ASPECTS OF MYTH AND RELIGION*

by B. C. Dietrich
(Rhodes University)

'At first there was Chaos, and Night, black Erebus and wide Tartarus. But the Earth was not there, nor the Sky or Air. But Night with her black wings first of all laid a wind-egg in the boundless bosom of Erebus, from which in the fullness of the seasons Love the desirable was born with glittering wings of gold on his back . . . He mingled with dark murky Chaos . . . produced our race and first brought us up to the light of day'. 1 This version of Hesiod's cosmogony might have been told by Trimalchio at one of his dinner parties, or by Lucian a century later to illustrate his cynical regard for Greek myth and religion.

In fact, as you know, the speaker is the chorus of birds in Aristophanes' play which was produced at the Great Dionysia of 414 B.C. Gross mythological burlesque became a popular feature of Middle Greek Comedy in the next century; but scenes like this suggest an even earlier decline of respect, particularly since this kind of censorious or frivolous attitude to the gods can be found in the more serious contemporaries of Aristophanes. However, fifth century blasphemous habits continued an older tradition which had begun with Homer and Hesiod who, according to Herodotus, gave the Greek gods their 'titles, offices and powers'. 2 By our moral standards it is disturbing to hear the story of Zeus' deceit (Aἰός ἀπάτη) in the fourteenth Book of the Iliad, or Demodocus' scurrilous description of Aphrodite's adultery with Ares. Of course, there are arguments that such passages were added later by some Ionic poet. But all attempts at whitewashing à la Pindar fail to conceal the bond which links Homer's gods and their myths with those of Euripides and Aristophanes. The question now arises whether Homer's world of divine myths, and by implication that of his literary successors, belonged to religious belief and the gods of cult. In other words, is it possible to equate Homeric mythology with Greek religion?

This is not an easy question to answer even now when modern opinion ranges between the two extremes of W. F. Otto, for whom Greek religion is synonymous with Homer's gods, and Paul Mazon who denies that the Iliad had any religious content whatsoever. 4 There is yet another question which ought to be asked, namely were Homer's and Hesiod's stories of gods and their origins Greek myths or were they borrowed from foreign cultures? And there seems to

---

* This paper formed the substance of a talk to the Classical Association of South Africa in Port Elizabeth in January 1977.
1. Aristophanes, Birds 693–702.
3. Homer, Od. 8.
be no doubt that the basic structure of Hesiod's cosmogony was Babylonian and ultimately Sumerian in origin. Homer's poems, too, contain unmistakable traces of dependence on Mesopotamian thought. But Homer and Hesiod were no Babylonian mythographers: what they used they made their own. Nevertheless it is salutary to remember that the 'fathers of the Greek gods' were part of an older tradition which at one time governed most of the Aegean peoples.

Recently Emily Vermeule pointed to the wide gap between Homer's picture of the gods and the 'real' world of cult in archaic Greece. Only Athena and Apollo had temples apparently: not a word in Iliad or Odyssey of the many famous shrines of Hera throughout the Greek world from Samos to Olympia, or of Artemis who seems sadly neglected. Eleusis, too, was a flourishing centre of worship in Homer's time. But Demeter and Dionysus, as we know, did not rank highly in Homeric epic. Did then Homer live in his own world of mythology with only a few shadows or ghosts of 'contemporary' cult figures? Forgive me if I leave my answer until later, borrowing an epic device to create tension: Hector departs the scene of battle at a critical point to perform some chore in Troy.

It is possible to argue that the Homeric poets consciously rationalized older myths. The treatment of Meleager's story is a case in point. In Book 5 of the Odyssey Calypso only reluctantly obeys Hermes' command to release Odysseus, 'A cruel folk you are . . . you gods', she says, 'who cannot bear to let a goddess sleep with a man.' And yet, she complained, many Olympians had loved mortals before, like Demeter who 'gave way to her passion and lay in the arms of her beloved lasion . . .'. Thus Homer turned an ancient rite into a naughty Olympian peccadillo.

