
ATHENIAN MYTHS & INSTITUTIONS

WORDS IN ACTION



Wm. Blake Tyrrell
AND
Frieda S. Brown

Athenian Myths and Institutions

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WM. BLAKE TYRRELL

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Preface

The perspectives developed in this book derive from myths as verbal constructs that are informed by the values, practices, and institutions of Athenian culture. We hope to show the ways in which myths both exemplify the categories of thought that describe the Athenian universe and condition their audience to those categories. We examine how mythmakers reflect, define, and defend the status quo, and we consider myths' bearing on ritual, the code of the warrior, marriage, and politics.

It has been our intention throughout this study to address a wider readership than that of professional classicists alone. To that end, we have glossed certain Greek terms. We believe that this book considers questions and provides directions for critical thinking that will be of value to university students of Classics as well as to a broader audience interested in Greek myths and mythmaking who would find useful a study that contextualizes Athenian mythmaking through a diversity of critical approaches. If we have failed to strike the proper balance, we trust we have erred in the direction of scholarship.

Our methodology combines traditional historical and literary criticism with the more modern approaches of anthropologists, feminist critics, and, in particular, the cultural historians Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. By grounding the myths in the cus-

toms, practices, and institutions of Greek society, these scholars have shown that myths are a verbal expression of beliefs, concepts, and practices operating in all aspects of culture.

Chapter 1 introduces the problems of defining myths and concludes that, for our purposes, a Greek myth is a tale rooted in Greek culture that recounts a sequence of events chosen by the maker of the tale to accommodate his own medium and objectives and to achieve particular effects in his audience.

Although the myths discussed in this study were active specifically in Athenian culture, we have treated the *Theogony* of the Boeotian poet Hesiod in Chapter 2 because Hesiod typifies Greek culture in imaging the cosmos from the male perspective.

Chapter 3 examines how myths validate and criticize what Arthur W.H. Adkins has called the “*aretē* standard.” We evaluate Nestor’s lesson in manly virtues in *Iliad* 11 as a prelude to Sophocles’ treatment of the myth of Ajax, which illustrates the destructiveness of excessive adherence to that standard.

Chapter 4 studies the ways in which mythmakers explored the irresolvable flaw in Olympian blood sacrifice, namely, its resemblance to murder. The rituals of blood sacrifice and the Bouphonia provide the social context for interpreting Sophocles’ *Ajax*.

Patriarchal mythmaking on marriage is the subject of Chapter 5. We begin by analyzing a particular form of marriage practiced commonly in Athens of the classical period and the dynamics which it reifies for Athenian mythmaking. Among the works we treat in this context are the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Sophocles’ *The Women of Trachis*, and Euripides’ *Medea*. We also examine a secondary myth which conceals Aeschylus’ maiming of the female in *Eumenides* beneath a supplement of juridical progress.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 deal with different aspects of po-

litical life in Athens. In this sphere, mythic discourse provides a medium through which a group of people identify themselves as related to one another and distinct from similar groups by telling the same myths and, more importantly, by how they tell them to those within and without the group. Politicians and other mythmakers appropriated myths, exploiting for propagandistic purposes such myths as those of Theseus and Ion. We analyze the mythmaking displayed on the marbles of the Parthenon and in funeral orations over the dead, and end our discussion with a new reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*, relating it specifically to contemporary funeral oratory.

Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the Greek are ours, and all dates are B.C. Dates are given the first time a work, event, or author is named. For familiar names, we have retained the latinized spellings; for others, we have approximated the Greek orthography. The only footnotes are those that seemed to us necessary for a better understanding of the text. References within brackets in the text are to works listed in the bibliography.

Some of the material contained within these pages appeared earlier in different form in Wm. Blake Tyrrell's *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking* and in his "The Unity of Sophocles' *Ajax*." We thank The Johns Hopkins University Press and the editor of *Arethusa*, respectively, for permission to use these texts here.

We express our thanks to Larry J. Bennett, whose separate work with Wm. Blake Tyrrell, "Sophocles' *Antigone* and Funeral Oratory," is forthcoming in *American Journal of Philology*.

East Lansing, Mich.
June 1990

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Athenian Myths and Institutions

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One

Introduction: Myths as Words in Action

Most of us formed our first impressions of Greek myths as children from the summaries and illustrated handbooks, movies, and cartoons that simplified and sanitized the doings of the gods and heroes. The stories were fun, and they impressed us as something uncomplicated, or frivolous. How, after all, could anyone take seriously such fantasy as Zeus's turning himself into a bull or Kronos' swallowing his children? In time, youthful skepticism was reinforced by the common opinion that myths are false and misleading. Commercial advertisements and political speeches abound with claims of exploding the "myth" of this or that by telling the truth. In the way of language, the word has become confused with the thing, and the meaningful place of Greek myths in the society that created them has become distorted, if not lost, through our own culture's estimation of myths.

