Introduction: *Muthoi* in Continuity and Variation

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> But as a rule the ancient myths [*palaious muthous* (παλαιὸυς μύθους)] are not found to yield a simple and consistent story, so that nobody need wonder if details of my recension cannot be reconciled with those given by every poet and historian.

The editor trusts that he will be forgiven the presumptuousness (or audacity, as the case may be) of beginning with Robert Graves's translation of Diodorus Siculus 4.44.5–6 – the lines that Graves prefixed to the preface of his work *The Golden Fleece* – lines that seem no less relevant here than at the outset of Graves' novelistic retelling (influenced by his experiences in the trenches of the Great War, no less than by Frazer's *Golden Bough*) of the ancient mythic tradition of the young hero Jason and his band of warrior comrades, who sailed from Greece on board the Argo to recover the fleece of a golden ram from distant Colchis. What we call "Greek myth" is no featureless monolith, but multifaceted, multifarious and multivalent, a fluid phenomenon, as was obvious to the historian Diodorus in the first century BC, and as is made plain by the essays that make up this *Cambridge Companion*.

The chapters that follow are divided into three major parts. *Sources and Interpretations*, the first part of the three, consists of seven essays examining the forms and uses of Greek mythic traditions in Greek texts, ranging in period and genre from eighth-century BC oral poetry to encyclopedic prose compilations of the early centuries AD – from an era rich in a spontaneous performative creativity to one seemingly more concerned with documenting the mythic traditions of a glorious

literary past. Yet even in the earliest attested periods, there is, as we shall see, evidence of a concern for preserving still more ancient forms and notions about gods and heroes.

Part One begins with Gregory Nagy's examination of the lyric poets, followed by his essay on Homer. If from a chronological perspective the order might seem unorthodox – it should not. As Nagy reminds his readers, "Lyric did not start in the archaic period. It is just as old as epic, which clearly pre-dates the archaic period. And the traditions of lyric, like those of epic, were rooted in oral poetry, which is a matter of performance as well as composition." In the archaic period, composition and performance are inextricably linked. Nagy explores occasions of performance for his readers by examining, *inter alia*, a "primary test case" – the lyric works of the Lesbian poets Sappho and Alcaeus, jointly representing "the repertoire of the myths and rituals of the people of Lesbos as expressed in lyric performance." The place of such performance was the sacred ritual space of Messon – the space for the celebration of the *Kallisteia*, a festival featuring choral singing and dancing by Lesbian women – a ritual space that can be "figured . . . in mythological terms."

In oral lyric poetry, Nagy demonstrates, the interaction of performance with composition parallels "the interaction of myth with ritual. The same can be said about the epic poetry attributed to Homer: to perform this epic is to activate myth, and such activation is fundamentally a matter of ritual." The performance of epic poetry is a matter of producing "speech-acts" – the doing of something by the act of the speaking of something (in the sense of Austin 1962): "In Homeric poetry, the word for such a performative act is *muthos*, ancestor of the modern term *myth*." Drawing upon Martin 1989, Nagy offers "a working definition of *muthos* as it functions within the epic frame of Homeric poetry: 'a speech-act indicating authority, performed at length, usually in public, with a focus on full attention to every detail.'" The truth-value of such speech-acts – 'myths' – is a function of their performative framing. From the perspective of the lyric poet Pindar, for example, the 'truth' (*alētheia*) of local myths, set in local rituals, concerning Odysseus and Ajax becomes 'falsehoods' (*pseudea*) when incorporated into the delocalized "master myth" of the epic *Odyssey*, "controlled by the master narrator" of that epic poem: "Under such control, the myths about Odysseus in the Odyssey lose the grounding they once had in their local contexts. Once *muthoi* 'myths' are delocalized, they become relative and thus multiple in application, to be contrasted with the *alētheia* 'truth' claimed by lyric."