The transition from old to new came harder to Hesiod: one becomes aware of a disturbingly bifocal effect between tradition and Hesiodic thought. In the famous tale of the division of sacrificial meat for gods and men Prometheus tries to cheat Zeus by offering his two unlike portions from which to choose. One contains the flesh but is wrapped inside the victim's skin, while the other portion consists of bones only which lie concealed underneath the animal's rich fat. After rebuking Prometheus for the unfair division Zeus of 'undying cunning', Hesiod tells us, 'recognized and did not overlook the trick' (Kirk's translation). But for all his cunning he still picked up the wrong lot and 'was enraged in his mind, and anger possessed his spirit.' We do not need Hyginus' learned note to realize that this episode is a badly patched up repair job of an older tradition in

7. Homer's version (II. 9, 529ff.) differs from what was probably the traditional account. The latter is related by Apollodorus (Bibl. 1. 8, 1ff.) and Ovid (Met. 8. 451ff.) whose immediate source was Bacchylides' Fifth Epinician (V. 9, 5ff.).
which Zeus falls victim to the ruse of Prometheus. After Prometheus', that is mankind's, 'original sin' against the gods, Zeus deprived them of fire, which is the instrument of civilization, and then punished them again for its restoration by devising the ultimate evil—woman. The story is told twice by Hesiod, once in the *Theogony* and again in the *Works and Days*, where we learn her name Pandora or 'All-gifts'. Not all of us agree with Hesiod's opinion of women, but beyond that there is one deeply puzzling feature in the two accounts: if Pandora was the first woman created by Zeus then the men of Hesiod's Golden Age lived without the fairer sex.

The story of divine succession from Uranus to Cronus and Zeus is told in the *Theogony*. The pattern of the dynastic progression and the cruel manner in which it was accomplished Hesiod had learnt from eastern models, but he used the story very much in his own way. When Cronus had deposed his father Uranus he feared a similar fate for himself, 'Therefore he kept no idle watch, but keenly observing them swallowed down his children, and Rhea was possessed by unforgettable grief'. His last son Zeus was saved by his mother Rhea who hid the infant in a cave in Crete substituting a stone which Cronus swallowed. Why should Cronus fear his offspring? Surely not because of any moral qualms. Hesiod's reason was that Cronus was fated to be deposed by his son through the will of Zeus. Consider the implications of this passage for a moment and you may understand the confusion of many modern critics who have attempted to explain it. The scholiast proposes to change the offending *Dios* to *patros* in the text asking quite properly, how could Cronus heed the advice of Zeus who had not yet been born. But the working of Zeus' will is seen from Hesiod's viewpoint. In the poet's understanding Cronus' fate and the will of Zeus are identical. In other words there are two Zeuses in Hesiod, the mythological figure of the succession story and the supreme god Zeus, ruler of the universe and highest arbiter. Curiously Zeus inherits the same fear together with the Olympian throne and also resorts to eating the opposition: he swallows Metis, that is 'Counsel' or 'Wisdom' personified, before she can give birth to the new threat. I have a theory on Metis as a pun along the lines of the Homeric Outis, the name Odysseus gave himself in Cyclops' cave meaning 'No One' or 'No Man'—*outis esti* 'there is no one', as opposed to Metis, i.e. 'may there not be any one'.

So far then we can answer an important part of our earlier question positively: the gods of Homer and Hesiod moved entirely in the world of myth much of which had been adapted from other cultures. But it remains to be seen how far this world was one of actual cult figures, and we should now look for a

---

15. ὁ γὰρ Ζεύς πῶς ἐξει συμβουλεῦσαι τῷ Κρόνῳ μὴν γεννηθεῖς; etc.
connection between his literary mythology and religious practice. Were myth and religion in classical Greece always interdependent or even compatible terms?

But we are generalizing. Myths can be folk tales, historical legends, cosmogonies, divine and heroic genealogies or deeds. To the Greeks μῦθος originally described a speech or tale without implying anything about its nature. The word assumed a negative sense, however, as early as the sixth century B.C., and by the time of Thucydides it had become a universally derogatory term: μῦθοι described fabulous unauthenticated histories in verse and prose.\(^{17}\) Plato, too, contrasted μῦθοι with ἀληθινῶτεροι λόγοι.\(^{18}\) The same negative quality attached to the adjective μυθικός in Aristotle. In particular stories of the gods and heroes of old became thought of as μῦθοι that is πλάσματα τῶν προτέρων\(^{19}\) opposed to ιστορίαι. They were figments of the imagination, sometimes direct falsehoods which, according to Solon,\(^{20}\) the poets spread abroad. In Hesiod's Theogony the Muses actually boast that when they wish they can proclaim the truth, but they also know how to tell lies resembling the truth,\(^{21}\) which seems to us a pretty serious admission to make in an introduction to the history of the origin of the gods. But such stories were labelled as myths, and although Homer regularly identified myth with truth,\(^{22}\) later Ionic thinkers separated tales of this kind from a true knowledge of the world.

