

Comparative *myths*

RE 230-002

W/F 12:20-1:40 PM

Classroom: Ladd 307

Prof. G. Spinner

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office hrs: W 3:00-4:00 *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. This course is both a sampler from world mythology and a survey of some major theorists of myth (such as Freud, Frazer, Dumézil 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 from peoples of the Pacific Northwest. 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.

Deadlines

Research Topic Proposal	Feb 26
First Take-home	Mar 12
Annotated Bibliography	Mar 26
Second Take-home	Apr 16
Oral Report	<i>To be scheduled: Apr 16-28</i>
Library Report	Apr 30

Course Requirements

Your grade consists of the following components:

Participation	10 %
First Take-Home	25 %
Second Take-Home	25 %
<i>Research Project:</i>	
Proposal	5%
Annotated Bibliography	5%
Oral Report	15%
Written Report	15%
Total	100 %

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.

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, marshalling evidence for your position; as I indicated, further explication will follow.

Research is a major component of your grade. I am asking you to pick a mythology that we are not covering in class and to spend the semester learning about it, and then sharing what you learn with the rest of the class. This research project results in both a written and oral report, which are graded separately. The former, also called a library report, will be 10 pages in length, use academic sources and proper citation. The latter will be a 10 min. presentation to the class in which you tell us the coolest things you found out while doing your research. Although based on the same research, your oral report does not simply duplicate the written. You should not simply

read aloud your library report, because it would take too long; instead you will be speaking to us about your project, although you may distribute handouts or use visual aids.

A separate handout on the research project will be distributed, and I ask that each of you meet with me to discuss potential topics. While I want to give you maximal leeway in picking a topic that interests you, but I also want to make sure it is researchable -- that it is a worthwhile project you can start and finish in one semester. I will be asking for a written proposal by Feb 26, so come talk to me *sooner rather than later* about choosing and refining your topic.

All papers must be submitted in hard-copy form. *Late work will be marked down.* I will deduct half a letter grade for each day an assignment is late. You will notice that I have placed various deadlines on the very front on this syllabus, because it is clearly important you meet them. While those dates are 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.*

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. 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,” “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 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.

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. I hope that at the core of this agreement we discover a mutual desire for increased understanding and a tolerance for respectful disagreement. 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, and that if I have not, you will call me to account. I also ask that you make your expectations clear to me, and let me know how we can best achieve that partnership in learning. 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 or phone, in order to discuss any matters pertaining to the course.

I look forward to an exciting semester working together.

Dr. Spinner

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CLASS SCHEDULE RE 230 / Spring 2010

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

Jan 27. Introductions: syllabus, classmates, instructor.

Jan 29. Definitions. Reading 1.

Feb 3. Gilgamesh: Battles. Reading 2.

Feb 5. Gilgamesh: Wanderings. Reading 3.

Feb 10. Gilgamesh: Myth & Meaning. Reading 4.

Feb 12. What about the Bible? Reading 5.

Feb 17. Greek myth: Homeric Hymn to Demeter. Reading 6.

Feb 19. Greek myth: Mysteries & Marriage. Reading 7.

Feb 24. Greek myth: Female Experience & Gender Conflict. Reading 8.

Feb 26. Egyptian myth: The Murdered King. Reading 9.

Mar 3. Egyptian myth: Magic & Cataclysm. Reading 10.

Mar 5. Egyptian myth: The Underworld Journey of the Sun God. Reading 11.

Mar 10. Myth and the Unconscious: Freud. Reading 12.

Mar 12. Myth and the Unconscious: Heroes & Archetypes. Reading 13.

Spring Break.

Go have fun, don't get too broken, & come back ready to learn.

Mar 24. Norse myth. Reading 14.

Mar 26. Norse myth. Reading 15.

Mar 31. Japanese myth: Sun and sovereign, revisited. Reading 16.

Apr 2. Tsimshian myth. Reading 17.

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CLASS SCHEDULE, *continued*

Apr 7. Structuralism: Lévi-Strauss. Reading 18.

Apr 9. Structuralism. Codes & Comparisons. Reading 19.

Apr 14. Myth and Ideology: Adonis reconsidered. Reading 20.

Apr 16. Haida myth. The Spoken Music of Oral Poets. Reading 21.

Apr 21. Haida myth. The Epic Dream. Reading 22.

Apr 23. Haida myth. The Iridescent Silence of the Trickster. Reading 23.

Apr 28. Haida myth. A Story Sharp as a Knife. Reading 24.

Apr 30. Conclusions.

Reading Assignments
for RE 230

Comparative *myths*

- Reading 1. Csapo, pp. 1-9. Eliade, "Toward a Definition."
- Reading 2. Gilgamesh, pp. xiii-lv and 1-47.
- Reading 3. Gilgamesh, pp. 47- 99.
- Reading 4. Ray, "Myth and Meaning."
- Reading 5. Genesis 1:1-9:17. Damrosch. Philo. Augustine.
- Reading 6. Foley, pp. 2-75.
- Reading 7. Foley, pp. 79-112. "Allegoresis." Dowden. Graf.
- Reading 8. Foley, pp. 112-top 142. "Prodicus." "Euhemerus."
- Reading 9. Hart, pp. 29-41. Csapo, pp. 10-very top 30. Muller, selections.
- Reading 10. Hart, pp. 42-49. Csapo, pp. 30-45. Frazer (first part).
- Reading 11. Hart, pp. 50-61. Csapo, pp. mid 57-top 67. Frazer, more selections from
The Golden Bough. Smith, "Dying and Rising Gods."
- Reading 12. Burns, Greek Myths. Csapo, pp. 80-110. Freud.
- Reading 13. Rank. Moon, "Archetypes." Campbell.
- Reading 14. *TBA*.
- Reading 15. *TBA*.
- Reading 16. Kojiki. Kinsley. Ellwood. Littleton.
- Reading 17. Boas (2 selections). Lévi-Strauss, "Story of Asdiwal."
Csapo, pp. 181-very top 189 and 212-very top 217.
- Reading 18. Csapo, pp. 217- 224. Littleton.
- Reading 19. Lévi-Strauss, Jealous Potter. Csapo, pp. 224-mid 229. Doniger.
- Reading 20. Apollodorus. Ovid. Csapo, pp. 262-276.
- Reading 21. Bringhurst, pp. 13-103. Lord. Dalrymple.
- Reading 22. Bringhurst, pp. 111-200. Csapo, pp. 279-284.
- Reading 23. Bringhurst, pp. 201-294. "Tricksters."
- Reading 24. Bringhurst, pp. 295-414.