

Preliminary Remarks

Abbreviations of ancient Greek and Roman authors and their works follow the conventions of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (OCD). Translations from Ancient Greek are mine unless otherwise noted. The spelling of mythical names follows the practice by Jenny March in *The Penguin Book of Classical Myths* (March 2009: 7): characters and places are by default spelt in their original Greek rather than their Latinized form (thus, e.g., ‘Klytaimnestra’, not ‘Clytemnestra’) unless the Latinized form is so established that the original Greek would appear obscure (thus, e.g., ‘Oedipus’, not ‘Oidipus’).

1 Mapping the Territory: Myth and Diachronic Narratology

1.1 What Is (a) Myth?

There are things in the world about which we seemingly know what they are, yet we are unable to define them adequately. Big universal ideas such as ‘love’, ‘truth’ and ‘culture’ are obvious such cases; and, at the time of writing – that is, about two years after the public launch of ChatGPT – concepts such as ‘life’, ‘intelligence’ and ‘consciousness’ also spring to mind. Admittedly, ‘myth’ and ‘mythology’ are perhaps not comparably burning topic of the day, but they nevertheless belong in the same category: for we all believe to know what a myth is – until we are asked to provide a precise definition of it. But how and why exactly do we know that the story of the Argonauts and their quest for the Golden Fleece is a myth, while the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs or that of Perceval and his search for the Holy Grail are not? We cannot immerse ourselves into the intricacies of all the similarities and differences between myth, fairy tale and legend here; however, recognizing the notorious difficulty of defining ‘myth’, along with the necessity to juxtapose the genre with other – related, but different – genres and modes of narration, must at least be acknowledged.¹ Frustratingly, a look into the work of scholars of myth is of little help; on the contrary, the deeper one examines theories of myth, the more complex the picture becomes, because there is simply no scholarly consensus as to what a myth is.² And indeed, as early as 1974, the

¹ On the differences between myth and fairytale and/or legend, see e.g. Jolles (1930: 23–125); Dowden (1992: 6–7); Renger (2006: 70–105 *et passim*); Neumann (2013 *passim*); Zgoll (2019: 205–246). On definitions of ‘myth’ by comparison with other areas of study, see also Wellek & Warren (1970: 190): “‘Myth’ ... points to, hovers over, an important area of meaning, shared by religion, folklore, anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, and the fine arts. In some of its habitual oppositions, it is contraposed to “history”, or to “science”, or to “philosophy”, or to “allegory” or to “truth”.”

² Gentile (2011) provides an insightful compilation of definitions, showing the wide variety of differing views. See further also, e.g., Honko (1972); Kirk (1973); Rogerson (1978–79); Dowden (1992: 3–7); Von Hendy (2001: 1–48); Csapo (2005: 1–9); Johnston (2018: 1–22).

British classicist Geoffrey S. Kirk stated that ‘the nature of myth is still, in spite of the millions of printed words devoted to it, a confused topic’ (Kirk 1974: 17) – an observation to which we can only add that another few millions of words on the topic have been printed in the meantime, only to reinforce and aggravate the problem identified by Kirk more than fifty years ago.

According to the *Greek-English Lexicon* by Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott and Sir Henry Stuart Jones (LSJ), the Ancient Greek noun *mýthos* (μῦθος) has a wide range of meanings; it designates, inter alia, a ‘tale’, a ‘story’, a ‘narrative’ or simply ‘fiction’. In other words, *mýthos* encompasses anything that we would typically look for, and find, in the ‘Fiction’ section of a bookstore today. Already in antiquity, the Greek historians Herodotus (c. 484–425 BCE) and Thucydides (c. 460–400 BCE) used the term to denote an implausible tale without sufficient validity (Hdt. 2.35, 2.45.1; Thuc. 1.22.4) – a tale that may make a good story, but that cannot constitute the basis of historical investigation. And, along similar lines, the geographer Strabo (c. 64 BCE–c. CE 24) defined myths as ‘things that are old, fabricated and marvellous’, as opposed to history, which ‘seeks the truth, no matter whether old or new’ (*Geography* 11.5.3). So, even if modern scholarship does not agree on a clear-cut definition, we can agree that our understanding of myth is considerably narrower than this broad definition (otherwise, Snow White and Perceval would indeed fall into the same category). The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines ‘myth’ as ‘a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon’.³ Similarly, the American folklorist Alan Dundes, in the introduction to a collection of essays, defines myth even more succinctly, but aptly, as ‘a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form’ (Dundes 1984b: 1). And indeed, almost all definitions, different as they may be in their details and their theoretical or ideological fundament, somehow relate myth to a ‘time before time’,⁴ combined with one or the other form of explanatory function (called ‘aetiology’), and involving divinities and/or other human-like, supernatural beings.