The cartoonist Charles M. Schulz has captured the equivocation surrounding myths for Americans with Linus's myth of the Great Pumpkin. Linus is waiting at the pumpkin patch for the advent of the Great Pumpkin. Lucy, ever the pragmatist, chides him: "Santa Claus has elves to help him. What does the Great Pumpkin have, oranges?" Linus explains his creed ("This is what I believe") to Sally who thinks him mad. His is a tale of rewards for the faithful—toys for children the world over. The Great

Pumpkin never comes, and Linus blurts out his frustrations: "Show up, Stupid!!!"—only to cover his blasphemous mouth in horror. Next morning, Lucy tries to browbeat him into cursing the Great Pumpkin and setting himself free, but he cries: "Just wait 'til next year!!"

On another occasion, Linus reproves Sally by claiming that Peppermint Patty also believes. "She's not like YOU. She doesn't call 'the Great Pumpkin' a myth and a legend." "How about a lie and a fraud?" retorts Sally. The exchange shows that both share the common outlook that myths are false and deceitful. They differ in that Linus's tale of the Great Pumpkin, by being *true for him*, is not a myth but a revealed word about his divinity. It is accompanied by a creed and by ritual actions—waiting in the pumpkin patch on a fixed night each year. Like many religious myths, his tale organizes his life, promises future benefits, and alleviates his loneliness in the present. Lucy, who may believe in Santa Claus (*her* true story), wants to break his faith, presumably freeing him to think for himself, but he remains in the embrace of the authority imposed by his myth. Linus's problems arise when he wants mythic beliefs to stand the test of concrete reality. It is one thing to believe in the Second Coming, quite another to state an hour for its occurrence.

The Greek word *mythos* denoted "anything said by the mouth" and thereby simply opposed the spoken word to the physical deed. In Homer, *mythos* also means a story or tale—without any implication of truth or falsity. And Plato (c. 429–347), the first to employ the term *mythologia*, meant by it only the telling of stories. As narratives, myths consist of words that relate events and actions. The narrative begins with one situation, passes through a middle in which the situation is elaborated upon or altered, then ends in quite another situation. The myth of Daphne, for example, tells how Daphne, daughter of the river god Pe-neus, was pursued by Apollo; she fled his embrace, pray-

ing for aid, and was changed into a laurel tree. Those stories which we know today as Greek myths were a vital, working, and formative medium in Greek society. For that reason, the study of Greek mythmaking, no less than the study of Greek history or philosophy, provides insights into a civilization which has value for itself and for our own.

G.S. Kirk has accurately pointed out that "the nature of myths is still, in spite of millions of printed words devoted to it, a confused topic" [1974, p. 17]. Given their many manifestations and complexities, myths have been richly mined by anthropologists, historians, psychologists, and social as well as literary critics. The same point might well be made about the definition of myth, which has been variously confounded with legend, folklore, allegory, and sacred tales. Part of the difficulty arises from attempting to determine what distinguishes a myth from another kind of narrative, say, a novel or a short story. A more insidious impediment is posed by the mode of the inquiry itself: what, in a word, constitutes the *mythic* element of a narrative? The question is that of the Platonic Socrates, heard here, for example, cross-examining Euthyphro, self-confessed expert on piety:

Teach me the look (*eidos*) of piety, so that by observing it and using it as a model, I could say that what resembles it in the things you do or someone else does is pious and what does not resemble it I could deny is pious (*Euthyphro* 6e).

Once set on this path, the inquiry is locked into pursuing one form, one shape or idea (Plato's *eidos*) of the mythic, something eternally the same and ever like itself. Once the mythic has been defined, a story to be a myth must fall within the strict limits of that definition. Moreover, the definition itself may engender a particular method of inter-

pretation or analysis. Yet scholars generally agree that no single approach suffices to explain everything in and about myths. There is also the danger that defining and analyzing myths, since we must do so in words, may become mythmaking activities in themselves. The present authors are not likely to escape these pitfalls entirely, but to avoid being entrapped by too refined a definition, we have opted for our purposes to define a Greek myth as *a tale rooted in Greek culture that recounts a sequence of events chosen by the maker of the tale to accommodate his own medium and purpose and to achieve particular effects in his audience*. As narratives that both exemplify and shape that culture, myths are words in action.

