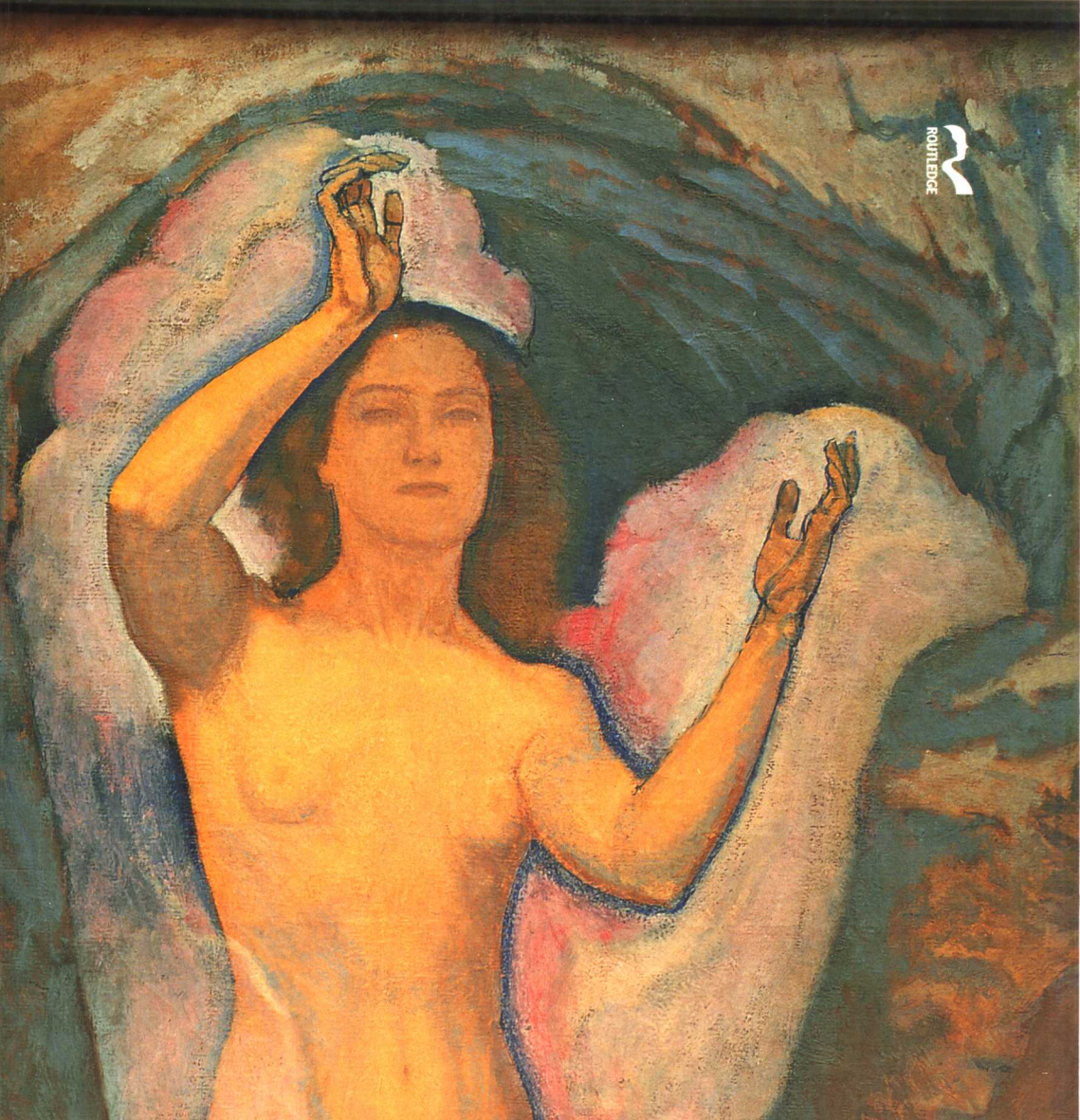edited by GEOFFREY MILES

A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY

CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

ROUTLEDGE

CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

A critical anthology

Edited by Geoffrey Miles

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PREFACE

This book has grown out of an undergraduate course on 'Classical Traditions in English Literature' which I have taught for several years at Victoria University of Wellington. One of the aims of the course was to take a handful of classical myths and trace the ways in which they had been reworked and reinterpreted by writers in English from the Middle Ages to the 1990s. I quickly discovered that, though there were many texts on classical mythology and some excellent studies of the reception of particular myths, there was no anthology which brought together the kind of material I wished to teach. So, with scissors and paste, I started assembling my own anthology, which has evolved into this volume.

The enormous number and diversity of English rewritings of classical myth has meant that the volume has swelled in size and narrowed in range, until it now covers just three myths: those of Orpheus, Venus and Adonis, and Pygmalion. Needless to say, these three do not adequately represent the whole of Greek mythology – but then no selection could. They do, however, have sufficient thematic links (as I have suggested in chapter 1) to make interesting comparisons possible, while their popularity with English writers and readers has allowed the inclusion of a wide range of texts, both famous and obscure. I hope, if this volume finds a market among teachers and students, to follow it up with further volumes covering other myths – the great heroic sagas, for instance, or the Trojan War, or the women of Greek mythology.

In selecting texts, my main principle has been to represent as fully as possible the variety of different interpretations and treatments, together with their chronological span and geographical range (Scottish, Irish, American, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand writers are represented). Most of the great canonical writers of English literature find a place here, but mingled with the minor, the unknown, and the positively bizarre. Indeed, I have regretfully abridged some of the more famous (but easily accessible) texts in order to make space for lesser texts that provide interesting comparisons and contexts: Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* is familiar, but readers are less likely to stumble across (say) Bartholomew Griffin, Richard Barnfield, William Browne, or Thomas Heywood. However, nothing has been included that I did not think worth reading in its own right (even if occasionally for its entertaining badness),

