

# Comparative *MYTHS*

## RE 223

Tues & Thurs 9:50-11:10 am  
Classroom: Tang, Wachenheim

## Prof. G. Spinner

gspinner@skidmore.edu  
office: Ladd 205 A  
office phone: 518-580-8406  
office hours: Wed 1:00-2:00 pm  
*and by appointment.*

### *Course Description*

A myth is a sacred story believed by those telling it to disclose important truths about the world and how people should live in it. Myths are stories that make us *think*, but they also allow us to *feel*: narrative has an emotional resonance often elided from formal modes of argument. Myths are mostly good stories, infused with action and imbued with meaning. Because myths signify on multiple levels, unpacking their meanings requires a careful examination of the complex interactions between religion and society.

This course provides both a sampler from world mythology and a survey of some major theorists of myth (including Freud, Frazer, and Levi-Strauss). You will read selections from some of the oldest literature in the world, as well as from more recently collected mythology. We will engage Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Norse, and Japanese myths, as well as stories from the Pacific Northwest and the eastern Andes. Moreover, you will learn to think critically about such sacred stories, examining the very category of “myth” and, in turn, 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.  
Robert Bringhurst, A Story as Sharp as a Knife.  
Eric Csapo, Theories of Mythology.

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

## ***Comparing Myths***

As comparison is one of the great hallmarks of the academic study of religion, let me say a few preliminary words here about working with a comparative method, which affords us cross-cultural and critical perspectives.

I contend that “myth” - - like “ritual,” or “religion” itself - - is a term that always implies comparison. It conjures a category that cuts across cultures, as a relative constant in human societies. While we extrapolate from specific instances of myths to general ideas about myth-making, we will not privilege one tradition over others. Rather, comparison focuses our attention on the defining features of our operative terms, such as “myth” and “religion.”

This means we do not advance a comparative approach in order to determine that some beliefs are true and others false, or to declare that some practices are better while others are worse. Rather than employ comparison as an instrument of polemic, we wield it impartially, as a valuable aid in learning. For by highlighting *both* similarities *and* differences, we hope to sharpen our perception of the materials being compared, and gain some critical distance.

Cultivating a critical distance is *not* the same as adopting a completely detached stance. One can care deeply about a topic and still think about it critically. By “critical” then, I mean one aims to be analytical, rather than simply being judgmental. That means moving beyond any gut-level reaction and working towards measured reflection, balancing one’s own opinions with both new information and the opinions of others. It requires an educated effort to be suitably informed about the topic, as well as a willingness to consider new interpretations.

## ***Theorizing Myth***

“All universal theories of myth are automatically wrong.”

*G.S. Kirk*

Our cross-cultural approach does not simply translate into “universal.” Kirk cautions that no theory can work all the time, everywhere. If we expect a theory to apply to every last story we might classify as “myth,” then we are bound to be disappointed in its utility. But this is, I think, to expect the wrong thing from a theory.

Theories are learning tools. They provide lenses through which we can more carefully inspect some facet of our subject; they should help us to *ask better questions* rather than *receive easy answers*. Theories can be productive and provocative without being correct.

Another quote to consider comes from David Maybury-Lewis:

“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.”

Human cognition involves recognizing patterns. But are the patterns we see when comparing myths perceived accurately, or are they are projections of our own agendas, like a Rorschach ink blot? Maybury-Lewis suggests it is something of both. As always, critical inquiry requires that we pay close attention to the relation between evidence and argument.

I think you will find it helpful to compare theories of myth, as different scholars have decidedly different takes on what are “myths” 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 learn from when it fails. Thus we will not only compare theories, but *theorize about comparison*. Because, ultimately, being critical involves being *self-critical*. Through the academic study of religion, we become more aware of our own cultural biases and untested assumptions, and reflect on how it is we know what it is we claim to know.

### *Course Requirements*

Your grade consists of the following components:

<b>Participation</b>	<b>10 %</b>
<b>Preparing Questions</b>	<b>5 %</b>
<b>First Exam</b>	<b>30 %</b>
<b>Second Exam</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 should make every effort to always attend class (and to be on time, and not leave prematurely). If you are too sick to come, or if an emergency arises, then please contact me as soon as possible.

Of course, **participation** is far more than showing up. It is an active engagement: you must have done the reading and be prepared to discuss it. It is talking with and listening to others: you will be an integral part of that conversation. You should have questions; you should have comments; above all, you should have curiosity. So understand that participation is not a default setting, as it requires a conscientious effort throughout the semester. Our goal is have a sustained and thoughtful conversation about this topic, and this will not be achieved through 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.

Email your questions to me *before the start of class*; I will not accept them after that point. While I will not be assigning grades to this writing, I will be looking over your questions to see what you have been thinking about and to assess your level of engagement.

Both **exams** are take-home essays of moderate length. I will say more about effective essay writing and developing your ideas once the semester is under way.

