sack of Troy.

B. The tragedies tell even fewer details of the war; they focus on specific incidents and the effects of the war on non-combatant groups.

C. As is often the case, Apollodorus gives a good summary of the story.

III. The story of the Trojan War is basically quite simple; however, many allied stories link into the story of the Trojan War in one way or another and make the overall topic quite complex. The basic story is as follows:

A. The most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, daughter of Zeus and wife of the Greek Menelaos, was abducted by the Trojan prince Paris.

B. Under the command of Menelaos’s elder brother Agamemnon, the Greeks mustered an army to go to Troy and fight for Helen’s return.

C. The war against Troy lasted for ten years. The fighting was fairly evenly balanced; each side had its foremost warrior (Achilles for the Greeks, Hector for the Trojans).

D. The greatest Trojan warrior, Hector, was killed by the greatest Greek warrior, Achilles, who was himself killed by Paris.

E. Finally, the Greeks resorted to trickery. Using the famous ruse of the Trojan Horse, invented by Odysseus, they infiltrated the walled city of Troy and sacked it by night. The traditional date for the destruction of Troy was 1184 BC.

IV. This basic story of the Trojan War attracted many related stories over the centuries. One such connected story has to do with the birth of Achilles.

A. The ultimate cause of the war was a prophecy about the hero Achilles, before he was conceived.
   1. Achilles’s mother was Thetis, a sea-goddess. She was desired by Zeus, but he heard a prophecy that she would bear a son who would be greater than his father.
2. Therefore, Zeus decided to marry Thetis off to a human being. The human picked for the purpose was Peleus.
3. Thetis was less than pleased with this marriage; to placate her, Zeus hosted a magnificent wedding feast, to which all the gods and goddesses were invited except Eris, goddess of Strife.
4. In anger at her exclusion, Eris threw onto the table a golden apple inscribed “for the fairest.”
5. Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite each claimed the apple as her own.
6. Zeus appointed the Trojan prince Paris to judge among these three goddesses.

B. This “Judgment of Paris” provided the immediate cause for the war, because each goddess offered him a bribe if he would award the apple to her.
   1. Hera offered him sovereignty over many cities.
   2. Athena offered him power in battle.
   3. Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world for his wife.
4. Paris chose Aphrodite, which led to his abduction of Helen and Menelaos’s determination to get her back.
5. The “Judgment of Paris” is not directly mentioned in either the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*; scholars disagree on whether Homer knew of this detail of the story or not. As we know, myth develops over centuries; it is not static.

C. This explanation of the causes of the Trojan War contains an interesting chronological inconsistency.
   1. Achilles was the most important Greek warrior in the Trojan War and was old enough to have a son who fought in the war as well.
   2. Yet the Apple of Discord, which sparked the war, was thrown down on the table at the marriage feast of Achilles’s parents.
   3. To harmonize the chronology, we have to account for a missing period of some twenty or twenty-five years.
   4. Again, probably the best explanation is that the incongruities are caused by disparate strands of tradition being woven into a whole.

V. The events leading up to the war are also closely connected with the story of the family of Agamemnon and Menelaos. Their entire past and future are bound up with this war.

A. The most obvious connection, of course, is that Helen was the wife of Menelaos, and her half-sister Clytemnestra was Agamemnon’s wife.

B. The abduction of Helen was an offense against the honor of Menelaos’s whole family and a profound offense against the Greek notion of *xenia*, or guest friendship. Because Agamemnon was the elder brother, the task of leading the expedition to get her back fell to him.
1. When the fleet gathered to sail, the winds blew against them for a month.
2. The seer Calchas declared that Artemis was angry; Agamemnon must sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigeneia, to get a wind for Troy.
3. Agamemnon kills Iphigeneia, and the winds blow for Troy.
4. Homer does not mention the adverse winds or the sacrifice of Iphigeneia.

C. Thus, the Greeks’ expedition to Troy began with a terrible act of impiety, which is mirrored by their misdeeds during the sack of Troy.

VI. The events that occurred during the Trojan War affected the Greeks’ attempts to return home.

A. The return to Greece was neither easy nor simple. The Greeks committed many outrages against the Trojans during the sack of Troy, which angered the gods.
   1. King Priam was killed at his household altar.
   2. Priam’s daughter Cassandra was raped in the temple of the virgin goddess Athena.
   3. Before leaving Troy, the Greeks sacrifice Priam’s daughter Polyxena to the ghost of Achilles; their expedition both begins and ends with the sacrifice of an innocent girl.

B. Because of the gods’ anger, the surviving Greeks suffered many hardships on their way home.
   1. Agamemnon was killed by his wife and her lover.
   2. Odysseus spent ten years wandering on his way from Troy.
   3. Menelaos and Helen were blown off course and spent seven years in Egypt.

C. Stories were also told about the surviving Trojans; the most important of these was Aeneas, son of Aphrodite and Anchises and a cousin of Hector.
   1. The *Iliad* says that Aeneas was destined to survive and found another city elsewhere.
   2. Roman tradition said that he made his way to Italy and became the ancestor of the Romans.

VII. In all these connected stories, we can see how complex the interaction is between the gods’ commands and individual responsibility.

A. The war was inevitable. Although it was caused by the actions of several individuals (most notably Paris), all the actions were sanctioned by the gods; thus, the individuals involved could claim necessity.

B. Yet this necessity does not mitigate the horror of the individuals’ wrongdoings on both sides.
   1. Paris violated the guest-host relationship, or *xenia*, by his abduction of Helen.
2. Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigeneia was a great transgression.
3. In both cases, the actions had the sanction of a goddess, but this does not spare the doers from the consequences.

C. Add to this the concept of Fate, and we have a very complicated system indeed.

**Essential Reading:**
Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book II.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, Vol. 2, Ch. 16. A detailed account, listing all the ancient sources for each detail of the legend.
Woodford, *Trojan War in Art*, Ch. 1–2. A simple, easily readable account of the background events.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. The Trojan War served as a kind of dividing line between “then and now” for classical culture. Does modern American culture have any similar “dividing line” myths? If so, what are they? If not, can you speculate why not?
2. Does the concept that *having* to commit an action does not excuse one from its consequences strike you as realistic? Is it just?
Lecture Eighteen

The Terrible House of Atreus

Scope:  We now turn to the myth of the House of Atreus and its hereditary
curse. We see how the curse, begun by Tantalos, is both inherited by
his descendants, Pelops, Atreus, Thyestes, Agamemnon, and Orestes,
and reasserts itself in and through their actions. The lecture discusses
the way in which the curse both causes and is caused by the misdeeds
of these individuals. We then examine some possible interpretations of
this story of multi-generational murder, cannibalism, and incest.

Outline

I. Of all the unhappy families who dot the annals of classical myth, the House
   of Atreus is perhaps the worst. It labors under a hereditary curse that
   repeats itself generation after generation.

   A. The concept of a “hereditary curse” implies that moral guilt is
      inheritable, just as monetary debts are inheritable. “The sins of the
      fathers” will be passed on to their children.

   B. This curse manifests itself through (and is caused by) inappropriate and
      excessive intergenerational violence: parents kill children; children kill
      parents.

   C. The curse also exhibits a strong connection with inappropriate eating
      and inappropriate sexuality.

II. The founder of the family was Tantalos, and his actions began the curse on
    his descendants.

   A. Tantalos (who was Niobe’s brother) tried to trick the gods into eating
      human flesh, specifically the flesh of his own son Pelops.

   B. Another, milder version is that Tantalos tried to steal nectar and
      ambrosia from the gods (thus to steal immortality).

   C. Tantalos’s transgression has to do with blurring the lines between
      mortal and immortal and is expressed through inappropriate eating.

   D. Tantalos, one of Greek mythology’s “cardinal sinners,” is punished in
      Tartaros by being eternally tormented with hunger and thirst.

   E. Tantalos’s punishment fits his crime; because he offended the gods
      through food, he is punished with hunger.

III. Pelops was resurrected by the gods, though he, too, incurred a curse on
     himself and his descendants through violence. In his case, however, the
     violence was not directed at a family member, and Pelops doesn’t seem to
     personally suffer ill effects after being resurrected.
A. Pelops wanted to marry Hippodameia, princess of Pisa, whose father had decreed that before marrying her, a suitor must first defeat him in a chariot race. If the suitor failed, he would be killed.
1. Pelops won the race by bribing the charioteer Myrtilos to remove the linchpins from the king’s chariot and replace them with wax.
2. The wax melted, the king was killed, and Pelops fled with Hippodameia and the charioteer Myrtilos.

B. When Myrtilos tried to rape Hippodameia, Pelops threw him to his death from a cliff; Myrtilos screamed out curses against Pelops’s family.

IV. Pelops’s children labor under the weight of a double curse; they have inherited the guilt of their grandfather, Tantalos, and they are directly cursed by Myrtilos. Pelops has several children, but the most important are Atreus and Thyestes.

A. The story of the interactions between these two brothers is extraordinarily complicated, but the basic outline is as follows:
1. The brothers quarreled over the kingship of Mycenae.
2. At Thyestes’s suggestion, they agreed that the kingship would belong to whichever of them had the fleece from a golden lamb.
3. Atreus had such a fleece, but his wife, Aerope, gave it to Thyestes, who was her lover.
4. However, the gods sent an unmistakably clear omen—the sun setting in the east—that Atreus should be king. Atreus thereupon banished Thyestes.

