

Classical Mythology

A Very Short Introduction

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You cannot expect a thorough survey of the treasures of classical mythology in a short introduction let alone a very short one (and hence this review will likewise be very short), thus the book instead of providing actual stories and examples of what many prospective readers may be in need of, address general questions as to what constitutes mythology, and how relevant it is today, in particular when we are talking about ancient myths. For one thing classical myths are part of our common cultural heritage, providing narratives that are still being retold in one form or another. This of course begs the question, tradition is by nature a case of historical contingency, and mankind could as well have been served equally well, as it repeatedly has been, by other traditions of myths. Yet tradition is something you need to relate to, be it in a mode of acceptance or rejection, and it cannot be thought away. Tradition is also convenient, as it provides a common reference of conventions, and part of the notion of education is to make the emerging generations familiar with a common corpus, just as we all need to grow up into a language, irrelevant which as long as it is commonly shared in our environment. Thus the book starts out with a discussion of Europe, how she was ravished by Zeus in the form of a bull, generally known enough to become part of the emerging mythology of the European union, mythologies growing out of mythologies. This becomes a point of departure to discuss other ways in which classical mythology is being exploited in the modern world. Admittedly classical mythology does not play the pivotal role in the modern world, as it did only a few generations ago, considering the wealth of artworks which take as their subjects scenes and stories from those classical myths, rivaled only by religious subjects. Thus much of those paintings lose much of their appeal if you are ignorant of the contexts, which at the time were taken for granted.

A more interesting question is whether myths have fundamental contents that are independent of the particular traditions. In other words whether mythologies from all over the world show underlying similarities, and if so what significance should be accorded. The most obvious significance is of course the psychological, and it is hardly surprising that a pioneer such as Freud revived myths. His choice of myths though seems not to have been optimal, only the case of the Oedipus myth has survived and become part of our culture in the form of the Oedipus complex, which according to Freud is the case of the son being in love with his mother and hence wanting to kill his father. Freud, whose case stories not only involved actual patients, but also perhaps more successfully historical figures and characters out of novels and plays, introduced classical mythology in a spirit of archeological excavations, but it was his erstwhile disciple latter rival and opponent - Jung - who carried the study of mythology to its logical conclusion, claiming not only the striking similarities across cultures, but also that they articulated deep layers of a common human subconsciousness, an ocean out of which individuals emerge. In particular he identified a

number of basic archetypes and thus laid foundations for a study that wanted to prove that myths were no accidental stories, but were reflections of human psychology and thus doomed to reinvent themselves in the course of human history.

Such ruminations have necessarily something grandiose about them, to cut things down to size, the author also views them from the perspectives of modern gender theories, and thus finds reasons for serious disavowal. Thus through the prism of political correctness, we can once again reject the past as being outmoded and misguided, having ourselves reached a higher level of understanding. It is in particular the abuse of women in the stories, in particular the many instances of rape, referring to liberties not even the gods are entitled to today, that provokes her ire. More generally the dominant role played by men in the stories is to be censored and a different interpretation and emphasis wanted. Yet in the end the author admits that classical mythology, in spite of its obvious defects, still deserves to be preserved provided it is developed and reenacted in a way that more complies to contemporary modes. What those are exactly is of course in the process of an ongoing change.

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