rather than as mere historical background. The introductions to each chapter sketch a context for the texts and glance at other texts not included (bibliographical information is supplied in the list of 'Other Versions' at the end of each chapter).

Wherever possible the texts have been newly edited from the original editions. My aim has been to minimise artificial obstacles between students and the texts. To that end, spelling has been consistently modernised in all post-medieval texts (including Spenser – it seems pedantic to maintain Spenser's deliberately archaic spellings when his work is already so genuinely archaic to present-day students). Punctuation has also been freely modernised in texts before 1800; after that date I have retained the original punctuation apart from altering some obsolete forms (such as the comma–dash combination). To the same end I have provided fairly detailed footnotes, as well as marginal glosses (marked >) for Middle English or Scots texts. From experience in teaching many of these texts, I have erred on the side of over- rather than under-annotation; I hope those who do not need the assistance will bear with the irritation of being told what they already know.

Sources of copyright material are acknowledged in the footnotes to the relevant texts. It has not been possible to trace all copyright holders before this book went to press. The editor and publishers will gladly insert further acknowledgements in subsequent editions.

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Geoffrey Miles
Wellington, July 1998

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Part 1

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THE MYTH-KITTY

> As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own sole
> freshly created universe, and therefore have no belief in 'tradition' or a
> common myth-kitty . . . To me the whole of the ancient world, the whole
> of classical and biblical mythology, means very little, and I think that
> using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots but dodges the
> poet's duty to be original.
>
> (Larkin 1983: 69)

Philip Larkin's dismissal of the notion of a 'myth-kitty' raises a real question.
Why, at the start of the twenty-first century, should writers, readers, or students
of English literature still be taking an interest in the fantastic tales told by Greek
peasants three millennia ago? Why should I, at a university on the Pacific rim
twelve thousand miles from Mount Olympus, be compiling yet another volume
about the classical myths and their influence?

