

## GREEK MYTHOLOGY: SOME NEW PERSPECTIVES

A NEW approach to the ancient world is only too often a wrong approach, unless it is based on some concrete discovery. But I think it fair to talk of new *perspectives*, at least, in the study of Greek mythology. Certainly the old and familiar ones are no longer adequate. Indeed it is surprising, in the light of fresh intuitions about society, literacy, the pre-Homeric world, and relations with the ancient Near East, that myth—one of the most pervasive aspects of Greek culture—has been left in its old and rather cobwebby pigeon-hole. Rose's simple paraphrases are accepted as adequate for students; Nilsson's sparse pages in his history of religion are rightly respected, though some of them are too simple; the Murray-Cook-Harrison-Cornford reconstruction of religion, ritual and myth is regarded as a little excessive, but perhaps not too far out; Kerényi and Eliade are roughly tolerated, if not widely read by Classicists, and their books are ordered in profusion for the library; the psychological side is adequately taken care of, or so it is supposed, by what is left from Freud and Jung, with Cassirer as sufficient authority for the sources of mythical imagination.

Many of these critics had their moments of brilliant insight, but most were misleading in their theories taken as a whole. We can now accept that many myths have ritual counterparts, and some have ritual origins, without having to adopt Cornford's belief, developed after Harrison, Frazer and Robertson Smith, that all myths are such.<sup>1</sup> Jane Harrison's Eniautos-Daimon is now known to be an aberration, and in spite of the brilliant texture of her *Themis* little that is original in it can also be said to be correct. Malinowski's division of myths based on Trobriand categories is useful up to a point, but it conceals too many real distinctions and wrongly denies the possibility of a reflective undertone. Eliade's catch-phrase *in illo tempore* summarises one aspect of many myths, not the central aspect of all. Kerényi's works, when they are not simply re-tellings of tales, are replete with Jungian archetypes, a questionable dogma; and Cassirer's theory of myth as a symbolic form effectively reduces it to a mere segment of religion.<sup>2</sup>

This is indeed one of the crucial problems: the relation of myths to religion. Needless to say, the relation is a complex one. That myths are either identical with or a part of religion was widely assumed in the last century, mainly because many Greek myths are concerned with the birth and development of deities. Greek myths, as we shall see, are not typical. Yet there *is* an important overlap between myths and religion, and determining its extent is one of the hardest parts of understanding myths in general. One is not helped by the anthropological practice of envisaging all myths as *sacred* tales—a definition that has become especially confusing because of ambiguities in the meaning of 'sacred'. The movement known as 'functionalism', associated with Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, treated any machinery for maintaining the social structure as sacred.<sup>3</sup> Myths were obviously part of that machinery, in certain of their uses, and therefore were sacred even when they did not focus on gods or spirits. A different application of the term is seen in Eliade; myths are concerned with the creative past and revive some of its power, and so they are sacred.<sup>4</sup> But a word that combines the complexities of 'sacer' with the sentiments of Victorian Christianity is unsuitable for either of these functions, even when they are not exaggerated.

<sup>1</sup> Cornford's views are most clearly exemplified in 'A ritual basis for Hesiod's Theogony' in *The Unwritten Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1950) 95 ff.

<sup>2</sup> B. Malinowski: see especially *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (1926), reprinted in R. Redfield (ed.), *Magic, Science and Religion* (Boston, 1948, paperback ed. Doubleday-Anchor no. A 23); M. Eliade: see e.g. *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (London, 1954);

E. Cassirer: see *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* vol. ii (New Haven, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, e.g. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (London, 1952) 178 ff., and cf. *The Andaman Islanders* (Cambridge, 1922) ch. 6, esp. 397 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g. *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London, 1958) ch. 1.

'Supernatural' is another term that has been complicated by Christianity and is still widely employed by anthropologists. Not all that is supernatural is caused by gods. Myths can be both sacred and supernatural, but one needs to say precisely what this implies in relation to religious belief and practice. Many, probably most, myths are 'about' gods in one way or another, since they tend to emanate from societies deeply involved with polytheism; but it is no less true that many myths are not essentially concerned with gods, but rather with human types acting in a world that may be supernatural but is not religious. It is unreasonable to exclude all non-sacred tales, in the obvious sense, from the study of myths; and the old idea (perpetuated by C. Robert, Kerényi and many others) that Greek mythology consists only of tales about the gods—the rest being heroic saga or Panhellenic legend—should be abandoned.

It should be abandoned not least because it disguises a fundamental part of any reasonable definition of myths: that they are stories, and traditional ones at that. Heroic tales in Greece were traditional no less than divine ones, and they can tell us something about the genre as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

It takes special qualities to make a tale survive from generation to generation—to make it traditional, in fact. Such qualities are various. They may be mainly narrative and dramatic, and in that case we have the kind of myth that is often called folktale. Sometimes they are more obviously practical in their effect, for example in reminding people of social rules and tribal traditions or in supporting institutions like marriage or kingship. These are what Malinowski called charter myths. Sometimes a tale is remembered because it is connected with a god or cult and is reinforced by religion. Often its traditional quality depends rather on aetiology in its deeper sense, on the ability to explain something, to offer an acceptable context for a reality that is worrying or puzzling—the fact of death, for instance, or irritating restrictions on the desire for women or property. And at other times a tale seems to have permanent appeal because of a more indefinable effect, because it embodies some powerful, mysterious and liberating subject or symbol. These are the main ways in which a tale may establish a hold on a group or community. But the analysis is obviously schematic, and in practice a tale will tend to possess more than one of these special qualities, which are not mutually exclusive. A charter myth often turns out to be aetiological in some degree; what is primarily seen as a folktale may also have charter aspects; a myth closely associated with religion often tends to be speculative or explanatory as well. Moreover a tale's emphasis can alter from generation to generation in response to changing social pressures and preoccupations. Boas and Benedict used to stress the movement from folktale to sacred myth and vice versa; that is true, but only part of the truth.<sup>6</sup> Any traditional tale, sacred or not, can take on different emphases, and it does so because the telling of tales is, in many non-literate societies, a primary mode of communication and discourse and an important factor for stability or, if necessary, for change.

