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Myth, religion and society

Structuralist essays by
M. Detienne, L. Gernet, J.-P. Vernant and
P. Vidal-Naquet

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The following are the sources of the essays in this collection. The Editor and Publishers wish to thank the publishers mentioned for their permission to publish these essays. The translations have been made by the Editor or adapted by him from those listed.

- 1 'L'Union avec Mêtis et la royauté du ciel', in M. Detienne and J.-P. Vernant, *Les ruses de l'intelligence: la mêtis des grecs* (Flammarion, Paris, 1974), pp. 104–24 [= *Mélanges . . . H. Ch. Puech* (Paris, 1974), pp. 101–16]. Published in English as *Cunning intelligence in Greek culture and society* (Harvester Press, Hassocks, Sussex; Humanities Press Inc, New York, 1978), pp. 107–30, translated by Janet Lloyd.
- 2 'La Corneille de mer', in *Les ruses de l'intelligence*, pp. 201–41 [= 'Le Navire d'Athéna', *RHR* 178 (1970), 133–77 considerably altered]. *Cunning intelligence*, pp. 215–58.
- 3 'Le Mythe prométhéen chez Hésiode', in J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne* (Maspero, Paris, 1974), pp. 177–94 [= *Il mito greco: atti del convegno internazionale (Urbino 1973)*, edd. B. Gentili and G. Paioni (Rome 1977), pp. 99–106]. Published in English as *Myth and society in ancient Greece* (Harvester Press, Sussex; Humanities Press Inc, New York, 1980), pp. 168–85, translated by Janet Lloyd.
- 4 'Sacrifice et alimentation humaine à propos du Prométhée d'Hésiode', *Annali della Scuola Normale di Pisa* 7 (1977), 905–40, reprinted as pp. 37–71 of 'À la table des hommes' in Detienne and Vernant et al. *La cuisine du sacrifice en pays grec* (Gallimard, Paris, 1979), pp. 37–132.
- 5 'Valeurs religieuses et mythiques de la terre et du sacrifice dans l'Odyssée', *Annales ESC* 25 (1970), 1278–97 [= *Problèmes de la Terre en Grèce ancienne*, ed. M.I. Finley (Mouton, The Hague, 1973), pp. 269–92]. (With alterations and corrections here.)
- 6 'Orphée au miel', *QUCC* 13 (1971), 7–23 [= *Faire de l'histoire*, edd. J. Le Goff and P. Nora (Gallimard, Paris, 1973), 3, pp. 56–75].
- 7 'La Notion mythique de la valeur en Grèce', in Louis Gernet, *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique* (essays collected by J.-P. Vernant) (Maspero, Paris, 1968), pp. 93–137 [reprinted without

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- significant alteration from *Journal de psychologie* 41 (1948), 415–62].
- 8 ‘Le Chasseur noir et l’origine de l’ephébie athénienne’, *Annales ESC* 23 (1968), 947–64, which appeared in the same year as ‘The Black Hunter and the origin of the Athenian Ephebeia’, *PCPhS* 194 (n.s. 14) (1968), 49–64 (translated by Janet Lloyd). (With extensive alterations and corrections here.)
 - 9 ‘Le Cru, l’enfant grec et le cuit’, in *Faire de l’histoire*, pp. 137–68. (With alterations and additions here.)
 - 10 ‘Esclavage et gynécocratie dans la tradition, le mythe et l’utopie’, in *Recherches sur les structures sociales dans l’Antiquité classique*, introduced by C. Nicolet (Colloques nationaux du CNRS, ed. CNRS, Paris, 1970), pp. 63–80. (With additions and corrections here.)
 - 11 ‘Athènes et l’Atlantide’, *REG* 78 (1964), 420–44. (With additions and corrections here.)
 - 12 ‘Entre Bêtes et Dieux’, in *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 6 (1972), 231–46 (special issue ‘Destins du cannibalisme’) [reprinted with slight alterations as ‘Ronger la tête de ses parents’, in M. Detienne, *Dionysos mis à mort* (Gallimard, Paris, 1977), pp. 135–60.] Published in English as *Dionysos slain* (Johns Hopkins, Baltimore, 1979), pp. 35–67, translated by Mireille Muellner and Leonard Muellner.

