



The Parthenon, upon the Acropolis of Athens, was dedicated to the goddess Athena and was considered her dwelling upon the earth. An earlier temple to Athena preceded this one.

The Value of Myths

Originally the Greek myths were stories passed orally from one generation to the next. What is the power of these stories that they remain vital after three thousand years? Why do children clamor to hear them? Why do poets, writers, and even advertisers allude to them? Why do anthropologists, sociologists, clergymen, psychiatrists, historians, and teachers of literature, study them?

The answer to these questions can be found in an analysis of the nature of myth. However, for scholars of various disciplines to agree upon a definition of myth would be as difficult as finding a needle in a haystack. Each has viewed myth from a particular perspective and has placed a different significance on it. Thus, to some scholars, myths are simply the imaginative product of a primitive mind. To others, they are sacred tales that were believed only by those who belonged to a particular tribe or religion; or, they were pure fantasy masquerading as reality, simply an early form of science fiction. Until recently, few scholars in any discipline considered myths to be either literal or symbolic representations of reality, past or present.

Yet, it has been the ways in which myths are real that has kept them meaningful to humankind for thousands of years. If they were merely fantasy or the secret language of a closed society, human beings would have discarded them as irrelevant or trivial. One has only to be aware of the Minoan civilization evident on the island of Crete during the period 2500–1400 B.C. to realize that the mind that created myths was sophisticated enough to create four-story buildings with indoor plumbing and skylights, written records, a system of weights and measures, a calendar based upon astronomical data, and the game of chess.

Far from being merely fantastic or cultish, myths are a treasure of realities—a kaleidoscope which, depending upon the age and experience of the reader, reflects and illuminates his experiences, fantasies, hopes, and fears. Myths have continued to capture the

imagination and the soul of man for thousands of years because they depict and reveal behavior and problems common to all human beings. They deal with people who could be alive today, reminding us that human nature has not changed throughout the long course of history. Thus, the ancient myths speak clearly to modern man. They focus directly upon the nature of man, as he was in the past, as he is in the present, and as he will continue to be in the future. They examine how man copes with his physical, social, religious, and political environment.

With little interest in scenic detail or historical background, the myths immediately plunge into a human situation. They use a specific event, such as the entrance of a wild animal, a cataclysmic event, or a human challenge, to examine how man reacts to the problems of living. Through the actions of individuals, who are always portrayed in human terms even when they are divinities, the myths reveal the nature of man. Because we share that nature, we can identify with these individuals and respond to them. Some we admire, others we reject. However, it is a tribute to the wisdom of the minds that created these myths that we must always take the characters seriously, for in them we confront many of our own potentialities, for good and for evil.

Myths originally served two purposes: to explain and to teach. The Greek myths explained man's origins to the ancient Greeks. They described how the world and man were created and what kind of order existed in the universe. They explained the existence of natural phenomena for which modern man may or may not have acquired scientific explanations. Invariably, the mythic explanation of the natural world was in terms of religious beliefs that provided man's earliest answers to universal questions. Given a multitude of natural phenomena which he could neither understand nor control, man populated the invisible world with a multitude of immortal deities, created in his own image, each of whom controlled one aspect of the natural environment. Such a religion is called polytheistic; such gods are called anthropomorphic. Humankind could relate through prayer, sacrifice, and other rituals, to these gods. Although they were more powerful than humans, they possessed human form and human personalities. They created order out of chaos, providing a rational scheme of life in place of confusion and question.

In addition to explaining natural and religious origins, myths also explained political origins, related how kingdoms became established, and provided men with a history of their people and with that of their neighbors. Thus, their myths told the Greeks how their lives had become what they were.

The Greek myths also taught man how to behave in society.