B. Atreus found out that Aerope and Thyestes had been lovers and decided to take a terrible revenge on his brother.
1. He summoned Thyestes and his sons back to Mycenae on the pretense of reconciliation.
2. Atreus killed Thyestes’s sons and served their flesh to their father at a banquet. Thyestes eats the flesh of his own children, only to have Atreus show him what he has done. Atreus then banishes Thyestes again.
3. When Thyestes realizes what he has done, he curses Atreus and Atreus’s descendants.

C. Atreus’s and Thyestes’s deeds reiterate the pattern established by Tantalos and add the element of sexual misconduct.
1. Once again, we have a man killing children of his bloodline in order to force an unsuspecting victim to cannibalism.
2. The adultery of Aerope and Thyestes forms a new thread in the pattern, which will be picked up in the next generation.

D. On the advice of an oracle, Thyestes fathered a son by his own daughter, so that he would have an avenger. This son, Aigisthos, would be crucial in the further playing out of the family curse.
V. Atreus’s sons were Agamemnon and Menelaos. By their generation, the curse is tripled: They are affected by the misdeeds of Tantalos, Pelops, and Atreus. Menelaos seems largely to escape the impending doom.

A. Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigeneia can now be seen in its full context; the sacrifice reenacts the pattern of his family curse.
   1. This adds yet a greater sense of inevitability to Agamemnon’s actions; not only does he have to obey Artemis, but he is also doomed by his family history.
   2. At the same time, the curse also makes Agamemnon’s action seem even worse; surely he should know just how horrific the slaughter of children is.
   3. Fate, then, does not negate individual responsibility.

B. The sacrifice of Iphigeneia reiterates the “father kills child” motif and obliquely raises the related motif of impious feasting.
   1. Iphigeneia is sacrificed in place of an animal. A sacrificial animal was almost always eaten by the sacrificers.
   2. The very fact of sacrifice hints at a meal to follow.
   3. Iphigeneia’s sacrifice thus mirrors the slaughter of Pelops; each of these can be seen as a horrific inversion of proper sacrifice and an affront to the gods.

VI. The secondary motif of adultery also occurs in this generation.

A. While Agamemnon is at Troy, Clytemnestra and Aigisthos become lovers.

B. When Agamemnon returns, Clytemnestra and Aigisthos kill him.

C. Several years later, Agamemnon’s son Orestes returns from exile and, with the help of his remaining sister, Electra, kills Clytemnestra and Aigisthos.

VII. This multi-generational story of murder, cannibalism, incest, and adultery clearly addresses many anxieties and fears.

A. The fear of intergenerational violence runs throughout Greek myth.
   1. Just as in Theogony, this myth reflects the anxiety that fathers may become overly powerful and kill or subdue their children.
   2. Elsewhere, most notably in the myth of Oedipus, we see the fear of sons becoming overly powerful and killing their fathers.
   3. A patriarchal society in which a great deal of power is invested in the father of an extended family must keep these two fears in balance.

B. The myth of the House of Atreus also speaks to the Greek anxiety about women’s trustworthiness, loyalty, and sexuality.
   1. Aerope and Clytemnestra’s infidelities lead to their husbands’ ruin.
   2. In each case, the woman’s lover is a close male relative of her husband.
3. In each case, the motive is assumed to be ungoverned female sexuality, a theme that runs throughout Greek myth. In a patriarchal society, a woman’s fidelity is the only assurance of continuing the legitimacy of a bloodline.

C. These themes make the House of Atreus myth particularly resonant in Greek culture and particularly suited to the genre of tragedy.
   1. All three of the great Greek tragedians wrote plays on aspects of the myth of the House of Atreus.
   2. The most important of these was Aeschylus’s great trilogy, the Oresteia.

Essential Reading:
Apollodorus, Library, pp. 143–146.

Supplementary Reading:
Lyons, Gender and Immortality, pp. 137–157. Examines variant traditions about Iphigeneia and what happened to her.

Questions to Consider:
1. Is the idea of a hereditary curse simply a metaphorical way of saying that families tend to repeat the same pathologies, or does it imply more than that?
2. The myth of the House of Atreus seems to associate sexual transgressions and cannibalism. Can you explain why these two forms of transgression should be grouped together in this way?
Lecture Nineteen
Blood Vengeance, Justice, and the Furies

Scope:  In this lecture, we continue our examination of the curse of the House of Atreus. The lecture focuses on Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and the ways in which the tragedian reshaped and refocused the traditional myth. Accordingly, we begin with a brief discussion of Greek tragedy’s form and function in Athenian society. We then examine the specific uses Aeschylus made of the myth in his trilogy to explore issues of justice and of gender roles and discuss some of the implications for our understanding of both the myth itself and Aeschylus’s drama.

Outline

I. The genre of tragedy developed in Athens in the fifth century BC, where playwrights entered tragedies into competition at the annual festivals of Dionysos.
   A. Three tragedians would each enter a group of three tragedies, followed by a “satyr play.”
      1. This group of three interrelated plays is called a trilogy.
      2. Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* (performed in 458 BC) is our only surviving trilogy. Even it lacks its satyr play.
   B. The subject matter of tragedy was always drawn from myth or (very rarely) recent history. The tragedians did not make up their stories.
      1. The author’s originality lay in the use he made of the myth, the way he slanted the story, not in creating a new story.
      2. We can safely assume that the audience knew the basic outlines of the story, so background exposition is minimal.
      3. At the same time, the playwright could and did add or subtract details of the story to serve his dramatic needs.

II. Aeschylus uses the myth of the House of Atreus to explore issues of justice, revenge, and personal responsibility. At the same time, he reshapes it to provide an aetiology for the court system of Athens.
   A. The problem of irreconcilable moral duties is one of the main themes of the *Oresteia*.
      1. In *Agamemnon*, this theme is expressed through both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.
      2. In *Libation Bearers*, the theme is expressed through Orestes.
      3. In *Eumenides*, the irreconcilable duties of the earlier plays are finally mediated by Athena, who sets up the first court in Athens.
   B. Aeschylus’s Agamemnon is faced with an insoluble moral dilemma: He must lead his army to Troy, but he must not kill his daughter.
1. In this version, Artemis’s anger is not Agamemnon’s fault; Artemis is angry because of an omen the army had seen, in which two eagles devour a pregnant rabbit.

2. The meaning of this omen seems to be that Artemis is angry over what Agamemnon will do in Troy, not over anything that he has already done.

3. In this situation, Agamemnon is an innocent man forced into the position of making an unbearable choice.

4. His innocence, however, does not spare him from the consequences of his actions.

C. The theme of irreconcilable duties is repeated in Clytemnestra. As a wife, she should remain loyal to her husband, but she is also a mother whose daughter was brutally murdered.

D. These earlier examples set up Orestes’s dilemma. He has an absolute duty to kill his father’s killer, but also an absolute duty not to kill his mother.

III. In Libation Bearers, we learn that Orestes journeyed to Delphi to ask Apollo what he should do. The god answered that he must avenge his father’s death.

A. Orestes accepts the god’s word and returns home, where he indeed kills Clytemnestra and Aigisthos with the help of his sister, Electra.

1. Almost immediately after he does so, the Furies begin to pursue him.

2. Thus Orestes’s dilemma is played out on the divine level as well as in his own mind: Apollo orders him to kill Clytemnestra, but the Furies forbid it.

B. In Homer’s Odyssey, Orestes’s killing of Aigisthos and Clytemnestra is mentioned approvingly over and over and is apparently considered unproblematic.

1. The picture of a man caught between two mutually exclusive absolutes is Aeschylus’s interpretation: Orestes absolutely must avenge his father but can only do so by killing his mother.

2. Aeschylus helps establish this dilemma by making Clytemnestra the actual killer of Agamemnon.

IV. The final play of the Oresteia provides a reconciliation for Orestes’s torment and for the wider issues of the contradictions inherent in a system of blood vengeance.

A. In Eumenides, Orestes appears as a defendant on a murder charge in a trial held in Athens.

1. Apollo is, in effect, his defense lawyer, the Furies are the prosecution, and Athena serves as judge.

2. Athena appoints a jury of Athenian citizens to hear the case.
B. There are two separate interpretations of how the jurors voted.
   1. The first interpretation is that the jurors’ votes are tied; Athena breaks the tie and acquits Orestes.
   2. The second interpretation is that the jurors vote seven to six to convict Orestes, and Athena’s vote makes the tie.
   3. In either case, Athena casts the deciding vote.

C. With Orestes’s acquittal, the curse on the House of Atreus is lifted.
   1. Orestes leaves to live a normal life. He marries his cousin and has children.
   2. This trial and acquittal also apparently brings an end to the Age of Heroes; Orestes and his descendants fade into normality.

V. In Aeschylus’s hands, the myth of the House of Atreus becomes a means to discuss methods of justice and the value of a court system.
   A. The system of blood vengeance breaks down in Orestes, who is the son of both the murdered man and the murderous woman.
   B. Orestes’s dilemma is insoluble according to a system of individual justice; the only way out is through the invention of a new system of public justice.
      1. The duty of exacting vengeance must be removed from the victim’s heirs and handed over to society in general.
      2. A court system must be inaugurated.
   C. Aeschylus uses the myth both to describe and to demonstrate the value of the Athenian court system, under which the state tries cases of murder rather than leaving vengeance to the victim’s family.

