Introduction

A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO MYTHICAL NAMES

The names of gods, heroes, and monsters are among the richest and most vibrant constructs that contemporary culture has inherited from antiquity. Even at a time when the languages of Greece and Rome play a shrinking role in higher education, the names of Odysseus, Oedipus, Medusa, and Narcissus are more familiar to us than ever before. From Disney's *Hercules* and Microsoft's "Age of Mythology" to the "Graphic Myths and Legends" series, movies, television series, computer games, comics, and graphic novels consistently feature characters named after the fictions of classical antiquity. Nor are the symbols of classical mythology limited to entertainment: Ajax of the towering shield is a popular line of cleaning products, gas and oil giant Exxon Mobil uses the winged horse Pegasus as its corporate logo, and Achilles' heel has become a common phrase referring to a vulnerable spot or weak point.[1] The Greek and Roman gods, heroes, and monsters permeate every aspect of our world.

Academics have responded to that popular interest with a wave of monographs tracing the history of mythical names from antiquity to the present. Since 2002, the series "Mythologica" spear-headed by Maurizio Bettini and published by Einaudi has devoted individual volumes to Helen, Narcissus, Oedipus, the Sirens, and Circe. Starting in the same year, the popular "Gods and Heroes" series edited for Routledge by Susan Deacy has been paying its dues to Diana, Zeus, Medea, Prometheus, Dionysos, Oedipus, Perseus, Athena, Apollo, Aphrodite, and Heracles. In addition to the series targeting a general readership, more specialized volumes have traced the history of Proteus from Homer to Bouchardon or Odysseus from Homer

[1] The use of mythical creatures in contemporary popular culture is an embryonic and promising area of classical reception studies. There is yet no systematic archive of that rich corpus of materials. The Wikipedia article "Greek Mythology in Popular Culture," organized alphabetically by creatures' names, with the longest entries divided into receiving media or genres, offers a tantalizing glimpse into the diversity of such appropriations in American culture.

to Quignard, thus updating W. B. Stanford's fundamental 1954 treatment, *The Ulysses Theme*.[2] A new supplement to Brill's *New Pauly*, organized as an alphabetic catalog of mythical names and their most important instances of reception, explores the routes and works through which the myths of Greece and Rome have passed into the cultural memory of Europe.[3] Mythical names and their deployment have thus become an important topic in classical and reception studies. The globalization phenomenon characteristic of contemporary economies and cultures finds a temporal counterpart in the study of diachronic layers of transmission and chains of mediation.

While the works mentioned above use various principles – thematic, chronological, or alphabetical – to organize their materials, they share a common reliance on the notion of "figure" to refer to their object of study.[4] That concept is rarely examined, probably for material reasons of scope and structure rather than intellectual grounds. The Einaudi and Routledge monographs are primarily introductions designed to acquaint students with the ancient world and its contemporary reception. Collective volumes are by definition the works of many hands whose strength often lies in discrete analyses rather than over-arching reflections upon the collection's topic.[5] Yet used as a heuristic device to explore the gods, heroes, and monsters of antiquity, the concept of "figure" is worth examining in detail, for it carries strong assumptions shaping the methodology and results of the studies that depend on it.

In contemporary English or French, the word "figure" primarily refers to the form or shape of a living being, or to the representation thereof. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following glosses: "Bodily shape, occas. including appearance and bearing. Now chiefly of persons"; "An embodied (human) form; a person considered with regard to visible form or appearance"; "An artificial representation of the human form." Applied to mythical names, the term therefore tends to assimilate a cultural construct to a person, and to confuse fiction and life. It may accurately describe the artistic effect produced by individual versions endowing fictional characters with the depth, complexity, and overall coherence of real-life organisms. Applied to a group of sources, however, the term "figure" assumes a far

[2] Rolet 2009; Babbi and Zardini 2000; Stanford 1954b. [3] Moog-Grünewald 2010.