In his chapter on Greek lyric, Nagy writes of the orientalizing of Lesbian traditions under the influence of the Lydians of Asia Minor. At the end of "Homer and Greek Myth," he takes note of Homer's Indo-European antecedents, while again reminding his readers of the orientalizing factor – "the lateral influence of Near Eastern languages and civilizations." These two formative elements – Indo-European inheritance and Near Eastern influence – lie at the heart of Chapter 3, the editor's treatment of myth in Hesiod's epic poems, the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Hesiod's poetic compositions, no less bound up with performance than lyric and Homeric epic, attest a particular, even unique, saliency and transparency for the formative history, documentation, and study of Greek myth and for that reason are examined in close detail. The so-called kingship-in-heaven tradition of the *Theogony* is one well attested among various Near Eastern peoples of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia and is reported to have existed in a Phoenician form as well. Hesiod's kingship-in-heaven account, though a primitive and core component of the "ancient myths" of the Greeks, was almost certainly taken over from one or another of these Near Eastern cultures and not inherited from the Greeks' own Indo-European ancestors. Hesiod's *Works and Days* is a didactic poem that is itself of a sort commonly encountered in the Near East (the Biblical book of Proverbs perhaps being the most familiar example), and Near Eastern influence in this case is also undeniable. For some scholars in fact, such as Georges Dumézil, precious little of Greek myth appears to be inherited from earlier Indo-European periods. Yet, I argue, following in part Jean-Pierre Vernant, there are indeed primitive Indo-European elements present – and conspicuously so – in *Works and Days* (as well as in the *Theogony*): "The playful, creative use to which Hesiod puts these inherited notions and conventions and the freedom that he displays in restructuring them on the surface, while preserving what we may term underlying structures, suggests to us that this 'Hesiod' is fully conversant with traditions of his Indo-European ancestors."

With Richard Buxton's chapter on tragedy and Greek myth, we move some 300 years beyond Homer and Hesiod, squarely into the world of classical Greek literature. The performative element of myth is, however, still central: "At the annual festival of the City Dionysia, myths were reembodied in performances by members of the citizen group. In these reembodiments, as heroes and divinities walked the stage, myths were not just narrated as past events: they were actualised as present happenings. Then and there, but also now and here; remote enough to allow room for pity, but close enough to inspire awe." Among

core issues explored by Buxton is that of the locality of this tragic reembodiment of *muthoi* – political, social, topographical, and psychological spaces of liminality: "the distinctive location of tragic myths is in the gaps between certainties. Tragedy is a place of edges and margins, an in-between territory where boundaries – literal and metaphorical – are ripe for exploration and contestation." The gods of the *muthoi* form the "framework" or "backdrop" of competitive tragic performance, Buxton demonstrates: "Each playwright staged his own version of the mythological past, striving to be adjudged superior to his rivals." The result was typically one in which the gods appear in conflict with one another and in which there is displayed a "readiness to tolerate overt criticism of the gods' behaviour" – "one feature of ancient Greek religion which can be particularly difficult to comprehend for a modern observer."

Such a willingness to scorn the gods is no less an element of myth-in-comedy, as Angus Bowie shows us in his essay "Myth in Aristophanes." Considering first the few remains of mythological Old Comedy generally – best evidenced by a summary of Cratinus' *Dionysalexandrus*, in which the story of the Trojan War "is reworked so that Dionysus becomes as it were a failed actor in the role of Paris" – Bowie observes that comedy "was a genre in which the gods were not spared mockery, even the god in whose honour the festival was being held. Indeed, Dionysus [celebrated by the City Dionysia] is the most frequent butt of humour in the comedies as far as we can tell: the god features regularly in his own festival." Indeed, from the fragmentary texts mythological Old Comedy looks to be a genre that "could take considerable liberties with mythology" and one that could frequently use a "mythical story for political purpose." Turning to Aristophanes, Bowie notes that "one not infrequent category of comedy is that which parodies earlier tragic performances of myth. The difficulty here is that it is not always clear whether Aristophanes is producing a parodic version of a myth or a parody of a particular tragic version of that myth." Beyond this, Bowie argues, comedy can imitate the structure of myth and its affiliated framing festivals, as in Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, structured in such a way that "the comedy . . . has (allegedly) the same benefit to the city as the Thesmophoria," the Eleusinian festival of Demeter.

Diskin Clay next examines Plato and myth in "Plato Philomythos." Clay captures the essential if sometimes unrecognized *otherness* of Greek "myth" for modern peoples and contextualizes it nicely for us – and this is very important – as he writes: "The luxuriant varieties

