

# COMPARATIVE *MYTHS*

**RE 230-001**

Tues & Thurs 2:10-3:30 PM  
Classroom: Ladd 307

**Prof. G. Spinner**

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office: Ladd 321  
office phone: 580-8406  
office hrs: W 2:30-3:30 *or by appt.*

## *Course Description*

A myth is a sacred story believed by those telling it to disclose important truths about the world around them and the human order therein. Myths are always good stories, alive with action and infused with meaning. Myths are stories that make us think, but which also allow us to *feel*: narrative contains an emotional resonance seldom found in systematic thought. Moreover, myths often signify on multiple levels (theological, astrological, agricultural, social, sexual, political, etc.), resulting in a complex and compelling relation between story and culture.

This course is both a sampler from world mythology and a survey of some major theorists of myth (such as Freud, Frazer, and Levi-Strauss). In this class you will get to read selections from some of the oldest literature in the world, as well as from more recently collected mythology. We will sample Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Norse, and Japanese myths, as well as stories told by peoples of the Pacific Northwest and along the Andean range. Moreover, you will learn to think critically about such sacred stories, in turn examining the very category of “myth” and interrogating the comparative method itself.

## *Course Materials*

The following books are required:

The Epic of Gilgamesh, translated (with an intro.) by Andrew George.  
The Homeric Hymn to Demeter, translated (with commentary) by Helene Foley.  
The Prose Edda by Snorri Sturlson, translated (with an intro.) by Jesse Byock.  
George Hart, Egyptian Myths.  
Eric Csapo, Theories of Mythology.

All other required readings will be made available as a Course Reader.

## Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

<b>Participation</b>	<b>10 %</b>
<b>Questions</b>	<b>5 %</b>
<b>First Take-Home</b>	<b>30 %</b>
<b>Second Take-Home</b>	<b>30 %</b>
<b>Group Presentation</b>	<b>25 %</b>
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<b>Total</b>	<b>100 %</b>

A few words are in order, at the outset, about some of these components:

Attendance is mandatory: you will come to each and every class. If you are too sick to attend, or if an emergency arises, then please contact me as soon as possible.

While participation is contingent upon attendance, it involves much more than just showing up. **Participation** requires active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. Our goal is focused conversation: it involves talking with and listening to others, rather than sitting quietly by (no matter how deep in thought you are). *Real education is not a spectator sport.* We are going to think through some difficult materials together, and I expect each and every one of you to have something to contribute. So you should have questions, you should have comments, and, above all, you should have curiosity. Over the course of the semester we will undertake a sustained and thoughtful discussion about our subject, and this will not be achieved through dispirited or half-hearted attempts.

**Preparing Questions:** for each class you should prepare a minimum of two questions, *along with your own (tentative) answers*, that you could ask the other students with the express purpose of facilitating classroom discussion. You are not trying to stump your classmates; rather you are trying to direct the conversation to some of the more salient points from the readings. Your questions should therefore be carefully chosen and thoughtfully worded. I will collect your questions at the end of each class session, and will only accept them in class on the day they were due. While I won't be assigning grades (or returning them), I will be looking over your questions to see what you have been thinking about and to assess your level of engagement.

This is a **reading intensive** course. We will start out a bit slower, and then pick up speed. *Expect to read obscene amounts of very cool things.*

There will be two **take-home** assignments, and these involve **writing essays**. Closer to the time of the first take-home, I will spell out in more detail my expectations as to what makes for a good essay. But the gist of it is that writing helps one formulate ideas, and so you should strive to express yourself *clearly* and *concisely*. Forego fancy words and convoluted constructions and tell us what you have to say in a straightforward manner. Beyond that, you will construct arguments, marshaling evidence for your position; as I indicated, further explication will follow.

All papers should be submitted in hard-copy form, unless other arrangements have been made with the instructor. *Late work will be marked down.* I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. While due dates are fairly firm, the instructor is not inflexible. It is, however, incumbent on you to explain to me why you might deserve an extension. And here's some good advice: *one asks for an extension before a deadline is missed.*

A separate handout on the **group presentations**, designed to be the culmination of a semester theorizing myth, will be distributed later on in the semester.

So, this is the tally: you have to come to class, you have to do *all* of the readings, you have to consistently participate in class, and you have to work with the other students in your group on a presentation. You have to make that effort, or it's not really worth taking the class, getting an ugly grade aside. Clearly I expect you to work; but it is also my hope that we will have quit a bit of fun doing so. *It's going to be an awesome semester.*

### *A Critical Approach*

The academic study of religion seeks *neither to promote nor to demote* any religious beliefs or practices. It recognizes that being educated *about* religion is quite distinct from being indoctrinated *for* or *against* religion. Favoring the impartiality appropriate to studying religion in an academic setting, we shall forego any advocacy or avenues of attack, and instead concentrate our efforts on accurate information and comparative analysis.