VI. Aeschylus’s treatment of these issues is linked to a particular political development of his own day.
   A. In the fifth century BC, Athens had a system of trial by jury, which had been in place since the early sixth century BC.
      1. Aeschylus backdates a fairly recent development into mythic time.
      2. This is a deliberately “literary” use of myth; Aeschylus and his audience must have known that the court system did not really stretch back to the Age of Heroes.
   B. In *Eumenides*, Aeschylus situates Orestes’s trial on the Areopagus, the “hill of Ares,” in Athens. This was the site of an actual council whose powers were important in the sixth century but decreased in the fifth.
      1. In 462, just four years before the performance of the *Oresteia*, the powers of the Areopagus council were radically decreased.
      2. Before this time, the council had dominated most areas of Athenian government.
      3. Now its areas of authority were reduced to trying cases of homicide, arson, and malicious wounding.
C. In the *Eumenides*, then, Aeschylus seems to be responding to these reforms of 462.
   1. He may be chiding the reformers for showing disrespect to an ancient institution.
   2. He may be reminding the members of the Areopagus council that they still have a crucial role to play in Athens.

VII. The *Oresteia* also has a great deal to say about gender issues.
A. The conflict throughout is largely cast in terms of shifting power between the sexes.
   1. Clytemnestra is called a man-like woman and wields power like a man.
   2. However, her motivation for killing Agamemnon is maternal love.
B. In *Eumenides*, the conflict between the Furies and Apollo is portrayed as a conflict between older female goddesses and a younger male god.
   1. The Furies embody the principal of blood vengeance and represent wildness, ferocity, and irrationality.
   2. Apollo embodies the rationality of patriarchal society in his claim that a woman’s life cannot count for as much as a man’s.
C. The gender issues come to a head in Apollo’s famous argument that Orestes did not in fact kill a blood relative when he killed his mother.
   1. Apollo’s argument is that the mother is not a blood relative of her child; rather, she acts as a host, preserving the child of a guest-friend (*xenos*).
   2. This was a current scientific theory of Aeschylus’s day, however counterintuitive it seems. The woman was analogous to the soil where the male seed was planted.
   3. This theory does not persuade the jury; the votes are tied.
D. Athena is the perfect solver of this dilemma. She is female but her characteristics and outlook are noticeably male. She breaks the tie vote and reconciles the two sides.

VIII. The *Oresteia* is unquestionably one of the greatest works of world literature. But where does the myth end and Aeschylus’s genius begin?
A. This trilogy is a perfect example of the difficulties of trying to access classical myth through its literature.
   1. It is fairly safe to say that Aeschylus invented the trial of Orestes or at least its details.
   2. But the basic situation is built into the myth.
B. The gender issues are even more entangled.
   1. Aeschylus puts the words into his characters’ mouths, so Apollo’s argument about the mechanics of conception is Aeschylus’s idea.
   2. But the conflict of genders is there in the myth, and in other myths, all the way back to Hesiod.
C. In studying classical myth, we can never disentangle the myth from the particular version of whichever author we’re reading. The greater the author, the more difficult the problem.

**Essential Reading:**
Aeschylus, *Oresteia*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Conacher, *Aeschylus’ Oresteia: A Literary Commentary*.
Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia*.
Tyrrell and Brown, *Athenian Myths and Institutions*, pp. 120–132.
Zeitlin, “Motif of Corrupted Sacrifice.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Can you think of any modern analogues for Aeschylus’s use of myth to explore serious social issues?
2. The jurors’ votes to convict and to acquit Orestes may have been evenly tied, or they may have been seven (or six) to convict and six (or five) to acquit. Does it make a difference which interpretation we take? Is anything implied about the human view of justice by either or both interpretations?
Lecture Twenty
The Tragedies of King Oedipus

Scope: In this lecture, we examine the myth of Oedipus, which has had a profound impact on twentieth-century thought. The lecture begins by summarizing Oedipus’s story; we then look briefly at Freud’s famous interpretation of the myth as presented in Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* and at Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist reading. We next consider two interpretations that are more widely accepted among classicists. The first of these sees the central point of the play in the conflict between fate and free will, while the second connects it with the philosophical movement Sophism, current in Athens when Sophocles was writing. The lecture concludes by considering the difficulties of disentangling the myth of Oedipus from its presentation by Sophocles.

Outline

I. The story of Oedipus has become, in this century, the most famous of all Greek myths. The basic outline of the story as it appears in various ancient sources shows many motifs from the familiar test-and-quest pattern.

A. The hero’s birth and conception are surrounded by difficulty.
   1. Oedipus’s parents know that their son will kill his father, Laios, either because of an oracle or because Laios was cursed by Pelops, whose son he had raped.
   2. An elaboration of the story adds that the oracle says Oedipus will also marry his mother, Jocasta.
   3. The infant Oedipus is exposed and expected to die—in the cultural norms of the time—but is instead rescued and brought up by foster parents.
   4. He grows up in Corinth, ignorant of his true identity.

B. The young man performs exceptional feats of strength, cleverness, or both. These often involve encounters with monsters.
   1. Oedipus shows exceptional strength when he kills Laios and all Laios’s attendants.
   2. He shows exceptional cleverness when he solves the riddle of the Sphinx, a monster that terrorizes Thebes.

C. Successfully completing these “tests” gains the young man a bride.
   1. When Oedipus solves the Sphinx’s riddle, he is granted the hand of the Queen of Thebes in marriage.
   2. Unfortunately, she is his mother.
   3. Oedipus’s discovery of the truth of his actions leads to Jocasta’s death and his own self-blinding.
II. We are most familiar with this story through Sophocles’s great play, *Oedipus the King*. Two of this century’s most influential theorists of myth, Freud and Lévi-Strauss, have interpreted the Oedipus myth, and other scholars have followed in their tracks.

A. Freud assumes that Sophocles’s play represents the desires of the unconscious; thus, it appeals to modern audiences no less than to ancient ones as a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy.
   1. Scholars often object that Oedipus’s ignorance of his parentage is crucial to the myth and that if Oedipus felt Oedipal desires, he would have felt them toward his adoptive mother, not Jocasta.
   2. Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex, whether correct or not, does not tell us much about the myth itself, but offers a reason for its appeal.
   3. The second main objection is the one we discussed as an objection to psychological theories of myth in general: Freud assumes that the unconscious operates the same way cross-culturally and through time.

B. Levi-Strauss reads the myth as mediating between the two conflicting accounts of human origin, autochthony (“coming from the earth”) and sexual reproduction.
   1. The riddle of the Sphinx and Oedipus’s uncertainty about his parentage both concern the essential nature of being human: What are human beings and where do they come from?
   2. Lévi-Strauss finds traces of autochthony in the “lameness” characteristic of Oedipus’s family—very often in autochthonic stories, the people who emerge from the earth are lame.
   3. The myth, which is about the origins of Oedipus, mediates between the theory of autochthonous human creation and the observed reality of sexual reproduction.
   4. Few classicists have been persuaded by this reading of the myth.

C. Other scholars connect the Oedipus myth with initiation rites, which sometimes include symbolic killing of the father.

III. The most common reading of Sophocles’s play (if not of the underlying myth) among literary critics and classicists is that its main topic is the conflict between fate and free will.

A. The actions taken by Laios, Jocasta, and Oedipus himself all lead to the inexorable working out of fate.
   1. By trying to avoid fate, these characters guarantee its fulfillment.
   2. They are fated to commit the deeds they commit, but this fate works through their own freely chosen actions.

B. Some scholars object that this is an anachronistic reading.
   1. The conflict that moderns find between the idea of fate and free will does not seem to have troubled the Greeks.
2. Classical Greek, in fact, has no term for “free will.”

IV. Another way to look at the play is to see Oedipus as the paradigm of a rationalist intellectual, seeking to establish truth through the use of his own intellect, rather than through relying on the gods’ oracles.

A. Modern critics often assume that this is a good thing and see Oedipus as a kind of humanist hero, battling for truth for its own sake.

B. In the context of fifth-century Athens, however, most people would probably have seen such intellectual independence as a bad thing.
   1. Sophocles is drawing on one of the most controversial movements of his day, the teachings of the “Sophists.”
   2. Among other subjects, the Sophists, itinerant teachers, taught rhetoric and techniques of argumentation.
   3. The most famous Sophist was Protagoras, best remembered for his dictum “man is the measure of all things.”
   4. They questioned the validity of oracles, which implies questioning the existence or relevance of the gods.
   5. Their opponents accused them of corrupting morals and weakening religious beliefs. Socrates was executed on just such grounds, although he vehemently denied being a Sophist.

C. In this context, Oedipus becomes an example of a Sophist.
   1. His refusal to accept the oracle and the words of the prophet Teiresias shows the distrust of religious traditions that was characteristic of the Sophists.
   2. He is also like a Sophist in his insistence on using his own intelligence and his determination to reason out the puzzles of his own origin and of who killed Laios.

D. Sophocles’s play seems to indicate that the human intellect alone is not sufficient for understanding the world, that the gods’ oracles are valid, and that the gods must be taken into account.

V. All these readings show the difficulty in separating the Oedipus myth from Sophocles’s particular telling of it.

A. The text of *Oedipus the King* has become so central in Western literature that it has even overshadowed Sophocles’s retelling of the aftermath of Oedipus’s story in his last play, *Oedipus at Colonos*.

B. Can we cut through the later interpretations and around Sophocles’s hegemony to try to uncover the original significance of the myth?

VI. The most unusual thing about this myth is its association of parricide and incest, two elements that are not normally part of the same classical myth.

