



Theory and the Teaching of Mythology

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THEORY AND THE TEACHING OF MYTHOLOGY

Most students who study classical myth take only one course in the subject; most classics departments offer only one such course. Yet the subject is so vast that hard choices must be made about what to include. Do theoretical approaches belong in the introductory myth course?

Some teachers of mythology hesitate to introduce theoretical interpretations because they are themselves unconvinced of the value of theory. The modern disciplines of anthropology and psychology (for example) have their roots in the nineteenth century and developed in many different directions in the twentieth, partly in response to changing social conditions and specific historical trends. Doesn't this make them anachronistic for the study of the classics? Inevitably it does, to some extent; but because we live in the present and can never fully recreate the thought-world of antiquity, it is not possible for us to avoid anachronism altogether in our interpretations of the past. Theory has the virtue of forcing us to be explicit about our assumptions, which we might not otherwise spell out even for ourselves. It is, of course, possible to become doctrinaire in one's endorsement and application of a specific theory; but if this pitfall can be avoided, the benefits of spelling out one's premises are great. So many different theories have been applied to the interpretation of myth that a responsible scholar-teacher cannot shirk the hard questions that such pluralism raises. Is one interpretation "right" and another "wrong"? Or do a range of different interpretations give a better sense of the complexity of myth and its functions? Many of us have concluded that no single theoretical framework is enough to make sense of the protean phenomenon we call myth. So we teach several different approaches and compare their findings.

Yet even a teacher convinced of the value of theory may hesitate to introduce it in the classroom for fear of alienating the students. The language of theory can be abstract, complex, even (to be honest) willfully obscure—in short, intimidating. Students are drawn to myth courses because they love the stories; should we risk "turning them off" by making the subject so difficult? My answer to this is twofold. On the one hand, it is obviously necessary to simplify the terms in which we present theory, especially in an introductory course. Readings should be chosen for clarity, and students should be prepared for them by in-class presentations. The teacher's job is precisely to demystify the work of the intellect, to put it within the student's reach. Pacing is an important part of this: it will take some time for students to absorb new and challenging ways of thinking about stories they have been content merely to enjoy. At the same time, a certain level of complexity is necessary—and, I believe, desirable. As in our teaching of the ancient languages, we must trust that some of our students will be drawn to the intricacies and subtleties of the material and to the exhilaration of making sense of it.

In an essay of this length I could not begin to do justice to the array of theoretical approaches that have been applied to classical myths.¹ Rather than merely cataloguing them, I will choose one and show how its application to a specific myth might be taught in an introductory course.²

¹ A number of collections are available that, through the detailed presentation of several theoretical approaches, give a good sense of the diversity of the field. See my suggestions for further reading (below, n.10).

² What follows describes a single hypothetical unit of a course. At some point in the semester, when one or more additional theories (e.g., psychological, structuralist)

The myth of Iphigenia is the best known of a number of similar stories in which a young woman of marriageable age is sacrificed, or almost sacrificed, to the gods—often specifically to Artemis, the goddess who in cult presided over a girl's transition to womanhood. Scholars such as Walter Burkert and Ken Dowden see this mythic plot as a reflection of some kind of ritual practice. Dowden sees the Iphigenia myth as evidence of women's initiation rituals.³ Burkert connects it with the well-attested practice of animal sacrifice, whose origins he traces to the hunting rituals of Paleolithic males.⁴ This form of interpretation, which is sometimes referred to as the "myth and ritual" approach, draws primarily on anthropological theory. It relies on parallels between the rituals of ancient Greece and those of traditional peoples in the modern era whose still-living cultures have been described and studied by ethnographers.