[4] As one example among many, see Rolet 2009: 13: "The intention that presided over this entreprise was to reconstruct the complexity and diversity of the mythological, literary, aesthetic, political, and ideological stakes implied by the occurrence of the *Proteus figure* through the ages" (translated from the French, emphasis mine). The first chapter in Stanford 1954b is entitled "The adaptability of mythical figures."

[5] For an incisive critique of that state of affairs, see Corinne Bonnet's *BMCR* review of Olshausen and Sauer 2009 at http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2010/2010–11-39.html.

from obvious set of postulates: that (a) disparate utterances of a mythical name refer in fact to a single mental entity, and that (b) this shared referent, while fictional, is modeled on real-life persons and endowed with consistent features of appearance, behavior, and character. Similar assumptions underlie the terms "person," "character," or "essence." All these terms presuppose that mythical names refer to entities ontologically comparable to human beings and endowed with an identity of the kind that modern biology conceptualizes in terms of DNA sequences and psychology as the product of individual history.[6]

The biographical approach to mythical names encouraged by postulate (b) has a long history arguably going back at least as far as Hellenistic mythography and remarkably exemplified in Plutarch's *Lives*, which treats mythical names like Theseus, Romulus, and Lycurgus side by side with historical characters like Pericles and Julius Caesar. It was enshrined and anchored as a standard practice in contemporary scholarship by nineteenth-century monuments like Pauly's *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* and Daremberg and Saglio's *Dictionnaire des Antiquités Grecques et Romaines*, both of which list mythical names alongside the names of real-life individuals within the same enterprise of positivist knowledge. More recently, however, several scholars have hinted at the irrelevance of such an approach when it comes to studying the fictional agents of mythical narratives. Fritz Graf highlights the problem of studying a Greek god "as if he were not essentially different from Pericles or Sappho" and stresses the impossibility to find a unity underlying Apollo's roles in myth and cult.[7] Emma Griffiths opens her monograph on Medea with the project of appreciating the "essence of this mythological figure," yet simultaneously stresses that the fluid nature of Greek myth makes such systematization impossible.[8] We are, it seems, at a juncture where contemporary scholarly practices highlighting generic, social, and local contextualization are discrepant with a conceptual apparatus inherited from nineteenth-century positivism.

The practical problem faced by classicists in the study of mythical complexes has a philosophical counterpart in the so-called problem of "empty names," which seeks to account for the intuition that non-referring proper names (i.e., proper names that do not refer to real-life individuals) have

[6] On the problems raised by the concept of "character" to describe mythical symbols, see Delattre 2009, who uses Kephalos as a case study. For a parallel criticism of the idea of unified meaning in a myth, see the rich body of work by Claude Calame, for instance Calame 1990a and Calame 2003, who emphasizes the diversity of the individual circumstances of enunciation of a story.

[7] Graf 2009: 5. [8] Griffiths 2006: 9.

a semantic content and that sentences like "Pegasus has two wings" or even "There is no such thing as Pegasus" are meaningful. Important contributions to the debate include John Stuart Mill's idea that proper names denote individuals and do not connote attributes, thus implying that the semantic content of a proper name is simply its referent; Bertrand Russell's theory that a proper name is a disguised definite description; and more recently, the direct-reference theory that empty proper names have, properly speaking, no meaning.[9] Thus philosophers have long spotted and articulated the problem with exemplary clarity, but so far their attempts to solve it on purely theoretical grounds have proved inconclusive.