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Introduction, by R.G.A. Buxton

Writing in the *Bulletin of the Council of University Classical Departments* for 1977, M.L. West addressed himself to the question of how, if at all, the subject of Greek myth should be taught to undergraduates. While accepting that students ought to be aware of ‘the stories themselves’, he expressed scepticism about the introduction of more theoretical matters:

When it comes to interpretation of myths, the problems are much harder. Before we can think about teaching anything, we must believe we know something, and probably most university teachers feel a profound lack of confidence in this area . . . interpretation of myths is not a field in which soundness abounds . . . The sort of graduate we ought to be aiming to produce, in my view, is not one who knows what the Greek myths are all about (for none of us claims to know that), nor one who has mastered some glistening Method . . .

These remarks by one of the most gifted philologists of the present day would, I imagine, be received with approval by most classical scholars. And indeed it is hard to refrain from a certain sympathy with such a brisk refusal to be taken in. The history of the study of mythology has been dominated by good ideas carried to absurd lengths; and one may be pardoned for thinking that Euhemerus, say, or Max Müller, would have benefited from more frequent promptings by the voice of Empiricism. But it is unrealistic to expect of a theory, or even of a Method, that it explain everything; enough, surely, if it permits us to perceive new connections or, in the case of history, to cut fresh diagonals through the past. The essays collected by Dr Gordon in this volume offer, from their different but related perspectives, hope that Professor West’s methodological reservations may be unduly defeatist.

What these studies have in common may, for better or worse, be summarized in the contentious word ‘structuralism’. Unfortunately, to say that one is a structuralist is about as informative as to say that one is a democrat. The range of uses to which the term has been put in linguistics, anthropology and literary criticism – to name only three areas – is such as practically to rule out any workable definition covering all the available cases. Yet in relation to the four authors here represented the definitional problem is not insuperable. All are working within the same intellectual tradition; all see as at least part of their task the recovery of the implicit categories – the structures – in terms of which ‘Greek mentality’ was articulated. In the case of Vernant,

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Vidal-Naquet and Detienne, who are all very much alive and active today, their own position *vis-à-vis* the structuralist movement is something which they themselves confront from time to time. In the case of Louis Gernet (1882–1962) we are dealing rather with one who is in certain respects a precursor of the structuralists, and in whose rich and many-sided output we can find the seeds of much that is occupying scholars at present.

Jean-Pierre Vernant, Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Marcel Detienne all teach or have taught at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris.¹ To say that they form a ‘school’, with the magisterial Vernant at its head, would not be entirely misleading: Vernant and Vidal-Naquet have produced a joint volume on Greek tragedy,² while Vernant and Detienne have collaborated on a book (from which the first two pieces in this collection are drawn) about cunning intelligence in Greek thought³ and, with others, on a study of sacrifice;⁴ moreover, the footnotes in their works bear frequent witness to the respect which they have for one another. None the less there are significant differences between them, both in approach and in their areas of special interest.

Detienne works principally on mythology. In *The Gardens of Adonis*,⁵ an analysis of a number of Greek myths and rituals involving spices, he made an important contribution to our understanding of how Greeks perceived the distinction between proper (wifely) and improper (excessively seductive) conduct by women, and how that perception received symbolic expression through myth and ritual. Characteristic of Detienne’s approach here and elsewhere – characteristic, too, of Detienne’s model in the book, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss – is the attention paid to ‘empirical categories’ as deployed in mythical narratives and ritual transactions: he shows repeatedly how contrasts between, say, types of animal or plant constitute one of the fundamental vehicles for the logic of myth. So in ‘The myth of “Honeyed Orpheus”’ (pp. 95–109 below) he draws our attention to the rôle of honey in various traditional tales. Much of Detienne’s work is concerned to illuminate the system of religious thought of the Greek *polis* (city), but he has also done complementary analyses of marginal types of religious activity which define themselves by contrast to the *polis*. A classic instance is the essay (pp. 215–28 below) in which he examines the different modes of deviance exemplified by Pythagoreans, Orphics, Cynics and followers of Dionysus, and in which, as usual, he pays close attention to the rôle of empirical categories – here those relating to the preparation and consumption of food – in the self-definition of these groups.