As our study of myths will be both **critical** and **comparative**, allow me to spell out what these two terms entail:

A *critical* approach means that we will be analytical, rather than simply being judgmental. I will not be looking for your gut-level reactions, but asking for your measured reflections. Personal likes or dislikes are not particularly relevant. While I certainly am interested in what you *initially think* about a text, I am even more concerned that you learn to *think critically* about those sources.

*Comparison* aids us in that endeavor. We familiarize ourselves with the foreign, which may initially appear outlandish to us. In turn, we find that what was so familiar now seems 'strange,' seen in a whole new light. We do not undertake a comparative approach in order to determine that some beliefs are true and others false, or to declare that some practices are better and others are worse. Rather than employ comparison as the instrument of polemic, we wield it as an impartial learning tool. For by highlighting both similarities and differences, we may sharpen our own understanding of the materials, and gain some critical distance.

While a critical distance is *not* the same as complete detachment from the subject, it is an educated effort to be informed and relatively objective about that subject. For instance, you might try to take both sides of a debate, or to tackle an issue from a variety of different angles, rather than slavishly insist on a single perspective. In this way, "thinking critically" is not a means of passing judgment, but a method of academic inquiry. It should mean that you are willing to step back from your prior commitments and to step outside of your own comfortable notions, in order to be intellectually challenged by the sources. Ultimately, being critical involves being *self-critical*: we can become aware of our own cultural biases, and we can become more capable of evaluating untested assumptions.

## *Comparing Theories / Theorizing Comparison*

At this point some of you might be thinking, "That's all fine, Dr. Spinner, but you say these sorts of things in every class...and didn't you just cut and paste that stuff from a previous syllabus?" Well, you'd be right -- but it's still important to know. And now I'll explain a bit about how a critical and comparative approach applies to this course in particular:

I would contend that "myth" -- like "ritual" or "religion" itself -- is a term that always implies comparison. It conjures a category that cuts across cultures; that is, we don't intend to confine myths to a single or even a few select traditions. Moreover, labeling something as "myth" is an act of classification: one sorts certain kinds of stories out from others, with "myth" being distinguished from "history," as well as from "epic," "saga," "legend," "fable," "folktale," etc. As we move from that sorting of stories towards explicit theorizing about myth, we want to examine how these types of narratives relate to language, thought and culture.

I like to treat theories as learning tools, and in this course we will be loading several of them into our toolbox. A very basic consideration to ask about any of these conceptual tools is how well it makes sense out of the sources in question: does it help us to view the materials in a new or better light? Where does it obscure our vision? Does the theory distort the data, forcing it to fit a ready-made conclusion? and so on. But a theory does not have to be entirely correct to be a valuable addition to the scholar's toolbox. To trope upon Lévi-Strauss: I would say that theorists are good to think with, even when their theories are quite wrong.

So I think you will find it helpful to compare theories of myth, as different scholars have decidedly different takes on what "myths" are and how they work. But I am also hoping that we will turn this scholarly gaze back upon ourselves, and wonder about how comparison works -- and how it fails. For just as we need comparison for our theorizing, *we will also be theorizing about comparison.*

With these prefatory remarks in mind, I offer two preliminary quotes for your consideration:

"All universal theories of myth are automatically wrong."

*G.S. Kirk*

"If I read a myth, select certain elements from it, and arrange them in a pattern, that 'structure' is bound to be in the material unless I have misread the text or demonstrably misrendered it. The fact of its being there does not, however, indicate that my arrangement is anything more than my personal whim....A myth is therefore bound to have a number of possible 'structures' that are both in the material and in the eye of the beholder. The problem is to decide between them and to determine the significance of any of them."

*David Maybury-Lewis*

### ***Classroom Civility***

Don't be late, and don't be rude. I hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, but both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will promptly result in being asked to leave the class.

Feel free to bring a beverage or snack, and, if you are so inclined, enough to share. I just ask that eating and drinking do not interfere with our learning.

Turn off cell phones and any other small electronic devices before you come to class. Take your headphones off, and stow anything that texts or beeps well out of sight. I will start the semester out by allowing the use of laptops, as some students prefer to take their notes this way, but I will promptly rescind this permission if I feel that people are paying more attention to their computer screen than to class. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students or to the instructor will not be indulged.

### ***Academic Integrity***

I have zero tolerance for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Make sure your work is entirely your own, and that you give credit to any ideas or formulations that originate with others. Plagiarism is a serious violation of academic integrity, whether fully intentional or not. Recall that Skidmore's Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations. To learn more about the Honor Code and related matters, please consult:

<http://cms.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.cfm>.

Suspected infractions of this policy will be reported to the Office of Academic Advising.

### ***Student Disabilities***

I am happy to make reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you will need it, then you must formally request academic accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, and provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Palamountain Hall.

### ***Partners in Learning***

To my mind, a syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. I hope that we find a mutual interest in critical inquiry, share a passion for increased understanding, and have a good time as we learn. You may always ask questions; I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. The most expedient way to contact me is by e-mail. And please feel free to come by my office if something's on your mind.

