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**Heroes, Heroines and the  
Wisdom of Myth**

**Georgia Nugent, Ph.D.**



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Georgia Nugent received her A.B., cum laude from Princeton University in 1973 and her Ph. D. from Cornell University in 1978. She has since studied at Goethe Institute, Bremen (1987), the American Academy in Rome (1982), and the American School of Classical Studies, Athens (1981).

Before coming to Brown University in 1985, Nugent taught at Cornell University, Swarthmore College and Princeton University. She has been a N.E.H. Research Fellow, a Fulbright Fellow and a grant recipient from Princeton, the New Jersey Committee for the Humanities and Department of Education and Brown University. In 1989, she was the recipient of the Wriston Award for Excellence in Teaching, and was a Howard Foundation Fellow from 1989-90.

Nugent is the author of many publications and reviews. Some of her works include: Allegory and Poetics: Structure and Imagery in Prudentius' Psychomachia (1985), and "Ausonius' 'Late -Antique' Poetics and 'Post-Modern' Literary Theory" in The Imperial Muse: Ramus Essays on Roman Literature of the Empire (1991). She is currently at work on Women in Roman Epic, "Tristia I.10: Ovid's Poetic Craft" and "A Post -Modern Oedipus: Sam Shepard's Fool For Love".

## Lecture One: Definition and Interpretation: What is a Myth?

- I. There are three major approaches to understanding myth.
  - A. The first approach grounds myth in reality.
  - B. The second approach locates myth in the human psyche.
  - C. The third approach emphasizes myth as a means of structuring, communicating and even creating human experience.
  
- II. Myth is a very difficult term to define.
  - A. One definition is that it's a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form.
  - B. However, approaches are so varied that myth can be defined as everything and nothing at the same time.
  
- III. Sir James George Frazer: The Golden Bough (1890)
  - A. Frazer advocated a cross-cultural view.
  - B. He defined myths as mistaken explanations of phenomena.
  - C. He believed that all cultures go through a process of maturing.
  - D. Frazer was part of the Cambridge School of Anthropologists.
  - E. "The Life and Death of the Year God" has five stages.
  
- IV. Jane Ellen Harrison: Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion (1903), Themis (1912).
  - A. She claimed that texts are skeletons of myths after the rituals fade.
  - B. Her formula: myth equals the things said over the things done.
  
- V. Bronislaw Malinowski: Argonauts of the Pacific (1922).
  - A. His view of myth was that it is functional in society for providing a rationale for moral and social cultural practices.
  - B. This approach can be culturally imperialistic and inherently conservative because it justifies the status quo.
  
- VI. Mircea Eliade: The Myth of the Eternal Return.
  - A. He emphasized function on a personal level.
  - B. He believed myth is getting in touch with the beginning of time.
  - C. Return to a source of origin is an escape from the terror of history.
  
- VII. George Dumézil: The Gods of the Indo-Europeans.
  - A. Dumézil forged a new conception of the relationship between language, myth and social organization.
  - B. He defines three roles in myth: cultural, physical and fertility.