One request, therefore, to be made of anthropologists is that they should devote special attention to myths as tales; that they should study all tales, not just sacred ones, in an effort to understand the criteria and changing tendencies of different kinds of oral tradition. Some anthropologists—and especially those who have worked in Africa, like Goody, Lienhardt and Evans-Pritchard—are aware of this. To others, Classical studies can offer

<sup>5</sup> It may be that 'traditional tale' is as far as one can reasonably go in defining the common quality of everything that tends to be classified as a myth (excluding specialised applications like 'falsehood'). Not all traditional tales, of course, are myths, even in this broad sense; for example tales that are clearly historical in essence may become traditional and yet have none of the other qualities that belong to one or another type of myths. The problem of definition

(which also includes the question of the relation of myths to folktales) is an awkward one; it is necessary to remain aware of it, yet it is also legitimate to by-pass it to some extent, at least until the special properties of commonly accepted instances have been further explored.

<sup>6</sup> F. Boas, *Tsimshian Mythology* (Washington, D.C., 1916) 879 ff.; R. Benedict, *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* xi (1933) 179.

some small help; for Milman Parry's examination of one product of a predominantly oral culture, namely the Serbocroatian epic, has led to a moderately sophisticated discussion among Homerists of types of variation in oral traditions.<sup>7</sup> There has been relatively less discussion among anthropologists of such general but important questions as this, mainly because of the unavoidable fragmentation of field studies and the reluctance of the individual observer to surrender the exemplary qualities of his own special area. Yet some agreement on the common tendencies of oral traditions is specially needed at the present time, when the last traditional groups are being sucked into the odorous swamp of modern literacy. Only so can the obvious distinctions be recognised; for example between the kind of literacy created by the irruption of the Bible and the kind created by the irruption of an oil company, or between both of these and the kind produced in ancient Greece by the sudden introduction of a viable writing system into an otherwise advanced society.

Discussion of the nature of myths has been left for so long to anthropologists, psychologists and students of religion that observations from the direction of Classical studies are apt to be regarded as irrelevant or even impudent. Anthropologists have made such wonderful progress in so many directions that they feel little inclination to question Malinowski's doctrine that the only person qualified to understand the nature of myths is the one who 'has the mythmaker at his elbow'. Yet we are in a position to emphasise one thing at least: that there are many different kinds of myth, that myths have different functions and, presumably, different origins, and that monolithic theories of myth are out-of-date. We can do so because of our distance from the diversity of types in modern tribal cultures; and because neither Greek myths nor other ancient ones respond to any unitary theory. The myth-and-ritual school, admittedly, drew comfort from the support of Cornford and others for the old idea that all myths are derived from rituals; but many serious students of ancient myths would now deny them that comfort.<sup>8</sup> And one has only to look at the other general theories—that all myths are allegories of nature, or explanations of some kind, or not explanations but charters, or reflexions of unconscious desires or fears, or expressions of symbols or structures in the collective mind—to see that none of them can possibly account for most, let alone all, of the obvious claimants to the title of 'myth'.

A slight but necessary shift of perspective suggests, indeed, that Greek myths do not fit easily into *any* account of the nature and functions of myths in general. I do not know quite what most Classical scholars and teachers feel about this. Do they persist in regarding Greek mythology as the pattern and exemplar against which all other myths should be judged? That, of course, is the traditional attitude, and it derives from the Renaissance itself, when Greek myths were virtually the only ones known and when they became, with the Bible, a primary source for literature and art. Later, when other European traditional tales were noticed, they tended to be given different names (like 'folktales') if they failed to fit into the aristocratic pattern of Greek myths. The myths of savage societies avoided that fate, and a few surprising thematic resemblances—like the primeval separation of earth and sky—perpetuated the idea of Greek myths as somehow still archetypal. Something of this attitude still maintains itself among anthropologists, who, though no longer trained in the Classics, tend to be as happy as Frazer or Robertson Smith was to cite a Classical parallel, real or imaginary. Even Lévi-Strauss, who admits to knowing very little about Greek mythology, hit upon the Oedipus tale as object of a notorious demonstration of his method, and recently Edmund Leach has chosen to elucidate Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth by applying it, not too fruitfully, to further Greek examples.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, now that a

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *The Making of Homeric Verse* (Oxford, 1971), ed. Adam Parry, lii ff.; and as one specific instance of such discussion see A. Parry, *Yale Classical Studies* xx (1966) 177 ff., and G. S. Kirk, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* n.s. xvi (1970) 48 ff.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Joseph Fontenrose, *The Ritual Theory of Myth* (Berkeley, 1966).

<sup>9</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (London, 1963) 213 ff.; E. R. Leach, *Lévi-Strauss* (London, Fontana Books, 1970) 68 ff.

mass of information is available about myths of other cultures, living and dead, it can be seen that Greek mythology, far from being typical, is exceptional in several important respects. In some ways it is richer than most other sets of myths, but in others, as we shall see, it is poorer. At any rate we must be careful in using Greek myths for the elucidation of non-Greek ones, and conversely the manifold comparative material from other cultures is not always so cogent for Greek myths as Jane Harrison and her brilliant friends used to think.