The Milesian School and their successors consciously reacted against the traditional stories which had been told about the world and its gods since the Bronze Age. The conflict between the so-called science of the new natural philosophy and its debt to inherited mythological thought is an intricate problem in itself which throws up some searching questions. In what respects did the Ionian First Principles differ from those of Mesopotamian myth? What are the distinctions between Thales' concept of water as ἀρχή and the Babylonian Tiamat or Apsu? Did not Anaximander's idea of the Boundless have much in common with Hesiod's Chaos? Like all good essay questions there are two sides to the story; but Thales' notorious, albeit apocryphal, statement that everything is full of gods,\(^{23}\) and a similar saying attributed to Heraclitus,\(^{24}\) are hints that we are moving in a grey area of ill-defined boundaries\(^{25}\) where double standards are common. Despite his contempt for myth, Thucydides unconditionally accepted the Trojan War as historic fact, although with the siege he was also obliged to

\(^{17}\) Thuc. I, 21.
\(^{18}\) Plato, Rep. 7, 522a.
\(^{19}\) Xenophanes 1, 22.
\(^{20}\) τοιαῦτα πειδίουνται λοιποί, in Arist., Metaph. 983a-4.
\(^{21}\) Hes. Theog. 27f.
\(^{22}\) ἀληθικοὶ μυθικοὶ, II, 6, 382; Od. 14, 125; 17, 15; 18, 342.
\(^{23}\) In Plato, Laws 899b; see Arist., de anima i. 5, 411a 7 (Thales A 22).
\(^{24}\) Arist., de part. anim. i. 5, 645a 17 (Heraclitus A 9).
\(^{25}\) Good discussions of this subject can be found in H. Frankfort, et al., Before Philosophy, Pelican Books 1961, ch. 8; W. Jäger, The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers (The Giffard Lectures 1936), Oxford 1948, 11ff.
believe in the Homeric figures associated with it. No doubt the historian, along with his contemporaries, possessed true faith even before the days of archaeology and the decipherment of Linear-B. The Cretan Minos was a real king for Thucydides who obviously judged certain myths by standards which he acquired by what he had read in Homer. In the event the Greek historian could have done far worse particularly in comparison with some of his overly critical 19th century colleagues.

If we discount the many accretions to the modern genre of stories, which are loosely classified as myths, and confine ourselves to those connected with gods and cult, it soon becomes apparent that we still have not moved out of the grey area of uncertainty. But a narrower focus promises some useful answers even if most of them are negative. One significant line of enquiry concerns the relationship of myth and religion through defining important aspects of their nature and function. Ernst Cassirer thought that 'Myth is from its very beginning potential religion'.26 If this is true, which came first? Unfortunately only the gods can answer that; our understanding is more limited, particularly with regard to ancient or primitive religions in which myths played a vital part. It is important therefore to avoid the arrogance of the Victorians who measured the world by their own perfect standards. Evans-Pritchard called this illusion of the modern scholar to think himself into the position of any being the 'If I were a horse' theory27 which Kirk defines as 'the restricted value of personal intuitions on the part of the literate, demythologized and Aristotelianized academics'.28

Personal intuition was to blame for the common error of postulating single causes, like animism or ancestor worship, for the complex beginnings of religious beliefs and practices in human society. Such theories need no longer be rehearsed or judged: their usefulness lies in drawing attention to one or other aspect of various religious systems. A more blameworthy error arose from a sense of superiority which plagued early anthropologists who conceived their ideas from observing the antics of other more primitive cultures, but from a distance; or, as Marett put it rather ambiguously, 'to understand primitive mentality there was no need to go and live among savages, the experience of an Oxford Common Room being sufficient.' The procedure was to enumerate and compare the religious practices of countless primitive tribes regardless of whether their backgrounds and beliefs were compatible. This type of comparative method, admittedly in refined form, underlies the structure of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Jane Harrison's extraordinary attempts to explain the origin of Attic Old Comedy from the practices of the Australian aborigines.29 Malinowski aptly exposes the folly of this method by concocting absurd

examples of his own: \(^\text{31}\) ‘Among the Brobdignacians when a man meets his mother-in-law, the two abuse each other and each retires with a black eye.’