Among classicists, theoretical approaches that have otherwise proved most fruitful and influential in the study of Greek myth in the last thirty years have surprisingly little to offer when it comes to finding a fitting framework to describe the deployment of mythical names. In fact, most current methodologies focus on the narrative patterns rather than the agents or objects of Greek myth. Structuralists inspired by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Vladimir Propp, and Claude Lévi-Strauss typically break down the tales into a series of semantic oppositions articulating fundamental dichotomies like nature and culture, mortality and immortality, or purity and impurity.[10] Psychoanalytic readings of Greek myth, often combined with dominant structural approaches, tend to interpret the stories as manifestations of psychological conflicts resulting from unconscious and repressed sexual desires.[11] Neo-ritual approaches study myth and ritual as two parallel symbolic systems and thus typically analyze mythical materials as sequences of actions.[12] Scholars interested in the relation between myth and history scrutinize the tales in search of reflections of historical events, cultural concerns, or cultural influences.[13] Comparative approaches have been largely informed by Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale* (1961) and often focus on finding international parallels for Greek narratives.[14] Some comparatists do stress the transmission and circulation of "conceptual foci" including "ideas, images, and narrative motifs,"

[9] For a recent synthesis of the problem and the various attempts to address it, see the contributions in Everett and Hofweber 2000 and the articles by David Braun, especially Braun 2005.
[10] For a paradigmatic deployment of that methodology, see the analysis of the Hesiodic version of Prometheus' story in Vernant 1974: 177–94.
[11] For attempts to combine structuralism and psychoanalysis, see e.g. Caldwell 1976; Segal 1978; Caldwell 1990.
[12] See for instance Burkert 1979: 14–34, who identifies biological "programs of actions" as the fundamental level of mythical narratives; Bremmer 1987; Versnel 1988.
[13] For a convenient summary of historical approach to Greek myth, see Brillante 1990.
[14] Typical of the kind are the approaches to the Cyclops story offered by Schein 1970 and Glenn 1971. For an encyclopedia of international tales found in classical literature, see Hansen 2002.

but typically eschew the problem of defining exactly what they mean by those terms.[15]

To find a systematic and theorized body of research on mythical names, we probably need to go as far back as Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), who highlighted etymology as the key to the meaning and significance of divine names, analyzed gods as the personification of natural forces, and viewed mythical narratives as the result of the misunderstanding of metaphorical statements about natural phenomena.[16] However, 150 years later, solar mythology has been abandoned, and structuralism and speech-act theory have highlighted the limits of approaches seeking to understand phenomena in terms of their origins. Even if Max Müller were right about Daphne's originally being a moon goddess, his theory would still tell us nothing about the significance of Ovid's Augustan version of the tale. We need to find new ways of approaching mythical names that incorporate the findings of contemporary theory.

Since mythical names are primarily signs within a human communication system, they are suitable objects for an approach informed by the science of signs, or semiotics. In what follows, I thus propose to approach mythical names as "symbols" without assuming that they refer to a "figure." By "symbol" I do not mean a word or image standing for a stable referent in the way Carl Jung or Mircea Eliade looked for symbolic manifestations of universal archetypes.[17] Rather, I use the term in a semiotic sense to refer to a *complex sign* that is part of a system of cultural communication.[18] I use the term "sign" in accordance with Ferdinand de Saussure's definition to refer to the combination of a sound pattern (the *signifiant*) and a concept (the *signifié*).[19] I call a mythical name a *complex* sign because, as will become clearer in the course of the book, its *signifié* does not overlap with the usual conceptual categories through which the Greeks apprehended the world.[20]

The recent monographs mentioned above have persuasively highlighted the diversity of semantic contexts where fictional actors of Greek myth can be deployed, a point epitomized by Stanford's subtitle to his Ulysses

[15] The phrase comes from Mondi 1990: 145. About the importance of defining units of comparison, see Hansen 2002: 1–31.
[16] Müller 1867: 1–143. The analysis of the myth of Endymion and Selene (pp. 78–81) epitomizes his methodology.
[17] See for example Jung 1964 and Eliade 1952: 33–72, who analyzes trees of life as well as ceremonial stairs as symbols for the archetype of the *axis mundi*.
[18] On symbols as parts of cultural systems of communication, see Geertz 1973.
[19] Saussure 2005 [1916].
[20] For a semiotic description of the complexity of mythical signs, see Barthes 1957 who describes myth as a second-order language using linguistic signs (combinations of signifier and signified) as its own signifiers.

