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Teaching Myth

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This paper was originally delivered as a short talk at the Open University on 1st February 2007. It is based very much on my own experience, both as a student and as a teacher.

The word ‘Myth’ is an evocative one, and courses promising to study ‘myth’, even if no more details concerning the precise contents of the course are available than the single word, tend to attract fairly large numbers of students. But what do these students expect when they sign up to study ‘Myth’? Do they simply want to increase their own knowledge of mythic stories and characters? Do they want to investigate the cultural history of myth, of what myths meant to the societies in which they flourished? Do they want to delve into theories of mythology, to investigate why myths are often so similar, and so enduring? Or are they simply attracted by the sheer mystery of the word and the magical imaginative connotations it brings up?

The first potential problem with courses dealing with ‘Myth’ is that they tend to be attached to Classics departments. This results in an almost exclusive focus on Classical, usually Greek, mythology. For students taking an optional module within a Classics and Ancient History department, this is not a problem, and our course at Birmingham is specifically entitled ‘Greek Mythology’. However, in the case of a course promising to study simply ‘Myth’, and open to all, there can be a problematic gap between student and lecturer expectation. For example, one of my coursemates on an MA in ‘Myth’ at the University of Bristol had come from a background in English Literature and was keen to study comparative mythology and the mythology of the British Isles. She was entirely unfamiliar with the core Classical texts that lecturers assumed we all knew well and sometimes struggled to keep up with seminar discussions. Two possible solutions for this problem spring to mind – either to name the course specifically as being on ‘Greek Mythology’ or ‘Classical Mythology’, or to widen the scope of the course to include the study of other systems of myth.

The second solution, however, presents its own problems, as the study of comparative mythology tends to be focussed around comparisons of Greek myths with certain others, notably ancient Near Eastern and Indian myths. This is the result of many years of specialist

study of myth in Classics departments. The study of other mythologies, such as Celtic or Native American, tends to be shoved out into the rather fuzzy area of 'folklore'. A course which focussed on the comparative theories of mythology would, inevitably, find itself becoming Greco-centric. Perhaps a study of a range of mythological texts in translation, such as epic poems, from a range of cultures, would start to redress the balance, but the privileged position of Greek mythology within scholarship on the subject will almost always bring the discussion back to the Greeks sooner or later.

On the positive side, Greek mythology is quite a good place to start in the general study of systems of myth. Many people who have an interest in the subject are already familiar with some of the major characters and episodes within Greek myth, so that the task of learning the names and attributes of the central figures is made easier. Greek mythology is perhaps the most thoroughly studied system of myth. From Max Müller in the nineteenth century, looking for elements of religious or scientific truth in Greek myths, to years of scholarship on mythologically themed Greek epic and tragedy, to the psychoanalytic theories of Freud or Jung, Greek myth has been examined, theorised upon and written about for centuries.¹

All of this scholarship becomes a subject for study itself, so that the broader area of 'myth' can be subdivided into the study of the myths themselves, and the study of theories of myth developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Our 'Greek Mythology' course at Birmingham is divided into two halves along these lines. During the first term, students study topics centred around the myths themselves. These include areas such as the extent to which myths may or may not be historically based, the nature of an epic cycle, the role of geography in myth, the value systems that seem to be promoted by particular myths and how far myths can or cannot be said to be 'moral'. The focus is on the nature of the transmission of myths and their cultural significance. For example, one class focuses on the Trojan War and examines the nature of oral-derived mythic poetry. Students also look briefly at some modern interpretations of the story of the Trojan War, from medieval poetry to the recent film *Troy* (dir. Wolfgang Peterson, 2004). Tracing the various evolutions of a myth from archaic Greece to modern Western culture emphasises

¹ On Max Müller's theory of the solar origins of mythology, see Max Müller 1898: 1-154. On Freud's theory concerning the relationship between myth and dreams, see Freud 1976: 461 and 363-366 on the Oedipus complex. On Jung's theory of the archetype, see Jung and Kerényi 1985: 70-81.

the transient nature of ‘mythology’ and the impossibility of pinning down a single ‘myth’. Meanwhile, classes on the myths surrounding Heracles and the Argonauts allow students to go further into the cultural history and significance of these myths in Ancient Greece.

During the second term, students study a selection of theories about myth and the theorists who developed them. Starting with an overview of nineteenth century thought concerning Greek myth, theoretical approaches studied include Max Müller’s solar mythology, psychoanalysis as developed by Freud and Jung, theories concerning the relationship between myth and ritual developed by van Gennep and Walter Burkert, and the structuralist theory of Lévi-Strauss.² The course is split into smaller topics which go along roughly chronological lines – for example, the students spend two weeks on psychoanalysis, the first focussing on Freud, and the second on Jung. This allows the students to follow the development of the theory of the subconscious, and to understand the cultural background that led to the development of these theories, focussing on issues such as the impact of Freud’s classical education on his development of the theory of the Oedipus complex.

The main problem with this division is that it creates a slightly uneven course, in which the first term is rather too basic for final year students, while the second term is much more difficult and often touches on Masters level issues. It is essential that students understand how the myths they are studying have been developed and transmitted and their cultural background, but, without the time to go into the issues surrounding the place of myths in Greek culture in any great detail, this part of the course can end up covering some very basic elements of the nature of myth. The second half of the course, on the other hand, can be extremely challenging. When I took this course as an undergraduate, as the final exam approached, students were in absolute terror of the myth exam, as many of them struggled with the concepts we were studying. In recent years, students have been assessed by oral presentation, and I believe that this reduces their fear, as they are able to select those areas in which they are most confident and go into them in some detail (though, of course, the prospect of oral presentation probably also fills them with terror!).