‘When a Brodiag encounters a polar bear he runs away and sometimes the bear follows.’ ‘In old Caledonia when a native accidentally finds a whisky bottle by the road-side he empties it at one gulp, after which he proceeds immediately to look for another.’

Progress only becomes possible when due allowance is made for the complex structures of myth and religion. Therefore looking for origins will turn out to be a less rewarding occupation than investigating common features and functions of the religious experience of different cultures. Two important avenues, which have been explored in more recent years, concern certain shared psychological and sociological motives. Psycho-analytical theories of religion and myth, as its symbolic expression, tend to agree that there are some universal themes which exist in men’s unconscious and rise to the surface in repeated motifs or common patterns. But it appears that significant parts of this symbolic substrate are shared only by members of the same race or culture. Jungian theories are more complex than Freud’s who traced back all mythical symbolism to basic human desires, fears and bodily functions.

The merit of the psycho-analytical school lies in the recognition of possible connecting links between the beliefs of different peoples, but none of the theories in this category makes sufficient allowance for the socially binding function of many cults and myths. When Aristotle opined\(^\text{32}\) that men create gods after their own image, he referred to the human habit of legitimizing a society by imagining a parallel society of gods; precisely the kind of set-up which Xenophanes found so objectionable in the Homeric Olympian family. But moral reservations aside, Homer’s constantly bickering gods illustrate the maxim that the success of a religion depends on its strength to create social cohesion and continuity. ‘Though a religion may be false’, Montesquieu said,\(^\text{33}\) ‘it can have a most useful social function’.

Sociological theories of religion have enjoyed great vogue since Robertson Smith. Coulange, for example, conceived the notion that the most elementary basis of religion must have rested on the worship of deified clan ancestors or totems, because god/totem and community represented an homogeneous unit. Although rather more elaborate, Durkheim’s thesis essentially covers the same ground, and so does Lévy-Bruhl who draws the consequential inference that all societies of a certain type have comparable religious systems. The only thing wrong with all of these theories is their universalism. Socio-political standards do not invariably explain the workings of a religion least of all the Greek. Thus without regard for historical causes, an oligarchical or democratic administration in Greece was said to be reflected by polytheism, while monarchy, during

\(^{31}\) In Evans-Pritchard, *op cit.* 9.

\(^{32}\) Arist. *Politics* I. 2. 7.

\(^{33}\) Cited by Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.* 49.
the Bronze and Dark ages perhaps, produced monotheism. This line of argument is distinctly Marxist. In fact Bukharin\(^{34}\) agreed with Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl in substance although he manages to sound disagreeably bureaucratic. Ancestor worship, that is the cult of clan leaders, for Marxist writers was in origin 'a reflection of production relations (particularly those of master and servant) and the political order of society conditioned by them'.\(^{35}\) All that is exciting in man's religious feelings has been hauled down to the level of production quotas: the gods like their mortal servants toil in the dust of this limited world.

One of the most valuable contributions of sociological theories is the recognition of the act of sacrifice as the basic religious rite. Again origins and the primary significance of sacrifice are lost in the fog of antiquity although theories abound\(^{36}\) which do agree, however, on the essentially unifying quality of the act within a community. But specifically in the context of Greek religion sacrifice has since Robertson Smith been understood as establishing a bond of communication between the worshippers and their gods by means of the sharing of the sacrificial victim. Nilsen still endorses this view\(^{37}\) which is problematical, however, in the light of stories like Prometheus' division of the sacrifice: bones wrapped in fat might be considered a gratuitous insult to the gods. The Hesiodic paradox contains some more ancient tradition whose significance the poet was unaware of. Walter Burkert draws from this point some ingenious conclusions which we can not pursue here,\(^{38}\) but for Hesiod the myth unquestionably explained the ritual practice. In other words the account of Prometheus' trickery illustrates an aspect of the interplay between rite and myth on the most elemental level which was not lost on Hesiod's audience although it had been conditioned by Homer's materialistic attitudes to the function of sacrifice as a payment for services rendered or indeed for services expected from the gods.