monograph, *A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*. That diversity parallels the plasticity of other linguistic signs, an observation that underlies Saussure's basic distinction between *langue*, a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable its members to use their faculty of language, and *parole*, the linguistic level at which individual speech acts occur. The study of *parole* in its diversity, plasticity, and ability to change is the object of historical linguistics and social linguistics; the study of *langue* as a set of structural rules governing the composition of words, phrases, and sentences is the object of grammar. The same distinction, I propose, may be extended to mythical names. Since their plasticity in *parole* is now well documented, we may attempt to uncover some of the structural features in *langue* that underlie, enable, and delimit their circulation. In other words, the empirically observable fact that mythical names circulate widely can be placed at the center of the inquiry, and the following questions be raised: What is the semantic content of proper names which by definition do not refer to real-life individuals? How is it that the same name can promote reflection upon a broad range of political, social, aesthetic, or anthropological themes? What is it about the symbolic structure of mythical names that allows for such manifold deployment? Is it possible to develop a grammar of mythical names just as we have rules for the use of other parts of speech?

To address these questions, the evidence at our disposal is made of individual utterances in *parole*, i.e., speech acts that actualize mythical names by combining them with other linguistic signs. In addition, since myths are often represented in visual media, sometimes with labels that match a specific iconographical type with a specific name, the linguistic evidence can be enriched and combined with a large body of images. The question subsequently becomes whether all individual deployments of a mythical name share common features that can be attributed to the properties of the sign in *langue* as opposed to the contingency of the individual contexts of *parole*.

Through the last hundred years or so, the development of the science of semiotics has provided us with a series of tools to discuss how individual utterances of a sign produce meaning in a given context. One of Saussure's insights was to stress that signs generate meaning differentially in relation to other signs.[21] The processes by which signs generate meaning in *parole* have been studied by his followers. Roman Jakobson has shown that within a single text, signs generate meaning through both syntagmatic

[21] Saussure 2005 [1916] §230–9.

relations resulting from linear concatenation, and paradigmatic relations resulting from possible substitutions.[22] To account for the semantic consistency resulting from the relations constructed by a text, Algirdas Greimas developed the concept of isotopy that describes "a redundant set of semantic categories which make possible the consistent interpretation [literally, 'uniform reading'] of a story, as it results from the reading of the successive segments of the text and the resolution of their ambiguities in view of the quest for a coherent global understanding."[23] In a verbal utterance, the network of paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations and resulting isotopies woven around a mythical name involve both signs of the same order (i.e., other mythical names) and non-mythical parts of speech (nouns, verbs, epithets, adverbs, etc.). In visual media, the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations woven around the visual type for a mythical name will involve visual types for other mythical names and images of empirical objects.[24]

Other structuralist critics have proposed tools to decipher how signs signify in relation to structures other than their immediate context. Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and other theoreticians of intertextuality have stressed that texts do not generate meaning in isolation but derive their significance from their relation to other texts.[25] Combining French structuralism with the German tradition of hermeneutics, reader-response criticism has offered a helpful framework for applying the notion of intertextuality to the interpretation of individual texts while integrating the fundamental insight that meaning is eventually achieved at the point of reception. Hans Robert Jauss's notion of horizon of expectations includes the set of questions, partly derived from the experience of other texts, which readers bring to their experience of a new text.[26] The reception of a work, he argued, can be described objectively in relation to a system of expectations that includes pre-understanding of the genre, form, and themes of familiar works, and opposition between practical and poetic language. Applied to mythical signs, Jauss's insight requires reconstructing the background that original audiences would have had in mind when they experienced a mythical name and comparing that background with the specific features associated with the name in its new utterance.

