

OVERVIEW OF GREEK MYTH AND SAGA

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INTERPRETATION AND DEFINITION OF CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

- The word *myth* comes from the Greek word *mythos*, which means “word,” “speech,” “tale,” or “story,” and that is essentially what a myth is: a story.
- Some would limit this broad definition by insisting that the story must have proved itself worthy of becoming traditional.
- Myths can be told through multiple modes, genres, or media—not just through words—but through painting, sculpture, music, dance, mime, drama, song, opera, or movies.
- Myth is a comprehensive (but not exclusive) term for stories primarily concerned with the gods and humankind’s relations with them.
- Saga (or legend) has a perceptible relationship to history—however fanciful and imaginative, it has its roots in historical fact or evidence.



MYTH AND TRUTH

- Can myths be true? What kinds of truth do they convey? Whose truth?
- What experiences of reality or history do myths represent?
- How do these experiences or truths change over time and across cultures?
- How does any single myth change over time because of shifting truths, facts, and experiences?
- How does the “truth” of a myth change depending on its teller or perspective?

MYTH AND RELIGION

Mythology and religious beliefs/practices are inextricably entwined.

Myths may have been believed by certain people as not only factually but spiritually.

Myths often provide the basis for devout religious belief in both historical and contemporary societies.

Religious ceremonies, rituals, and cults may be rooted in or based on mythology.

In this sense, myths can convey a sense of sacred timelessness or spiritual view of the world; within many religious perspectives they provide stories about the creation or origins of things.





MYTH AND ETIOLOGY

- Myths can often be interpreted as an explication of the origin of some fact or custom—hence the etiological theory of myth, from the Greek word for “cause” (*aitia*).
- If we think of myths as explanatory, this provides a broad definition that can be applied to most myths—they usually try to explain matters physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual not only literally and realistically but figuratively and metaphorically.
- Myths might attempt to explain the origin of our physical world; where humans came from; the source of beauty and goodness, and of evil and sin; the nature and meaning of love; the organization of any specific society or its cultural practices.

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS

- **Myth and psychology:** via Freud and Jung, myths can convey recurring patterns and archetypes within individual and societal psychologies.
- **Myth and society:** often rooted in the ritualist interpretation of mythology, for example social or religious rituals.
- **Myth and structuralism:** myths act as a mode of communication, one with ever-changing parts, versions, structures, and codes of meaning.
 - In other words, myth is a mode by which societies communicate and through which they seek resolutions between conflicting or changing perspectives.
 - The development of a tale meets the needs or expectations of the group for whom it is told—family, city, state, nation, or cultural group—it has collective importance.

MYTH AND GENDER

- Feminist critical theories and gender studies have made important interventions in the study and reading of myth, urging us to think critically about the social and psychological assumptions that underlie approaches to mythology.
- They approach mythology from the perspective of women and interpret the myths by focusing especially on the psychological, social, political, and cultural situations of their female characters.
- Many feminist authors are creating new versions of traditional tales designed to illuminate their point of view about political, social, and sexual conflict between men and women in our world today—for example, Christa Wolf's *Cassandra*, Madeline Miller's *Circe*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (all of which we're reading).
- On the other hand, some scholars have warned against interpreting classical myths in light of contemporary social and political concerns—the position of women in ancient Greece, the pervasive theme of rape, and representations of homosexuality in classical myth cannot be used to import our own standards onto classical society and literature.