The involvement of the divine sphere as a characteristic trait of myth undoubtedly indicates that there is an inherent relation between mythology and religion. This, in turn, begs the question as to how the two areas relate

³ ‘Mythology’, in turn, is defined correspondingly as ‘a body or collection of myths, esp[ecially] those relating to a particular person or thing, or belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition’.

⁴ On the close relation between mythology and historiography in antiquity, and the idea of myth as a form of ‘early history’, see e.g. Graf (1993 [1987]: 121–141).

to – and correlate with – each other. Clearly, one is not identical with the other, but one is not thinkable without the other either. The probably most memorable, and surely the most cited, explanation is that by the American historian of religion Joseph Campbell, who regards myth as ‘other people’s religion’ and religion as ‘misunderstood mythology’, ‘the misunderstanding consisting in the interpretation of mythic metaphors as references to hard fact’ (Campbell 2002 [1986]: 27). And, whether we like it or not, Campbell does have a point; for indeed, I as a Christian (for example) would not be inclined to call the stories of the Old Testament ‘myths’, but at the same time I cannot deny the fact that (to pick a random example) the story of Moses’ abandonment on the waters of the Nile strongly resembles, and in fact is structurally identical with, the myth of the abandonment of Romulus and Remus on the Tiber (or that of Oedipus in the woods). This understanding takes me to what I want to propose as my own definition of mythology: mythology is the narrative side of religion.⁵ Religion, on the other hand, is mythology that is believed in and/or played out in performance. The performative side of religion is ritual; and ritual reconnected to myth raises a typical chicken-and-hen-problem – namely, what was first? The Dutch historian of religion Jan N. Bremmer summarizes the problem as follows:

Although myths existed without rituals and rituals without myths, the two symbolic systems were often interrelated. This relationship is only gradually becoming clearer and is still the subject of lively debate. In the course of time, three possibilities have been suggested: ritual follows the pattern of myth; ritual generates myth; and ritual and myth arise at the same time, *pari passu*. (Bremmer 2021: 72–73)

A discussion of this complex debate and its long history would take us too far away from the focus of this introduction; suffice it to say that the ritual approach to the study of myth is not currently *à la mode* (and is not the focus of this Element either),⁶ but nevertheless cannot go unmentioned in a discussion of questions relating to the definition of myth and mythology. What is crucial to be aware of, in any case, is, again, the aetiological aspect: the triangle ‘religion – mythology – ritual’ works only through the aetiological ‘grease’.⁷ Myths explain the world as it is on the basis of what happened in the past (within the system of mythology,

⁵ The narrative nature of mythology is also at the heart of Northrop Frye’s approach (Frye 1957: 131–239), according to whom all forms of literature and storytelling ultimately stem from myth, irrespective of the medium through which they are communicated (textually, orally, visually etc.).

⁶ On the debate and its history, see e.g. Versnel (1993: 15–88); Von Hendy (2001: 77–112); Kowalzig (2007: 13–55); Bremmer (2010); Johnston (2018: 35–64); Bremmer (2021: 72–76); Edmunds (2021: 80–93).

⁷ Contrast e.g. Johnston (2018: 58–64), who considers aetiology to be less important than generally considered, in my opinion playing down its importance too strongly.

references to an even earlier past – a mythical plupast – are not uncommon either, for example, when the heroes of Homer's *Iliad* talk about the good old days when their stronger and taller ancestors were still alive and active). Often, such explanations concern the presence and the functioning of an oracle, a cult, a festival and so on but also other things like, for example, natural phenomena and stellar constellations. An instructive and well-known example is the Eleusinian Mysteries, a cult of Demeter and Persephone at the Panhellenic Sanctuary of Eleusis near Athens, the origins of which are explained by the aetiological narration of Demeter's attempt to nurse and thus deify Demophon, the son of king Keleos of Eleusis, as recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (lines 231–255).⁸ Some theoreticians of myth even go a step further and claim that mythic narration embedded in a ritualized setting had the potential to concretely influence and change the world view, at times even the actual behaviour, of its audience.⁹ To summarize, we can say that through aetiology, myth and ritual acquire meaning and are concatenated with each other, and the present of a society and its views and values are thus connected to and explained by the past.