of definitions of Greek 'myth' are a symptom of the remoteness of our culture from the culture of ancient Greece. We have no real equivalent for the traditional stories and histories that circulated among the Greeks (and Romans) concerning their origins, the origins of their world, their gods and the progeny of their gods, the relation between humans and animals, and the fate awaiting mortals after death." Among the issues that Clay addresses is the contrastiveness not uncommonly set up between *mythos* (i.e., *muthos*) and *logos* ("the myth of *logos* versus *mythos*"). "In Homer, *mythos* is a word that describes something said in epic. But already in Herodotus the word *mythos* had come to describe an idle and unbelievable tale. . . . Yet Herodotus' predecessor, Hecataeus of Miletus, can describe his own history as a *mythos* . . . and, conversely, traditional but misleading historical accounts as *logoi*. . . . Thucydides rejected what he called the poets' 'tendency to myth' . . . but, in his narrative of speeches . . . *logoi* were often the equivalent of myths." And what of Plato? "Because of the deliberate ambiguity he has created in his dialogues as to what constitutes a *mythos* and what qualifies as a *logos*, Plato has contributed to our modern confusion over what can be described as a 'myth.'" Though he can use *mythos* to denote 'fable' and *logos* a 'noble and true account', as in the *Gorgias*, "the distinction does not hold. Elsewhere in Plato, what we would regard as his seriously meant truth is often treated as a *mythos*, and fictions, based on traditional accounts, are called *logoi*." Clay further observes, "Whether a narrative is called a *mythos* or *logos* depends on the viewpoint of the teller of the tale (usually Socrates) and his audience." More than that, Plato is capable of the "simultaneous dismissal and use of Greek myth." And Plato is himself a mythmaker – an artisan "weaving the strands of Greek myth into a fabric of his own design": "It has been said that myth died in Plato's youth. It did not. Of all Greek philosophers, Plato is most mythopoeic" (and "the most notorious of Plato's myths is the myth of Atlantis . . . the most impressive philosophical fiction ever written"). "Plato's real quarrel," Clay shows us, "is not with Greek myth; it is with the poetry of the Greek polis and its false and debasing representations of reality."

Part One comes to an end with Carolyn Higbie's contribution on the "Hellenistic Mythographers": "from sometime in the fourth century BC on, Greeks developed an interest in collecting, documenting, and interpreting the important literary works of their past." Scholarly devotion to the written records of performative traditions led to the production of interpretative aids and an acute awareness of the particular body of information preserved within these traditions: "from this

double opportunity . . . developed at least two genres, mythography and paradoxography" – "stories about the gods and heroes" and "stories about the weird or unusual," respectively. Higbie notes that "myths certainly appeared in prose texts before the Hellenistic world, but they lack, so far as one can tell from the fragmentary remains, the flavor of a compilation, of time spent in libraries gathering stories from different sources." Of such "mythological compendia," "the most famous and influential, in modern times, . . . is the *Bibliotheca* – 'Library'" authored by Apollodorus in, perhaps, the first century AD.

Part Two, *Response, Integration, Representation*, begins with Claude Calame's discussion of "Greek Myth and Greek Religion." The position occupied by Calame's work – at the midpoint of the volume – is metaphorically significant: it is a work that intersects in crucial ways with several of the contributions that precede and several that follow. Opening with the claim that "neither 'myth' nor 'religion' constitutes a category native to Greek thought," Calame challenges the very existence of what we are given to conceptualize as *Greek mythology* – "unless considered in the form of manuals of mythography, such as the one in the *Library* attributed to Apollodorus." His examination of the relationship of Greek "myth" and "religion" takes the form of five case studies: in each, he observes, "we can see how an individual heroic tale is called upon to legitimate a particular cult practice through an intermediary poetic form that influences both the narrative and semantic characteristics of the account and the religious and political conception underlying the ritual concerned." Calame's conclusion from the fivefold examination – "Supported by poetic genre, this or that episode of the divine and heroic past of the Greek communities is inserted into both a specific cult institution and a form of ritual poetry, most often choral. These poetic forms make from narratives, appearing to us as mythic, an active history, inscribed in a collective memory realized through ritual." And, he continues, "The ensemble of the myths of the Hellenic tradition is characterized by a certain plasticity that allows the poetic creation of versions constantly readapted for cult and for religious and ideological paradigms offered by a polytheism that varies within the multifarious civic space and time of the cities of Greece."

In "Myth and Greek Art: Creating a Visual Language," Jenifer Neils begins by reminding the reader that, with respect to myth, "Greek narrative art displays an amazing degree of imagination, ingenuity, and originality" (echoing Calame and many of the contributors that the reader has by now encountered) and goes on to expound manageably for the reader the vast domain of Greek myth and art by focusing on

two essential – one might say "performative" – elements: "First, what devices did the artist employ for depicting a myth and how did this visual language come about? Second, how did the artist make his chosen theme relevant to a particular audience at a specific point in time?" Special attention is given to the example of a wine cup decorated by the Codrus painter on which are depicted "the seven deeds of the local hero Theseus." Harbingering Jonathan Hall's discussion of Athenian usage of Theseus for political ends (Chapter 11), Neils reveals how, when the symbolism of the object is properly parsed, "this cycle cup does much more than recount some of the deeds of the hero Theseus; it rewrites history by associating Athens's glorious Bronze Age hero with its glorious present. For the Athenians their myths were their history, and they saw no problem in embellishing them for the greater glory of the *polis*."

