

# Comparative *MYTHS*

## RE 223

Tues & Thurs 2:10-3:30 pm  
Classroom: Tisch 201

## Prof. G. Spinner

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office hours: Tues 11:00-noon, *or by appt.*

### *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 during formal modes of argument. Myths are always good stories, alive with action and infused 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, 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.
- 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 the comparative method, which affords us a cross-cultural and critical perspective.

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.”

So 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 and 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. So 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. 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.

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 the above section makes quite 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 real 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 for this course. Be assured that **you need to do all of the assigned readings**. There is no way to understand the subject and to fully participate in class if you skip, or skimp, on this most fundamental of labors.

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 spelling, 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 a major paper, then you may exercise that option. (This option only applies for major papers, such as midterms; it is not available for shorter, reflection papers, and, due to time constraints, for finals). If I hand you back a paper with a lower grade, then you can choose 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.

### ***Classroom Civility***

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

hope that we will engage each other in open and honest ways, yet both our speech and our demeanor should reflect common courtesy for those around us. Inappropriate or disruptive behavior will result in being asked to leave the class.

Please turn off your devices before you come to class. Take off headphones, remove ear buds, and stow anything unconnected to our class well out of sight. I will start out the semester 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 screens than to class. Eye contact is not optional.

If you need to stand up and stretch, please do so. 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. In short, anything that might provide a distraction to the user, to other students, or to the instructor will not be indulged.

### ***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 Starbuck Center.

### ***Honor Code***

I expect you to live up to Skidmore's Honor Code and strictly avoid any forms of academic dishonesty. Copying from others, submitting someone else's work as your own, or submitting your same work for two different courses are all forms of cheating. Any fact, word or thought that originated with somebody else must be promptly and properly cited. Plagiarism, even when inadvertently performed, is a serious violation of academic integrity, and will be treated as such. Suspected infractions of the Honor Code will be duly reported to the Dean of Academic Advising.

### ***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. Therein, we debate positions and challenge each other, and we do so respectfully. Whether engaging the instructor or other students, I simply 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; if I have not, please let me know. *You may always ask questions.* I will not mind if you ask me to repeat something or to clarify a point. Feel free to come by my office, or to contact me by e-mail, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

# Comparative *MYTHS*

CLASS SCHEDULE / Spring 2017

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

- Jan 24. Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.  
Jan 26. Definitions. Reading 1.
- Jan 31. Gilgamesh: Battles. Reading 2.  
Feb 2. Gilgamesh: Wanderings. Reading 3.
- Feb 7. Gilgamesh & Genesis. Reading 4.  
Feb 9. Greek myth: The Abducted Maiden. Reading 5.
- Feb 14. Greek myth: Mystery Cults & Marriage. Reading 6.  
Feb 16. Egyptian Myth: Making the World. Reading 7.
- Feb 21. Egyptian myth: The Murdered King. Reading 8.  
Feb 23. Egyptian myth: The Underworld Journey of the Sun God. Reading 9.
- Feb 28. Myth & the Subconscious: Freud. Reading 10.  
Mar 2. Myth and the Unconscious: Archetypes & Heroes. Reading 11.
- Mar 7. Norse myth: Cosmogony & Kingship. Reading 12.  
Mar 9. Norse myth: The Death of Baldr. Reading 13.

## *Spring Break*

- Mar 21. Norse myth: Ragnarok. Reading 14.  
Mar 23. Tsimshian myth, structuralist interpretation. Reading 15.
- Mar 28. Jivaro myth: The Jealous Potter. Reading 16.  
Mar 30. Myth & Ideology: Adonis, Reconsidered. Reading 17.

**CLASS SCHEDULE**, *continued*

- Apr 4. Haida Myth: The Spoken Music of Oral Poets. Reading 18.  
Apr 6. Haida Myth: The Iridescent Silence of the Trickster. Reading 19.
- Apr 11. Haida Myth: Sharp as a Knife. Reading 20.  
Apr 13. Myth & Ideology, again: The Labors of Herakles. Reading 21.
- Apr 18. Movies as Myth? The Case of *Star Wars*. Reading 22.  
Apr 20. Japanese Myth: Group Presentations. Reading 23.
- Apr 25. Japanese Myth: *more* Group Presentations.  
Apr 27. Japanese Myth: *more* Group Presentations.
- May 2. Conclusions.

Reading Assignments for

# Comparative MYTHS

- 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." Campbell.  
Reading 12. Byock, pp. ix-xxx and 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." Lindow.  
Frazer, *concluding selections*. J.Z. Smith, "When the Bough Breaks."  
Reading 14. Byock, pp. 69-78.  
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. 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. Gordon. Lyden.  
Reading 23. *Kojiki* selections. Kinsley. Ellwood.