What then *are* the special characteristics of Greek mythology? Certain things go without saying: its breadth and complexity, its relative freedom from physiological pre-occupation. Yet Nordic myths, for instance, provide some parallel here, and the special properties I have in mind are rather these: the thematic limitations of Greek divine myths; the number, superficial variety and conventionalised plots of the heroic ones; and in general the lack of fantastic and imaginative themes in comparison with many other cultures. Some at least of these qualities are the result of one central condition—that Greek mythology as we know it is a *literate* mythology, one based on genuinely traditional tales (no doubt), but one that was elaborated and adjusted for several generations in accordance with developed literary criteria.

That is an important point, and I develop it further. Literacy makes an enormous difference to a mythical tradition. In Greece the content of oral myths was retained as the basic plot-element of literature, but new kinds of elaboration and variation changed the underlying emphases. One important new factor is the individual author aware of his own artistic entity, the poet no longer content to act as a link in a traditional chain. Archilochus in the mid-seventh century is typical: he accepts much of the language and some of the situations of the oral epic tradition, but drastically alters the ethos. Pindar not only extrudes certain crude elements of the traditional tales, but deliberately idealises the quality of *arete*, aristocratic virtuosity and privilege, in the mythical heroes. The tragedians freely adjust their mythical plots to illuminate political and social problems of their own day, as Aeschylus does with Zeus and Prometheus, and Sophocles with Antigone and Philoctetes. In one way these reflective and analytical poets were following a genuinely traditional practice of constantly elaborating the old myths, of bringing them up to date. In another they departed radically from the social continuity of the process by recording their own individual reactions rather than those of the community as a whole.

Greek mythology as we know it depends on writers like these. The poets of the Classical age were ultimately the main source—apart from Homer and Hesiod—for the later mythographers who supply many of the details to be found in modern handbooks and encyclopaedias. But there were other agents of distortion, too: antiquarians and genealogists in the logographical tradition, philosophical allegorisers, learned Alexandrian poets like Callimachus. Yet suppose the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman versions *did* become rather different from their oral prototypes; what about Homer and Hesiod? They, surely, stood at the very beginning of the literate era, and their information (whatever their precise mode of composition) was derived more or less directly from the oral tradition; therefore the myths they record ought to reflect the true tone of Greek mythology before it became adulterated by literate elaboration. There are two drawbacks to this commendable observation. First, the mythical range of Homer and Hesiod is fairly limited, especially in relation to the heroic myths (by which I mean those about Heracles, Perseus and so on as opposed to the quasi-legendary figures of Achilles, Agamemnon and the rest). Second, Hesiod almost certainly added a measure of order to the process of theogony; and passages in Homer too show that the nature of Zeus's power and his relation to older forces like the Giants and Titans were already under interpretation in the pre-Homeric epic tradition. To put it in another way, that tradition was already so highly developed in a literary sense that, although not technically literate, it had already acquired some of the destructive qualities associated with literacy; and something similar is probably true of the theogonical tradition brought

to a head by Hesiod. Here we confront an odd thing about the Greeks: that they lived for hundreds of years in an international *milieu* that was extensively literate, and yet themselves remained illiterate (except for the limited and peculiar span of Linear B) till the ninth or eighth century B.C. By then they were already advanced in ideas, social structure and the techniques of warfare, art and building; also in a highly organised poetical tradition. The functional emphases of myths must have suffered severe erosion even before the onset of literacy. We must not make the mistake of counting pre-Homeric Greece, just because it was illiterate, as in other ways comparable with those societies—mostly ‘savage’ ones studied by anthropologists—in which myths are integral. We must be careful, too, not to classify modes of thinking as revealed in Homer as necessarily irrational or ‘mythopoeic’, to use a dubious term. If we incline to believe that many Greek myths must at some time have been organically connected, like those of so many other societies, with the problems and paradoxes of social and personal life, then the stage at which they were so did not lie in the centuries immediately before Hesiod and Homer, or even in those of the Achaeans kingdoms. It lay far back in the mists of pre-history, and its *locus* was Asia as much as the Greek peninsula itself.

I have suggested that Greek mythology, partly as a consequence of these effects of literacy, is unusual in three respects: the thematic restrictions of the divine myths, the elaborate but conventionalised heroic myths, and the shortage of fantasy and imagination by comparison with many other mythologies. Those who regard Classical mythology as supreme will feel that each of these assertions needs defending.

