Introduction to Mythology

(notes based on lectures by Elizabeth Vandiver, Ph.D, Professor of Classics at Whitman College)

I. Classical mythology
   A. “Classical” refers to the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome
      1. Ancient Greek culture’s highpoint: Athens in the 5th century BC
      2. Roman culture’s highpoint: 1st centuries BC and AD
         a. Rome simply adapted Greek mythology
   B. “Mythology” is an ambiguous term
      1. “-ology” ending means “the study of”
      2. “mythology” is frequently used to mean “a culture’s body of myths.”

II. Many scholars subdivide traditional tales into 3 categories:
   1. Myth- refers only to stories that concern the gods and their rites. It is connected with religious ritual.
   2. Legends- refer to traditional stories based on historical fact, describing the (greatly exaggerated) adventures of people who actually lived.
   3. Folktales- refer to stories that are primarily entertaining and that often involve animals or ordinary but clever humans.
      a. with mythology, these categories overlap

III. “Myth” defined
   A. Myths are traditional tales or stories a society tells itself
      1. Myths are presented in narrative form
      2. Myths are handed down in a society from one generation to the next. It’s usually impossible to say who first “invented” a particular myth.
   B. Myths are set in the past
      1. A myth recounts events of long ago (usually very long ago)
      2. Myths often reflect the belief that, in the far past, things were very different.
   C. Myths are ostensibly “true”; that is, they present themselves as giving an accurate narrative of “what really happened.”
      1. A culture rarely recognizes its own mythology as mythology.
      2. Judged from within a culture, myths are true accounts of the way things are.
   D. Myths often explain, justify, instruct, or warn
      1. An aetiological myth may explain why things are as they are or how certain events, entities, or conditions came into existence.
      2. A charter myth may offer a justification for a certain rite or social institution.
      3. A myth may instruct its audience in how people ought or ought not to behave
         a. Such instruction frequently takes the form of a warning by showing the consequences of misbehavior.
   E. Myths frequently concern gods and the supernatural
      1. This area of myth overlaps with religion
         2. One useful distinction is that “religion” refers to what people do to honor their gods—the rites, ceremonies, etc, whereas “myth” refers to the underlying narratives about those gods.
IV. Which societies use myth, and why?
   A. All societies have myths; however, myth is most important in preliterate cultures.
      1. Modern, literate cultures have many different forms of explanations available to
         them, including theology, psychology, philosophy, ethics, history, etc.
      2. All these depend on a sophisticated and long-established literate tradition.
      3. In a preliterate culture, myth is the only means available to explain and discuss
         a whole range of phenomena and concepts that society otherwise doesn’t
         understand.
   B. This idea is important for the question of what myth really means.
      1. Modern Western culture makes a distinction between fact and fiction, true and
         false, actual and imaginary.
      2. When myth is the only available form of explanation, these distinctions are
         not so clear.
      3. In Greek myth, Gaia (Earth) and Ouranos (Sky) are good examples of this. As
         anthropomorphized deities (gods given human characteristics), they are also
         physical “realities” – our usual distinction between metaphorical and literal
         doesn’t apply.

V. Greek mythology developed in a preliterate culture, which presents problems for modern
   scholars.
   A. Ancient literature and archaeological artifacts are the main source of access
      to mythology.
   B. These written versions of myths present difficulties for scholars
      1. Written versions of myths are “frozen” by one author (his version of the story)
      2. Because myths were understood throughout the society, literary works
         frequently refer to myths without giving a full synopsis of them.
      3. Only a fraction of ancient Greek literature has survived, and it often does not
         reveal details about people’s religious beliefs and practices, daily lives, etc.
   C. Archaeological records and literature can sometimes shed light on one another
      1. Archaeological remains, such as buildings and artwork, are even more difficult
         to interpret than literature is.
      2. References in literature can mislead people into thinking that they know what an
         object or building was used for, when in fact they really don’t know.

VI. Why do cultures develop myths?
   A. Myths offer insight into what a specific culture thinks about the nature of the world in
      general and about key questions, such as:
      1. The nature and function of the gods
      2. Humans’ relationship to the gods
      3. The social systems and values within a culture
      4. What it means to be human
      5. The two sexes’ relationship to one another

VII. Why study myths?
   A. Myth provides materials for much of the world’s great art
      1. literature
      2. architecture
      3. music
      4. painting
      5. sculpture
VIII. History
A. earliest record: clay tablets from Myceanaean Civilization (1400-1200 BC)
B. basic sources for Classical Greek Mythology are 3 works that date from about the 700s B.C.:
   1. *Theogony* by Hesiod
      a. the origin and history of the gods
   2. *The Iliad* by Homer
   3. *The Odyssey* by Homer

IX. Greek Divinities
A. Titans, led by Cronus (earliest group)
B. Olympians (most powerful)
   1. Top ranked 6 gods and goddesses:
      a. Zeus  g. Hera
      b. Poseidon h. Demeter
      c. Hades  i. Hestia
      d. Apollo  j. Athena
      e. Ares  k. Artemis
      f. Hephaestus l. Aphrodite
   2. Other important gods associated with the Olympians:
      a. Hermes
      b. Dionysus
      c. Pan
C. minor divinities
   1. Nymphs
      a. Dryads- lived in forest
      b. Nereids - lived in the sea
   2. Fates
      a. controlled human destiny
   3. Muses
      a. 9 goddesses of various arts and sciences
D. demigods = part mortals, part divine
   1. Hercules
      a. strength and physical endurance
   2. Orpheus
      a. beautiful singing