

Chapter 1 : Gregory Nagy, Greek Mythology & Poetics

A path-breaking application of the principles of social anthropology, comparative mythology, historical linguistics, and oral poetry theory to the study of classics, Greek Mythology and Poetics will be an invaluable resource for classicists and other scholars of linguistics and literary theory.

Poetry and the Ideology of the Polis, pp. In this sense, it is appropriate to think of comparative mythology, more broadly, as comparative philology: The comparative approach, as we shall see, gives a vision of epic that is significantly different from the picture emerging from a "separatist" approach that restricts the field of vision to Homeric standards. What comparative philology teaches us is that epic is a reflection not so much of historical events as of myth. According to this scheme, epic allows myth to take precedence over reality as we know it. Even where epic utilizes the raw material of real events, the argument goes, it will reshape these events to accommodate the requirements of myth. This insight from comparative mythology concerning myth is a far cry from our own contemporary usage of the word "myth," which conveys the opposite of reality. Myth, in societies where it exists as a living tradition, must not be confused with fiction, which is a matter of individual and personal creativity. Rather, myth represents a collective expression of society, an expression that society itself deems to be true and valid. From the standpoint of the given society that it articulates, myth is the primary reality. Myth is applied narrative. Myth describes a meaningful and important reality that applies to the aggregate, going beyond the individual. There are serious problems, however, in connecting the epic traditions of ancient Greece with those of other societies belonging to the Indo-European language family. Whereas the archaeology of the second millennium has encouraged students of Hellas to concentrate on the historical realities found in Greek epic, the archaeology of the eighth century may lead them to perceive the mythmaking framework that integrates these realities. For a working definition of "ritual," I choose the following formulation: As communication and social imprinting, ritual establishes and secures the solidarity of the closed group. Even in cases where a given society deems a given ritual to be static and never changing, it may in fact be dynamic and ever changing, responding to the ever-changing structure of the society that it articulates. Besides the cult of gods, another example of interplay between polis and pan-Hellenism in Homeric poetry is its attitude toward the cult of heroes. The strong eighth-century upsurge in the local cults of heroes can thus be viewed as a phenomenon parallel to—rather than derivative from—the pan-Hellenic epics of heroes, namely, the Iliad and Odyssey. Thus the ideological heritage of Greek heroes may still in principle be reconstructed as Indo-European in character. But there are problems in extracting comparative evidence about the hero from Greek epic, especially about the religious dimension of the hero. It is worth stressing that the hero as a figure of cult must be local because it is a fundamental principle in Greek religion that his supernatural power is local. Still, we may expect to find at least latent traces of this religious dimension within the Homeric poems. I have in fact produced a book with this expectation in mind. What I would add here is that this same pattern is central to the narrative traditions of Greek epic in particular, as exemplified in the Iliad and Odyssey. There is a striking attestation of all three levels in the Homeric Hymn to Herakles Hymn 15, which can be described as a brief and stylized prayer in worship of the hero Herakles, invoked as the son of Zeus verses 1 and 9 and implored to grant success and wealth 9. Hesiod Works and Days

Let us compare the verses beginning the Odyssey: Many are the men whose cities he saw, and he came to know their way of thinking, and many are the pains that he suffered at sea. There is a striking reflex of this state of affairs on the formal level of poetic diction. It is as if the Indo-European model of hero were no longer appropriate for the Homeric tradition of epic narrative, whereas it remained so for other poetic traditions such as the Hesiodic. At verses 95 and following, we find a tightly compressed narrative about the beginnings of the Trojan War: By good fortune, a corresponding passage is attested in a fragment from the epic Cycle, specifically from the beginning of the epic Cypris F 1 Allen. And yet the general themes shared by these Cyclic and Hesiodic passages are distinctly Indo-European in character. As the Iliad puts it, the Judgment of Paris entailed the blaming of the goddesses Hera and Athena along with the praising of Aphrodite: Thus the primary narrative of Greek epic, which is the Trojan War, is self-motivated by the Indo-European social

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principle of counterbalancing praise and blame. Paris the herdsman is being offered a gift from each of the three functions: More broadly, Homer can be judged an authoritative source for the myths inherited by and through the Greek language. A notable example is Page N b, reviewing Detienne , and Martin On the truth-value of myth: My translation, with slight modifications, of Burkert b. Parry collected works and Lord My model for a sensible deployment of this word is Lord Snodgrass see esp. For a reappraisal, stressing regional variations, see Whitley Further discussion in N a ch. On the antagonism of Achilles and Apollo, I refer again to N a ch. It is fitting that a complex figure like Odysseus should have more than one divine antagonist. On the implicit antagonism between Odysseus and Athena, see Clay The nonspecialization of the Herakles figure in comparison with the main heroes of attested Greek epic suggests that the Herakles theme may be appropriate to poetic forms other than epic: More on these heroes at p. More on this passage in N a. More in N pp.

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