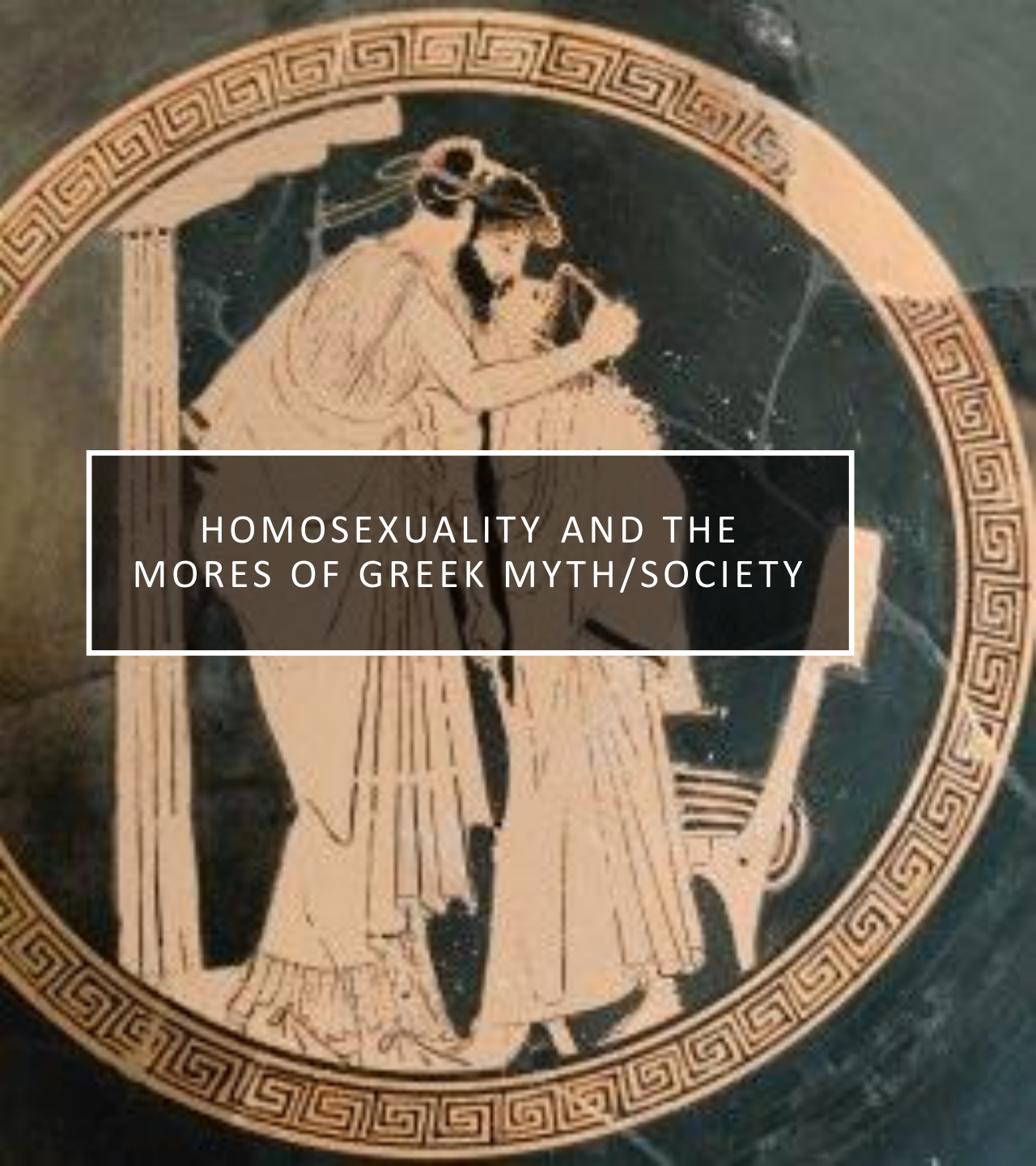
WOMEN IN GREEK SOCIETY

- The evidence for the position of women in Greek society is meager and conflicting, and it's impossible to make broad generalizations—for example, the situations of women in sixth-century Lesbos must have been very different from that in fifth-century Athens, and as time went on women in Sparta gained a great deal of influence.
- Many women in Athens were citizens (as long as both parents were citizens) but did not have the right to vote (as most women across much of western history); many were outspoken about their own inferior positions as citizens in relation to that of men.
- Many were literate, played important roles in religious ceremonies, enjoyed freedom and public movement, attended the theatre (which was a public responsibility for all citizens), where they saw and heard vivid depictions of the strength of their character and convictions and debates about their rights.
- The mythological world of goddesses and heroines can be understood to reflect the real world of Greek women, for whom the myths had to have had some meaning.



THE THEME OF RAPE

- Many feminist authors have highlighted the pervasiveness of rape in classical myth to comment upon contemporary experiences of women, but Greek views of rape were not necessarily the same as our own today:
 - They were fascinated with the phenomena of blinding passion and equally compulsive virginity.
 - Passion was usually evoked by the gods Aphrodite and Eros, who could uplift or devastate a human being and a god.
 - The equally ruthless force of chastity was symbolized by devotion to Artemis, but not always restricted to the man defining lust and the woman chastity; these roles could often be reversed.
- There is no real distinction between the love, abduction, or rape of a woman by a man and of a man by a woman: Eros is a relentless force for everyone.



HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE MORES OF GREEK MYTH/SOCIETY

- Homosexuality was accepted and accommodated as a part of life in the ancient world; there were no prevailing hostile religious views that condemned it as a sin.
- However, homosexual activity had to be pursued in accordance with certain unwritten rules, and it was typically condoned only as a short-term relationship between an older and younger man with strict roles in the sexual act and primarily for purposes of education, the molding of character and responsible citizenship.
- Although nonjudgmental in its acceptance of homosexuality, Greek mythology overall reflects the point of view of a heterosexual society; the body of Greek drama, myth, and saga heavily emphasizes family and religious values with an emphasis on patriarchy, marriage, and the family as the core of the politics and mores of the Greek city-state (*polis*).

THE TROJAN WAR AND MYCENAEAN SAGAS

- Greek saga is a blend of history and myth; it is rooted in historical civilizations, events, and cultures of the ancient Greeks, their myths of the gods and goddesses, and legendary heroes; through a series of archaeological finds since the 19th Century, we also have evidence for the existence of the real sites of Troy and Mycenae, and that these were not simply mythological places.
- Just as there are numerous contemporary revisions of the Trojan War and Mycenaean sagas, there is no one version or source material for these stories in the classical literature. The two sagas are also often entwined with each other.
- Different versions and events of the Trojan War can be found in Homer's *Iliad*, which focuses on the last year of the war and its conflict, the aftermath of the war in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, and many other Greek tragedies surrounding the returns of the Greek heroes. We learn of events preceding and following the war in *The Odyssey* and the many Greek tragedies focused on the Mycenaean saga, such as *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus, and the *Orestes*, *Electra*, and *Iphigenia* plays by Sophocles and Euripides.



Aeschylus & *The Oresteia*



- In the recorded lecture for this Friday, “Intro to Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia*,” I will provide a more comprehensive summary of the Mycenaean saga and its relation to the Trojan saga. You might also read the Robert Fagles introduction, though this is not necessary, and I will try to touch on some of his key points in the lecture and our class discussions.
- For Monday’s class discussion, be sure to read *The Agamemnon*, the first play in the trilogy, and on Wednesday we will discuss the second play, *The Libation Bearers*.
- As you read, pay close attention to the imagery set up in the plays and the key conflicts/arguments that take place between the main characters, as well as the role of the Chorus.