I trust that with this syllabus I have made clear my expectations, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your own expectations clear to me, so that we can best achieve a partnership in learning. I look forward to an exciting summer of working together.

Dr. Spinner

# COMPARATIVE *myths*

## CLASS SCHEDULE RE 230 / Fall 2012

*Please Note:* you should have the assigned readings done **before** you come to the class for which they have been assigned.

- Sept 6. Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.
- Sept 11. Definitions. Reading 1.  
Sept 13. Gilgamesh: Battles. Reading 2.
- Sept 18. *No class:* Rosh ha-Shanah.  
Sept 20. Gilgamesh: Wanderings. Reading 3
- Sept 25. Gilgamesh & Genesis. Reading 4.  
Sept 27. Greek myth: The Abducted Maiden. Reading 5.
- Oct 2. Greek myth: Mysteries, Marriage, & Gender Conflict. Reading 6.  
Oct 4. Egyptian myth: Cosmogonies. Reading 7.
- Oct 9. Egyptian myth: The Murdered King. Reading 8.  
Oct 11. Egyptian myth: The Underworld Journey of the Sun God. Reading 9.
- Oct 16. Myth & the Subconscious: Freud. Reading 10.  
Oct 18. Myth & the Unconscious: Archetypes & Heroes. Reading 11.
- Oct 23. Norse myth: Cosmogony & Kingship. Reading 12.  
Oct 25. Norse myth: The Death of Baldr. Reading 13.
- Oct 30. Norse myth: Ragnarok. Reading 14.  
Nov 1. Tsimshian myth/structuralist interpretation. Reading 15.
- Nov 6. Jivaro myth: more structuralism. Reading 16.  
Nov 8. Myth & Ideology: Adonis reconsidered. Reading 17.

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CLASS SCHEDULE, *continued*

Nov 13. Haida myth: The Spoken Music of Oral Poets. Reading 18.  
Nov 15. Haida myth: The Iridescent Silence of the Trickster. Reading 19.

Nov 20 & 22. *No classes held this week:*  
American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting,  
followed by Thanksgiving Break.

Nov 27. Myth & Ideology: The Labors of Herakles. Reading 20.  
Nov 29. Modern Superheroes: Secularized Mythology? Reading 21.

Dec 4. Japanese myth: Group Presentations. Reading 22.  
Dec 6. Japanese myth: *more* Group Presentations.

Dec 11. Conclusions.

Reading Assignments  
for RE 230

## COMPARATIVE MYTHS

- Reading 1. Csapo, pp. 1-9. Eliade, "Toward a Definition."  
Reading 2. Gilgamesh, pp. xiii-iv and 1-mid 54.  
Reading 3. Gilgamesh, pp. 54- 99. Ray, "Myth and Meaning."  
Reading 4. *Bible*: Genesis chs. 1-9. Damrosch. Philo. Augustine.  
Reading 5. Foley, pp. 2-75. "Allegoresis." Dowden. Graf.  
Reading 6. Foley, pp. 79-97, *skimming* 97-mid 104, and reading 104-137.  
"Prodicus." "Euhemerus."  
Reading 7. Hart, pp. 9-28. Csapo, pp. 10-very top 30. Muller: selections.  
Reading 8. Hart, pp. 29-49. Csapo, pp. 30-45. Frazer (first part).  
Reading 9. Hart, pp. 46-61. Csapo, pp. mid 57-top 67. Frazer, more selections from  
The Golden Bough. Smith, "Dying and Rising Gods."  
Reading 10. Burn, Greek Myths. Csapo, pp. 80-110. Freud.  
Reading 11. Rank. Moon, "Archetypes." Jung. Campbell.  
Reading 12. Byock, pp. ix-xxx, 9-38. Page, "Odin and Thor."  
Csapo: pp. 132-mid 144 (after first full paragraph).  
Reading 13. Byock, pp. bottom 38-top 69. Page, "Baldr and Loki." Frazer (concluding  
selections). J.Z. Smith, "When the Bough Breaks." Lindow.  
Reading 14. Byock, pp. 69-78. *TBA*.  
Reading 15. Boas (2 selections). Lévi-Strauss, "Story of Asdiwal."  
Reading 16. Lévi-Strauss, Jealous Potter. Doniger, Implied Spider.  
Csapo, pp. 181-very top 189, 212-224, and 226-top 229.  
Reading 17. Apollodorus. Ovid. Csapo, pp. 262-276.  
Reading 18. Bringham, first part. Lord. Dalrymple.  
Reading 19. Bringham, second part. Sullivan, "Tricksters."  
Reading 20. Burn, Greek Myths. Csapo, pp. bottom 301-315.  
Reading 21. Thor Annual 5. Blanshard and Shahabudin. Spinner.  
Reading 22. *Kojiki*. Kinsley. Ellwood.