There is to our way of thought an obvious logical connection between the ritual act and the spoken myth. Jane Harrison more than fifty years ago defined the two aspects as the *dromenon* and *legomenon* of cult;\(^{39}\) and this appeared to be the last word on the subject for many\(^{40}\) who, like Durkheim and Leach, saw myth only in the context of religion.\(^{41}\) For Leach myth and ritual are 'different modes of communicating the same message'.\(^{42}\) 'Myth, in my terminology', he

---

38. See note 36.
40. For a comprehensive list of modern bibliography see Burkert, *Homo Necans*, 40 notes 4–6.
I says, 43 'is the counterpart of ritual; myth implies ritual, ritual implies myth, they are one and the same. . . . ' He does not tell us which, in his opinion, came before and determined the other. Perhaps the question is insoluble 44 which would be a pity, as there are some interesting implications concerning the development of Greek tragedy from the function of myth as the dramatisation of a cultic act. 45

Few critics will deny the relationship between myth and ritual; but fewer still should accept it as universally true. Doubts in fact were voiced some years ago by Kluckhohn. 46 More recently Kirk similarly argues that the spheres of myth and ritual overlap without being interdependent. 47 He is obviously right if we take into account the many occasions on which myth is connected with ritual without being an essential part of it, which does not mean that one should subscribe to the other extreme of searching for the origins of myth in one or other of its related functions. 48 High on the list is the aetiological myth which is told to provide an explanation for some sacred custom or figure regardless of logic or even plausibility. The Greeks were inordinately fond of etymologizing to explain a god’s or hero’s function: Odysseus became the ‘Angry One’ from odussomai, Erinys’ name was derived from erinuein. 49 Zeus meant ‘to live’ from zen in Aeschylus’ opinion 50 and Apollo ‘to destroy’, 51 while Helen was a ‘Snatcher of Ships, Men and Cities’. 52 Surprisingly many, including Andrew Lang, 53 have mistaken aitia for rational explanations which qualify as some kind of protoscience. That this is a very superficial view of the meaning of myth can be seen from the story of the Promethean division of meat. Closely allied to this common function is the myth as charter for traditional institutions, customs and beliefs. 54 Myths could be used to validate otherwise inconsistent ritual practices or even conflicting political and property claims with the authority of law through divine sanction. 55 Hence the baffling solemnity with which Greek cities moved about the bones of their national heroes in order to enforce some dubious territorial rights. The spoken myth, the

44. Burkert, for example, Homo Necans 41, favours ritual as the older of the two since myth only became possible with human speech.
47. Myth 28.
49. Hom. Od. 19, 40ff. (Odysseus); Paus. 8, 25, 6 (Erinys).
50. Aesch., Suppl. 584ff.
51. apollonai, Aesch., Agam. 1090ff.
52. Aesch., Agam. 689.
53. A. Lang, Myth, Ritual and Religion, 1887.
55. Cohen, op. cit. 344.
legomenon, also possessed comparable properties to the ritual act in releasing
the divine strength needed to recharge nature's creative power. In this way
communities ensured their annual supply of corn and the other necessities of
life. Their king, too, renewed his god-given rule at periodic intervals through
divine communion which involved the recital of certain myths.\textsuperscript{56} A good deal of
ancient Mesopotamian literature falls into this category like the Babylonian
Creation Epic (Enuma Elish) which was publicly read each year during the New
Year Akitu Festival. There are clear hints, as well, of similar practices in
Minoan/Mycenaean religion, particularly in the periodic renewal of the king's
power, the memory of which survived in tradition.\textsuperscript{57} But in the classical Greek
world this is only one function of myth and a comparatively minor one at that. It
would hardly do to count Hesiod's literary treatment of Babylonian cosmology
in this category, because to our knowledge the \textit{Theogony} was never recited as
part of a ritual act. However, one attestable survival of this type of myth seems
to be the story of Persephone's annual descent into the underworld and her
return symbolizing the growth of the new corn. A version, but probably not the
Homeric one, could have been recited or enacted during the celebration of the
Eleusinian Mysteries.