*Late work will be marked down.* I will deduct half a letter grade for each day any assignment is late. While due dates are firm, the instructor is not inflexible. It is, however, incumbent on you to explain to me why you deserve an extension. And here is some good advice: *one asks for an extension before a deadline is missed.*

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

### ***Fair Grading & A Reasonable Workload***

As even a brief glance at the above sections makes clear, I expect you to work. I think the workload is entirely appropriate for this level of course; and I trust that we can have some fun working through it together. But, in the interest of fairness, allow me to be more explicit about what my expectations are, and the standards to which I will hold you.

For each hour spent in class, I expect you to spend *3 hours outside of class* reading and writing. This means that you should commit approximately 9 hours per week in preparing and executing assignments.

In an era of grade inflation, let me address my understanding of what letter grades signify. I take “C” to be the baseline grade: it is *acceptable*. Thus doing all the assigned work, and doing it adequately, earns one a solid “C.” “B” then stands for doing *better than acceptable*, demonstrating some measurable improvement over “C” quality. And “A” translates to *excellent* - - a superlative I do not dispense lightly. I am not interested in employing mathematical models, such as by grading on a curve; I will happily give as many “A”s as I have students earning them. But do understand that such a high grade must be achieved through diligent effort, and can not merely be assumed.

I do not just attach a grade to your written work, but provide you with feedback on your writing. I make this effort in order to help you improve your writing skills, and so it behooves you to attend to that critique, and learn from your mistakes. While not my primary concern, errors in spellings, punctuation, and grammar detract from your writing, and thus impact your grade. The overarching goal, however, is more focused on content, so that you learn to express your ideas clearly and to build convincing arguments through a careful use of evidence. This pedagogical concern is shared across disciplines, and this course contributes to that ongoing effort.

With this goal in mind, you will have the option to rewrite certain papers. If you receive a B- or lower on an exam, then you may exercise that option. If I hand you back one of these assignments with a grade of B- or lower, then you can chose to meet with me. We will discuss the shortcomings of the paper, and set a new deadline for the rewritten version. You will turn in the older version along with the newer, and receive the average of the two grades.

### ***Pandemic Protocols***

Please observe all the guidelines that Skidmore has issued regarding the pandemic. You must wear a mask to class, and keep it on, even while speaking. (You may have to speak up! This is an adjustment for all of us). Normally, I would allow students to bring in food and drink, but under these conditions I ask you forego eating or drinking while in class.

To be prepared for the possibility of contact tracing, we will be using a seating chart. Please sit in the same chair each class time; if you need to change seats, be sure to let the instructor know. You will be dismissed row by row, to avoid crowding.

All assignments and papers should be emailed directly to me, preferably as a Word document.

Note that this semester my office hours will be held virtually, via Zoom:

<https://skidmore.zoom.us/j/98837422231>

You can always make an appointment for another time; and we can also use other platforms (Face Time, What's App) if you prefer.

I do understand that these are stressful times, and that it may be more difficult to talk about what you are going through. But communication is, I think, preferable to silence, and so I hope you will stay in touch with me even if you are struggling, or absent from class.

### ***Classroom Civility***

Do not be late to class, do not leave the room during that time, and do not be rude while here.

I expect you to stay in the classroom the whole time that class is in session. Please anticipate bodily needs, and minimize having to leave. Excuse yourself for an emergency, but not simply as a matter of convenience.

Address your instructor and classmates with respect, and respond with some measure of goodwill. Even as we try to engage each other in open and honest ways, we still want our speech and our demeanor to reflect courtesy, even kindness, for our interlocutors. Your Golden Rule of thumb here: even when perturbed or vehemently disagreeing, consider the feelings of those present and treat others as you would want to be treated yourself.

All electronic devices must be turned off, and stowed away. Digital distraction has become a serious problem in our contemporary culture, allowing our attention to easily drift. We aim to make the classroom a space where we engage each other, and focus squarely on our subject, rather than check our messages or browse social media.

### ***Academic Integrity***

There is a zero tolerance policy for any form of intellectual dishonesty. Skidmore articulates and enforces an Honor Code, and any suspected infractions will be reported to the office of Student Academic Affairs. As the Skidmore Honor Code does not accept ignorance or error as adequate defense for violations, make sure the work you submit is entirely your own.

Copying from others, submitting the work of other people, or submitting your same work for two different courses all constitute forms of cheating. Any fact, word, or thought that originated with somebody else should be properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such.

### ***Student Disabilities***

Skidmore College is committed to making reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you believe you need accommodation, then please formally request academic accommodation from the school. Contact Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities, who can explain how to provide documentation verifying your disability. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

### ***Title IX***

Skidmore College considers sexual and gender-based misconduct to be one of the most serious violations of the values and standards of the College. Unwelcome sexual contact of any form is a violation of students' personal integrity and their right to a safe environment and therefore violates Skidmore's values. Sexual and gender-based misconduct is also prohibited by federal and state regulations. Skidmore College faculty are committed to supporting our students and upholding gender equity laws as outlined by Title IX. If a student chooses to confide in a member of Skidmore's faculty or staff regarding an issue of sexual or gender-based misconduct, that faculty or staff member is obligated to tell Skidmore's Title IX Coordinator or Title IX Deputy Coordinator. The Title IX Coordinator or Deputy Coordinator will assist the student in connecting with all possible resources for support and options for reporting both on and off campus. Identities and details will be shared only with those who need to know to support the student and to address the situation through the college's processes. If the student wishes to confide in a confidential resource, the Counseling Center Staff, Health Services, and Victim Advocates (anonymous) are all options available.