A. Many Greek myths can be found about sons killing or almost killing fathers and vice versa.
1. Parricide, and even lesser violence against fathers, was regarded with absolute horror as the worst imaginable crime.

2. We tend to see the incest with Jocasta as a worse crime than the killing of Laios, but this may be anachronistic.

B. Jan Bremmer suggests that the incest was added to the story to underline the horror of the parricide.

1. Parricide, cannibalism, and incest are the worst imaginable transgressions.

2. Cannibalism does not appear in Oedipus’s story (unless we see it as displaced onto the Sphinx), but the incest here functions as the cannibalism does in the House of Atreus: to underline the horror of the murder.

3. As Bremmer puts it, “the monstrosity of the transgression is commented upon by letting the protagonist commit a further monstrosity.”

C. Oedipus’s eventual heroization at Colonos is a reminder that heroes, in the sense of guardian spirits, were not necessarily noted for good deeds.

1. Oedipus’s crimes mark him as different from the rest of humankind.

2. This difference qualifies him to be a hero.

D. In this context, it is interesting to consider Burkert’s reading of the myth.

1. Burkert connects the myth with the scapegoat or pharmakos, a person who is driven out of a city to free it from some disaster, such as a plague.

2. The pharmakos must be disgusting or foul in some way; this quality enables him able to divert the disaster from the city.

3. In this regard, Oedipus’s pollution enables him both to lift the plague from Thebes and to protect Athens.

Essential Reading:
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*.

Supplementary Reading:
Bremmer, “Oedipus and the Greek Oedipus Complex.”
Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex.”
Freud, “The Oedipus Complex.”
Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, especially Ch. 3.
———, “Oedipus the King: Introduction.”
Leach, *Lévi-Strauss*, Ch. 4, pp. 63–86.
Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Lévi-Strauss holds that all variants of a myth are part of the myth; thus, Freud’s Oedipus complex is as much a part of the Oedipus myth as are Sophocles’s plays. Do you agree or disagree with this view? What are its implications for interpreting myth?
2. The Oedipus myth, at least as told by Sophocles, seems to allow for an enormous range of interpretations. Is this part of its appeal? Is the attempt to isolate one primary meaning in the myth misguided from the outset?
Lecture Twenty-One
Monstrous Females and Female Monsters

Scope: In this lecture, we will look at some of the female figures in Greek myth who break out of women’s usual roles. We will start by discussing the Amazons, a race of female warriors who fought such heroes as Achilles, Theseus, and Heracles. We will then examine another foreign woman, Medea, who is most famous for her marriage to Jason but has tangential connections to other myths as well. Finally, we will look briefly at the numerous female monsters that appear in classical myth and discuss the possible genesis of these figures in male anxieties about women’s roles.

Outline

I. The greatest Greek heroes all had encounters with Amazons at some point in their careers. Theseus, Heracles, and Achilles each met and defeated an Amazon in battle. Who were the Amazons, and why was encountering them a test of hero status?
   A. The Amazons were a race of warrior women who lived somewhere on the edges of the civilized world.
      1. The most common location for their homeland is near the Black Sea.
      2. Some traditions put them in Ethiopia.
      3. The location near the edge of the known world stresses their alien nature.
   B. The myth of the Amazons may have some historical basis.
      1. It is highly unlikely that a female-only society of the type depicted in the Amazon myth ever existed.
      2. However, the location of the Amazons near the Black Sea is significant, particularly the versions that put their homeland in Scythia.
      3. Ancient Scythian women, as well as men, were riders and nomads; the two sexes dressed very much alike.
      4. The Amazon myth could be based on exaggerations of reports about the Scythians.
   C. For our purposes, the most important thing to observe about the mythical Amazons is that they reverse, or invert, almost every standard assumption of Greek society about the proper roles for women.
      1. They are warriors who meet men on equal terms on the battlefield.
      2. They are sexually active outside the bounds of marriage.
      3. They prefer female children to male children; when they give birth to boys, they kill them, castrate them, or sell them into slavery.
D. The acts of marriage for girls and battle for boys are symbolically equivalent. A girl matured when penetrated sexually; a boy, when wounded in battle.
   1. This helps to explain the Amazons’ role as warriors. They reject marriage, so they must accept its equivalent, battle.
   2. Because they are also sexually active, however, they are a sort of hybrid, both male and female, and remain sexually attractive to males (including Greek heroes).
   3. As such, they are extremely disturbing.

II. The interactions of Greek heroes with Amazons can be seen as reasserting the “proper” order of things, because the hero always defeats the Amazon.
   A. On the simplest level, the Greek heroes always defeat the Amazons; thus, Greek defeats barbarian and male defeats female.
   B. The encounter between a Greek hero and an Amazon always entails a re-feminizing of the Amazon.
      1. Theseus marries Hippolyta.
      2. Heracles steals Hippolyta’s “girdle” (or belt); “loosening the girdle” of a woman was a standard euphemism for having sexual intercourse with her.
      3. Achilles falls in love with Penthesilea as she dies from the wound he has given her.

III. The myth of Hippolytos, as told by Euripides, highlights several of these themes.
   A. Hippolytos is the son of Theseus and the Amazon Hippolyta.
   B. He shuns sexuality (and so incurs the anger of Aphrodite) and devotes himself to Artemis.
      1. His refusal of sex indicates a refusal of adulthood and societal responsibilities (to beget children).
      2. Artemis is the patron goddess of young unmarried girls; in his devotion to her, Hippolytos is acting like a girl.
      3. Like the Amazons, Hippolytos is a hybrid between male and female. Unlike the Amazons, who take on aspects of both genders’ adulthood, Hippolytos cannot achieve adulthood in either a male or a female way. He remains frozen in a kind of pre-adolescence.

IV. The myth of Medea highlights many of the same points as the myth of the Amazons. In many ways, Medea is a pseudo-Amazon.
   A. Like the Amazons, Medea comes from the edges of the known world, near the Black Sea.
      1. She was princess of Colchis, to which Jason sailed in search of the Golden Fleece.
      2. She helped him on the understanding that he would take her with him and marry her.
B. Like the Amazons, Medea is an extremely powerful woman who does not hesitate to use violence against males.
   1. She is not a warrior like the Amazons; her power consists in her knowledge of magic and sorcery.
   2. When the need arises, however, she is as capable of physical violence as any warrior; when she and Jason are fleeing Colchis, she kills her younger brother Apsyrtos and cuts his body into little pieces to delay her father’s pursuit.

C. Like the Amazons, Medea is no less desirable for being frighteningly powerful; unlike them, she uses this desirability in the framework of marriage.
   1. Jason marries her.
   2. After she leaves Jason, she becomes the wife of Aigeus.

D. When Jason takes another wife, she murders her own sons.
   1. This murder has no direct analog in Amazon behavior; in the logic of her story, Medea kills her children to make Jason suffer.
   2. This act can also be seen as reasserting her Amazon-like status; by killing her male offspring, Medea puts herself entirely outside the pale of normal behavior for a Greek female and follows the normal pattern for an Amazon.

V. We must look closely at one more category of mythic females: the large number of threatening female monsters. These occur in various types.

A. Some are monsters that eat men. Scylla and the Sphinx are examples of this type.

B. Others are monsters that kill men, but don’t devour them. The Gorgons, specifically Medusa, come to mind here.

C. Often these females become monsters because of an earlier sexual transgression.
   1. Scylla was loved by the sea-god Glaucus, whom the goddess Circe desired; Circe turned Scylla into a monster to punish her for attracting Glaucus.
   2. Poseidon raped Medusa in Athena’s temple, and Athena cursed Medusa with snakes for hair.

VI. We have one example of a female monster who is not particularly threatening, despite being associated with snakes. This is the Scythian echidna, or Snake-woman, as described by the historian Herodotus.

A. Heracles encounters her as he is driving Geryon’s cattle home.
   1. The Snake-woman has stolen Heracles’s mares and promises to return them only if Heracles will sleep with her.
   2. She wants children from Heracles, not to destroy him. After Heracles begets her three sons, she lets him go.

B. She parallels the dangerous females in several ways.
1. Like Medea and the Amazons, she lives near the Black Sea.
2. Like Scylla and Medusa, she is partly snake; Herodotus says that she is a woman from the waist up and a snake from the waist down.
3. Her youngest son is Scythes, who becomes the ancestor of Scythians. The Scythians later mate with the Amazons to produce a tribe called the Sauromatae.

VII. These various females—the Amazons, Medea, and the monsters—all seem to represent the Greek male’s anxiety about women’s power, particularly their sexual power.

A. This theme is encapsulated in Medea’s name, which means both “genitals” and “clever plans.”
B. The theme of women bearing children only to kill them reiterates the regret that women are necessary for men to reproduce.
   1. Sexual reproduction means that women control men’s ability to have offspring.
   2. Mothers’ killing their offspring is simply an exaggerated form of that control.
   3. This may even help to explain the frequent rape motif in Greek myth, because such rapes always result in offspring; the motif may have less to do with male sexual pleasure than with male desire to control fertility.
C. Women’s ability to deny men continuity through offspring is enlarged in these myths into a tendency on the part of females to destroy men entirely.
D. The connection that we saw in the House of Atreus myth between illicit sexual activity and illicit eating, specifically cannibalism, appears here as well.

Essential Reading:
Euripides, Hippolytus.
Euripides, Medea.

