



NATURE OF MYTH

LWV4U1 - GRADE 12 CLASSICAL CIVILIZATION - MR. A. WITTMANN

UNIT 2 - LECTURE 1

What Is Myth?

- ◆ (mythos = authoritative speech)
- ◆ a traditional story with collective importance
- ◆ narrative with plot, setting, characters, conflict and resolution
- ◆ handed over (trado) orally and transmit a culture's sense of identity
- ◆ past cultural wisdom, memories, and models
- ◆ not literal fact, but symbolic truth

- ◆ Contrasted with logos (-logy)
 - ◆ reasoned account of facts by an author.
- ◆ Oral transmission creates constant changes
- ◆ Emphasizing motives and meaning at that times & places
- ◆ No identifiable author
- ◆ Written down myth, in a literary form, uses well known story
 - ◆ e.g. Sophocles's Oedipus plays.

- ◆ Oral traditions are inherently unstable & sometimes the myths defer in details
 - ◆ Homer's Oedipus continues to rule after discovering his sin
 - ◆ Sophocles's Oedipus blinds himself and goes into exile
- ◆ One version is not more true than another
- ◆ Typically we focus on the best-known versions
- ◆ But a myth is the collection of all versions

Types of Myth

1. Divine Myth

2. Legend (Saga)

3. Folktales

Divine Myth

- ◆ Supernatural beings are the main actors
- ◆ Anthropomorphic gods are “super” human beings
- ◆ Forces of nature and whose quarrels can cause cosmic consequences.
- ◆ Either fully developed personalities or personified abstractions
 - ◆ divinities of natural, social or psychological phenomena
- ◆ Animism
 - ◆ belief that everything is alive & possess will & purpose
 - ◆ sometimes personified & can be pleased or offended

- ◆ Divine myths take place before time and space functioned as it does now
- ◆ Greeks didn't ask how long ago Zeus's battle vs. the Titans took place
- ◆ Greeks believed in the symbolism of their myths, not necessarily the facts
- ◆ Divine myths had religious implications, but did not constitute "religion"
- ◆ A myth is a story, while religion is a set of actions directed by beliefs

- ◆ Divine myth explains aetiology of the evolution and functioning of cosmos
 - ◆ structures, rhythms & humankind's place in it.
 - ◆ i.e. Why the seasons vary (Persephone and Demeter)
- ◆ Sometimes explain only local traditions or religious practices.
- ◆ Attempt to explain the origins of practices, when the actual origins were long forgotten
- ◆ Divine myth and modern theoretical science both tell of the origins of the fundamental arrangement of the cosmos as we experience it.

Legends

- ◆ Divine myth is similar to theoretical science
- ◆ Thus legend is similar to history & events of the human past.
- ◆ Great human heroes who interacted with the gods
- ◆ Gods play a role, but are not main characters.
- ◆ Legends contain some elements of historical accuracy.
- ◆ Aetiology of ethnicity

- ◆ Legends tell us what the transmitters of the legend thought was important to understand.
- ◆ Artists interpret the ready-made plots of legends for social, political, or artistic statements
- ◆ Thus there are various versions of the same stories
- ◆ Sparta had very few myths
- ◆ Mycenae had the most

Folktales

- ◆ More difficult to define and describe
- ◆ Often merely described as not a divine myth or legend
- ◆ Broad category that can include fables, fairytales, etc.
- ◆ Entertain & teach & justify customary patterns of behaviour
- ◆ Characters are not believed to have really existed.

- ◆ Often of very low social status (i.e. youngest of the family)
- ◆ Underestimated and abused by their social betters
- ◆ Often animals are characters
- ◆ Folktale ends with reversal of fortune
- ◆ Trickster hero outwits his opponents
- ◆ Few pure folktales survive from the Greeks and Romans
- ◆ But there are folktales from all over the world and they share certain key characteristics, 700 folktale "types" (i.e. Cinderella)

- ◆ Basic element of folktale is the motif:
 - ◆ abused younger sister
 - ◆ spirit helper
 - ◆ marriage to a prince
 - ◆ wicked mother-in-law
 - ◆ foundling child
- ◆ Thousands of motifs are used to make up the hundreds folktale types.
- ◆ The Brothers Grimm

THE END