Treatment of the visual aspect of the presentation of Greek myth continues in Ada Cohen's "Mythic Landscapes of Greece"; Cohen offers an insightful look at the use of landscape – caves, countryside, the Underworld, mountains, and so on – vis-à-vis mythic representation in both literature and art, exploring the "intersection of narrative and description in light of common as well as rarely depicted myths in painting and sculpture." Pausanias, the second-century AD periegetic (travel) author, is an important literary source for Cohen and other scholars of mythic landscape – a source with a retrospective view: "When invoking landmark single trees and groves as noteworthy spatial markers . . . Pausanias, to whom we owe much of our knowledge of ancient sites and now-lost monuments, did not linger on their greenery or on the flowers and fruits they produced, but on their cultic associations as well as associations with important events of the classical past." The use of landscape in ancient Greek art is surprisingly limited; when landscape elements are depicted, it is by utilizing "a restrained repertoire and a symbolic employment of landscape." Even so, Cohen argues, there is in Greek art "a rich and viable conception of landscape." She concludes that "in all cases artists took for granted their audiences' deep familiarity with the Greek landscape and asked the imagination to fill the voids. This situation is in the end not so different from that of mythical discourse itself, whose multiple versions were the result of traditions colliding with individual tellers' points of view and emphases."

It is with a contrastive reference to this Roman-era Greek, Pausanias, and the "matrix of myth and memories" that Pausanias invokes for the various *poleis* he visits, that Jonathan Hall begins his essay on "Politics and Greek Myth" ("The fact is that myth meant something

entirely different to the Greeks of Pausanias' generation than it had to their ancestors"). The political uses of myth that Hall addresses – "myth's capacity to charter and justify changing political circumstances" – are, he argues, grounded in myth's ideological character and its existence as a productive symbolic system (analogous to the system of *langue* and *parole* of Saussurian structural linguistics): "Through the dynamic dialectic between narrator and audience, traditional materials could be reconfigured and modulated to stake claims about the natural order and to advance partisan interests and it is precisely myth's ideological character that made it so effective in the practice of ancient Greek politics." The mutability and adaptability of myth is foregrounded, again, as Hall presents his readers with three case studies: these involve the Spartan and Argive use of "mythical prototypes of alliances to justify their own claims to Peloponnesian hegemony in the mid-sixth century"; the Athenian Pisistratus' capitalizing upon Theseus as "an attractive prototype of the strong, wise, and just leader" and his elevation of "Theseus to Panathenaic status"; and the fifth-century "orientalization" of the Trojans, consequent, chiefly, to the second Persian War.

A. J. Boyle's "Ovid and Greek Myth," the concluding chapter of Part Two, which moves the reader squarely into Imperial Rome, brings this aspect of Greek myth into the sharpest focus yet: "Much of the discursive and political use of Greek myth was made possible by its separation from Roman ritual, its function in Roman intellectual life as an instrument of thinking. By Roman intellectuals Greek myth was generally regarded as *fabulae*, a collection of fictions." "[Ovid] is fully aware of the contemporary categorisation of myth as fiction. . . . His interest in myth is neither religious nor ritualistic, but poetic." With regard specifically to Ovid's sardonic literary response to Augustus' moral legislation ("The transformation of adultery and other forms of transgressive fornication [*stuprum*] into crimes with severe penalties imposed by a special permanent court [*quaestio perpetua*] suddenly made sexual morality and practice subject to political control"), Boyle observes, "The poet develops his subversion of Augustan sexual codes by turning to Greek myth – to the famous adulteress Helen"; that Ovid should have invoked the unfaithful wife of Menelaus "not as a denunciation of adulterers but rather as a text pontificating on the excusability, even innocence, of certain kinds of adultery, astonishes": thus, Boyle concludes, "Myth's paradigmatic function dissolves into political and social critique." Ovid's stinging political critiques can, already in the first century, make recourse to the *otherness* of Greek myth: "What Ovid presents in *Metamorphoses* is a world of unaccountable otherness, in which controllers of that

world and the putative guardians of its morality exemplify the vices they condemn."