Finally, a word on scope: this Element is concerned with diachronic narratology in Greek myth – whereby 'Greek' refers to the culture of ancient Greece from the first written sources (i.e. Homer's epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, dated, very approximately, to c. 700 BCE) all the way through to what is commonly considered the nodal point between late antiquity and the early Byzantine era (which is – again, very approximately – set at c. CE 500; in terms of literary history, the gargantuan epic *Dionysiaca* by Nonnus of Panopolis often serves as a landmark). This Element does, however, not include the sphere of Roman mythology (nor the mythologies from any other culture, for that matter). Although Roman mythology was heavily influenced by Greek mythology, it has its decidedly own texture, its own twist. On the other hand, although the general considerations about the nature of mythology as delineated above are based on my reading and thinking about Greek mythology, I would nevertheless make a claim for a certain universal validity of them as far as the general outline is concerned – for the simple reason that the mentioned triangle 'religion – mythology – ritual' is of such a general nature that it seems difficult to imagine a culture that would not possess each of these aspects at least in its nucleus. Or, to put it in slightly different terms: as both religion and storytelling are universal to all human cultures, it must be concluded that the same applies to ritual practice and, above all, to mythology.¹⁰

⁸ See e.g. Deichgräber (1950); Walton (1952); Richardson (1974: 231–242); Foley (1994: 65–75, 84–97).

⁹ Claude Calame calls this the 'pragmatic effect' (see especially Calame 2009a [2000] and Calame 2011; Johnston 2015a: 14–16 for a critical discussion).

¹⁰ On the evolutionary origins (and hence archetypal nature) of religion, see e.g. Boyer (2001).

1.2 What Is (Diachronic) Narratology?

Narratology is the systematic study and analysis of the mechanisms and parameters that constitute storytelling.¹¹ Since storytelling is an archetypal human activity, we can find narratives in all cultures, at all times and on all levels of complexity. Consequently, a narratological analysis can in principle be applied to any type of narrative, be it the bedtime stories parents tell their children or James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* (1922), with all its finicky intricacies. And, narratology is equally timeless, meaning that, for example, the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh (dated to between c. 2100 and 1200 BCE) can be subject to a narratological study as much as the crime novels that are published here in Norway every year shortly before Easter ('Easter crime' being a uniquely Norwegian phenomenon).

In what follows, I provide a 'laundry list' of the most important parameters that are typically studied and analysed by narratologists, together with the most common terms that are used to describe the corresponding phenomena:

- 1) *Narrators and narratees*. Narratologists distinguish between the actual author of a text and the voice of the narrator that tells a story (in addition, sometimes the concept of the 'implied author' is added between the flesh-and-blood author and the narrator-figure of a text).¹² Another important distinction is that between the *homodiegetic narrator*, designating a narrator who is also a character in the story he/she tells, and the *heterodiegetic narrator*, who remains outside the story frame recounted.¹³ Also of importance is the differentiation between the *primary narrator* (i.e. the narrator

¹¹ The following sketch is by no means meant to be an encyclopaedic introduction to the vast field of narratology; what follows are the basics that allow the reader to understand the fundament of this essay. There are several giants upon whose shoulders narratological theory of the twentieth century rests; see, inter alia and especially, Lämmert (1955); Hamburger (1973 [1968]); Chatman (1978); Genette (1980 [1972]); Booth (1983); Stanzel (1984 [1979]); Genette (1988 [1983]); Phelan & Rabinowitz (2005); Altman (2008); Fludernik (2009 [2006]); Bal (2017); Martínez & Scheffel (2019). For narratology in/and Classics, see especially Schmitz (2007 [2002]: 43–62); de Jong (2014a); de Jong (2019). For the terminology used, see the glossaries provided by de Jong (2001: xi–xix); Phelan & Rabinowitz (2005: 542–551); Fludernik (2009 [2006]: 150–162). See also the narratological dictionary by Prince (2003) and the online resource *The living handbook of narratology (LHN)*.

¹² The concept of the implied author goes back to Booth (1983), but despite its usefulness (it helps us to talk about the author-figure without entering the realms of speculation about authorial intention), it is not universally accepted by narratologists. See e.g. Kindt & Müller (1999) and Heinen (2002) for discussions. An analogous concept is that of the implied reader: a hypothetical reader figure projected through the text (Iser 1974 [1972]).

¹³ This comes close to, but is not fully congruent with, the distinction between first-person-narration and third-person-narration (on which see e.g. Stanzel 1984 [1979]: 80–88, 91–93 *et passim*). There is always an 'I' in a text, even if it does not participate in the events of the story, such as e.g. in Homer's *Iliad*, which clearly has a heterodiegetic narrator, but the 'I' still emerges from the narrator's call to the Muses at *Il.* 2.484–493.

sensu stricto, often described as ‘auctorial’ and/or ‘omniscient’) and the *secondary narrator* (i.e. a narratorial voice that is inserted into the main narrative, e.g. through the direct speech of a character telling a story in the story). On the other end, the *narratee* of a text is the hypothetical person to whom a story is told – who may, but need not, be identical with a text’s actual reader (an obvious example to illustrate this point would be if someone secretly reads a letter that was in fact addressed to someone else).