"I write what I believe to be true, for the stories of the Greeks are many and, it seems to me, absurd" (fr. 1). So the geographer Hecataeus (sixth century) begins his *Genealogies*, a treatise on the generations of mythic figures. He expresses his intention to tell the true, correct versions of the myths he surveys, but, to judge from the surviving fragments of his work, he simply recounted absurd versions of his own, which he created by applying logical and rational criteria to his subjects. Accordingly, Cerberus, for example, was not the "dog of Hades," but a serpent from Taenarum in the southern Peloponnesus whose poison instantly killed anyone it bit (fr. 27). Despite himself, Hecataeus could not escape the grip of those myths. An incident related by Herodotus (died c. 430–425) in his narrative of Egypt suggests a reason for his failure. "When Hecataeus, the prose writer, was in Thebes, he engaged in genealogy, tracing his lineage back to a god in the sixteenth generation" (2.143). Hecataeus' family was prominent among the nobles in Ionian Miletus and no doubt founded its claim to recognition, in part, on its divine ancestor. Its scion could not deny the reality preserved in his familial tradition. Self-interest or unquestioned belief or some other motive compelled him to accept the fun-

damental historicity of the stories he had heard from boyhood about his family's god. Scholars like Hecataeus might have quibbled with details and tried to make the myths more realistic, but not even they could deny their validity outright.

The authority imparted by time and by the voice of Homer and countless other poets had conditioned the Greeks to believe that their myths held truths. For them, the continued existence of the myth itself was apparently enough to guarantee the validity of its events and characters. Arrian (second century A.D.), a historian of Alexander the Great, writing eight centuries after the myths came to be questioned, affirms this in a typical response. While denying that Amazons were alive in Alexander's day (356–326), Arrian refuses to discredit their existence altogether because of the testimony of “so many authorities” (*Anabasis* 7.13.4–5).

Myths work the illusion of recording reality. Even modern scholars, falling under their spell, go in search of Priam's Troy or Odysseus' Ithaca. Until it can be demonstrated that myths are tied to a sequence of actual events and deeds of living persons, they will lack the essential element of a historical narrative: referentiality to real happenings. The word “history” denotes what happened in the past, the analysis of the evidence of what happened, and the creation of a narrative describing what happened; respectively, history denotes real events, a branch of knowledge, and a literary activity. That Athenians and Persians fought on the plain of Marathon in 490, no one seriously denies. A historian—Herodotus first in this case—gathers, sifts, and evaluates evidence for the battle to reconstruct, as far as his research allows, what happened. He then creates a narrative of the battle, which his imagination, literary talent, and prejudices influence. Every fighter that day fought his own Marathon. Those Marathons, although real for the individuals involved, per-

ished with them. The Marathon that exists is the Marathon of the historian's sources and craft; it is historical by virtue of its embodiment in a narrative written by a historian. If the evidence did not permit analysis or no historian chose to analyze what was available, Marathon, no less real, would not be a historical event.

Like history, myths embody events in narratives; however, they refer not to real events but to other narratives. Myths recall different versions of the same story as well as other myths. The idea of a son who marries his mother opens to the imagination the possibility of a son who kills his mother and vice versa. In this sense, Oedipus implies Orestes, and Orestes, Oedipus, as well as any number of permutations of over- and underevaluating kinship ties. Neither denotes a real person or a unique set of events. Since a given version of the myth of Orestes or Oedipus presupposes an earlier one, such questions as "Who told the story first?" and "In what form was it first told?" have aroused extensive discussion. The pursuit of an "original" which, in any case, belongs to an irrecoverable past, is a fruitless endeavor. It tacitly assumes that no one had ever told a story about a son killing his mother until one day someone had the idea and told it in a way that forever remained *the* version of which later ones are distortions and corruptions.

To the contrary, myths refer to relations inherent in the culture's value system and may be told with manifold emphases and variations within the confines of their basic plots. They constitute a discourse, a verbal medium, through which members of the community—those who share the same myths—use the past to talk about the present. They communicate with one another *through* but not *about* their past. Myths contain the same oppositions and structures that characterize other social institutions. They validate and sanction civilization as a human construct by relating it to and distinguishing it from the divine and the

bestial. They depict in imaginary form a model to be emulated, as well as the destructive forces active in society, which, left unvented, could rupture the social bond. Myths provide examples of how things go when they go "right" and when they go "wrong." Heracles of Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis* not only illustrates how not to act in marriage; he incarnates the lust felt and feared by the Athenians. Society is not a static, once-erected-ever-stable entity, but a fragile arresting of centrifugal forces. Myths serve as one medium through which its members attempt to hold off total fragmentation.

Greek myths indirectly reproduce in narrative form the values and beliefs, prescriptions and regulations, customs and practices that simultaneously reflected and helped shape a warlike, imperialistic society of aristocrats. We may perhaps draw an analogy with the modern technology of computers. A myth corresponds to a program in that it provides the maker of the tale with an easily remembered sequence of events. The myth, like the program, allows access to a data bank through the technique of the maker's craft (his "hardware"). Since the data consist of things defining the identity of the group, the meanings derived from the data through their encoding in the tale depend upon the listener's understanding, attitude, and social position. The polyvalence of myths, their ability to convey meaning and appear significant to people of wide-ranging sorts, cultures, and historical periods, is the necessary result.