A work of central interest to Boyle is *Heroides*, "an early work of Ovid and a self-proclaimed revolutionary one (*Ars* 3.346), in which a whole collection of poems focusses on the female voice, female memory, and female desire." These, in turn, are issues on which the first chapter of section three, *Reception*, has direct bearing – "Women and Greek Myth" by Vanda Zajko, an essay that explores "some of the tensions surrounding the descriptions of stories about women as being 'pro' or 'anti' women and the ideological entailments of such descriptions." One of the issues with which Zajko deals is central to all of the chapters of Part Three, and indeed one that we have repeatedly encountered in the first two Parts – that of the "rewriting of myth." At what point does the "rewriting" of a myth create something that is fundamentally different from that myth? Is the result of the "rewriting" still "myth" – still *muthos*? These are questions with which the reader of this *Companion* will have to grapple. Zajko herself chooses to paint with the broader stroke: "But tradition can be seen as a less static concept that is, and always has been, reshaped and reenergised by continual retellings. Doherty's statement that 'the modern rewritings of myths is a continuation of ancient practice' [(2001) 10] subscribes to this kind of notion and emphasises that ancient poets and artists freely imported the issues of their own times into their treatments of myth."

"Let Us Make Gods in Our Image," David Brumble's contribution on Greek myth in Medieval and Renaissance literature, follows. Allegorical interpretation of the ancient myths is the hallmark of these materials, whose authors and readers often assume a composite and variegated profile of Greek mythic figures – the product of the deposition of layers of interpretative accretion, one upon another: "Theseus appears in the 'Knight's Tale.' A good classical dictionary would not tell us that Chaucer's readers might have interpreted Theseus as a wisdom figure; as an example of perfect friendship, of the ideal ruler, of the unfaithful lover; as a type for God or Christ; as an allegorical figure for the balance of the active and contemplative lives." In keeping with the Medieval Christian tradition of interpreting Old Testament figures typologically (i.e., as "types"), "Deucalion was a type of Noah"; "Hippolytus . . . could be a type of Joseph"; "Hippolytus, Theseus, Hercules, Orpheus, and many others served as types of Christ." Among interpretative methods utilized was that one dubbed "fourfold allegory," involving allegorical readings at different levels simultaneously – a method readily associated with Dante; though, Brumble reminds his

readers, "fourfold allegory is just one expression of the Medieval and Renaissance inclination to multiple interpretation."

Sarah Brown treats the literary response to Greek myth from the seventeenth century onward in her "Hail Muse! *et cetera*: Greek Myth in English and American Literature": "Many of the most interesting responses to Greek myth register its polyvalency, and display a corresponding ambivalence towards their sources, a combination of reverence and antagonism." The interpretative tradition of this era is clearly heir to the past, but is also, one might say, "reactive" (the editor's term, not the author's): "Mythology is central to the works of Pope, Keats, Pound, Toni Morrison, and Carol Ann Duffy, *inter alia*, but each of these writers figures his or her relationship with the classical past in a distinctive way." Brown demonstrates that the pendulum has oscillated between what she aptly likens to the Protestant and Catholic aspects of Christianity: "Whereas some writers appear to seek an unmediated correspondence with an 'authentic' and pristine past, wherever possible sloughing off intervening layers of adaptation and reception, for others Greek myth represents a continuous tradition whose origins may certainly be traced back to Homer, Hesiod, Euripides, et al., but which owes at least as crucial a debt to such mediating forces as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton." In part, these oscillations reflect a resurgence of literary awareness of and interest in Greek-language, as opposed to Latinized, mythic materials: "Gradually, over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, interest in Greek antiquities, literature and society intensified, and a movement away from Roman culture towards Greek can be identified, although the shift was not stark or absolute." Still – the pendulum has momentum; in commenting on the monologues in Duffy's *The World's Wife*, Brown observes: "They emerge from the strong late-twentieth-century reawakening of interest in classical myth, in part a response to Ted Hughes's much praised *Tales from Ovid*. (We seemed to have returned to the Renaissance preference for Latinised mythology.)"

The *Companion* concludes with Martin Winkler's treatment of the portrayal of myth in cinema, "Greek Mythology on the Screen." The interpretative dimension of Greek mythic tradition is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than here: "Cinema and its offspring, television, have proven the most fertile ground for reimagining and reinventing antiquity." As Winkler tells us – and as the reader will have by now observed many times over – "the tradition of imagining alternatives to well-attested and even canonical versions of myth goes back to antiquity itself. . . . This tradition has never ceased." The phenomenon of contemporary cinematic reinterpretation, Winkler continues, citing Italian