This and other related functions of myth, which we have discussed, expose
the exclusive Myth-Ritual School as far too one-sided. The doubts, which
Kluckhohn and others expressed, become only too real the moment one tries to
match actual cults with their respective myths. Robert Graves describes Greek
myth as a 'narrative shorthand of ritual mime'.\textsuperscript{58} In fact the myth of Athena's
birth from the head of Zeus might well have reflected an actual ritual
performance, if I correctly interpret the strange scenes of divine birth on a
number of seventh century Tenean-Boeotian relief vases. Graves includes this
myth in his repertoire of examples but for the wrong reasons. To him the birth
symbolically expressed Zeus' victory as Indo-European Weather-god over the
prehistoric cult of a supreme goddess.\textsuperscript{59} But exceptions apart, the best known
festivals in Attica and elsewhere in Greece either lacked myths altogether or,
if a myth was told on the occasion, there was no obvious link between it and the
particular cult. At the Panathenaea, for example, a sheep was sacrificed, not to
Athena, as one might expect, but to Pandrosus, daughter of Cecrops. However,
Pandrosus with her two sisters was really more involved in the preliminary rite
of the Arrhephoria than the actual Panathenaea which incidentally also ought
to have honoured the founding kings Erichthonius or Theseus.\textsuperscript{60} There are
numerous instances of similar odd gaps or barely skeletal myths in the cult of
major deities like Athena, Demeter, Dionysus, Apollo and Artemis. Frequently,
when myths do survive, they fail to reflect the nature of the rites. In Apollo's
cults, for example, the Hyacinthia festival at Amyclae in Sparta was primarily
apotropaic, but the often told story of the god's accidental killing of Hyacinthus
bore no relation to the purpose of the festival. If we reason along the lines of
Robert Graves, we might conclude that the myth symbolically told the story
of Apollo's take-over of an older cult. But I suspect the answer may not be as
simple as that, since the Hyacinthia had belonged to Apollo long before the end
of the Bronze Age. In Delphi the Stepterion was celebrated in honour of
Apollo every eighth year. The rite, which was also apotropaic in nature,
consisted in the burning of a straw hut, the flight to Tempe of a group of boys
and their return to Delphi after purification. The only myth associated with the
Stepterion festival in Delphic tradition was the patently irrelevant account of
Apollo's victory over the serpent Python. These are only a few selective
examples from a host of others with the same message.

There seems to be no end to the counterarguments a Devil's Advocate could
muster against our theorists. I confess that, unlike Socrates, I have no theory of
my own to put in the place of those that have tumbled down. But the reason for
our mainly negative results can be found in the nature of our subject. One
reviewer of Kirk's long labour on the subject concludes that "Myth" does not
turn out to be an analytical category of any great usefulness. And yet, while
no universal theory can explain all aspects of myth and religion, each
contributes to our understanding of an extremely wide area of human
experience. Nothing illustrates this point better than the two diametrically
opposed theories which have proved most popular, although to the unbiased
observer both might appear to be purely academic exercises in ingenuity.

The premise that all myths were nature myths came from Germany originally
but was imported to Oxford by Max Müller where it managed to capture the
imagination of quite a few generally more sober English academics. Primitive
people, Müller believed, attributed numinous qualities to names of celestial
objects. In other words mythological figures symbolized natural or cosmo-
logical events: nominā became numinen and myth was nothing but a "disease
of language". For Müller and his followers the myth of Apollo chasing Daphne
was another way of describing the sun's conquest of dawn. Despite its excesses
the nature-myth theory had the virtue of providing a reasonable explanation for
the curious habit of many cultures to elevate a Sky-god to the head of their
pantheon. The name Zeus, for example, had nothing to do with the verb 'to live',
but, like that of the Roman Jupiter, derived from Sanskrit Dyaus-Pitar
meaning 'Light' or 'Day'. Needless to say, however, it is quite absurd to reduce
everything to the terms of nature symbolism. The myth of Athena's birth, for
example, or her contest with Poseidon for the supremacy of Athens would be
hard to equate with natural phenomena.

61. See my article, 'The Dorian Hyacinthia' in Kadmos 14 (1975) 133-142.
63. For a discussion of the nature-myth theory see Kirk, Grk. Myths 43ff.
On the opposite end of the scale the structuralist theory presupposes the consummate algebraic skill of the myth-maker coupled with philosophical insight into abstract concepts of contrasting forces or tensions. Lévi-Strauss, who formulated the structuralist principles in a series of works, understood the function of myths to be the mediation of contradictions or opposites which man felt to operate in his life. A myth consists of a series of events whose narrative order is not as important as the structure of the various elements. Lévi-Strauss is an anthropologist, and he based his ideas on the results of a careful study of the myths of the South American Indians. His difficulties start naturally enough when he applies his findings to other cultures. Let me illustrate his method through his analysis of the Oedipus myth. The story has four main elements which in the narrative sequence are 1) Oedipus becomes swollen footed, 2) he kills his father, 3) he kills the Sphinx, 4) he marrys his mother. The structural order is, however, 4) incest, which signifies an overrating of blood relations, contrasting element 2) parricide, i.e. an underrating of blood relations. The murder of the Sphinx 3) is said to cancel out 1), the latter affirming and the former denying man's autochthonous nature. In other words the ratio 4 : 2 = 3 : 1 signifies that 'overrating kinship is to underrating, as non-autochthony is to autochthony'. As a criterion for classifying Greek myths this method seems to me as obscure as a Sphingian conundrum.