Consider the divine myths first. Much of the divine action of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* must be excluded—for example, the developed conversations on Olympus and many of the divine interventions on the battlefield. These are the special contribution of literary artists; they became part of Classical mythology, if you like, and they elaborated earlier motifs, but in their developed forms they are unlikely to be typical of the ancient heritage of traditional oral tales. What remains of that heritage in its divine aspects? What is known from the rest of Homer and from other Greek literature, which constantly alludes to the Olympian deities and their acts? Surprisingly little beyond the birth of each god and the acquisition of his or her special functions. It is the mythical cosmogony and theogony that is the richest part of Greek divine mythology (and it is not my fault if most of it is derived from Asiatic myths like the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* and the Hurrian succession-myth about Kumarbi). Kronos’s castration of Ouranos and his swallowing of his own children is powerful mythical material, obviously ancient and truly imaginative. Subsequent proliferation is less so; it is more conventional and repetitive, and once the Titans are out of the way the mythical process of theogony begins to flag. The element of *story* diminishes. Zeus gets various wives and mistresses, divine or human; some of these episodes are dramatic enough (his transformation into the shower of gold to penetrate Danae, his anticipation of Amphitryo in the bosom of Alcmena), but others are sketchy, allegorical or excessively abstract (his swallowing of Metis and consequent birth of Athena from his head). *Gamos* and transformation; they are motifs full of liveliness and a kind of imagination, but even so Zeus does not have much in the way of a personal mythical history—less, at any rate, than one is accustomed to think. Most of the other gods and goddesses are no solidier in this respect. What does Hermes do apart from being a miraculous, resourceful and mischievous baby, one who invents the lyre and steals Apollo’s cattle (by a common folktale motif) before being made into herald and *psuchopompos*? It is true that he appears incidentally in many other tales, most of them heroic ones, and he acquired an important cult; but in his own right as an anthropomorphic *persona* he has few traditional actions to boast of. Athena is similar; her myths (aside from her birth) almost all concern her cult and her functions as palace- and city-goddess. Apollo is born in Delos, and we possess a long account of how this took place. But essentially the myth as we know it is a learned aetiological response to

a paradox—how is it that a dry little island like Delos is one of his two main cult-places? The other part of the surviving *Hymn* describes how he overcame the dragon Pytho at Delphi and then brought the Cretan sailors to be his priests; but again this is an almost scholarly exercise, probably no earlier in ultimate origin than the tenth or ninth century B.C., on certain details of his actual worship. Aphrodite, too, does little of a specific kind after her remarkable birth. Her embroilment with Ares is sophisticated and relatively late, and the affairs with Adonis and Anchises and the contest judged by Paris probably derive from Asiatic prototypes. Poseidon has the building of the walls of Troy to his credit and competes with Athena at Athens; both are local myths, perhaps of the late second millennium, but in his more general functions as god of horses, water and earthquakes he receives rather little in the way of narrative and dramatic development. I am thinking, as a possible standard of comparison, of the Nordic gods of Asgard and of the Mesopotamian gods, Enlil, Enki and Inanna and their Akkadian equivalents. How much richer were those non-Greek gods in tales, not only of birth and development and the acquisition of cult and function, but also of dramatic and creative actions towards each other and mankind! If divine myths were systematically reduced to separate motifs of the Stith Thompson type, I suspect that the Greek gods and goddesses would account for a markedly smaller number than their Nordic and Mesopotamian counterparts, in spite of the fragmentary evidence for the latter; or than the active and varied gods and culture-heroes of many savage societies.

Some of the reasons for the thematic limitations of these divine myths can be conjectured—if one is prepared to abandon the idea that all Greek myths are perfect of their kind. Simple bowdlerisation and rationalisation are relatively unimportant, and the Ouranos-Kronos myth shows that the Greeks were prepared to retain tales that were strange and apparently immoral. A more significant cause is the unusually diverse origin of the Greek gods and goddesses as compared, once again, with the Nordic deities or the city-gods of ancient Mesopotamia. Zeus is an Indo-European sky-god and patriarch, Athena a Minoan/Mycenaean house- and palace-goddess, Hera a local Argive mother-wife fertility type, Apollo a distinctively Asiatic newcomer, Artemis part Asiatic mother, part mistress of animals, Aphrodite an Ishtar-like sex-queen, Hephaestus a Lemnian and Asiatic craftsman-god—and so on. Now when deities are borrowed or transported from abroad it is their general powers and functions, not their specific associations and incidental biography, that survive the move. Conversely, autochthonous deities like Hera tend to lose their local folklore in the process of syncretism and expansion. That is one important reason for a limitation of mythical incident. Another is that the Mesopotamian gods and their other Asiatic offshoots, from which so much of the Greek pantheon seems to be derived, were not ideally suited to Greek needs. Some were etymological in inspiration; most of their mythical actions were performed before men were even created; as city-gods they were largely irrelevant to Greek requirements; and even in their nature-functions they reflected conditions that were simply extraneous in Greek terms. The Greeks did not have to bother much about floods or droughts, and that is why certain Mesopotamian obsessions like the great flood and the destruction of mankind, when they appear in Greek form, seem half-hearted and badly integrated into the total mythological context.<sup>10</sup> The ‘plan of Zeus’ at the beginning of the *Iliad* was probably in origin a reflexion of the Mesopotamian or Egyptian gods’ recurrent itch to destroy mankind; the *Cypria* preserved the idea, but in the *Iliad* this un-Hellenic conception is in process of being watered down into Zeus’s more limited intention of gratifying Thetis by avenging Achilles.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Great flood: cf. *ANET*<sup>2</sup> (= *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, 2nd ed., Princeton, 1955) 42–4 (Sumerian); *ibid.* 93–5, also W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-hasīs* (Oxford, 1969) 67 ff. (Akkadian). In Greek contexts the flood is variously

associated with Ogygus, Deucalion, Lycaon.

<sup>11</sup> *Iliad* i 5; on the *Dios boule* cf. schol. A Vind 61 and *fr.* 1 of the *Cypria*, most conveniently in Homer, OCT vol. v, pp. 117 f.