I would begin a unit (of two or three classes) on the links between myth and ritual by reminding the students that some myths had a frankly aetiological function: that is, they were cited as explanations and precedents for otherwise puzzling phenomena, including ritual practices. The story of Prometheus' role in the first sacrifice, for example, was used to explain why humans consumed the edible parts of the sacrificial animal while the gods received only the smoke from the burning fat and bones. A number of stories similar to that of Iphigenia were told as aetiological myths for the rituals celebrated in honor of Artemis at Munychia and Brauron in Attica. Like Iphigenia (in some versions of her story), the girl in the Munychian myth is destined to die in reparation for the death of an animal—a bear rather than the deer in Iphigenia's case—that had been consecrated to Artemis. The girl's father, more cunning than Agamemnon, dresses a goat in his daughter's clothes and sacrifices it in her stead. In the Brauronian myth, the reparation demanded is not the death of the girl but the celebration of the Brauronia festival by all the young girls of the region. In performing this ritual the girls are said to "act the bear" (ἀρκεύειν) for Artemis; one source says that they had to do so before they could be married. In a further puzzling detail, the tomb of Iphigenia was said to be located within the sanctuary at Brauron.

After having the students read summaries of the myths, I would assign the first half of chapter 7, "Myth and Initiation Ritual," in Ken Dowden's *The Uses of Greek Mythology*, where he argues that the whole group of parallel stories reflect the ritual pattern of girls' initiation.⁵ I might also assign chapter 3 of Bruce Lincoln's *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiation*, in which he describes a well-attested girls' initiation rite still performed among the Navajo that seems to share a few elements with the Brauronia, including races, communal feasting, and a female divinity, Changing Woman, in whose honor the ritual is

have been presented, they can be compared by applying each in turn to a single myth. For an example of such a comparison using the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, see chapter 1 of L. Doherty, *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth* (London 2001).

³ His position is most fully argued in *Death and the Maiden: Girls' Initiation Rites in Greek Mythology* (London and New York, 1989).

⁴ W. Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, tr. P. Bing (Berlin 1972; Berkeley 1983).

⁵ K. Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London and New York, 1992).

performed.⁶ In lecture, I would describe what is known from textual and archaeological sources about the Brauronia—and what remains in dispute, since the details of the ritual and the number and ages of the participants have not been determined with any certainty.

In discussion, I would then ask the students to identify ways in which the details of the myths seem to match what is known of the Brauronia, and of initiation ritual cross-culturally. Perhaps most striking is the symbolic equivalence established between a young girl and an animal (a wild animal, in most versions): her life is initially demanded in exchange for the animal's, and another animal may be substituted for her in the end.

I would also have students identify ways in which the ritual is assumed to *diverge* from the myths. This should elicit the fact that the myths themselves diverge: whereas that of Iphigenia is ambiguous, ending sometimes with the death of the girl and sometimes with the substitution of a deer,⁷ the others do not allow the death of the girl but substitute an animal sacrifice and/or another ritual practice. The greatest discrepancy between ritual and myth, however, is that a rite supposedly designed to prepare girls for a new phase of *life* is explained by a myth in which one girl meets her death, or narrowly escapes death. A further discrepancy involves the role of the goddess Artemis: if her sphere is the nurture of wild animals and young girls, how is it that she demands the sacrifice of both? In Dowden's view, the girl's death is a purely symbolic one: she "dies" to her childish life in order to enter the phase of adulthood. Over the course of time, Dowden believes, the myth became "detached" from the rite and was used for new purposes by poets such as Aeschylus and Euripides.

Yet the death of the animal was real, in ritual as in myth. Thus Walter Burkert proposes a ritual background for the myth that emphasizes the practice of animal sacrifice. I would ask the students to read selections from chapter 1 of Burkert's *Homo Necans*, which provides a clear introduction to his theoretical framework. For modern parallels, Burkert uses evidence from the hunting peoples of Siberia, who use ritual to atone for their killing of the animals they hunt. By reassembling a bear's skeleton, for example, they seek to propitiate its spirit and to ensure a continued supply of game. Such rituals, in Burkert's view, also create a solidarity among the (male) hunters that is necessary to the group's survival. Burkert argues that rituals invented for hunting were later adapted to warfare, in which the "prey" was human and even greater group pressure was required to overcome the hesitation and guilt of the individual warrior.

Burkert also posits a biological link between male aggression and sexuality. Once primed for battle, the warriors will feel sexual arousal. The sacrifice of a desirable young girl in myths like that of Iphigenia represents the ultimate form of "renunciation" of individual (male) pleasure for the

⁶ B. Lincoln, *Emerging from the Chrysalis: Studies in Rituals of Women's Initiation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981). See also B. Zweig, "The Primal Mind: Using Native American Models for the Study of Women in Ancient Greece," in N. S. Rabinowitz and A. Richlin, eds., *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (New York and London, 1993) 145–80.