However, I am oversimplifying Lévi-Strauss' tremendously complex ideas which have had a profound effect on modern interpretations of early cultures. The concept of opposing tensions, which balance or overcome one another, is familiar to many cultures not least the Greek. Not only the Presocratics were fond of speculating along these lines but it was normal practice to conduct philosophical arguments by the contrast of opposites which, as we know, constituted a common feature of Greek literary style in all periods. In myth the opposing forces of nature and culture might be said to have produced the hybrid Centaur and the Cyclops, both of which were popular figures in Greek art. We are reminded of the essential significance of the battle of Lapiths and Centaurs expressing symbolically the victory of a new civilized order over the old, as it is depicted for example on the west pediment of the archaic temple of Zeus at Olympia. The sophisticated Orphic myth of man's origin also portrays the constant struggle between his divine and human nature. Where Lévi-Strauss errs, in my opinion, like all other propounders of monolithic theories, is in the singleminded devotion to his thesis, the relentless rigour with which he applies his rules to all situations. Above all he believes that the human mind functions

---


65. For particular references see Cohen, Man (1969) 346, on whose discussion my summary is based.

on a binary system of discrimination, classifying everything as good or bad, light or dark, X or non-X, and constantly subdividing major into infinite numbers of minor categories. But, and we may be thankful for that, few of us think like a computer, nor do customs observed among South Americans necessarily apply to ancient Greek conditions, and we may be thankful for that, too.67

Earlier on I posed and answered a question regarding the effect of Homer and Hesiod on Greek myths as they survived into the classical age and beyond. It is the essentially literary quality of Greek myths which forbids too close analogies with primitive cultures. Conversely Homer's world of gods and myth, though a highly selective and distorted reflection of traditional cult, was real in that it provided the basis of official state cult. Homer imposed his will on a classical Greek religion with dire consequences for its future, but it would be wrong to suppose that his literary inventions did not command the belief and worship of many generations of Greeks. This knowledge represents a step forward for us, I think, but a small one and we should still not forget our limitations but resign ourselves to the fact that no one, not even anthropologists, will ever fully understand what faith the classical Greek had in his myths and cult.

In the light of our new understanding, let me conclude by laying to rest another rampant myth about Greek myths which haunts modern discussions including those of Kirk. There is still the idea abroad that myths exist only in polytheistic societies in a non- or pre-scientific climate. This orthodox dogma, which is also notably present in structuralist thought, rests on the false premise that the symbolic form of thought so characteristic of myths represents a relatively low step on the evolutionary ladder of human intelligence. Some would count Presocratic philosophy as belonging to the 'childhood of the race', since its concepts correspond, we are told, with those of seven to ten year old children.69 Are they committing crimen maiestatis or simply misreading the evidence? To me the leap from Orphic myth to the Heraclitan concept of γνώμη seems bolder than that from his διαμορφώσει of opposites to the ideas of Lévi-Strauss. The common notion that myths lost their hold on Greek thought with the arrival of the Sophists late in the fifth century B.C.70 derives from the same assumption that rationalism and traditional mythology do not mix. But it seems more likely that myths can flourish under any cultural conditions, only they take more materialistic forms in a so-called 'scientific' society.

The parts played by religion and religious mythology in human experience can not be easily classified or judged in isolation without taking into account the

70. Kirk, Myth 250.
moral, ethical and other social factors of a community. But moral attitudes notoriously differ from society to society and so do beliefs even within one religious system. Pausanias lectured on this topic in his otherwise pedestrian speech on the occasion of Agathon's dinner party. Herodotus, too, expressed the same sentiments in his History. We should then remember the diversity of human thought and cultures before launching new theories of myth and religion, however ingenious they might seem.

Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

For further information go to: http://www.casa-kvsa.org.za/acta_classica.htm