Since mythical names refer to fictional agents, they can also be studied from the point of view of narrative syntax. The method goes back to

[22] Jakobson 1956; Jakobson 1960. [23] Greimas 1970: 188.
[24] The possibility of extending semiotic readings to ancient Greek art has been extensively discussed and exemplified by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood. See e.g. Sourvinou-Inwood 1991.
[25] For a concise introduction to current theories of intertextuality, see Allen 2000.
[26] Jauss 1982.

the work of Vladimir Propp on the segmentation of tales into sequences of functions and was further elaborated by theoreticians like Algirdas Greimas and Claude Brémond, who attempted to define a universal narrative grammar.[27] According to Greimas's actantial model, for instance, an action can be broken down around the positions of subject, object, helper, opponent, sender, and receiver.[28] In its concrete applications, the narratological approach intersects with the comparative perspective exemplified by Aarne and Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale*, which looks for common narrative patterns underlying tales stemming from various geographical areas.[29] Applied to mythical names, that methodology provides us with a tool to examine whether a name usually occurs in tales of the same type, and thus whether it can be interpreted as the embodiment of a specific narrative function.

Although semiotics and especially the processes through which mythical names generate meaning are major issues in this book, I do not propose to retrieve "the" meaning associated with individual utterances. Such a project would be doomed from the start in a post-structuralist world that has emphasized the instability of the signifier, the elusiveness of meaning, and the death of the author as a source of authoritative meaning.[30] Rather, I aim to describe contextual and intertextual networks within which audiences and viewers were – and are – invited to make sense of a mythical name. The appreciation of what counts as significant paradigmatic or syntagmatic connections and what is the relevant intertext of a specific text is still a matter of critical discernment, and in that sense my analyses cannot but remain subjective. That inevitable subjectivity will, I hope, find a counterweight in the comparative dimension of the project. I seek to identify constants and variables in the semiotic networks surrounding individual utterances of a mythical name through Greek and Roman antiquity. Given that my temporally grounded and theoretically loaded position as an observer remains the same throughout the inquiry, the filters at work in my analysis of individual sources should remain the same and therefore partly cancel themselves out when it comes to comparing those utterances.

Scylla in Fiction and Cultural Reflections

As a case study for the semiotic approach to mythical names outlined above, I have chosen to focus on Scylla, a name familiar to most of us from

[27] Propp 1968; Greimas 1971; Brémond 1973. [28] Greimas 1966: 174–85 and 192–212.
[29] Aarne and Thompson 1961; Propp 1968; Greimas 1971. [30] Barthes 1968.

Homer's *Odyssey*, where it applies to a six-headed creature that devours six of Odysseus' companions, and from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which describes Scylla's transformation from maiden to monster. Besides these two detailed treatments, shorter mentions of Scylla occur in Athenian drama, Hellenistic poetry, Roman epic and elegy, and philosophical, historical, and exegetical texts. Furthermore, the name "Scylla" is also inscribed next to a hybrid shape combining a woman's upper body, a fishtail, and dog heads on a fourth-century Paestan red-figure krater, thus allowing us to attach the name to pictures displaying the same visual type.[31] The resulting visual corpus ranges from the fifth century BCE to the fourth century CE and includes clay reliefs, pottery, coins, gems, sculptures, and mosaics.[32]

For a mind keen on thinking about how and what mythical names signify, Scylla raises an interesting problem. The twelve-footed, six-headed, anthropophagous monster to which the name is attached in the *Odyssey* has little in common with the beautiful half-female and half-fish hybrid featured on the visual artifacts. As a result, many scholars have given up trying to reconcile those various manifestations and insisted on a split between Scylla's textual and material representations.[33] Like other monstrous, non-anthropomorphic entities of Greek myth, Scylla stretches the plasticity of mythical names to a breaking point, thus highlighting the limitations of a biographical approach and prompting us to find new ways of conceptualizing mythical symbols. Precisely because the deployment of Scylla's name is difficult to understand, it promises rich rewards in the uncovering of mental processes alien to us in so many ways.

