AUCLA 102
Greek and Roman Mythology
The Nature of Myth
Mythos

- Archaic Greek: a story, speech, utterance.
  - Essentially declarative in nature
- Classical Greek: An unsubstantiated claim
  - Mythographos
  - Logographos
  - Logopoios
Logos

– An argument
– A statement or story based on comparative evaluation or collection of data
– The result of a process
– A study
  • Bio-logy, Socio-logy, mytho-logy

• Powell:
  – *logos* is defined by authorship, it has a known origin,
  – *mythos* is anonymous, it exists in a social milieu undefined by its origin
Narrative

• Both *mythos* and *logos* are types of narrative

• Narrative
  – the structured transmission of a story:
  – Sequence of events, plot
  – Characterization
    • Protagonist vs. Antagonist
  – Development and resolution of a crisis
  – The medium is the message?
Tradition

• Orally transmitted through bards:
  • *Aiodos*  
    – *Ode*
  • *Mythode*
  • *Rhapsode*
• Stories are handed down generation to generation essentially intact...
• But they are subject to change
• “...Myth is defined as a complex of traditional tales in which significant human situations are united in fantastic combinations to form a polyvalent semiotic system which is used in multifarious ways to illuminate reality...” (Burkert 1985: 120).

• “A traditional story with collective importance” (Powell, 2009: 2)
Religion

• Religion
  – An institutionalized system of rituals.
  – An institution is a “system of ideas whose object is to explain the world” (Durkheim, 1965: 476).

• Spiritualism
  – A belief in forces that exist outside of space and time but that can act within those domains

• Myth is “a convenient paradigm to bridge the spiritual to the actual” (Powell, 2009: 5)
### Types of Myth

- **Powell:**
  - ‘Divine Myth’
    - Primary actors divine
  - Legend
    - Primary actors heroes
  - Folktale
    - Ordinary People

- **Morford et al (4):**
  - ‘Myth Proper’
    - Stories about the gods
    - Saga
      - “roots in historical fact”
  - “primarily to entertain”
Truth and Falsehood

• Divine Time

• Poetry was preferable to history in the ancient imagination because it dealt with, revealed, the universal (Finley, 1965: 283)

• The ‘truth’ about the past did not matter. “Acceptance and belief where what counted” (Finley, 1965: 299).
Modern Theories

• Myths... “describe patterns of behaviour that serve as models for members of a society especially in times of crisis” (Powell, 2009: 3).

• “Myth provides us with absolutes in the place of ephemeral values and with a comforting perception of the world that is necessary to make the insecurity and terror of existence bearable” (Morford et al., 5 citing Leszek Kolakowski, 1989: The Presence of Myth)
• Archetypes:
  – Behavioral patterns that reflect a collective unconscious (Jung in Morford et al)
  – “A society can neither create itself nor recreate itself without at the same time creating an ideal” (Durkheim, 1965: 470).
  – “…from the moment when it is recognized that above the individual there is society, and that this is not a nominal being created by reason, but a system of active forces, a new manner of explaining men becomes possible” (Durkheim, 1965: 495).
Culture and Belief

• “Religion is sociologically interesting not because, as vulgar positivism would have it, it describes the social order...but because... it shapes it” (Geertz, 1973:119).

• “The social function of myth is to bind together social groups as wholes or, in other words, to establish a social consensus.” (Halpern, 1961: 137)
Greekness

• Greek:
  – Is a cultural definition
  – Language
  – Custom
  – Religious practices
  – Direct connection to the myth cycle
    • The only reason to preserve community memory beyond the stories of three or four generations is for the explanation or justification of religious and socio-political orders. Oral tradition is a tool for the maintenance of the status quo (Finley, 1965: 297-8).
Conclusions?

• If myth is a cultural charter, is divine participation necessary?

• Myth is any communally ratified narrative that serves to define or legitimate membership in the community, and, therefore, is not and must not be subject to proofs. (just my thoughts...)
Ancient Roots
Ubaid and Samarran

- 6000 BC
- Lower Tigris Euphrates valleys
  - Spread through Fertile Crescent
- Pictographic writing
- Sophisticated irrigation
- Mostly Semitic Languages
- Mother goddess fertility images
Sumer

Arrived from Asia ca 3900 – 3500

Unique language resembles Turkic
– Brought (?) Copper tech.
– Applied to irrigation
– Kish or Uruk earliest city
– Legend of the Flood
– Legends of divine parentage
– Legends of humble origins
Semitic Revival

• Akkadian
  – 2340 – ca. 2000 BC
• Babylon
  – 2000 - 1600
• Assyria
  – ca. 1600 – 612 BC
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sumerian</th>
<th>Babylonian</th>
<th>Role</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An</td>
<td>Anu</td>
<td>Sky</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inanna</td>
<td>Ishtar</td>
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<td>Enlil</td>
<td>Enlil/Marduk</td>
<td>Storm</td>
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<td>Ea</td>
<td>Water</td>
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<tr>
<td>Utu</td>
<td>Shamash</td>
<td>Sun</td>
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Indo-European

• Defined by language
• The principle of Indo-European relationship with the gods is “do ut des” (Burkert, 1985: 25).
• A patriarchal, warrior culture.
Geographic Context
Geography
Mycenaean Greece

• Proto-Greek, Indo-Europeans
  – Fully developed by 1600
  – Warrior (charioteer) elite
  – Mycenae, Pylos, Sparta, Athens
  – Complete collapse by 1000 BC

• Homeric Epics
  – Age of Heroes
  – Iliad
  – Odyssey
Chariots of the Gods

Athens, National Archaeological Museum, Acropolis Collection 15116 (696)
Sources for Greek Myth
Literary: Epic Poetry

• Epic Poetry:
  • Homer (ca. 850 BC)
    – Iliad; Odyssey; Homeric Hymns
  • Hesiod (ca. 750 BC)
    – Works and Days; Theogony
  • Ovid (ca. 50 BC)
    – Metamorphoses
Literary: Playwrights

- **Aeschylus** (525 – 456 BC)
  - Prometheus Bound
  - Seven Against Thebes

- **Euripides** (484 -407 BC)
  - Alcestis
  - Medea

- **Sophocles**
  - Oedipus Tyrannus
  - Antigone
Literary: Prose Literature

• Herodotus
  – *The Histories*

• Plato
  – Socratic Dialogues

• Diodorus
  – *Bibliotheca*

• Plutarch
  – *Biographies*
Pottery and Painting
Sculpture