Supplementary Reading:
DuBois, Centaurs and Amazons, Ch. 1 and 5.
Herodotus, Histories, pp. 271–274 (on the Scythian snake-woman); 306–308 (on the Scythians and the Amazons).
Vandiver, Heroes in Herodotus, pp. 169–181. Analyzes the story of Heracles and the viper-woman; unfortunately, the Greek is not translated.

Questions to Consider:
1. It is clear by now that Greek myth reflects a great deal of anxiety about and fear of women’s powers. Given what you have learned about Greek marriage
and family structures, can you suggest a reason for these anxieties, beyond the obvious one that women control fertility? What else was it about women or their position in society that was so frightening?

2. Heracles meets far fewer female monsters than do other heroes (or, put another way, the stories of female monsters tend to cluster around heroes other than Heracles), and the Scythian snake-woman is relatively benign. What is it about Heracles that accounts for this?
Scope: In this lecture, we turn from Greek culture to look at the specific uses that the Romans made of Greek myth. The lecture discusses Roman culture’s relationship to Greek culture and some of the reasons that the Romans “borrowed” so much of their art, literature, and myth from Greece. We then look at the specific ways in which the Romans modified and adapted the Trojan War myth to provide a foundation story for their own culture and discuss some of the psychological motivations behind this adaptation. Finally, the lecture considers the native Roman foundation myth of Romulus and Remus.

Outline

I. “Classical” mythology is so called because the myths in question appear in both Greek and Roman literature and art.

A. Rome took over and adapted Greek forms of art, philosophy, history, literature, drama, and so on.

B. One of the main reasons for this adaptation can be found in the chronology of the two cultures.

1. Rome was founded in 753 BC, when most of the important Greek city-states were already ancient.
2. Athens reached its zenith during the fifth century BC; Athens was waning in importance as Rome was rising.
3. In the fourth century BC, Athens and Greece came under the domination of Philip of Macedon and then of his son Alexander.
4. Alexander’s death in 323 BC marks the end of the “Classical” age in Greece and the beginning of the “Hellenistic” period, which lasts until 31 BC.
5. Greece was politically less powerful during the Hellenistic age than it had been earlier, but it was culturally prolific in this period, producing a great deal of literature and artwork.
6. Rome’s political power was growing during the fourth, third, and second centuries, and the two cultures naturally came into contact with one another.

C. The many Greek colonies in southern Italy were other areas of contact.

1. From the eighth to the fifth centuries BC, Greece had colonized the area around and south of Naples, an area that came to be called Magna Graecia (Great Greece).
2. Rome was never a Greek colony, but as Roman power spread in Italy in the fourth century, the Romans came into direct contact with the ethnic Greeks of Magna Graecia.
3. In 146 BC, Rome conquered Greece, which then became a Roman province.

II. All this explains how the Romans could come into contact with Greek culture, but it does not explain why they borrowed so much of that culture wholesale.
   A. The Romans had an image of themselves as practical, down-to-earth people; perhaps this practicality expressed itself in simply adapting Greek models rather than “reinventing the wheel.”
   B. The influence of Greece on Rome has often been compared to the influence of England on America. It may simply not have occurred to the Romans not to mimic Greek cultural forms.
   C. Perhaps the most surprising cultural borrowing is religion and mythology.
      1. Several stories of native Italian gods survive in literature, including Janus, the two-headed god, and the household gods, the Lares and Penates.
      2. These tend to be minor, local gods.
      3. The Romans assimilated their major deities to Greek equivalents; they also adopted Greek stories about those deities.

III. Despite the extent of their cultural borrowings from Greece, the Romans had a strongly ambivalent attitude toward Greece and Greek culture.
   A. The Romans saw the Greeks as cultural models, as better artists, poets, rhetoricians, and so on than they themselves were.
   B. At the same time, however, they saw the Greeks as decadent and “soft,” as well as treacherous, tricky, and untrustworthy.
   C. The Roman conquest of Greece in 146 BC only confirmed this double view of Greece.
      1. The Romans had access to more Greek art and more Greek culture than ever before.
      2. But the Greeks had been conquered, which seemed to prove their inferiority.

IV. This double view of Greece means that the Roman appropriation of Greek myth is bound to contain some unresolved tensions.
   A. If myth is, returning to my original definition, stories that a culture tells itself about itself, then Roman culture will need to adapt Greek myths to reflect its own values.
   B. This adaptation can be seen most clearly in the Roman accounts of the Trojan War, particularly in Virgil’s treatment of the Trojan War story in the *Aeneid.*
1. The Roman tradition that Aeneas was the ancestor of their people had its origins in the *Iliad*, where Poseidon prophesies that Aeneas will survive the sack of Troy and found a new city elsewhere.

2. As early as the fifth century BC, Aeneas’s new city had been identified with Rome by Greek writers.

3. Virgil’s treatment of this story in the *Aeneid* is both the most complete and the most influential version to survive.

C. Aeneas, the son of the Trojan Anchises and the goddess Venus/Aphrodite, fought for the Trojans in the *Iliad*.

D. He managed to escape from the sack of Troy, taking his son, Ascanius, and his father, Anchises, with him.

E. Aeneas reached Italy, married the Italian princess Lavinia, and founded a city called Lavinium. His descendant, Romulus, eventually founded Rome.

V. The main point of interest for us here is the psychological implications of this supposed connection to Troy.

A. As we have seen, the Romans were ambivalent about the Greeks, particularly about their own cultural relationship to Greece.

B. Part of this ambivalence undoubtedly sprang from Rome’s knowledge that it was a much younger culture than Greece.

1. Greece had myths that linked its cities and its leading families to mythic time and gave them gods for ancestors.

2. Roman tradition said that Rome was founded in 753 BC.

C. Appropriating the Greek myth of the Trojan War by identifying themselves with the Trojans gave the Romans a pedigree as ancient as the Greeks and linked them to the same nexus of mythic history.

1. The Romans could view themselves as every bit as ancient as the Greeks.

2. They could also view their conquest of Greece in 146 BC as a “second episode” in the Trojan War.

3. This Roman reconstruction is almost undoubtedly completely ahistorical; we have no reason to think that Trojan refugees actually came to Italy.

VI. Side by side with the Greek story of the Trojan War, the Romans also had legends about the founding of the city of Rome itself by Romulus.

A. By making Romulus Aeneas’s descendant, the myth allows for the chronological gap between the traditional date of the fall of Troy (1184 BC) and the traditional date of the founding of Rome (753 BC).

B. Thus, the Romans were able to feel the reassurance provided by the connection with Troy and to retain their local myth about their eponymous founder.
VII. Romulus is a typical hero in many ways; his story contains elements that we have seen in other hero myths, and he is not an entirely admirable man.

A. Romulus and his brother, Remus, were twin sons of a princess, Rhea Silvia, and the god Mars/Ares. They lost their birthright, then regained it.
   1. At birth, the boys were set adrift in a basket on the Tiber River by their wicked, usurping uncle.
   2. After they washed ashore, they were suckled by a she-wolf.
   3. They were found and adopted by a shepherd, who raised them.
   4. After they reached adulthood, their true lineage was discovered.
   5. They restored their grandfather to the throne of Alba Longa (a city founded by Aeneas’s descendants).
   6. They then decided to found a new city of their own.

B. This new city was Rome, so named after Romulus killed Remus over a quarrel about who would name it.
   1. After founding his city, Romulus offered asylum to anyone who wished to come join him there.
   2. He soon gathered a large group of men, but they needed wives.
   3. To procure wives for themselves, the new Romans invited their neighbors, the Sabines, to a religious festival, then abducted all the young, unmarried women.
   4. Romulus began his rule over Rome by murdering his brother. He consolidated his rule by violating a religious festival through a mass abduction. Again, heroes need not be “good” men.

C. Romulus’s ambiguous nature—a violent founder—is reflected in the story of his death, of which the Roman historian Livy gives two versions.
   1. The first version says that Romulus was taken up into the clouds by the gods.
   2. The second says that the Senators tore him to pieces and hid the body.

VIII. Livy wrote in the late first century BC. By this time, we see a strong rationalizing tendency in writers’ treatment of myth.

A. Unlike Greece, Rome was a literate society from its earliest times.
   1. This means that we have nothing comparable to Hesiod or Homer, who are located near the introduction of writing into Greece and, therefore, may preserve less contaminated versions of myth.
   2. The earliest Roman writers do not deal with myths.

B. The problems of reconstructing myth through literature are even more pressing when we study Roman myths than they were with Greek myths.

C. This problem comes to a head when we consider Ovid.
Essential Reading:
Livy, Book I.
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 305–324. (This passage begins with the story of the contest between Ajax and Ulysses—the Greek Odysseus—for the armor of Achilles. The depiction of Ulysses is anything but flattering.)
Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book II.

Supplementary Reading:
Wiseman, *Remus*.

Questions to Consider:
1. The Roman attitude toward Greece is often compared to the American attitude toward England, particularly in the nineteenth century. Have we “borrowed” any cultural myths from England as Rome did from Greece?
2. Why do you think Roman culture invented the ambiguous figure of Romulus as its founder? Why attribute your city’s name to an act of fratricide?
Lecture Twenty-Three
“Gods Are Useful”

Scope: In this lecture, we discuss the life and work of Ovid, the author of *Metamorphoses*. Because *Metamorphoses* is our main or only source for many famous classical myths, it is an extremely important text for any study of classical mythology. We begin by discussing three of these myths, the stories of Daphne, Phaethon, and Narcissus. We then turn to contextualizing *Metamorphoses* by examining the cultural milieu in which Ovid wrote and the subject and tone of his other works. Finally, we discuss the difficulties of trying to recover “myth” from Ovid’s very literary, ironic retelling of it.