Vidal-Naquet is a historian of formidable range. His contributions in this collection cover the world of ‘Homeric’ society, rites of status-

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transition between adolescence and adulthood, ideological reflections of the rôles of women and slaves in Greece, and a discussion of a 'philosophical' myth in Plato. Elsewhere he has written on Greek tragedy, the Jewish historian Josephus, and a wide variety of problems in Greek social history, as well as on several contemporary historical issues.⁶ He writes in a more condensed way than Detienne, is more diverse, and is certainly less easy to classify. If one were to isolate one thread which runs through his essays reprinted below it would be an interest in the relationship between social practices and institutions, on the one hand, and their ideological counterparts in myth and literature, on the other; perhaps the clearest example is the paper on the 'Black Hunter' (pp. 147–62 below), in which a myth and an institution are brilliantly confronted.

Like Vidal-Naquet, Vernant has tended to prefer the article to the book as his vehicle. His aim in the splendid *Les Origines de la pensée grecque* and *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*⁷ – to recover the way in which the Greeks' mental universe was articulated, above all in relation to matters of religion – has been continued in his later writings. The two papers on Hesiod (pp. 43–56 and 57–79 below) are typical of his approach. Hesiod's tales about Prometheus and Pandora turn on the crucial distinction between men and gods: men must work and put up with misfortune; the gods are free of such trouble. Vernant explores the implications of the distinction by examining Hesiod's accounts in detail. Central to the analysis is sacrifice, the ritual which re-enacts, by the separation of the parts of the victim which it entails, the separation of men and gods. Hesiod, as Vernant presents him, is much concerned with boundaries; and that makes him a prime witness for the structuralists.

Having glanced at the three scholars individually we must return to 'structures'. Vernant's approach to Greek myth offers a convenient place to begin.

One common way of studying the Greek pantheon has been to select a divinity and trace his or her ancestry back to its 'origins' in natural phenomena, ritual, geographical or historical fact, the unconscious, or somewhere else.⁸ This enterprise, like etymology, is a perfectly respectable branch of human enquiry. But, just as etymology needs to be complemented by research into the interrelationships of words within a language at a given time, so, argues Vernant, no single member of the pantheon can be properly understood in isolation from the rest: we must broaden our outlook and take in the pattern of interrelationships between the deities. Only then shall we be in a position to see how the conceptual universe of the Greeks was divided up, and how differentiations with respect to time, space, sovereignty, etc., were implicit in the way in which they conceived of their gods.

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An illustration may help. The ancient traveller Pausanias (5.11.8) tells us that on the base of Pheidias's statue of Zeus at Olympia the goddess Hestia is linked with the god Hermes. In a long and brilliant analysis⁹ Vernant suggests that the pair embody contrary but complementary aspects of the Greeks' experience of space: Hestia is the hearth, the fixed point, the centre around which human life within the *oikos* (household) is organized; Hermes operates in a context of change, transition, movement, the linking of opposed states. And the polarity has a parallel in Greek social life: As Hestia is to Hermes, so woman (who stays at home) is to man (who leaves home and has dealings with others). Neither Hermes nor Hestia makes sense if viewed in isolation; only when each is contrasted with other elements in the 'system' do the distinctive traits of the two emerge clearly. Moreover – and here is another characteristically structuralist gambit – the analysis points the way towards an identification of homologous patterns within different areas of experience in the given culture: as Hermes is to Hestia, so man is to woman. A third aspect of Vernant's study is its demonstration that something which is for us an abstract category – space – was perceived by Greeks as a function of the specific forms of divine activity represented by Hermes and Hestia. What is true of space is also true, for example, of work¹⁰ and cunning intelligence:¹¹ the Greeks' way of classifying sorts of physical and mental behaviour by no means always corresponds with our own.