- 2) *Focalization*. Focalization designates ‘[t]he perspective in terms of which the narrated situation and events are presented’ (Prince 2003: 31); hence, the focalizer of a text is a figure (the narrator or a character in the story) through whose eyes the story is told and the events unfolding are seen. A common distinction is that between *external focalization* (i.e. an outside perspective on the text and its characters) and *internal focalization* (i.e. a from-within perspective, typically by a character of the story world). Further, one speaks of *embedded focalization* when the two levels are merged, be it when a character’s viewpoint is embedded into the otherwise external focalization by the narrator, be it when narratorial (‘auctorial’) knowledge sneaks in to the speech of a character who thus knows more than he/she can in fact know.¹⁴ In contrast, when the reader has more information than the character(s) in a text, one speaks of *dramatic irony*. Focalization can change in the course of a narrative.
- 3) *Narrative levels*. Narratologists distinguish between different types of narrative levels in relation to their fictional and/or ontological status. The *diegetic level* is the fictional frame of a story, the fictional world of all the characters and their fictional reality. The real world outside is correspondingly called the *extradiegetic level*. An extra narrative level embedded into the diegetic world is called the *intradiegetic level* (or *metadiegetic level*); consequently, a secondary narrator can also be called an intradiegetic (or metadiegetic) narrator. The diegetic and the extradiegetic levels are normally kept separate; when they are blended, a surprise effect arises – this is called a *metalepsis* or (somewhat more broadly) a *crossover* (a striking example would be the famous cameo appearances by Alfred Hitchcock in his films: a figure from the extradiegetic level intruding into the diegetic level).
- 4) *Time*. There are several important narrative aspects, and corresponding narratological concepts, related to time. First, there is the crucial distinction between *story time* and *narrating time*, the former relating to the time span covered by a given story, the latter to the actual time it takes to tell the story

¹⁴ For further refinements of the concept of focalization, see e.g. Jahn (1999) and Nieragden (2002).

(a perspicuous example to illustrate this difference would be that of a play, the duration of which [= narrating time] may be about two hours, yet the play might cover events that span over several months or years in total [= story time]).¹⁵ Secondly, and in close connection to the aforementioned point, there is also the question of narrative speed – the narration of an event can be extended (*extension*), compressed (*compression*), summarized (*summary*) or omitted entirely (*ellipsis*). Thirdly, the temporal order in which events are narrated also constitutes a crucial narrative parameter. The most basic order of narration is narration in chronological order (the default mode of storytelling children use: ‘and then ... and then ...’). On the other hand, non-chronological storytelling (*anachrony*) also occurs; here an important distinction is that between *prolepsis* (foreshadowing: a pointing-forward to events ahead in time), *analepsis* (flashback/backshadowing: a pointing-backward to events that have already taken place) and *sideshadowing* (i.e. an allusion to an alternative version of a story or story detail that could have taken place, but did not happen). Finally, questions relating to when the narration of a story begins (*beginning*, *opening*) and when it ends (*ending*, *closure*) also belong to this category.

- 5) *Space*. Space as a narrative parameter is crucial for the simple reason that a fictional story world does not exist without a space within which the story unfolds and their characters can exist and act; ‘all narratives imply a world with spatial extension, even when spatial information is withheld’ (Ryan 2014: 796).¹⁶ A narratological analysis of spatial parameters may for example look at how characters move in their space, how boundaries shape the narrative frame, how a change of location corresponds and/or contributes to the narrative development and how descriptions of spatial entities create a reality effect (*effet de réel*).¹⁷ A term that is often used to denote the whereabouts of a scene in a story is *setting*. A literary topos that is intrinsically connected to space is that of the *locus amoenus*: an idealized, beautiful, paradise-like place; this topos is often combined with the practice of literary description (*ekphrasis*).
- 6) *Character*. The study of literary characters is a tricky matter because literary characters resemble – but in fact are not – flesh-and-blood people. However, in narratology, characters are understood as narrative entities as much as, for

¹⁵ See Müller 1948.

¹⁶ The study of space entered narratology relatively late, and its inclusion into the field is now commonly referred to as the ‘spatial turn’. Important studies include Zoran (1984); Dennerlein (2009); Hallet & Neumann (2009); Warf & Arias (2009). On the spatial turn in cultural studies more broadly, see e.g. Weigel (2002).

¹⁷ The concept of the *effet de réel* stems from Barthes (1968). An insightful discussion of the functions of space in ancient narrative is offered by Lowe (2000: 41–46).