More information can be found at the Sexual and Gender-Based Misconduct [website](#) or by contacting the Title IX Coordinator, Joel Aure ([jaure@skidmore.edu](mailto:jaure@skidmore.edu)), 580-5708, or Deputy Coordinator for Student Affairs, Gabriela Melillo ([gmelillo@skidmore.edu](mailto:gmelillo@skidmore.edu)), 580-5022.

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

To my mind, this syllabus establishes a kind of social contract, in which you and I agree to create a stimulating and supportive learning environment. We want to cultivate a passion for learning and a commitment to critical inquiry, as well as the ability to respect those with whom we disagree. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I ask that you be civil, even as I will push you to be honest and open in your thinking.

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, letting me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. Please do not hesitate to contact me about matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

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## CLASS SCHEDULE / Fall 2020

- Aug 25. Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.  
Aug 27. Definitions. Reading 1.
- Sept 1. Gilgamesh: Battles. Reading 2.  
Sept 3. Gilgamesh: Wanderings. Reading 3.
- Sept 8. Gilgamesh & Genesis. Reading 4.  
Sept 10. Greek Myth: The Abducted Maiden. Reading 5.
- Sept 15. Greek Myth: Mystery Cults & Marriage. Reading 6.  
Sept 17. Egyptian Myth: Making the World. Reading 7.
- Sept 22. Egyptian Myth: The Murdered King. Reading 8.  
Sept 24. Egyptian Myth: The Underworld Journey of the Sun God. Reading 9.
- Sept 29. Myth & the Subconscious: Freud. Reading 10.  
Oct 1. Myth and the Unconscious: Archetypes & Heroes. Reading 11.
- Oct 6. Norse Myth: Cosmogony & Kingship. Reading 12.  
Oct 8. Norse Myth: The Death of Baldr. Reading 13.
- Oct 13. Norse Myth: Ragnarok. Reading 14.  
Oct 15. Tsimshian Myth, interpreted structurally. Reading 15.
- Oct 20. Jivaro Myth: The Jealous Potter. Reading 16.  
Oct 22. Myth & Ideology: Adonis, Reconsidered. Reading 17.
- Oct 27. *Group work*. Reading 23.  
Oct 29. Haida Myth: The Spoken Music of Oral Poets. Reading 18.
- Nov 3. Haida Myth: The Iridescent Silence of the Trickster. Reading 19.  
Nov 5. Haida Myth: Sharp as a Knife. Reading 20.
- Nov 10. Myth & Ideology, *again*: The Labors of Herakles. Reading 21.  
Nov 12. Cinematic Myth? Superheroes & Transmedia Storytelling. Reading 22.
- Nov 17. *Group work*, continued.  
Nov 19. Conclusions.

Presentations will be made during the  
**Exam Period**, scheduled during Dec 1-4.

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- Reading 1. Csapo, pp. 1-9. Eliade, "Toward a Definition."  
Reading 2. *Gilgamesh*, pp. xiii-lv and 1-mid 54.  
Reading 3. *Gilgamesh*, pp. 54- 99. Ray, "Myth and Meaning."  
Reading 4. *Bible*: Genesis 1:1-9:17. 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. Müller, selections.  
Reading 8. Hart, pp. 29-45. Csapo, pp. 30-45. Derchain. 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. *Gylfaginning*, chs. 1-21 and 43-48. (Byock, pp. ix-xxx, 9-top 33,  
and 53-top 65.) Page, "Odin and Thor."  
Csapo, pp. 132-mid 144 (after the first full paragraph).  
Reading 13. *Gylfaginning*, chs. 22-42 and 49-50. (Byock, pp. 33-52 and 65-70).  
Page, "Baldr and Loki." Lindow. Frazer, *concluding selections*.  
J.Z. Smith, "When the Bough Breaks."  
Reading 14. *Gylfaginning*, chs. 51-55. (Byock, pp. 71-79.)  
Reading 15. Boas (2 selections). Lévi-Strauss, "Story of Asdiwal."  
Reading 16. Lévi-Strauss, Jealous Potter. Csapo, pp. 181-very top 189,  
212-224, and 226-top 229.  
Reading 17. Apollodorus. Ovid. Csapo, pp. 262-276.  
Reading 18. Bringhurst, pp. 13-101. Lord.  
Reading 19. Bringhurst, pp. 102-134 and 223-293. Sullivan, "Tricksters."  
Reading 20. Bringhurst, pp. 362- 384 and bottom 408-mid 412. Dalrymple.  
Reading 21. Burn, Greek Myths. Csapo, pp. bottom 301-315.  
Reading 22. Davis. Burke.  
Reading 23. *Kojiki* selections. Kinsley. Ellwood.