## Lecture Two: Definition and Interpretation: How does it Mean?

- I. Sigmund Freud: Myth is an external manifestation of the internal psychic processes.
  - A. Myth is the dreams of the race; dreams are the myth of the individual.
  - B. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Freud defines the fundamental model of the dream as the "latent content" rising to the "manifest content."
  - C. The "dream work" is the physical process of this evolution.
    1. Symbolization: in order for the latent content to rise, it must be translated into a symbol.
    2. Condensation: the manifest dream has a smaller content than the latent content.
    3. Displacement: threatening contents of the unconscious can be displaced into some other field (dream censorship).
    4. Secondary revision: in the telling of a dream, the conscious mind will impose order on what was disordered.
  - D. Contents of Freudian unconsciousness: a repository of infantile responses that are sexual in nature.
  - E. Totem and Taboo is Freud's attempt to move from a personal psychology to communal notion of society.
  - F. Psychoanalysis itself can be seen as a form of modern mythology.
- II. Carl Jung was a student of Freud's but broke with his philosophy.
  - A. Jung's house dream: Freud and Jung disagreed on interpretation.
  - B. Jung said the collective unconscious is shared by everyone.
  - C. He identified mythical archetypes.
  - D. He felt there were three psychic levels: consciousness, personal unconscious and collective unconscious.
  - E. There are two particularly interesting archetypes, that of the Shadow (the dark side of the personality) and that of the anima/animus (femininity/ masculinity).
  - F. There is a need for personal individuation (a process in which a person becomes a psychological individual -- a whole).
  - G. He believed that culture needs myth.
- III. Joseph Campbell follows in Jung's footsteps.
  - A. He attempts to find one underlying myth -- the "monomyth".
  - B. Criticisms of Campbell: he makes universal claims about things of which he has few examples and he often holds out delusions.

## Lecture Three: The Creation of Woman

- I. There is a linguistic approach to Mythology.
  - A. Claude Levi-Strauss is called the father of structuralism, although he actually adopted a linguistic theory.
    1. The fundamental tenet of structuralism is that meaning is only constructed by a series of structured differences from other things.
    2. The relations that are especially important in understanding meanings are relations of difference.
  - B. Applied to myths, there is a religious message embedded in the structure, not the story.
    1. Opposition, polarity and mediation are needed for decoding.
    2. This involves oppositions, and how one deals with them.
  - C. If myth works like a language, then redundancy is a factor.
    1. The basic structural problem will be represented several different ways within a myth.
    2. This makes temporal sequence less significant.
  - D. Levi-Strauss granted autonomy to other cultures. "Man has always been thinking equally well."
- II. The creation of woman: the tale of Pandora.
  - A. Hesiod addresses the creation of woman in *Theogony* and *Works and Days*
  - B. There are two versions of Pandora's origin. In the first version, Zeus revenges Prometheus for stealing fire by creating woman.
  - C. What enters the world is the need to work for a living, and the inevitability of death.
  - D. In the second version, woman is constructed from earth and water. Her attributes include strength, knowledge of crafts, beauty, voice, charm, sexual obsession, "a bitch mind" and a "thievous nature".
  - E. The name Pandora (all, gifts) can mean receiving gifts (passive) or bestowing gifts (active).
  - F. Inside and outside attributes are key to the myth.
    1. Pandora did not have a box, but a pithos (jar) which can represent the womb.
    2. The fact that hope (translated as wishful thinking) remains, is not consoling. It's a quality that enables man to go on in spite of futility.
    3. The womb (children) may be the hope for the future.
    4. The female figure takes on a large burden.
    5. The interior and exterior are both positive and negative.

## Lecture Four: The Invention of Sexuality

- I. The invention of sexuality was constructed, not found.
  - A. In the Symposium ("drinking together"), each participant gives a speech on the meaning of love.
  - B. Socrates speech:
    1. It's unique because it's the only speech where knowledge is attributed to someone else.
    2. The speech is a central - passage of platonic love.
    3. Love ascends from beauty of soul, to moral beauty, to remote contemplation.
    4. A major criticism is that it fails to attend to the particularity of the individual.
  - C. Aristophanes' speech:
    1. Everyone is looking for only one other person to be their heart's desire.
    2. He presents a myth where the human race is divided into three genders developed from the sun (male), the earth (female), and the moon (both).
    3. The descendants anger the gods who decide to cut them in half, weakening them through proliferation.
    4. Their desire for their other half uses so much energy that they are starving to death, so Zeus introduces sexuality.
    5. However, sexual union was still not satisfactory. The final solution (fusion) is romantic, but problems still remain.
  - D. The myth of Tiresias:
    1. Tiresias helped to settle a quarrel between Juno and Jupiter over who has more fun in bed, men or women.
    2. His answer was women, causing Juno to blind him. However, Jupiter gives him internal sight (prophecy).
  - E. The myth of Narcissus:
    1. His first love is Echo who was punished by Juno and could only repeat what was said to her.
    2. She falls in love with Narcissus, but he sees his reflection and falls in love with himself.
    3. In each tale, there is the inability to reach one another. This is linked to sexuality.
  - F. There are positive and negative interpretations of this myth.
    1. In a large cultural analysis, we are trapped in a culture of self-improvement.
    2. Or, it can be seen as a way to make an intellectual reach beyond ourselves.