Of the articles reprinted below it is Detienne's piece on the 'sea-crow' (pp. 16–42) which matches most closely the account I have just given. He discusses the different forms of power exercised in relation to the sea by Athena (the sea-crow is a marine bird which figures occasionally as an epithet of Athena) and Poseidon. When Athena has to do with the sea it is, Detienne argues, in relation to navigation and the finding of a path across the treacherous deep. Her interventions show her to be the divine equivalent of the ideal human helmsman: quick-witted, deft, able to out-manoeuvre the tricky problems posed by the shifting sea. Poseidon, by contrast,

does not help the helmsman by opening up a route for him through the raging sea. His form of action is rather in keeping with his status as the elemental power of the sea: he calms its violence and restrains the anger of the waves which he himself has unleashed . . . In other words, the rôle of Poseidon in navigation is as passive as that of Athena is active (p. 29)

The argument widens to embrace other areas of activity in which Athena and Poseidon might appear to overlap; but the result is the same: Athena displays *mētis* (cunning intelligence), Poseidon does not. Once more we have an emphasis on boundaries, and a demonstration that the figures in Greek myth should be seen not as isolated individuals but as stand-

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ing in a network of contrastive relationships with other comparable figures.¹²

Vernant, Vidal-Naquet and Detienne share an awareness of the essential seriousness of the myths, a sense that they are not ‘just stories’, but tales with a logic of their own and with a profound relevance to issues generated by Greek culture. The view that there can be a ‘logic’ or ‘reason’ of Greek myth¹³ does not of course recommend itself to proponents of the idea that Greece witnessed the emergence of Reason from the fogs of (irrational) Myth; but it is none the worse for that. This last-mentioned idea contains, in fact, about equal measures of truth and falsity. It is plain that in certain contexts – philosophy, medicine, historiography come to mind – issues came to be debated in classical Greece in ways which constitute a radical break with traditional ‘mythical’ modes of thought. Yet it is equally plain that men such as Plato, Hippocrates and Thucydides were marginal in the influence which they had on the beliefs of ordinary Greeks. For hundreds of years after these and similarly gifted intellectuals had been applying principles of reasoned argument to their chosen field of enquiry, most Greeks will have carried on articulating their view of the world in terms far more traditional; and not surprisingly, since the myths were embedded in and supported by the ever-present ritual observances of the religious calendar. Moreover, even when individual thinkers did introduce ‘rational’ argumentation and the deployment of empirical evidence, these commonly existed side by side with inherited assumptions owing more to myth than ‘reason’. In the case of philosophy and the sciences this has been brilliantly demonstrated by Lloyd in two major works.¹⁴ For historiography we may cite Herodotus: on the one hand, he is a meticulous assembler of detailed empirical data, as in the account of embalming among the Egyptians (2.86ff.); yet, on the other, he will express views based on breath-taking *a priori* assumptions, asserting for example that the customs of the Egyptians are the reverse of those of the rest of mankind (2.35). In Greek thought there is a ceaseless *va-et-vient* between the ‘mythical’ and the ‘rational’, and he who would generalize in the matter needs to beware of the different situations obtaining in different contexts.

The paper by Gernet is devoted precisely to the complexities of the ‘transition’ from a mythical to a more positivistic mode of thought. Louis Gernet¹⁵ was a specialist in ancient Greek law, but his interests in anthropology and sociology led him to explore other, wider aspects of Greek society. The result was a series of extraordinarily penetrating articles later collected under the title *Anthropologie de la Grèce antique*; the paper translated as ‘“Value” in Greek myth’ (pp. 111–46) formed part of this collection. To our own ‘positivist’ way of thinking, argues

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Gernet, 'value' is an abstract notion which we perceive in terms of quantity. But for a society such as archaic, premonetary Greece 'value' is a product of a complex of symbolic associations 'combining categories which are for us distinct' (p. 111; compare Vernant on the mythical perception of space). The bulk of the paper consists of an attempt to identify this archaic sense of value by examining a group of stories about *agalmata*, objects of (usually) aristocratic wealth – tripods, gold cups, magical-royal rings, etc. – whose worth resides in their special talismanic numinousness as opposed to their 'external' value. The enquiry is a circuitous one (cf. Gernet himself at p. 140) but it has many telling points to make about the distinctiveness of mythical thought. He ends by explicitly confronting the mythical/rational opposition in the light of his particular theme:

Because [the 'external signs of wealth'] were no longer the exclusive property of a class within which the heritage of mythical kingship and its effective symbols had continued to flourish, economic value tended to eclipse the older complex image . . . The invention of money certainly makes possible the deployment of an abstract conception of value. (p. 145)

But Gernet is too subtle to miss the true complexity of the picture, recognizing that the 'symbolic' and 'external' conceptions of value coexist and interact long after the introduction of money (cf. p. 146).