Two members of the Greek pantheon form an exception to the paucity of divine incident beyond birth and development. I refer of course to Demeter and Dionysus. Demeter is part-subject of the remarkable and widespread myth about the rape of Kore, her mother's search for her through the world, the infertility that resulted, and the foundation of the cult at Eleusis. Dionysus is the subject of unusual tales of resistance and madness, of drunkenness, hysterical mountain dances, and the *sparagmos* or tearing apart either of the god himself, or of a votary, or of a wild animal. Both of them—and this is the significant fact—are fertility deities, and both sets of myths have strong foreign connexions. The disappearing fertility-god theme is clearly Mesopotamian; Dionysus is Phrygian or Thracian. But the Kore-tale was saved by being grafted on to a local fertility-cult at Eleusis at some time in the Bronze Age; and Dionysus fitted so neatly into the place of local tree- and vegetation-daemons that he succeeded in keeping some of his alien biography as well as absorbing certain local folktale-incidents.

In general, however, the divine myths are thematically somewhat jejune, and I have suggested some historical reasons for this being so. The heroic myths present different problems. My own rather Farnellian view of the heroes (and again I do not mean the historicising warriors of Homer, but figures like Heracles, Perseus and Jason) is that they are diverse in type and origin.<sup>12</sup> Some were shaped after the model of imprecisely-remembered Bronze-Age princes, who then acted as magnet for folktale themes of success and danger. Some were almost anonymous figures of local cult, based occasionally on a surviving Mycenaean tomb. Others were hypostatised folktale heroes; a few were functional daemons, recipients of cult like Asclepius the embodiment of healing. Most of the myths that surround these diverse figures are primarily of folktale type, compounded of a limited set of common themes concerning tests and quests, superhuman adventures, acts of exemplary ingenuity, pollution and hardship, quarrelling kinsfolk and offended deities. A few brilliant incidents stand out, but in general there is little that is either unexpected or profoundly imaginative. The specific emotions aroused are predominantly those of simple excitement, satisfaction at the triumph of the underdog, or other kinds of wish-fulfilment. Social preoccupations are hardly visible; religious and ritual connexions, though commoner than appear on the surface, are not strongly marked and are quite often the result of secondary and learned aetiology.

If that is so, how is it that the heroic myths—all of them, not only the special ones like Oedipus or Theseus and the Minotaur—make such a deep impression on us? I suggest it is because of their careful complexity, their rich and realistic elaboration of place and personnel. This is a complete and vital world, remote enough to be romantic and intriguing yet sufficiently detailed to be sympathetic and alive—and that was so for Greeks of the Classical age as much as for ourselves. It was this kind of quality, rather than a wide range of substantially different incident, that made the strongest appeal. The quality is reinforced, admittedly, by a few themes of unusual power and imagination; but they *are* few (as I shall attempt to confirm shortly), even by comparison with other sets of myths and other cultures. Which leads to the third and most paradoxical property that I assigned to Greek myths—their deficiency, apart from a few striking instances, in fantasy and imagination.

Let me begin by reminding you of certain qualities of various non-Greek myths.<sup>13</sup> In an

<sup>12</sup> Cf. L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921) esp. pp. 19 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Brief references for what follows in the main text: Shukallituda, cf. S. N. Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Garden City, N.Y., 1961; Doubleday Anchor no. A 229) 117 f.; Geriguiaguiatugo, C. Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le cuit* (Paris, 1964) 43 ff., cf. G. S. Kirk, *Myth, its Meaning and Functions* (Cambridge and Berkeley, 1970) 64 f.; Winnebago trickster, cf. P.

Radin, *The Trickster* (London, 1956) 38 f.; Egyptians: cf. J. A. Wilson in Frankfort, Frankfort, Wilson and Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy* (Penguin Books, 1949) 54–6; Kumarbi, *ANET*<sup>2</sup> (cf. n. 10 above), 120 f., cf. Kirk, *Myth* (above) 214–19; Loki, cf. E. O. G. Turville-Petrie, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964) ch. 5; Zuni, cf. R. Benedict, *Zuni Mythology* (New York, 1935) *passim*; Pitjandjara, cf. C. P. Mountford, *Ayers Rock* (Sydney, 1965) *passim*.

ancient Sumerian tale the gardener-god Shukallituda plants a special tree to shade his garden; Inanna the queen of heaven lies down under it and falls asleep, and he rapes her. But why did she go to sleep under this tree, so far from her usual haunts, and why did the pious gardener run amok? One kind of answer is that this is not the sort of question that myths envisage or care about. Why are Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and what is the Tree of Knowledge doing there? An equally silly question, you may say, as might the story-teller himself. Why does young Geriguaguiatugo in a Bororo myth have a grandmother who tries to kill him, and then with her waste gases instead of in a more straightforward manner? The analytical answer stresses that this is a variant on the theme of excrement and its symbolic relation to nature and culture; but in dramatic terms the strangeness does not matter, in fact the stranger the better. Why does Trickster in the Winnebago cycle have a male member so long that he has to carry it in a box slung over his shoulder, and why do bits of it turn into plants when they are bitten off by a chipmunk? We can answer if we choose in terms of superficial aetiology or wish-fulfilment; but in narrative terms this kind of fantastic exaggeration and inconsequence needs no explanation—it gives the tale a kind of extra dimension and even a bizarre charm. Why did the ancient Egyptians swallow the odd and inconsequential idea that the sky is held up on posts or rather, if you prefer, by the legs of a celestial cow? Because the reason must be something like that, and in any case that is how a tale should be—surprising and fantastic. Is it not absurd that the male Hurrian god Kumarbi becomes pregnant with the weather-god and actually discusses with him the difficult problem of precisely how he is to be born? It is absurd by the standards of logic and obstetrics, but that is not what myths are primarily about. Why is the Norse trickster Loki a homosexual, and what has this to do with his odd combination of creativity and malice? Nothing at all, by ordinary standards; but myths are not interested in the ordinary. Why in the Zuni emergence-myth should the War Twins descend through a lake into a world within the earth, and lead therefrom a few insubstantial creatures who become our ancestors? That is a fantastic idea, largely remote from real life: a typically mythical idea. Why did the Pitjandjara aborigines determine the relations of their mythical ancestors by the positioning of vaguely animal-like crevices on the great monolith of Ayers Rock? Not because they were savage or stupid, but because mythical truth, the truth of the Dreamtime, reveals itself like that, by almost random association.