## Lecture Five: The Heroic Ideal

- I. There are three concepts of the hero: one exists outside literary texts in cult or religious practices, one is Homeric and another occurs in Greek tragedy.
- II. "The only hero is a dead hero."
  - A. These heroes have extraordinary powers.
  - B. Heroes later have powers that are active after death and may be invoked by the living.
  - C. For Homer, warriors were people who populated his world and were in the flower of their life.
- III. The Iliad presents the heroic code.
  - A. The job description of the Homeric hero: you get the best things, but you have to fight on the front lines.
  - B. In return, heroes receive "time" (tee -may), a material honor.
  - C. Heroes also receive "kleos", an intangible reputation of honor (fame) after death. This is the foundation of epic poetry.
- IV. The protagonist of Greek tragic drama embodies a distinct, yet elated heroic ideal.
  - A. Tragic figures deliberately pit themselves against destiny.
  - B. An attempt is often made by those close to the hero to discourage them from destruction, but the hero resists.
  - C. The tragic hero dares to strive with the gods in his own lifetime.
  - D. Heroism is embedded in Narcissism which explains extraordinary achievement (wanting to count).
  - E. The form of achievement is often murderous. Why?
    1. Destroying others is necessary to clear a space for the self (an explanation offered by psychoanalysis).
    2. Men have invented war as a counterbalance to childbirth (an explanation offered by feminism).
- V. Todorov offers an alternative model of heroism.
  - A. Spectacular heroism is a spending of the self to gain fame and immortality. This usually involves war.
  - B. Common/everyday heroism has the goal of saving the self. It values life more highly than reputation and personal glory.
  - C. The distinction between the two types of heroism may be gender.
  - D. An alternative to the heroic code is the courage to live over the willingness to die.

## Lecture Six: The Heroic Ideal

- I. There are other patterns of heroic life which include an extraordinary birth narrative, a series of adventures and an unusual death.
- II. Characteristics of heroes:
  - A. The hero's mother is a royal virgin and his father is a king or god.
  - B. At birth, there is an attempt by the father to kill his son, but he is taken away and reared in a foreign country.
  - C. Eventually, the hero returns and is victorious over a king/dragon.
  - D. He marries, becomes king and then loses favor and the throne.
  - E. He dies a mysterious death, usually on a hill.
  - F. His children don't succeed him, and his body is not buried.
- III. Joseph Campbell in *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, searches for the "monomyth" -- recurrent themes characterizing heroes lives.
  - A. Among these themes are separation, trial or victory and--return or integration into society.
  - B. Campbell has not verified his monomyth with any examples.
- IV. Why do these patterns repeat themselves?
  - A. The structure of the human condition generates these patterns.
  - B. The unusual death may be an attempt to underplay the importance of the power of death -- leaving the potential to rise again.
  - C. The unusual childhood may be a universal fantasy that a person's real parents are more grand. This also fulfills Oedipal desires.
  - D. Campbell suggests this special childhood denies us hero status.
- V. Heracles is the most typical and unique hero.
  - A. He is typical in that he fulfills the heroic pattern.
  - B. He is atypical in that he crosses the lines of the Greek cosmos.
- VI. Heracles' heroic career is detailed in *The Library* by Apollodorus.
  - A. Heracles had human and divine parents.
  - B. Hera was Heracles' nemesis. She always tried to do him in.
  - C. Heracles lived with the flocks and fathered 50 children.
  - D. He had overwhelming appetite and too much of everything.
- VII. Why was Heracles called "the glory of Hera?"
  - A. Hera and Heracles were a reflection of Greek Society.
  - B. There was a paradoxical love/hate between mother and son which perhaps led to homosexuality.