Although Gernet predates the explosion of widespread interest in structuralism, his reference (p. 116) to Saussure (the linguist who must be seen in retrospect as one of the founding-fathers of the movement), and especially the unambiguous adoption of the myth-as-language analogy (*ibid.*), mark him out firmly as a forerunner of the approach later developed by Vernant. In fact, the analogy with language is basic to structuralism, and lies behind much of what is done in this book. It can be seen most clearly at work in 'Between Beasts and Gods' (pp. 215–28). Detienne looks at some mythical accounts of cannibalism, and then develops his analysis by locating the practice within a system of comparable terms designating other ways in which humans relate to food (see esp. p. 217); only when a grid or map of the contrasting possibilities has been reconstructed does it become feasible to consider the significance of any one of them. The area of linguistics which supplied the impetus for this approach is phonology: a phoneme only signifies in virtue of the contrasts between it and other phonemes. As critics of the myth-as-language analogy have observed, this does not apply rigorously to myth: one can hardly regard the isolated utterance 'Scythians eat human flesh' (cf. p. 220) as *entirely* devoid of meaning, however much more nuanced its import becomes by its being put back into its structural context. But surely we should be reasonable here. (1) To say that myth is like a language in certain respects is not to say that it is a

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language in every respect. (2) To speak of Greek myths as constituting a 'system' may err on the side of formality, but it is a vitally important counter to those who regard the stories as a random hotch-potch of the inherited conglomerate.

It may be useful to say something about how the selected articles have been grouped together. Section I consists of two pieces on the Greeks' perception of their gods. Vernant discusses how the sovereign power of Zeus was thought to operate; Detienne looks, as we mentioned earlier, at the relative provinces of Athena and Poseidon. In both studies the central theme is the extent to which divinities display or lack *mētis*. The concept is one for which we have no satisfactory equivalent, so the two papers cover a similar area to Vernant's analysis of Hermes/Hestia, viz. a demonstration of the way in which Greeks divided up their experience differently from ourselves.

From boundaries between divinities we turn in Section II to boundaries which externally delimit and internally structure the condition of humanity. In 'The myth of Prometheus in Hesiod' Vernant, after examining the 'narrative logic' of the two accounts, summarizes what is implied in them regarding the position of mortals: '... the story locates humankind between beasts and gods, its status characterized by sacrifice, the use of fire for cooking and for manufacture, woman seen as wife but also as animal belly, corn as staple food and labour in the fields' (p. 50). Sacrifice, agriculture, marriage: these are the markers of human life, distinguishing men from gods and from beasts. (Compare the last paragraph of 'Sacrificial and alimentary codes in Hesiod', p. 79.) Sacrifice and agriculture also appear as central themes in Vidal-Naquet's fine essay on the *Odyssey*. This might just as well have been placed in Section IV, since it is much preoccupied with questions of deviation from social normality. Vidal-Naquet shows how accepted Greek conventions relating to land-cultivation and sacrifice are contrasted with a rich variety of alternative modes of behaviour found in lands with which the wandering Odysseus comes into contact. The last paper in the section, and perhaps the most methodologically radical (and contentious) one in the book, brings us to the third Hesiodic constituent of the human condition: marriage. In seeking to make sense of the Aristaeus episode in Virgil's fourth *Georgic*, and in particular that aspect of it which concerns Aristaeus's loss of his bees, Detienne goes right outside, or behind, Virgil's text. He starts from two facts: (1) Aristaeus is guilty of a sexual transgression — pursuit of Orpheus's wife; (2) Aristaeus loses his bees. The link is reconstructed by Detienne on the basis of associations which bees have elsewhere in ancient thought with sexual purity. The analysis broadens to incorporate more and

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more myths about bees and honey, especially those which in some way touch on the relations which should properly obtain between men and women in marriage. Some scholars will remain unconvinced that the key to *Georgic* 4 has been discovered here, feeling perhaps that what Virgil himself chose to convey disappears from time to time under the weight of mythological context. But there can be no denying that Detienne once again provides many insights into the way in which myths make statements about social reality through the deployment of an empirical logic.