It is plain that the same kind of question and answer could not often be applied to Greek myths as we know them. What it reveals is mainly the kind of fantasy that depends on inconsequence. I shall return to this at the end, and for the moment merely remark that the orderly complexity of Greek heroic myths, in particular, is quite the opposite of inconsequentiality; and therefore that in this respect Greek mythology is unusual.

From this kind of inconsequential fantasy I want to distinguish a more positive kind of imaginative fantasy. There is a kind of imagination that does not depend on unusual combinations, unexpected juxtapositions or simple exaggerations, but rather on concepts or images that are in themselves poetical and suggestive. The idea of a Tree of Knowledge, or of a luscious fruit or delicious fountain that must nevertheless be avoided by men, is evocative in this sense; so is that of a ghost-world under the earth. Greek myths are not strikingly fertile in this kind of imaginative theme—but are more so, perhaps, than in inconsequential fantasy. Let us survey the evidence more systematically.

The greatest imaginative concentration in Greek mythical sources is found in parts of Hesiod. In the birth and development of the gods, as distinct from their later activities, there is no lack either of fantasy or of thematic variety. The idea of the sky as father refusing to separate from the earth as mother, his castration by the infant Kronos from within the womb, and the structurally similar motif of Kronos in turn preventing the growth of his children by swallowing them as they are born from Rhea, are striking enough.



They are, however, and I repeat, substantially Mesopotamian in derivation. Subsequent details of cosmogony and theogony—the establishment of weather-god Zeus's rule, the assignment of parts of the cosmos to different deities, the fight against a monstrous progeny of the displaced older gods—likewise reproduce, but in a more attenuated form, some widely diffused Asiatic themes.<sup>14</sup> Zeus is less picturesque as a champion than Marduk in the Babylonian Creation Epic; the Titans seem a colourless collection after Kingu and the unpleasant Tiamat; Typhoeus is a feeble substitute for the sinister stone giant Ullikummi in the Hurrian succession-myth. Hesiod does his best with snake-women and hundred-handed giants, and the result is not negligible.<sup>15</sup> Even so, the exceptional power and purity of some of the great Mesopotamian imaginative prototypes have been diminished. Equally the Greek conception of Hades, the dark kingdom under the earth where Zeus's brother rules over the insubstantial dead, powerful though it is, seems less so when we compare it with the model from which it is surely derived, the Mesopotamian 'House of Dust'. Not even Homer's elaborate underworld-scenes in the eleventh and twenty-third *Odyssey*, still less the learned variations on the depth and darkness of Tartarus in Hesiod's *Theogony*, can rival the force and terror conveyed by a few Sumerian and Akkadian tablets—the record of Inanna's descent through the seven gates of Hell, at each of which she is further stripped until she is hauled naked before her pitiless sister Ereshkigal, queen of the dead, to be instantly killed and hung on a hook; or the obstinate and fatal quest of Enkidu for King Gilgamesh's *pukku* and *mikku* that have fallen through a hole into the world below.<sup>16</sup>

The Golden Age comes to an end and Prometheus becomes involved in a long quarrel with Zeus. Here Greek myth goes beyond Asiatic themes—although they are still present. The trick over the sacrifices seems to develop a detail of the Akkadian tale of Adapa, and the creation of woman is familiar through the ancient Near East.<sup>17</sup> Yet the idea of a mediator between men and gods, as Prometheus became, is foreign to the Asiatic conception of men as slaves of the gods, and a far cry, even, from the role of the king as high priest and divine representative on earth. The combination in the Pandora-episode of folktale themes about the origin of evils with those about the social drawbacks of the female sex could be Greek in inspiration. Hesiod continues with the tale of the five races or generations of mankind; it contains, as well as some obvious expansions, remarkable flashes of genuinely mythical imagination—the impious retarded boobies of the silver race, the ghastly grey-headed babies of the iron.<sup>18</sup> The metallic *schema* may be Iranian, but certain of the undeniably fantastic details are probably Greek. With the Golden Age itself the Greeks did no less well. Again it is based on an Asiatic conception and reflects the world of the Mesopotamian gods before men were created, tempered perhaps by the Egyptian idea of a blessed land of the semi-divine dead; but in the Hesiodic and Pindaric vision of a land without toil, a land of golden flowers where the sons of gods dwell, it takes on new power and meaning.

Theogony and the early history of men give rise, then, to a number of fantastic themes; and the fantasy is not primarily of the inconsequential kind. Many of these ideas are Asiatic in derivation, some have been attenuated, but the notable thing is that the Greeks did not subject all of this material to wholesale purification. Their careful retention and evident enjoyment of the tales of Kronos castrating his father and Aphrodite's birth from the discarded member (although a nicer version of her birth admittedly made some headway) stand in contrast with the taste that deprived most of the heroic myths of what H. J. Rose

<sup>14</sup> Cf. P. Walcot, *Hesiod and the Near East* (Cardiff, 1966) chs. i and ii.