Outline

I. Throughout the course, we have read selections from the Roman author Ovid. We will now look more closely both at Ovid’s great mythological work, *Metamorphoses*, and at the poet himself, in the context of his own society.

   A. Ovid is our primary source, at times our only source, for some of the most well known classical myths, such as the stories of Apollo and Daphne, Phaethon, and Narcissus.

      1. Daphne was a nymph, the daughter of a river god. Apollo was struck with desire for her, but she had vowed to remain a virgin. To escape Apollo, she was turned by her father into a laurel tree. Apollo makes the laurel his sacred tree.

      2. Phaethon was the child of Apollo in his aspect as sun-god and the nymph Clymene. Wishing to prove his parentage, he asked Apollo to grant him one request. This request was to drive the chariot of the sun; in the attempt, Phaethon was killed.

      3. Narcissus was a youth who was too proud to yield to any lover. As a punishment, he fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. He died of starvation, unable to tear himself away from his “beloved,” which he thought was a water nymph.

   B. Because *Metamorphoses* is our primary source for these and other myths, we need to have some idea of the work’s overall tone and purpose. What sort of book is *Metamorphoses*?

II. Ovid wrote near the end of the first century BC and the beginning of the first century AD. This was a crucial time in Rome’s political and cultural history.

   A. From about 509 BC on, Rome was a republic, governed by elected officials.

   B. Under the Republic, Roman power expanded from the city of Rome itself throughout Italy and into other areas.
C. Rome came into its own as an international power after the Punic Wars, a series of three wars with Carthage.

III. Rome’s internal situation was far from stable; in the second and first centuries BC, it saw a series of social upheavals, often breaking into full-scale civil war.
   A. A crisis was reached with Julius Caesar’s assassination on March 15, 44 BC. Caesar’s assassins claimed that he had wanted to establish himself as king, a point still hotly debated.
   B. After Caesar’s death, an open power struggle went on for many years. The struggle had two primary contenders:
      1. Marcus Antonius (“Mark Antony”), Caesar’s trusted friend, who was involved and allied with Cleopatra.
      2. Octavian, Caesar’s great-nephew and adopted son.
   C. Finally, in 31 BC, Octavian defeated the combined forces of Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium.
   D. With his victory at Actium, Octavian became the sole ruler of Rome and remained so until his death in AD 14. In 27 BC, he was awarded the title Augustus (“the revered one”), which came to function as his name. He cleverly refused to adopt the names of kingship.

IV. For our understanding of Ovid, we must understand three crucial aspects of the new government of Augustus (which he claimed was the restitution of the old Republic).
   A. Augustus wanted to reestablish old-style religious ceremonies and reverence for the gods.
   B. He also wanted to reestablish old-style morality. In 18 BC, Augustus passed laws regulating marriage, making adultery a criminal offense, and encouraging couples to have children.
   C. Augustus was also a patron of the arts, including poetry. During his reign, Roman literature entered its “Golden Age.” Virgil and Horace were among those who received his patronage; Ovid was not.

V. Ovid’s work could hardly have been less congenial to a regime that espoused old-fashioned moral and social values.
   A. Ovid’s earlier work was focused on amatory poetry.
      1. Amores (c. 16 BC) is a collection of short love elegies to Ovid’s mistress, Corinna.
      2. Ars Amatoria (c. 1 BC) contains practical advice for both men and women on how to find lovers. He is, in fact, advocating adultery, contrary to Augustus’s laws.
      3. Remedia Amoris (between 1 BC and AD 2) advises the reader on how to get out of a love affair.
B. *Metamorphoses* (written probably between AD 4 and 8) takes myth as its stated subject, specifically myths about the transformations of bodies into other forms.

1. Even here, most of the myths Ovid recounts include a sexual element, often a very strange and outlandish sexual element.
2. In the story of Daphne, Ovid places less emphasis on the aetiological aspects of the story and concentrates on Apollo’s passion and Daphne’s revulsion.
3. In many episodes in *Metamorphoses*, the transformation seems to be added almost as an afterthought, so that Ovid will have an excuse to tell the story.
4. The treatment of the gods and traditional myth is done humorously, scarcely calculated to please Augustus.

C. Ovid was exiled by Augustus in 8 AD. The exact reason for this exile remains a mystery, but it had something to do with Ovid’s writing.

1. Ovid says that it was for *carmen et error*—“a poem and a mistake.”
2. The poem is probably *Ars Amatoria*.
3. We do not know what the “mistake” was. The most common theory is that he found out something compromising about the emperor’s family.
4. In any case, Ovid died in exile.

VI. *Metamorphoses*, like Ovid’s other works, is a highly polished, literary, and self-consciously ironic production. These qualities have profound implications for the use of *Metamorphoses* as a source of classical myth.

A. First, we cannot assume that Ovid is giving us the “straight” version of any myth; he may be altering myth significantly for effect. His overall tone is playful and almost always ironic.

1. The anthropomorphism of the gods is used to comic advantage, as in the story of Phaethon.
2. Ovid may have added some of the more unusual sexual permutations in some of the stories.

B. Second, we cannot assume that all the myths mentioned in *Metamorphoses* were well-known or important ones. Although *Metamorphoses* contains many myths that are well attested elsewhere, Ovid did not necessarily limit himself to major or important myths.

1. Several of the stories Ovid tells in *Metamorphoses* are obscure and may well have been included to demonstrate his erudition.
2. Others stories, such as that of Pyramis and Thisbe, may be entirely Ovid’s own invention.

C. In sum, Ovid’s use of myth anticipates the use that later authors will make of it, when the myths survive as literary tropes but no longer as part of a belief system.
D. Questions of an author’s beliefs are very difficult to determine, but Ovid’s attitude throughout *Metamorphoses* seems close to a statement he makes elsewhere, that the gods are “useful.”

E. Undoubtedly Roman society showed a whole range of beliefs, but Ovid’s target audience was the highly educated, sophisticated elite, who would be able to read and enjoy his tales of the gods as literary stories.

VII. Given the separation of *Metamorphoses* from living myth, it is an ironic twist of history that it exercised an extraordinary degree of direct influence on later literature and art.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Lyne, “Augustan Poetry and Society.”

**Questions to Consider:**

1. I have assumed in this lecture that Ovid’s playful and ironic tone in *Metamorphoses* must mean that he did not literally believe in the gods he described. Is this a safe assumption or is it grounded in my own preconceptions about belief and the nature of divinity?

2. Because Ovid is our only source for several of the tales in *Metamorphoses*, is it valid to call these tales “myths” at all? Is there any way for us to know if Ovid simply made them up? Does it matter?
Lecture Twenty-Four

From Ovid to the Stars

Scope: In this final lecture, we consider the enormous influence Ovid had on later European culture, especially on English literature and culture through Shakespeare. We then discuss the influence of classical mythology in general, an influence that continues in literature and art to the present day. Finally, the lecture concludes by suggesting that the prevalence of stories about extraterrestrials in our own society is a reflection of the myth-making impulse and that the particular form of our most popular science fiction stories reflects the ongoing influence of classical mythology.

Outline

I. Classical civilization gave way over time to Christianity, but beginning in the late eleventh century, classical literature was resurrected. Ovid’s influence on European culture from the late eleventh century onward was significant.

A. The twelfth century has been called the aetas ovidiana, the “Ovidian Age.”
   1. The growth of cathedral schools increased knowledge of Ovid’s work.
   2. Medieval writers interpreted Metamorphoses as a collection of allegories, both moral and specifically Christian.

B. By the fourteenth century, the allegorical use of Ovid reached its highpoint in an anonymous poem of 70,000 verses entitled Ovide moralisé.
   1. In this work, the flight of Daidalos and his son Icaros was interpreted as representing the soul’s flight toward God.
   2. Daphne was interpreted as representing the Virgin Mary.

C. By the fourteenth century, Ovid was also becoming well known in England.
   1. William Caxton published the first English translation of Metamorphoses in 1480.
   2. Caxton worked from a French translation and included explanations of the “morals” or allegorical interpretations behind Ovid’s stories.

II. For English literature and culture, the crucial point is Ovid’s influence on Shakespeare.

A. Shakespeare clearly knew Metamorphoses very well indeed.
   1. We do not know the details of Shakespeare’s education, but if he studied at the Stratford Grammar School, he would have read Ovid in the original Latin.
2. He probably also used Golding’s 1567 translation of *Metamorphoses*.

**B. Metamorphoses** permeates Shakespeare’s works to an extraordinary extent.

1. When Shakespeare wants a point of comparison, Ovid seems to be the first example that springs into his mind.
2. These allusions are part of what makes Shakespeare difficult for modern readers.

**C.** Because Shakespeare’s influence on English literature is incalculably great, it is fair to say that Ovid, too, has had an incalculably great influence.

**III.** Ovid is only one author, but he can stand as a representative of the enormous influence classical mythology has had and continues to have on later Western civilization.

**A.** Authors have taken and continue to take themes, images, plots, and points of comparison from Homer, Virgil, Ovid, the tragedians, and many other classical authors.

**B.** Because these ancient authors’ subject matter was largely based in myth, the modern authors who use them as sources reflect classical myth.