The third section brings together three essays which show how myths reflect features of social organization. Gernet, as we have seen, uses a group of myths to illustrate the conception of value held by Greeks at a particular stage in the development of their society. Vidal-Naquet's two studies relate to the period of social adolescence, known in the case of Athenian males as *ephebeia*, through which young people passed before reaching adulthood: 'The Black Hunter' attempts, by reconstructing a little-known myth, to recreate the ideology of the *ephebeia*; while 'Recipes for Greek adolescence' – a slight departure from the French title, which translates literally as 'The Raw, the Greek child, and the Cooked' – involves initiation rituals outside Athens as well as in it, girls as well as boys. To any who remain sceptical about interpretations in terms of empirical logic I recommend Vidal-Naquet's account of the astonishing find in a necropolis at Eretria (p. 173) where the Raw and the Cooked differentiate childhood from adulthood in a manner clear enough to quicken the pulse of even the most algebraic of structuralists.

Sometimes Greek myths reflect social reality, but sometimes they distort or invert it. In the final three papers we meet a number of mythical narratives which tell of inversions of the norm. In 'Slavery and the rule of women' Vidal-Naquet assembles several 'world-upside-down' traditions in which it is imagined that power is in the hands of women and/or slaves; from the way in which slavery is projected ideologically, important conclusions are drawn about the differences between the Athenian and Spartan models of slavery. 'Athens and Atlantis' is about a rather special sort of myth, namely the one invented by Plato in his dialogue *Timaeus*. Vidal-Naquet's densely-argued analysis of the twin mythical cities, proto-Athens and Atlantis, demonstrates that they represent alternative imaginative models which contrast with each other and with the real Athens; *en passant* he disposes of a number of naively realist historical-geographical interpretations of the Atlantis story, a procedure which might well be extended to discourage comparably literalist readings of the more orthodox myths.

In the concluding paper Detienne offers us more alternative models. Taking as the norm the type of mediating sacrifice (*between* beasts and

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gods) usually practised within the *polis*, he shows the complementary and contrasting ways in which four sects circumvent this normality. The analysis is neat and formally satisfying – whether too neat is something for the sceptical empiricist to decide for himself – and the style is refreshingly direct.

It should be clear from what I have said that no one uniform approach will be found exhibited in what follows; rather, a variety of strategies, a number of which are common to many or most of the pieces. Needless to say, there is nothing sacrosanct about the order – the articles may be taken by date of composition, or grouped according to author. In the latter case what emerges is the individuality of the four scholars represented. If structuralism is ‘some glistening Method’, the quality of the reflected light is entrancing in its variety.

Notes

- 1 Vidal-Naquet and Detienne are still there; Vernant is now at the Collège de France.
- 2 Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1972.
- 3 Detienne and Vernant, 1978.
- 4 Detienne and Vernant, 1979.
- 5 Detienne, 1977.
- 6 One may cite *Torture: Cancer of Democracy*, Harmondsworth, 1963; *Journal de la commune étudiante* (with Alain Schnapp), Paris, 1969; ‘La mémoire d’Auschwitz’, in *Esprit* for September 1980, 8–52.
- 7 Vernant, 1962; 1971.
- 8 At this point I am adapting some remarks from my note in the *Bulletin of the Council of University Classical Departments*, 1977, 12–13.
- 9 Vernant, 1971: I, 124–70.
- 10 Vernant, 1971: II, 5–64.
- 11 Detienne and Vernant, 1978.
- 12 For another aspect of the Athena/Poseidon distinction see Vidal-Naquet at p. 206 below.
- 13 Cf. a chapter in Vernant, 1974, entitled ‘Reasons of myth’.
- 14 Lloyd, 1966; 1979.
- 15 For an appraisal of his work see Humphreys, 1978: 76–106.