<sup>15</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony* 295 ff. (Echidna), cf. 821 ff. (Typhoeus); 665 ff. (Titans and 100-handed giants).

<sup>16</sup> Inanna's descent: *ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 52–7; Enkidu: *ibid.*, 97–9 (i.e. Epic of Gilgamesh, tablet XII).

<sup>17</sup> Adapa: *ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 101–3; cf. Kirk, *Myth*, 122–5, 130 f.

<sup>18</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days* 131 f. (silver race), 181 (grey-headed babies).

described as 'horrible features'.<sup>19</sup> This is a puzzle in itself. Why did the Greeks elevate (or reduce) so many of their traditional themes to the moral level of a parish magazine, leaving only the theogony with the uninhibited vigour of myths in other cultures? Was it because they were puritanical and prudish? Surely not; no one who knows the literature of the Classical age can call them that—no one who recalls that at almost every corner one came across a stone pillar from which protruded an erect male member, that enormous models of the same organ were prominent in several of the festivals of the sacral year, and that the handling of imitation female genitalia was a common religious act. Ritual matings in the so-called Hieros Gamos may have been too much emphasised by our enthusiastic predecessors, but there can be no doubt that from a tender age the ancient Greeks, girls as well as boys, were confronted with sex in forms that would have been regarded as acceptable even today. Perhaps the answer is this: that the Greeks were prepared to tolerate almost anything in a religious context, especially since so much of their religion was connected with fertility in one or other of its aspects; but did not feel that sex belonged in literature. Heraclitus, after all, thought that songs about phalluses were acceptable only in a religious procession.<sup>20</sup> A roughly converse inconsistency affected the Zuni and Hopi Indians of the Pueblo culture, who were agreeably uninhibited in their ordinary social relations but so respectable in ritual matters that they obstinately denied any sexual connotation in their annual hoop-and-stick races.<sup>21</sup> Apart from this possibility, the admiring conception of the Heroic Age itself was hostile to physiological myths. Excrement was ruled right out, and only Heracles of the major figures was periodically credited with behaviour that would once have raised an eyebrow in Surbiton.

The lack of inconsequential fantasy in the heroic myths is hardly surprising, because they depend so heavily on the weaving together of folktale themes—as well as on the agglomeration of different regional tales. Folktales tend to be naturalistic in colouring; they may include supernatural or magical elements, but their basic social situations are only slightly different from those of real life. That, in a way, is the point of this kind of tale. The concentration of themes produces a sequence of actions that becomes improbable in the end, but this is something different from the startling and even traumatic juxtapositions that we know from other mythologies. The myth of Athamas is a typical Greek instance. It begins with an element of the supernatural in that his first wife was Nephele, originally a cloud-woman designed by Zeus to punish Ixion. Ino, who replaced her, resorted to a complex stratagem in order to destroy her step-children: she persuaded the women of Boeotia to roast the seed-corn, the crops failed, the Delphic oracle was duly consulted, and Ino managed to tamper with its response. Athamas was consequently on the point of sacrificing his son Phrixus when a prodigious ram bore the boy away, with his sister, to Colchis. Little Helle fell off and gave her name to the Hellespont, and the ram provided the golden fleece that became the object of the Argonauts' quest. Meanwhile Athamas was driven mad by Hera and shot one of his sons by Ino, mistaking him for a stag. Ino seized the other and leapt into the sea, where she turned into the sea-goddess Leucothea: again a touch of the supernatural, as indeed is the ram. The story is actually more complicated than that, and was so already by the time Sophocles wrote a tragedy about it. But the point is that it is based on a sequence of common folktale themes—jealousy of a rival, hatred of step-children (or step-mother), ingenious means of causing a disaster (or arranging a murder), misusing an oracle, being forced to sacrifice one's own child, miraculous rescues, aetiological explanations of odd place-names, quests, being driven mad as a punishment for offending a deity,

<sup>19</sup> H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London, 1953) 14.

<sup>20</sup> Heraclitus *fr.* 15 Diels-Kranz (*cf.* Kirk-Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* [Cambridge, 1963 etc.] 211 f.): 'If it were not for Dionysus that they made

the procession and sang the hymn to the shameful parts, the deed would be most shameless . . .'

<sup>21</sup> R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston, 1934 etc.) 123–6.

killing a loved one by mistake, and so on. Most of these themes are piquant extensions of possible situations, and it is their concentration upon one set of people, together with occasional supernatural details, that makes the whole tale implausible in realistic terms. The total effect is not one of fantasy either in the traumatically inconsequential or in the deeply imaginative sense.

Imagination in this second sense, the kind that depends on an evocative subject or symbol, occurs sporadically in the heroic myths. The labyrinth is a case in point, and it does not matter if the idea of the monstrous creature at the heart of the maze is partly determined by Minoan bull-jumping on the one hand, the intricate plan of Cretan palaces on the other. The important thing is that the Greeks developed this mythical idea in a form that allows little improvement. It was left for others to elicit all the symbolic implications, as it was with the tale of Oedipus, but the basic narrative was complete. Medusa was a similarly potent concept. The idea is not the private property of the Greeks, but their version of it was uniquely spare and pure in itself, and was moreover associated with other Perseus themes that made a satisfyingly complex tale. Pegasus and Bellerophon are based no doubt partly on the Akkadian tale of Etana and the eagle,<sup>22</sup> but the whole Bellerophon cycle, so far as we can guess from tantalising fragments, developed an imaginative force of its own. The idea of the Centaurs is another powerful one, perhaps more exclusively a Greek invention. No Mediterranean myth about semi-tame horses is likely to be much earlier than around 1700 B.C., when the domesticated horse was introduced into the eastern Mediterranean world; but man-horses do not appear alongside the bull-men and other mixed types on Mesopotamian cylinder-seals, and may therefore be a Greek invention. The Centaurs are prominent in Greek heroic myths; they are no anonymous group like the Satyrs—on the contrary Cheiron is a key figure in heroic education and has several important myths of his own, and Nessus and Pholus, too, are quite strongly individualised. Perhaps it is only when the horse-man concept is set beside that of the Cyclopes, another equivocal clan half barbarous and half divine, that its most imaginative implications for the relation of culture and nature can be properly appreciated.<sup>23</sup>