  The shortest answer is that, despite Larkin's disbelief, a classical 'tradition'
does exist: a continuous line of inheritance and influence connects ancient
Greece and Rome with the modern 'western' world, shaping our arts, our instuti-
tions, our values and philosophies. One small aspect of that tradition has been
the use of classical mythology in English literature. For many centuries writers in
English have been able to draw upon a common stock of mythological stories,
characters, and images – a 'myth-kitty', to use Larkin's derisive term – in the
confidence that their readers will recognise and understand their allusions. In the
words of the critic George Steiner,

> From Chaucer to [Eliot's] *Sweeney among the Nightingales* much of English
> poetry has relied on a code of instantaneous recognition. Where the
> code lapses . . . a good deal of the poetry may lapse too.
>
> (Quoted in Radice 1973: 13)

For educated readers from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century, a
reference to (say) Hercules, or Venus, or Helen, or the sack of Troy, could be
relied on to produce 'instantaneous recognition' – not an anxious search of

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school memories for a vaguely familiar name, but the involuntary and subliminal flash of images and associations that a modern reader would have on encountering the name of (say) Superman, or Sherlock Holmes, or Marilyn Monroe. Hence mythological references can work as a language, a 'code', to communicate instant and vivid meaning. When Hamlet describes his mother at his father's funeral as 'like Niobe, all tears', or says that his hated uncle is 'no more like my father / Than I to Hercules' (*Hamlet*, 1. 2. 149, 152–3), he is invoking mythical archetypes: Hercules, the strongest and bravest of men; Niobe, who wept for her children's deaths until she turned to stone, the ultimate in grief and misery. The mythic allusions, set against the realities of Hamlet's own situation, convey his disillusionment and self-loathing with extraordinary vividness and economy – so long as the audience understands the code.

The language or code of mythology, however, is not a fixed one. The mythic images may remain stable and simple, but the interpretation of the stories shifts from period to period and from writer to writer. For instance, the image of Orpheus the musician has remained more or less stable over the centuries (though his lyre may change to a lute, a violin, or an electric guitar), but the meaning of his story shifts radically. For the Greeks, he was a religious teacher and mystic; for the Romans, a tragically bereaved lover. In the Middle Ages he may be a symbol of sinful man trying to save his soul from hell, or of Christ successfully saving human souls. In the Renaissance he is a symbol of cosmic order and harmony. In the eighteenth century he is the great civiliser, bringing order and culture to society. In the nineteenth century he is again primarily the tragic lover. In the twentieth century he may be a fearless explorer of the darkness of the soul, a symbol of the limitations of human art, a revolutionary liberator, or an arrogant male chauvinist. To study the evolution of a single myth over time reveals not only the richness and adaptability of the myths, but also the characteristic themes and preoccupations of successive literary periods.

Moreover, these changing interpretations do not simply displace each other, but rather build up on top of one another, creating increasingly complex layers of meaning. A myth is in a sense a palimpsest – a document that has been repeatedly written over, so that traces of earlier texts can be faintly read beneath the surface text. For instance, a feminist text like Elaine Feinstein's 'The Feast of Eurydice' in a sense depends on the earlier, more heroic views of Orpheus which the reader brings to the poem, and which partly emerge between the lines of the poem itself. The significance of Orpheus, in a twentieth-century text, is potentially a compound of all the various significances he has acquired in earlier texts.

It is, I believe, this combination of simple 'instantaneous recognition' and complex and multiple meanings which makes classical mythology a continuingly popular resource for writers. Even if it were possible for a writer to be, as Larkin demands, totally original, and to create, like God, a 'sole freshly created universe' in every work, such a work would lack the richness and complexity attainable by drawing on the centuries of tradition accumulated around the figures in the 'myth-kitty'.