Although the Greek gods did not give man an authoritative moral code by which to live, the Greek myths conveyed a moral directive. They examined the extent to which man is a victim of circumstances and the extent to which he brings his destiny upon himself. By examining the decisions human beings made and the consequences which resulted, the Greek myths supplied humankind with a gallery of models, both positive and negative. By learning from the mythical characters, who usually were so realistically presented that such people, in fact, could have existed, man imposed a meaningful pattern upon his life and upon his world.

Although the principle purpose of the myths was to explain and to teach, in order to be effective, they had to be entertaining, for they were the product of an oral culture. If they were dull, no one would have listened to them; no one would have made the major effort to memorize them for transmission to succeeding generations. Therefore, the expert storytellers endowed them with a spectacular quality. The stories invariably would start in a quiet, routine manner and would gradually build up to an unforgettable conclusion. The listener who became familiar with this technique would find himself waiting expectantly for the action he knew would occur, smiling to himself as he recognized the human responses that would lead to destruction. There is little question that blood, gore, and personal tragedy have done their share in perpetuating the popularity of myths. Today, these aspects of life still sell newspapers and glue listeners to their television sets. Now, as then, violence and personal tragedy are an integral part of human life.

For modern man, the Greek myths reflect the attitudes and priorities of the ancient cultures which produced them. Yet, they are relevant today because many of these ancient social, ethical, and religious attitudes continue to be important. Those who treat others with arrogance and disrespect still bring personal disaster upon themselves. Man still must conquer his fears and accept challenges which appear to be insurmountable, in order to achieve a sense of self-satisfaction and accomplishment. The kind of person a man is, remains today as then, more important than what he accomplishes; it lingers behind the event like an after-taste, either sweet or bitter. Man continues to be violent. He continues to covet his neighbor's (or neighboring country's) possessions, and he will still go to war in order to gain more territory and power. Man has continued to impose his patriarchal, or male, attitudes upon the fabric of society, determining the role of women as well as his own role. The concepts behind the ancient matriarchal or female-dominated Mediterranean religions become more meaningful, and the ancient Greek conflict between these opposing sociological and religious schemes becomes more

relevant in modern society where the roles and opportunities of men and women are changing rapidly.

Thus, the myths reveal eternal truths about the nature of man and his quests in life. They reflect attitudes and feelings that are common to all men, in any time. Artists and writers constantly allude to them and recreate them as they explore the relationships between man and man, man and society, and man and God.

Historical Background

About 2600 B.C., Greek-speaking warrior tribes marched from central Europe and southwestern Russia and invaded Macedonia, to the northeast of Greece. They were herders of cattle and excellent horsemen. They used bronze and copper in their tools and weapons. Along with their horses and their bronze tools, they brought a new, male-dominated religion, which, in time, became the religion modern man associates with the ancient Greeks. Their myths were dominated by heroic male gods, such as Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. Their lives were dominated by a heroic weapon, the spear.

About 1900 B.C., these warriors began to move southwest into Greece. They encountered natives whose descendants came from Asia Minor, across the Aegean Sea. The natives were peaceful, agrarian peoples, who lived in scattered, independent villages and followed a female-dominated religion. The chief deity was a great mother-earth goddess, called the Mother Goddess or the Great Goddess.

By about 1600 B.C., the invading warriors had conquered all of Greece. They made themselves at home in their new land, learning the farming and craft skills of the native population. To these they added the horse, a new-style house (rectangular, supported in the front by two columns, the prototype of the Greek temple), and a new religion. These ancient Greeks are usually called the Mycenaeans, after their most powerful community (Mycenae).

From approximately 1600 B.C. to approximately 1150 B.C., the Mycenaeans prospered in Greece. They developed several thriving political and economic centers in the Peloponnese peninsula and the nearby mainland: Pylos, Tiryns, Mycenae, Athens, and Thebes. Ancient sections of some of these cities have been excavated in modern times; other possible sites of Mycenaean culture have not been excavated due to the location of modern cities or the presence of later ruins. The Mycenaeans were an aggressive people. They built well-fortified palaces that were the center of the community, and became