It is difficult to determine how best to compensate for this discrepancy, as the basic information presented in the first term is necessary for a complete understanding of the myths,

² On Lévi-Strauss’ structural approach to mythology, see Lévi-Strauss 1963: 206-231. For an overview of scholarship on myth and ritual, including the theories of Van Gennep and Burkert, see Doty 2000: 335-367.

but it is in the theoretical material of the second term that students start to deal with the work of mythography, the academic study of myth. For those of us who specialise in this area, it is the material covered in the second semester that tends to be the more interesting. And so the challenge is to introduce this material in a way that helps the students to understand these concepts. One way in which we try to do this is by ensuring that the students understand the cultural background from which these theories came. An introductory session on nineteenth century thought on myth helps them to place these ideas within a specific cultural context, and later classes take into account, for example, the influence of nineteenth century Orientalism on Max Müller, or, as mentioned above, the impact of the cultural status of Greek tragedy on Freud's decision to use the *Oedipus Rex* as a model for his theory.

The other major problem with studying theories of myth is that these topics tend to come as a surprise to students.

It is difficult to say what a student expects when they take a course entitled 'Myth'. There seems to be a strong feeling that myths are interesting, and that studying them must be a very interesting topic, but it is very difficult to say why they seem so interesting. Indeed, this is the very problem which many of the various myth theorists are trying to solve – the question of why myths continue to fascinate a large number of people. Perhaps students who take up the study of myth are expecting a key to understanding myth, or a catalogue of myths, along the lines of Joseph Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces*.³ This book, made famous by George Lucas' oft-stated claim that he based *Star Wars* on it, outlines a selection of stock characters and plots that Campbell, following on from Jung's theory of the archetype, claims appear in all great myths and stories. It is often claimed that the reason *Star Wars* is so successful is because it is based on this book. Have we all simply watched *Star Wars*, or read *The Lord of the Rings*, too many times? At any rate, although some students may have heard of Joseph Campbell, they tend to find Jung, on whose theory Campbell's work is, in part, based, much more difficult. 'Myth' is not a subject that is taught in school, or discussed much in History; perhaps student expectations of 'Myth' suffer from being almost entirely derived from popular culture, whether it is *Star Wars*, Disney's 1997 version of *Hercules*, or even simply the enormous number of questions relating to myth, and usually asking nothing more

³ See Campbell 1993.

complicated than which god produced which other god with which human female, that appear on *Mastermind* and *University Challenge*.

This can, on occasion, work in the teacher's favour. The most lively discussions in class tend to be those which the students feel connected to; for example, a particularly lively discussion followed the question, 'Is Freud right? Is what he says true?' The students were able to latch on to something they felt they knew a little about already and had some genuine personal feelings about. On the other hand, it can become ever more difficult to engage students in areas which do not touch a popular nerve. The theories of Max Müller and Lévi-Strauss baffle students, partly because they are difficult theories, but also partly because they are not what the students were expecting. Their preconceived ideas about 'myth' seem to have little connection with these obscure academic theories. It is the task of the teacher to try to show them how these different ideas fit together.

There is no right or wrong answer as to how to achieve this. Two solutions suggest themselves immediately. The first is the model we follow, for the most part – to introduce the students to these theories in chronological order, so that they can see how each scholar develops their thought from the work of previous scholars. The advantage of this method is that students gain an idea of the history of mythographical thought, and are able to place these theories in their own cultural and historical context. The other option is to take a single myth and explore it from the point of view of the various theorists, giving a Freudian interpretation, a Jungian interpretation, a myth-and-ritualist interpretation, and so on. This option would lose some of the sense of the history of ideas gained from the chronological approach, but would enable the students to get a clearer grasp of what each theorist has to say at a fundamental level. The main drawback to this option is that it is difficult to say which mythic story would be the most appropriate to use. Although the Oedipus myth might seem to suggest itself as a useful example, it would probably be best to steer clear of the myth actually used by both Freud and Lévi-Strauss and known so well already, and choose a story that offers less obvious solutions, requiring a greater depth of thought to reinterpret it in various different ways. It might be necessary, in the end, to look at a whole mythic or epic cycle, in order to be able to interpret it fully according to each theory. This year, we have started to incorporate this second approach into the course, by ending each session with a discussion of how the theory we are studying might be applied to a different myth.

‘Myth’ is a subject with huge potential. It is inherently interdisciplinary, reaching out to areas including theology, religious history, the history of ideas, archaeology, literary history and literary theory, psychoanalysis and social studies and, of course, traditional Classics. It lends itself quite well to distance learning; the study of myth is often the study of texts, and many of the most important texts, from Homer’s *Odyssey* to Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, are readily available from popular bookshops and public libraries, owing to the continued interest in the subject (this is as opposed to other areas of History and Classics, which tend to be so specialized that the relevant books are almost impossible to find outside of a university library). It is a subject students of all ages feel that they know something about; often, the challenge for the teacher is politely to demonstrate that there is much more that they do not know! It is a difficult subject and one which may take the student unawares, but, if well taught, it is also very rewarding and can lead the student on to a variety of fascinating specialist areas.

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