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The main purpose of this anthology is to bring together versions and rewritings of three major classical myths, starting with the ancient sources and then moving through English literature from the Middle Ages to the present day. The stories are those of Orpheus the musician, Pygmalion the sculptor, and the lovers Venus and Adonis. These are not necessarily 'typical' or 'representative' myths; many typical concerns of Greek mythology – war, heroic quests, hubris and nemesis, the family feud – are barely touched on in them. Nevertheless they are linked by a knot of common concerns which make them interesting to compare: art, and love, and death, and the borderlines between life and death and immortality, and the relationship between the human and the divine. Perhaps more important, each has been treated by a number of major writers across the centuries, making it possible to see how the treatment of each myth shifts with changing literary fashions, moral values, and intellectual concerns.

First, however, the book aims to provide a basic introduction to Greek mythology, a kind of primer to the 'code'. The remainder of this chapter will introduce the principal ancient sources of the myths, and sketch the history of classical mythology in English literature. Chapter 2 will briefly introduce the classical gods, goddesses, and demigods; and chapter 3 is a rapid survey of the whole story of Greek myth, from the creation of the universe down to the foundation of Rome.

The ancient sources of the myths

The ultimate 'source' of the Greek myths is, of course, the people who originally made them up, told them as stories, and passed them on to later generations. That source is inaccessible, though we can speculate about it. Scholars have propounded many views of the origins of myths: that they were pre-scientific attempts to explain the world and its phenomena; that they were aetiological stories, explaining the origins of things; that they acted as 'charters', explaining and justifying social institutions; that they were records of religious rituals, garbled over time into narratives of real events; that they were political propaganda; that they taught moral lessons; that they were historical facts distorted and fantasticated over time into legends of gods and superheroes (this theory is known as Euhemerism after its ancient inventor).

The most sensible view (argued by Kirk 1974) is that myths can be any or all of these things; no single theory can explain all the great variety of traditional stories told by the Greeks or any other people. For example, the figure of Zeus the sky god, gathering clouds and hurling thunderbolts, is clearly a primitive attempt to explain weather. The story of how Zeus was tricked by Prometheus is an aetiological or charter-myth, explaining why the Greeks ate the meat of their sacrificed animals and sent the gods only the smoke and bones. On a higher level, the figure of Zeus as archetypal king, giver of laws, protector of guests and strangers, functions as a kind of moral charter-myth, justifying the importance of law and custom. On the other hand, the stories of Zeus's adulteries with assorted

women and nymphs seem to be told primarily for entertainment – though they may serve both a political purpose (in tracing a historical family back to an ancestor casually begotten by Zeus) and a social purpose (in embodying conventional assumptions about male/female roles and power relationships). No single view of myth will explain all the ways in which the myths about Zeus work.

To take another example: the three myths dealt with in this anthology seem to be of quite different types. The story of Venus and Adonis seems to be an ancient 'explanatory' myth, which traces the fertility of the world to the sexual union of the goddess and her consort, and the cycle of the seasons to the repeated ritual death and rebirth of the young god. The story of Orpheus may be explained in Euhemerist terms: it is possible that he was originally a real person, revered by the Greeks as a poet and religious teacher, who came to be an archetype of the poet-musician and a symbol of the powers and limitations of human art. The story of Pygmalion may have had a ritual origin, in the sacred marriage of a king to the goddess's statue; but it has been thoroughly remade by the poet Ovid into a humorous literary fantasy about art and love. The interesting thing is that all three legends, as retold in classical and English texts, cover almost exactly the same range from profound seriousness to sheer frivolity. The origins of a myth seem to have little to do with how it is treated by later writers.

The primary concern of this book is with the literary uses of myth, and by the time the myths were written down by classical writers they were already generations or centuries removed from the people who had originally created them. For this reason I will spend no more time on the origins of the myths, but turn instead to the literary texts in which they were handed down.