1. Sometimes the author makes the connection obvious through the title of a work; examples would be Joyce’s *Ulysses* or O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*.
2. Other authors do not indicate their intentions so clearly; an example is Charles Frazier’s novel *Cold Mountain*, which owes not just much of its plot but many of its episodes and images to the *Odyssey*.

**IV.** Classical mythology permeates our culture’s literature, art, and language. Is this the only reason why it is still important to us?

**A.** Most of the theorists we surveyed at the beginning of the course would say that myth is important to us for deeper reasons than merely its influence on our culture.

1. These theorists may well be right that myth taps into some deep structure or psychological tendency in the human mind.
2. But this leaves unanswered the question of why classical myth, in particular, is so congenial to us.
3. Its continuing use in our literature and art explains its familiarity, but does not seem adequate to explain its appeal.

**B.** I think the reason for this is that classical myth’s presence in our culture represents more than just a borrowed set of literary and artistic tropes and images.
1. In the stories of Greco-Roman antiquity, we have inherited a whole cast of mind.

2. Literature does more than entertain; it interacts with other areas of human endeavor to shape our worldview.

V. Finally, the question remains of where the myth-making impulse has turned in our own society.

A. As I said in the first lecture, all cultures have myths; however, identifying and analyzing these myths from within a culture can be very difficult.

B. If myths are stories a culture tells itself that encode its aspirations, anxieties, beliefs, and fears, then I think we can identify at least one strong mythic tendency in modern American culture: the whole complex of stories, word-of-mouth accounts, and widespread belief in visitors from extraterrestrial cultures.

1. We can no longer place our monsters and our bizarre creatures at the edges of our own world; we know what is there.

2. The impulse that put the Amazons in Scythia and triple-bodied Geryon in the far west now puts savage monsters in outer space.

C. We can no longer place our Age of Heroes in the remote past; history and archaeology have made that impossible. Instead, we put them in the remote future. And, of course, in our culture, we find these stories not in books, but in film and television.

1. Popular television programs and movies, such as the Star Trek series, reflect the same theme as Hesiod’s “Race of Heroes.”

2. However, the pattern is now inverted chronologically. We tell stories about a race of people greater, stronger, and more capable than we, who are in some sense related to us, but these people are our descendants, not our ancestors.

3. Hesiod’s pessimism is not lacking; many of our “futuristic” movies portray a dark and horrible future. Even there, though, a hero figure is usually present, who overcomes great difficulties, such as in the Road Warrior and Terminator movies.

D. What is the explanation for these recognizable mythic themes in modern entertainment?

1. Psychological theorists, of course, would say that the stories of fantasy and science fiction are reflections of the mythic impulse welling up from the subconscious and that the oddly familiar characters we find there are archetypes.

2. In my opinion, it is more likely that these stories are an indication of the degree to which the patterns of classical mythology have permeated our culture.
3. These stories are appealing because twenty-five centuries of repetition have made them familiar and have built them into the texture of our minds.

Supplementary Reading:
Lerner, “Ovid and the Elizabethans.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Most modern readers would reject allegorical readings of *Metamorphoses* that find a specifically Christian message in it, because Ovid died before the development of Christianity. Are other allegorical interpretations of *Metamorphoses* valid? For instance, can we read the story of Phaethon as a warning against pride, or does Ovid’s ironic tone preclude such interpretations?

2. I have suggested that the modern genre of science fiction owes a great deal to classical mythology. Can you think of any other modern genres of entertainment that reflect some of the narrative patterns (such as the test-and-quest pattern) that we have discussed in this course?
Timeline

c. 7000–c. 2000 BCE.............The “Pre-Palatial” period of Minoan civilization on Crete. Knossos was colonized around 7000, possibly by settlers from southwest Anatolia.

c. 3000–c. 1000 .....................Successive cities occupy Hisarlik in northwestern Turkey; one of them may have been “Homer’s Troy.”

c. 2200–c. 2000 .....................Probable timeframe for arrival in Greece of speakers of an Indo-European language, the ancestor of Greek.

c. 2000–c. 1470 .....................The “Palatial” period of Minoan civilization in Crete and Thera, which was the culture’s high point.

c. 1575–c. 1450 .....................The “formative period” of Mycenaean culture in Greece.

c. 1470–1100 .....................The “Post-Palatial” period of Minoan civilization. After 1100, the Minoans disappear as a cultural presence on Crete and Thera.

c. 1450–c. 1200 .....................The “Palatial” period of Mycenaean culture. The civilization’s highpoint, during which it gained control over Minoan culture.

c. 1200–c. 1050/1000 ............The “Post-Palatial” period of Mycenaean civilization in Greece, after which culture in Greece reverted to a pre-Mycenaean level.

c. 1184 ..................................The most commonly accepted traditional date for the Fall of Troy.

c. 1100–c. 776 .....................The “Dark Ages” in Greece; 776, the traditional ending date of the Dark Ages, is the traditional date of the first Olympic Games.

c. 800?–780 .......................The alphabet introduced into Greece.

753......................................Traditional date of the founding of Rome.

c. 750?–700 .......................The \textit{Iliad} and \textit{Odyssey} are perhaps transcribed into writing.

c. 700?..............................Hesiod writes \textit{Theogony} and \textit{Works and Days}.

c. 525...............................Birth of Aeschylus, author of \textit{The Oresteia} and other works.

496......................................Birth of Sophocles, author of \textit{Oedipus the King}, \textit{Oedipus at Colonus}, and other works.
480..........................................Birth of Euripides, author of *Bacchae, Hippolytos, Medea*, and other works.

458..........................................*The Oresteia* performed in Athens.

456..........................................Death of Aeschylus.

431–405 ...........................................The Peloponnesian War (between Sparta and Athens and their respective allies).

429..........................................Probable date of performance of *Oedipus the King*.

c. 420...........................................Herodotus publishes his *Historia* (or “Inquiry”), which includes many references to the heroes of mythology.

406..........................................Deaths of Sophocles and Euripides.

405..........................................Posthumous performance of Euripides’s *The Bacchae*.

401..........................................Posthumous performance of Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*.

399..........................................The execution of Socrates.

c. 380...........................................Plato writes *Republic*, which includes the “Myth of Er.”

264–241 ...........................................First Punic War between Rome and Carthage; this war and the two succeeding Punic wars establish Rome’s hegemony over the Mediterranean.

218–202 ..........................................Second Punic War.

151–146 ..........................................Third Punic War; final defeat of Carthage. Corinth is captured this same year.

44 BC ..........................................Assassination of Julius Caesar on March 15.

43 BC ..........................................Birth of Ovid.

31 BC ..........................................Battle of Actium; Augustus’s victory here marks the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire.

29?–19 BC ...........................................Virgil writes the *Aeneid*, modeled on the Homeric epics but taking the viewpoint of the Trojans (whom the Romans considered their ancestors). Book II of the *Aeneid* gives the fullest extant account of the Sack of Troy. The *Aeneid* was left incomplete when Virgil died in 19 BC.

c. AD 4? ..........................................Ovid writes *Metamorphoses*.
8..............................Ovid exiled to Tomis on the Black Sea.
14..............................Death of Augustus.
17..............................Death of Ovid, still in exile.

First–second centuries ......Probable period of composition of Apollodorus’s
Library of Greek Mythology.

312..............................Constantine converts to Christianity after his victory
at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge.

361–363............................Reign of the Roman emperor Julian “the Apostate,”
who briefly re-established paganism as the official
religion of the Empire. Supposedly received the last
oracle ever given by Delphi.

1054 AD...........................Permanent break between Roman Catholic and Greek
Orthodox churches leads to rapid loss of knowledge
concerning Greek language and literature in the West.

c. 1313–1321 ......................Dante writes The Divine Comedy.

1396..............................Manuel Chrysoloras offers classes in Greek in
Florence. This begins the revival of interest in Greek
literature in Europe.

Fourteenth century ..........Publication of Ovide moralisé.

1453..............................The Sack of Constantinople by the Ottomans. A great
many Greek scholars flee to Italy, bringing
manuscripts with them. The study of Greek becomes
important in Europe.

1480..............................William Caxton publishes Ovyde Hys Booke of
Methamorphose, the first English translation of
Metamorphoses.

1495..............................Aldus Manutius founds the Aldine Press in Venice
and begins printing editions of Greek classics.

1498..............................Erasmus begins teaching Greek at Oxford. He
becomes professor of Greek at Cambridge in 1511.

1567..............................Arthur Golding publishes his translation of
Metamorphoses, which Shakespeare probably used.

1626..............................George Sandys publishes his Ovid’s Metamorphoses
Englished.

1870–1873 ......................Heinrich Schliemann conducts his first excavations at
Hisarlik. He finds the “Treasure of Priam” in 1873 and
continues to excavate sporadically until his death in 1890.

1890........................................Sir James Frazer publishes the first edition of *The Golden Bough* in two volumes.

1900........................................Freud publishes *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which includes his theory of the Oedipus complex.

1900........................................Sir Arthur Evans excavates at Knossos on Crete. He finds the remnants of a great prehistoric civilization that he calls “Minoan.”

1903........................................Jane Harrison publishes *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*.


1912........................................Jane Harrison publishes *Themis*.

1913........................................Freud publishes *Totem and Taboo*, which suggests that myths are the wish-dreams of a culture and defines the Oedipus myth as a memory of an actual occurrence in the “primal horde.”

1926........................................Bronislaw Malinowski publishes “Myth in Primitive Psychology.”

1928........................................Vladimir Propp publishes *Morfologija skaski* (*Morphology of the Folktale*); the first English translation was published in 1958.