Thematically, moreover, Scylla provides us with a point of entry into intriguing segments of Greek and Roman cultures. Greek and Roman speakers use the name in two distinctive kinds of discourse. On the one hand, the Scylla symbol occurs in fictional discourses that comment on real-world experiences through parallel but fictional worlds. While the name can be tied to creatures of various kinds, it often refers to a female sea-monster, and Greek-speakers etymologically connect it to the word σκύλαξ, or "puppy." The deployment of Scylla's name across time and genres thus documents ideas, images, and especially anxieties associated with three fundamental areas of Greek experience: the sea as a vital route of

[31] Paestan r.f. calyx-krater signed by Asteas, *c.* 340–330 BCE. Formerly in Malibu, Getty Museum 81.AE.78, now in the Archeological Museum of Paestum. *CVA*, USA 27, Malibu iv 45–7 and pls. 231–4; *RVP* 85, 129; 92–3 pl. 49; *LIMC* s.v. Skylla I nr. 16 = Europe I nr. 74 (M. Robertson).

[32] For a catalog of Scylla's representations in the visual arts, see *LIMC* s.v. Skylla I.

[33] The article by Walter-Karydi 1997 is symptomatic of that approach. I will come back to the problem of the relation between verbal and visual versions of Scylla in Chapter 5.

exchange allowing the inhabitants of a rocky and barren land to develop an elaborate commercial network; the dog as man's closest animal companion, hunting partner, and guardian of houses and flocks; and woman as the other half of humanity.

While Greek ideas of and images for dogs have been the object of detailed studies by Saara Lilja, Cristiana Franco, and others, notions connected with the sea have been surprisingly neglected.[34] The analysis of the texts and images associated with Scylla's name will therefore allow us to capture an important and understudied section of the Greek imagination. As we navigate through Scylla's deployment from Homer onward, we will encounter a wide array of images, concepts, and ideas associated with the sea, ranging from its perception as an uncharted, mysterious, and riddle-like space to its representation as a gullet infested with ravenous creatures.

In addition, Scylla-the-female documents male anxieties about women and therefore opens up vistas into gender construction in antiquity. Except for the atypical and rare story of her encounter with Heracles, Scylla remains untamed throughout ancient culture. She thus powerfully exemplifies the widespread psychological phenomenon of *horror feminae*, or gynophobia, highlighted in a 1932 seminal article by psychoanalyst Karen Horney.[35] Among scholars of Greek culture, that anxiety has been notably discussed by Philip Slater, who analyzed the female characters in Greek tragedy as manifestations of a fear of female envelopment, and Eva Keuls, who used evidence from law, myth, and drama, to document "an underlying fear of women getting out of hand, and taking control over their men and their own lives."[36] The manifold semantics of the Scylla symbol over time and genres allows us to refine the models proposed by Slater and Keuls by evidencing the complementary nature of anxieties associated with two types of women. While some sources interpret Scylla along the lines of the engulfing, castrating, aggressive females highlighted by Horney, Slater, and Keuls, others cast the monster as a nubile, fierce, and wild maiden. The wide-ranging and polymorphous semantics of the Scylla symbol thus highlights the narrowness and rigidity of the Greek ideal of femininity, precariously positioned between the twin dangers of excessively aggressive and defensive female sexuality.

[34] Lilja 1976; Franco 2003.

[35] Horney 1932. Horney traced instances of dread of women in poetic images and patient analyses and argued against Freud that such anxieties originate in fears of the female genitals rather than in fears of the castrating father. Interestingly, she includes dreams of sailing in a narrow channel and being sucked into a whirlpool among manifestations of gynophobia. For a more recent treatment, see Lederer 1968.

[36] Slater 1968; Keuls 1985: 321–5. See also Rabinowitz 1993; Zeitlin 1996.