First in age and authority are **Homer**'s two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Almost everything about Homer is debatable, including whether or not he existed; scholars agree that the Homeric poems derive from a tradition of orally improvised poetry, but disagree whether a single author (or two authors) put the poems into their present form. The orthodox current view seems to be that there was a 'Homer' around the end of the eighth century BC. What is indisputable is that the Homeric poems became the basis of Greek literature and education, carrying the combined cultural prestige of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and the Bible for English readers. Both poems deal with the stories of the Trojan War; the *Iliad* focuses on the destructive anger of the Greek warrior Achilles, his quarrel with his commander Agamemnon, and his eventual duel to the death with the Trojan Hector; the *Odyssey* follows a different kind of hero, the patient and resourceful Odysseus, on his journey home after the war. Homer created the classic picture of the Greek heroic age, and also of the very human, quarrelsome and meddling Olympian gods. Other poets completed the '**epic cycle**' by filling in the gaps around the Homeric epics, but these later and lesser poems are now almost entirely lost.

Contemporary with Homer, or a little later, is **Hesiod**. His *Theogony* ('Origin of the Gods') gives the fullest account of the earliest Greek myths, dealing with the creation of the world and the early battles of gods, Titans, and Giants leading

up to the establishment of Zeus as ruler of the universe. His *Works and Days*, a didactic poem about farming life, also includes the myths of Prometheus and Pandora and the Four Ages.

In the so-called 'lyric age' (mid-seventh to mid-fifth centuries), the dominant literary form was song: poems to be publicly sung, either by an individual or by a choir. From the earlier part of this period probably come the **Homeric Hymns** (which, despite their traditional name, have no connection with Homer): choral hymns to various deities, sometimes including vivid retellings of stories about them. The five longest hymns are those to Demeter (telling the story of her search for her lost daughter Persephone), to Apollo (about his birth and the founding of his temple at Delphi), to Hermes (about his mischievous childhood thefts), to Aphrodite (about her love for Anchises), and to Dionysus (about his transformation of a band of pirates into dolphins). Other lyric poets also take their subjects from myth, but the treatment becomes gradually less narrative and more allusive. An early poet like **Stesichorus** writes miniature epics (his lost song about Hercules' battle with Geryon ran to over 1,800 lines); later poets like **Simonides**, **Sappho**, and **Bacchylides** focus on brief, vivid vignettes of mythic scenes and characters. Most subtly, **Pindar** (early fifth century), in his odes in honour of victors at the athletic games, makes an art of quick, glancing allusion to a variety of myths. His audiences were clearly expected to know the stories well enough to pick up the allusions and understand their often oblique and unstated relevance to the subject of the ode.

Myth is also central to classical Athenian drama. The tragic playwrights **Aeschylus** (late sixth to early fifth century), **Sophocles** (fifth century), and **Euripides** (fifth century) took their plots from the age of heroes and the Trojan War, and many of the great tragic stories – Agamemnon and his children, Oedipus, Pentheus, Jason and Medea, Phaedra and Hippolytus – took on their classic form in their plays. The dramatists took stories which were already familiar to their audience, and reinterpreted them in the light of contemporary issues and shifting ethical debates; Euripides' plays about the Trojan War, for instance, clearly offer a commentary on Athens's involvement in the Peloponnesian War. In at least one case – the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides about the revenge of Orestes and Electra – we can see all three dramatists successively reworking a single myth, casting a progressively more 'realistic' and disillusioned eye on the heroic story. The comic playwright **Aristophanes** (fifth to early fourth century) also on occasion plays irreverently with myth, as in *Birds* (in which an Athenian entrepreneur founds a kingdom of the birds and blockades Mount Olympus) or *Frogs* (in which the god Dionysus disguises himself rather unconvincingly as Heracles for a trip to the underworld).

While Greek poets and dramatists were reworking the myths, Greek philosophers were beginning to criticise them. **Plato** (early fourth century), for instance, though he was happy to create his own allegorical myths (such as the vision of Er in the *Republic*), attacked the traditional tales of the gods' tricks and thefts and adulteries as immoral, objected to their central role in literature and