1941........................................Carl Jung publishes *Einfuhrung in das Wesen der Mythologie* (translated into English in 1949 as *Essays on a Science of Mythology*), in collaboration with Karl Kerenyi.

1949........................................Joseph Campbell publishes *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.


1964–1968.........................Claude Lévi-Strauss publishes *Mythologiques* (English: *Mythologies*); the first volume is *Le cru et le cuit* (*The Raw and the Cooked*).
Glossary

**aetiological myths**: Myths that provide an explanation (“aetiology”) for how something came into existence. The myth of Persephone is an aetiology for the existence of the seasons.

**ambrosia**: The food of the gods. In the *Iliad*, the gods anoint the dead bodies of Patroklos and Hector with ambrosia to protect them from corruption. See *nectar*.

**anthropomorphism**: The representation of non-human entities in human form and with human emotions.

**Areopagos**: The “Hill of Ares” in Athens; meeting site of the Areopagos council, whose powers were restricted in 462 BC to hearing cases of murder, arson, and malicious wounding. In Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, it is the site of Orestes’s trial for the murder of Clytemnestra.

**athanatoi**: “Deathless ones.” A term used to refer to the gods, particularly as contrasted to mortals, or *thnêtoi*.

**charter myths**: Myths that provide a justification for a social institution or custom. The term is Malinowski’s.

**dactylic hexameter**: The meter of epic. It is constructed of six “feet,” each consisting of *either* a dactyl (one long syllable followed by two short syllables) or a spondee (two long syllables). The resulting line is flexible and varied in Greek, though it tends to sound pedestrian in English.

**Colchis**: Town on the Black Sea where the Golden Fleece was kept. Jason sailed there in search of the Fleece, which Medea, daughter of the King of Colchis, helped him to steal.

**Delphi**: Site of Apollo’s most important oracle and the temple complex associated with it. Oracles at Delphi were spoken by the Pythia, a priestess supposedly inspired with prophetic powers by the god.

**Eleusinian Mysteries**: Religious ceremonies held at Eleusis in honor of Demeter. The term “mysteries” means “secrets”; the ceremonies were open only to initiates, who were bound by an oath not to divulge what was done in the rites. Our knowledge of the Eleusinian Mysteries is tantalizingly imprecise; however, it seems clear that the rites promised that initiates would have a better status in the afterlife than non-initiates. Initiation was open to males and females and to slaves as well as free people. The Mysteries fell into disuse around 400 AD.

**Epic Cycle**: A series of epics, no longer extant, which told the story of those episodes of the Trojan War not contained in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

**Euhemerism**: The theory that all myths are misunderstood history; named for Euhemeros, who said that the Olympian gods had originally been great kings whose stories were exaggerated over time.
**herm**: A stylized representation of Hermes, used to guard houses and mark boundaries. Herm was a pillar topped with a bearded man’s head; they were otherwise featureless except for an erect phallus.

**Homeric Hymns**: A collection of poems in dactylic hexameter in honor of various gods and goddesses; they range from a very few lines to several hundred lines in length. The longest and most important ones were probably written between 650 and 400 BC; the others were probably written later, though the exact dates are uncertain.

**Indo-European**: The prehistoric parent language of Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, most modern languages of Europe, and many modern languages of India. Indo-European was never written down, but scholars have made hypothetical reconstructions of some of its words and forms by comparative study of the languages that descended from it. The people who spoke this language are referred to as “Indo-Europeans.”

**Hisarlik** or **Hissarlik**: The flat-topped hill in the Troad where Schliemann located the prehistoric ruins of Troy.

**Knossos**: Ancient city on Crete; Sir Arthur Evans uncovered its ruins in 1900.

**Linear B**: Mycenaean syllabic writing system; Michael Ventris’s decipherment of it in 1952 proved that the Mycenaeans spoke Greek.

**mêtis**: Wisdom, skill, cunning, craftiness. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, personified as a goddess with whom Zeus mates.

**Minoan culture**: Pre-Hellenic culture of Crete and Santorini (Thera); discovered by Sir Arthur Evans and named “Minoan” after King Minos of myth. Minoan culture flourished from c. 2000 to c. 1470 BC, after which time it came under the influence of Mycenaean culture and eventually vanished.

**Mycenaean culture**: The name given by archaeologists to the prehistoric Bronze Age culture discovered in Greece by nineteenth-century archaeologists. The Mycenaeans were descended from Indo-European speakers and spoke an archaic form of Greek; their cities figure prominently in Greek myth.

**nectar**: The drink of the gods. See also **ambrosia**.

**pharmakos**: A “scapegoat”; a human being driven out of his own city during a crisis, such as a plague, on the assumption that he would somehow take the contagion or other crisis with him.

**potnia theron**: “Mistress of Beasts”; a phrase used by Homer to describe Artemis.

**psyche**: Often translated as “soul,” this word originally seems to have meant “breath.” It is what leaves the body at death. Though it survives in some sense in Hades, its existence there is vague and shadowy.
**satyr play**: A short, comic or satirical play performed after a trilogy of tragedies.

**synoikistes**: A unifier; used of Theseus as the supposed unifier of Attica under Athenian rule.

**thnêtoi**: “The dying ones.” A term used to refer to human beings, particularly as contrasted to the immortal gods, or *athanatoi*.

**transliteration**: The system of representing the sounds of one language (e.g., Greek) in the alphabet of another (e.g., English).

**xenia**: The “guest/host relationship.” Our term “hospitality” does not convey the seriousness of the concept. *Xenia* was protected by Zeus and covers the whole range of obligations that guests and hosts (*xenoi*, singular *xenos*) have to one another. Violations of these obligations bring dire consequences: Paris’s theft of Helen was, among other things, a violation of *xenia*.

**xenos**: A guest, host, friend, stranger, or foreigner (cf. *xenophobia*). The range of this word’s meanings reflects the essential nature of *xenia* (see previous entry), which does not depend on prior acquaintance but operates between strangers. Once two men have entered into a relationship of *xenia*, when one of them stays in the other’s house, they are “guest-friends” and have obligations to one another.
Bibliography

Essential Readings:
(Note: Most of the Greek and Roman texts cited are available in many different translations. The editions listed here reflect my own preferences and an attempt to offer a balance in different translating styles.)


London: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 256–269. A succinct, clear exposition of the objections many scholars have to Campbell’s theory.


Virgil, *The Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage Books, 1984. This is probably the most frequently used translation in college literature courses. It translates Virgil’s hexameters into quick moving, fluid, and very readable lines of iambic pentameter. The line numbers of the original are given at the foot of each page, which is helpful to the student who is reading supplementary materials that include line references.

**Supplementary Bibliography**

(Note: In recent decades, a vast amount has been written on classical mythology and myth in general. I have tried to winnow out a representative selection of useful and interesting studies while avoiding books that assume knowledge of complicated modern theoretical approaches. I have also included several works that disagree, at least to some extent, with my own views of what myth is, how it works, and the interpretation of individual classical myths, so that students may gain some sense of the immense complexity of these topics. Finally, I have tried to favor works that have good bibliographies to aid students who wish to continue their investigations into mythology.)


Bremmer, Jan. *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983. Argues that Greek culture originally recognized two types of soul, the “free soul,” which represented a person’s individual essence, and the “body soul,” which endowed the body with consciousness and motion. Chapter 3, on the soul after death, is particularly useful.


concludes that the main point of the incest is to underline the horror of the parricide.


———. *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions*. Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1996. A fascinating and controversial exploration of the idea that sacrifice and religion in general may have a biological basis. The author draws on non-classical and classical material.


Dodds, E. R. “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*,” in Berkowitz and Brunner, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, pp. 218–229. An influential article that locates the main point of Sophocles’s play in Oedipus’s role as an intelligent questioner. Argues against earlier interpretations that stress fate or Oedipus’s guilt.

DuBois, Page. *Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1982. Examines the function of anomalous creatures, such as Centaurs (half-man, half-animal) and Amazons (women who act like males), in Athenian thought and culture; particular emphasis on the growth of philosophical thought in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BC.

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in the archaeological evidence for Minoan religion and the difficulties involved in interpreting it.


[Katz], Marilyn Arthur. “Politics and Pomegranates: An Interpretation of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*,” in Foley, *Homeric Hymn*, pp. 211–242. A literary analysis based on Freudian theory; the author seeks to “elucidate a common structure underlying both the ancient text and the modern theory” (p. 211).


———. “On Defining Myths.” In Dundes, *Sacred Narrative*, pp. 53–61. A discussion of the difficulties inherent in attempts to arrive at any single theory of what myth is; suggests that the only safe definition is “traditional oral tale.”


Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975. When it appeared, this book was pioneering, one of the first studies to systematically examine women’s roles and
lives in classical culture. Although dated in some respects, it remains a very useful and readable source of information.


Vandiver, Elizabeth. *Heroes in Herodotus: The Interaction of Myth and History*. Studien zur klassischen Philologie 56. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991. Examines the function of mythological heroes in the *Histories* of Herodotus. Unfortunately, Greek and other foreign languages are left untranslated (if I had it to do over again, I would change this), but the recommended section does not depend on the Greek to be comprehensible.

Vellacott, P. H. “The Guilt of Oedipus,” in Berkowitz and Brunner, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, pp. 207–218. A provocative article that goes against most interpretations of the play by arguing that Oedipus actually knew Laius was his father and Jocasta, his mother.