## Lecture Seven: The Woman in the House

- I. Medea shows us how women lived in Greek society. The basic story is as follows:
  - A. Jason and the Argonauts sailed away to acquire the golden fleece.
  - B. The barbarian princess, Medea, falls in love with Jason and aids him in his quest. Medea makes success possible.
  - C. She is rewarded with becoming Jason's wife.
  - D. Medea returns with him, betraying her family and country.
  - E. Jason divorced Medea and remarried.
  - F. Medea sought revenge by murdering her children.
  - G. Medea is taken up by the gods -- escaping unscathed.
  - H. The intentional killing of Medea's children is not included in all versions of the story.
- II. "Medea the exile":
  - A. The pending exile of Medea from Corinth was a constant motif.
  - B. Female exile in antiquity can only be metaphorical since they were not recognized politically and had no property or voting privileges to be taken away.
  - C. Women were always strangers, removed from their own family into the family of their husband.
  - D. To be exiled is to be sent to the periphery of society.
    1. The center is a masculine space where power is exercised.
    2. Those at the periphery can exert sacred power.
    3. In encounters with outsiders, the center must have an appropriate response. Both parties stand to lose everything.
  - E. Because of their position, women had an affinity to strangers.
  - F. A woman's threat was unavoidable, yet, her induction threatened to destroy the center.
  - G. Unlike other strangers, women are a sexual threat.
- III. Several instances that show Medea's magical and violent powers:
  - A. Medea slows her father's chase by killing her brother and tossing the pieces in the water.
  - B. Medea tricks King Pelias' daughters into killing their father.
  - C. Medea melts the flesh of Jason's new princess and fused her and her father together.
  - D. Medea killed her children, deliberately dismantling her status.
  - E. Medea's magical destructive power is employed in the context of fathers and children and always dismembers households.
  - F. Linguistic elements of the play also show Medea's power.

## Lecture Eight: Who Knows if Death Be Life?

- I. The *Alcestis* is fundamentally about the death of Alcestis.
  - A. The God's offer to let someone die in Admetus' place.
  - B. His parents refuse, but his wife Alcestis agrees.
  - C. Heracles later brings back a woman from the underworld -- possibly Alcestis.
- II. What kind of play is *The Alcestis*?
  - A. Alcestis was originally presented as a "satyr play," a light comedy.
  - B. Elements within the play also suggest that it's a comedy.
    1. Death appears as a heavy, a democrat and a debater.
    2. Heracles is shown as a heroic savior and a buffoon.
  - C. There are many moments in the play where you are caught between the laughable and the tragic.
- III. The *Alcestis* has been labeled as a Tragi-Comedy.
  - A. In theory, it is a mixture of noble and base characters.
  - B. Hazel Barnes said any dramatic conflict originates in the discrepancy between man's aspirations and achievements.
- IV. There are mixtures of thematic elements in *The Alcestis*.
  - A. There are mixtures of darkness and light, bargains and contracts, and "insiders" and "outsiders."
  - B. The most striking mixture is that of the living and the dead.
- V. Who are Admetus and Alcestis, and what was their marriage like?
  - A. When Admetus and Alcestis were newlyweds, their bed chamber was full of snakes. This symbolized a marriage with death.
  - B. Admetus' name: The "A" negates the second part (Domitas) which means incapable of being subdued.
  - C. Admetus' only salient characteristic is that he is hospitable (receives all comers) which also refers to death.
  - D. Alcestis' name: "Alce" means strength, and "hestia" means heart giving a sense that a life force is married to death.
  - E. Their son, Eumelos, is associated with beautiful music. Two kinds of music were in the house: a funeral march and a drinking song.
- VI. There was a close relationship between Euripides and Plato.
  - A. The Symposium explored the relationship between comedy and tragedy.
  - B. Euripides accomplished what Socrates spoke of.