⁷ Her death seems to be described (albeit ambiguously) in Aesch. *Ag.* 218–249, whereas the surviving ending of Euripides' *IA* and lines 783–785 of his *IT* describe her rescue.

sake of group cohesion. It is essential to Burkert's interpretation that Iphigenia is sacrificed to permit the Greek fleet to sail for Troy: that is, to permit a group of warriors to begin a long campaign of aggression far from home.⁸

My next questions to the students would be, "In Burkert's interpretation, who are the protagonists of the myth and the ritual? Does this differ from Dowden's analysis?" I would hope to elicit the observation that in Burkert, the male sacrificers are central, whereas Dowden sees the "sacrificed" girl initiate as the protagonist. This comparison should lead into a discussion of potential differences between men's and women's religious experiences in Greek culture. The meanings Artemis held for her male worshippers were almost certainly different from those she held for Greek women. At the same time, gender roles in our own culture inevitably influence the way we ourselves—including the scholars among us—interpret the ancient evidence. Within anthropology, for example, the debate over the role of male hunting in human evolution is clearly inflected by gender.⁹

A good conclusion to this unit of study would be a reading and discussion of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, which raised explicitly for the ancient Greek audience some of the questions students are likely to have raised about gender roles and the meaning of sacrifice. Time permitting, we might also raise the question whether initiation ritual has disappeared from contemporary American culture, and if not, whether it continues to have any associations with sacrifice—and with stories we consider "mythic."

My brief case study is meant only to hint at the kinds of issues anthropological theory can raise for the student of mythology. Some of the interpretive problems suggest that other theoretical frameworks—from, e.g., biology, psychology, and gender studies—are needed to supplement this one. Theory is not static or unitary: each of the fields I have mentioned is itself in flux, and competing theoretical models exist in each. I am not suggesting that classicists try to educate themselves in all these disciplines; that would be impossible. But in the mythology classroom, it can be enormously valuable to choose at least one and ask the students to wrestle with its implications. There are further pedagogical benefits in choosing two interpretations that, like Dowden's and Burkert's, share some theoretical assumptions and yet reach different conclusions. Such disagreement forces us to consider the myth itself more closely, including the fact that it exists in a range of versions with different emphases and even different endings. The lens of gender studies, which can be applied to theory in all the disciplines, further reveals that men and women within the "same" culture may have very different experiences—and different perspectives on the same myth. At the same time, the anthropological approach brings Greek myth into conjunction with the myths and rituals of other cultures, potentially including our own. The use of analogy as evidence raises questions about the comparability of cultures and about whether "human nature" can be said to exist independent of culture. How were the Greeks like and unlike ourselves? To what extent can we reconstruct the meanings these

⁸ This interpretation does not take account of the fact that the campaign is justified as a means to retrieve *another* woman, Helen, for her husband.

⁹ See, e.g., L. D. Hager, ed., *Women in Human Evolution* (London and New York, 1997).

myths had for them, as compared with the meanings they have for us today?

A discussion like the one I have outlined necessarily brings classics into the twenty-first century and reveals its connections with other disciplines. It may even lead to the forging of alliances between academic departments, if we are willing to invite our colleagues in these other disciplines to collaborate in our analyses. Above all, it can engage our students in the most vital practice of scholarship: the act of interpretation. For all these reasons, it is desirable to incorporate at least some discussion of theory, even in the introductory myth course. If we find ourselves being stretched and challenged as teachers, so much the better: we will be modeling for our students the necessary connection between scholarship and learning.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Suggestions for further reading include J. Bremmer, ed., *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (London and Sydney, 1986), E. Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Oxford 2004), L. E. Doherty, *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth* (London 2001), K. Dowden, *The Uses of Greek Mythology* (London and New York, 1992), L. Edmunds, ed., *Approaches to Greek Myth* (Baltimore 1990), R. L. Gordon, ed., *Myth, Religion, and Society* (Cambridge 1981), B. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago 1999), and R. A. Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst, Mass., 1999).

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