The mythic element of a story, then, does not reside in its plot or a particular "making." The power of the message, "Please come here," does not derive from the computer. (By contrast, "Mr. Watson, come here, I want you," is unique: it gains meaning from the instrument as the first intelligible words communicated by telephone.) A story is endowed with the mythic by the receptors, who, consciously or unconsciously, grant it its power to make them

consider their value system, their conceptual universe, their world within and without. The extent to which the narrative fulfilled cultural needs and appealed to the concerns and interests of those telling and listening to it contributed to its survival, and that survival led over time to the designation of the Greek *mythos* as a myth. In other words, that a story is old or traditional is not its mythic element; that element must be assigned to the audience that kept the story alive. In a very real sense, successive generations of tellers and listeners from the Romans on, ourselves and our readers included, have continued to make Greek *mythoi* into myths.

Accordingly, the mythic has no fixed look or Platonic form. It functions within the dynamic between the culture as a system and senders and receivers of messages communicated in myths. Modern students of Homer's *Iliad* often find the repeated combat scenes tiresome and hardly relevant, whereas the poet's audiences among ancient Greeks at some time must have found them meaningful. Similarly, most Americans know the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. But how many perceive it as a tale of America's defiance of old Europe, the taming of a new frontier, the purposeful but innocent destruction of the old, and paternal approval of youthful rebellion? [Robertson, 1980, pp. 10–14]. We do not readily see these applications of the myth to American society, because America is no longer that of the teller Mason Weems and of McGuffey's *Readers*, the popularizing medium of his story.

By making the receptors the final arbiter of what is mythic, we recognize the essential role that psychological, sociological, political, and other motives play in communication between mythmakers and audiences. On the other hand, we cannot reproduce the feelings and thoughts of an ancient audience. We therefore must imagine an audience that has knowledge of Athenian social

institutions, such as the warrior ethic and marriage, knowledge that we postulate from the available evidence. In studying the myths through this hypothetical audience, we seek to approach what Athenians found mythic in these stories and how these stories defended and defined Greek, specifically Athenian, culture against disorder and the forces of entropy.

Athenians, like all Greeks, defined their world as something apart from the divine above and the bestial below, apart from the female and from the foreign. No matter whether Thales (early sixth century) or Socrates (c. 469–399) voiced the following sigh of relief, it is typically Greek:

[Thales or Socrates] kept saying that he gave thanks to Fortune for three reasons: “first, that I was born a human being and not a beast; secondly, that I was born a man and not a woman; third, that I was born a Greek and not a foreigner” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 1.33).

Aristotle (384–322) in *Politics* expresses a similar conception of the world:

If each individual when separate is not self-sufficient, he must be related to the whole *polis* (city-state) as other parts are to their whole. The man who is incapable of entering into a partnership or who is so self-sufficient that he has no need to do so, must be either a beast or a god (1253a).

The ideal was the adult Greek male. Such men inhabited a *polis* in partnership with other men, the whole having precedence over its parts. Any man who did not need partners because of his self-sufficiency belonged by definition outside the *polis* in the realms of the divine or the bestial. The methods and strategies of interpretation in this book are based upon that outlook.

Our methodology combines traditional historical and literary criticism with the more modern approaches of anthropologists, feminists, and, in particular, the cultural historians Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. By grounding the myths in the customs, practices, and institutions of Greek society, these scholars have shown that myths are a verbal expression of beliefs, concepts, and practices operating in all aspects of culture. What emerges is the view that myths reflect the categories of thought which structure the universe and, at the same time, acculturate their receptors to it. The Greeks conceived of the universe in polar terms, that is, they viewed and defined themselves as Greek, male, free, adult, and warlike as opposed to others who were *barbaroi* (foreign), female, slave, young or old, pacified. The pervasiveness of such polar thinking opens the Greek myths to an approach that concentrates on the oppositions that differentiate one group from another and on the circumstances under which those oppositions break down. Myths rarely deal with the normal because, in part, the norm is neither interesting nor exciting. A woman's place was in the home tending the children and watching over her husband's property. She could no more leave the house alone than take up the warrior's life. But the myth of the Amazon, a female warrior, derived from Greek culture when the values associated with the male/female opposition were lost by imagining the daughter's refusal to leave her mother for a husband chosen by her father. By telling what happens when those values are lost, myths teach what is culturally valued. Myths act to assert, in the face of entropic forces, the status quo.

Greek mythmaking is one of many media that conditioned the members of Greek society in the meaning and expectations of their culture. The major structures found in myths, immortal/mortal, human/bestial, and male/fe-

male, were not confined to myths but pervaded all of Greek life. They and countless others imposed order on the physical world and created the Greeks' conceptual universe.