## SUGGESTED READINGS TO ACCOMPANY

### PRIMARY SOURCES

Homer, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The Homeric Texts occupied in classical society the central role that, until recently, the Bible has occupied in later European society. They remain indispensable for understanding classical myth. Recommended translations: Richmond Lattimore (a remarkably faithful, literal translation -- sometimes ponderous on that account); Robert Fitzgerald (a much lighter, faster reading work, a bit less doggedly faithful to the Greek); Robert Fagles's new *Iliad* provides a rhetorically powerful rendition.

The Greek Tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides. Aeschylus himself called his plays "slices from the banquet of Homer." Often it is true that Greek tragedy provides fuller accounts of tales alluded to in Homer; many other stories, however, are unique to this genre, the second great source of classical Greek myth. The most accessible translations remain those published by the University of Chicago in the 1960's, the so-called "Chicago Series," edited by Richmond Lattimore and David Grene.

Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*. Since its appearance in the 1st Century B.C., this work has been taken as an exuberant, protean compendium of mythical tales -- the source, for example, of Pyramis and Thisbe, Echo and Narcissus, Apollo and Daphne, Arachne, Actaeon and on and on... the poem claims to be nothing less than a narrative of the world from the beginning of time down to Ovid's own era under the Emperor Augustus! Recommended translations: Rolfe Humphries' translation (University of Indiana) admirably captures Ovid's fast-paced humor and wit; the Penguin translation by Mary Anne Innes is quite faithful and readable, though much less lively.

Apollodorus, *The Library*. This little known work, by an author of whom we know nothing (not even his dates), gained its title in antiquity, because it was thought to be the repository of mythological knowledge. It is an encyclopedic work, concerned to recount plots, not elaborate them artfully, a kind of ancient Cliff's Notes. For a true aficionado of myth, however, Apollodorus is a gold mine of surprising variants and astonishing details. Did you know, for example, that Penelope slept with all the suitors and thereby gave birth to the god Pan (meaning "all" in Greek)? Who but Apollodorus would tell you these things? The Loeb Library (Harvard University Press) publishes the monumental edition of the text by Sir J. G. Frazer (author of *The Golden Bough*). Frazer's translation is perfectly workable Victorian English; his copious notes citing cross-cultural analogues are a wonder and a delight. A much more trendy and readable translation by Keith Aldrich, with a very helpful index of the myths (including those which do not appear in *The Library*) and where they can be found, is also available in paperback from Coronado Press.

## SECONDARY SOURCES

The bibliography on mythology is vast and proliferating wildly in the last few years. Many bookstores have a section devoted to the study of myth in its various Freudian, Jungian, anthropological and sociological modes. Some basic reference works for classical myth are:

Pierre Grimal, A Dictionary of Classical Mythology. Recent, reputable and just what its title implies. It includes brief, explanatory entries on most mythological figures. (In the English version, ancient sources for the myths are included separately at the back of the book.)

Robert Graves, The Greek Myths. An extremely quirky but fascinating two-volume compendium by a writer and scholar with quite eccentric views about primal matriarchy and pervasive agrarian allegories. These, predictably, slant his presentation. Yet he has collected wonderfully interesting materials, and his format is easy to consult.

For an introduction to the theoretical study of myth, particularly useful texts are:

G.S. Kirk, Myth and The Nature of Greek Myths. Kirk is a classicist considerably influenced by, but ambivalent about Levi -Strauss. The latter book particularly represents a good overview of modern approaches to Greek myth.

Alan Dundes, Sacred Narrative. (University of California Press) Dundes is a prolific folklorist, who has collected in this anthology a very worthwhile array of approaches to the definition and interpretation of myth (not necessarily classical). Dundes' brief introductory notes are masterpieces of concise exposition, replete with bibliographical suggestions for further reading.

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