Then there are the recurrent themes of old age and the distinction between mortality and immortality—Peleus and Tithonus crumbling into senility while their divine brides remain irritatingly young, or the monstrous grey-haired girls, the Graeae themselves. Change of sex is not a common theme and has little to do with folktale, but it receives powerful expression in the myth of Caenis who became Caeneus in revulsion from Poseidon's love, and then set up his (possibly phallic) spear to be worshipped in the market-place—Caeneus who could not be wounded, but had to be bludgeoned into the earth by Centaurs after the riotous Lapith wedding-feast. And to particular imaginative acts or subjects there must be added the general aura of fantasy conferred by the close connexion between heroes and the gods themselves. The heroes behave for the most part like extraordinary humans; only Heracles can begin to emulate the Amerindian Coyote or African Spider as a culture-hero; but even Perseus and Jason, Oedipus and Theseus, draw imaginative force from the environment in which they move, an environment partly Mycenaean but partly that of the Golden Age.

That Greek myths contain moments of brilliant imagination cannot be denied; the significant fact is that the moments are few in relation to the number of mythical characters and the complexity of the whole system. This kind of imagination is not common among the Greeks as we know them; but it never, fortunately, quite disappeared. There were a few remarkable outbreaks even after the oral period and outside the direct mythical tradition. Conspicuous instances are Pherecydes of Syros and the great Aristophanes. Pherecydes' cosmogony owes something to the Hesiodic tradition, and the five (or seven) recesses in

<sup>22</sup> Etana: *ANET*<sup>2</sup>, 114-18.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Kirk, *Myth* 152 ff., esp. 170 f.; P. Vidal-Naquet, *Annales* v (1970) 1285-7.

which fertile seed is placed may be oriental in inspiration; but the wedding of Zas and Chthonie, at which Zas weaves a cloth depicting sea and the surface of the earth and gives it to his chthonic bride, and the spreading of the cloth over a winged oak representing the earth's substructure, are a genuinely imaginative mythical conception, one that shines out from the exiguous fragments we possess.<sup>24</sup> As for Aristophanes, in him both kinds of fantasy—inconsequence and brilliantly positive imagination—find a new form. Sometimes he brings old themes to life—the dung-beetle is Pegasus—but the city of birds and Dicaeopolis's separate peace, to look no further, are new and striking inventions.

The Greek mythical tradition, then, has its moments of luminous fantasy; but many of them are foreign in inspiration, and its strongest qualities remain those of narrative ingenuity rather than of poetic insight. I may not have entirely convinced you of this; but the slight role of inconsequentiality, in comparison with most other mythologies, is surely hard to deny. Usually, when it is noticed at all, it is regarded as a matter for congratulation, a commendable by-product of Greek rationality; and I want to end by emphasising how misleading such an assessment might be. Aristophanes should remind us that inconsequentiality is not necessarily a negative quality. Foreign myths are not inconsequential just because they have been made up by poor ignorant savages wandering round in a sort of Lévy-Bruhlian daze. Inconsequence is not just a nasty accident of primitivism; it is a valid facet of the mythical imagination, one of the ways in which traditional tales fulfil some of their most crucial sociological and psychological functions. The displacement of ordinary events, the reversal of normal roles and expectations, are common to myths and to dreams. In each the immediate cause of the displacement may be fortuitous—a heavy supper, or the juxtaposition of disparate themes in a loose oral tradition. There may also be artistic reasons for inconsequence; many audiences like unexpectedness in their stories, and in an oral society fantasy can become an independent literary category. But displacement in myths is more than just a matter of style, taste or accident. It accords with certain features of ritual, like the reversal of roles and sexes on special occasions. The ritual rejection of normal life is deliberate, and its purpose is agreed to be the establishment of a potent non-secular interlude, as in rites of passage, or to confirm the connexion of society with a sacred and abnormal past. We may reasonably suppose that fantastic myths do something analogous. For the liberating effect of myths is not caused just by a mysterious and evocative subject or symbol; it can be the result of restructuring experience in an apparently random or secret way. There is something indefinably powerful, almost holy, in this kind of fantasy. It is absorbing not only because of its supernatural or dreamlike connexions, but also because it enables one to see life quite differently, to sense strange archaic possibilities behind the façade of existence. That is a perspective, an approach, that deserves the most careful investigation, and might enable us to give some answer, at least, to questions like these: For how long had the Greeks managed to live without this kind of fantasy, or with so little of it? And how was their peculiar creativity affected by what looks, from a certain point of view, like a kind of emotional and even intellectual deprivation?<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The possibility that the oak and cloth are also oriental in derivation is re-raised by M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford, 1971) 52–60; his arguments at this point are far from decisive.

<sup>25</sup> This article is a substantially unchanged version of a talk given to the Triennial Conference of Classical Societies in Cambridge in July 1971.