CLIFFS NOTES

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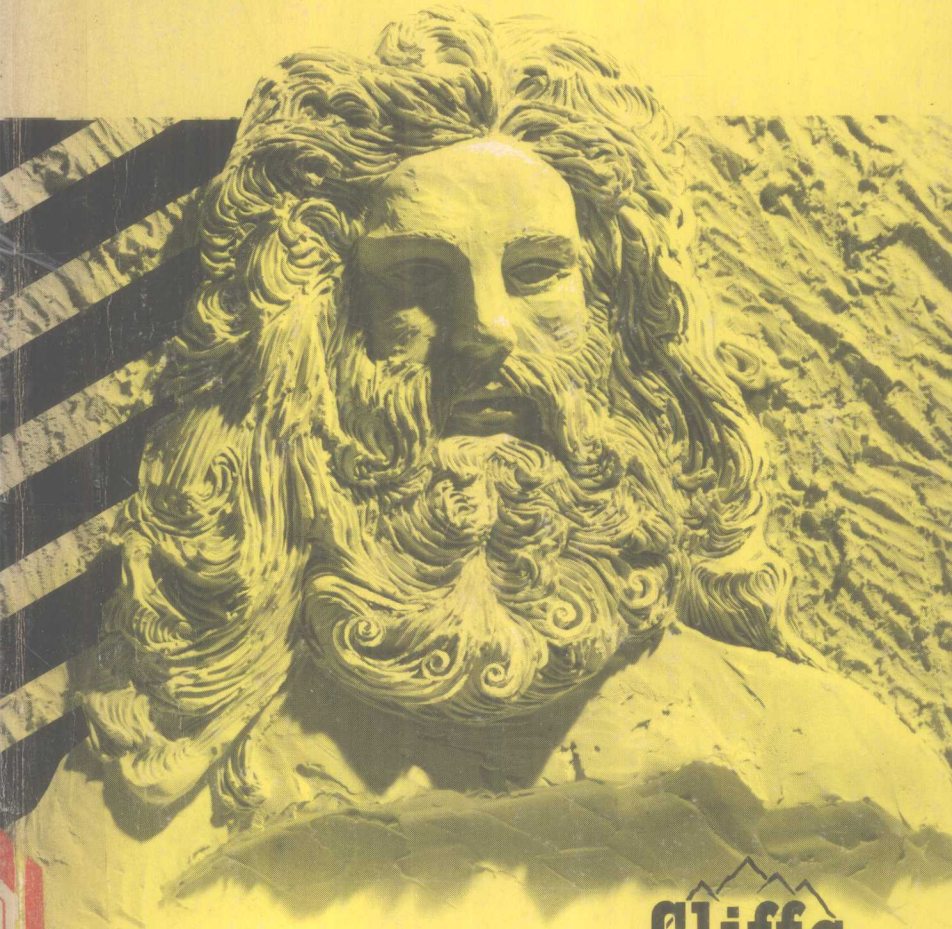
MYTHOLOGY



Cliffs NOTES INC.

A NOTE TO THE READER

These Notes present a clear discussion of the action and thought of the work under consideration and a concise interpretation of its artistic merits and its significance.

They are intended as a supplementary aid to the serious student. They serve to free him from interminable and distracting note-taking in class so that he may listen intelligently to what the instructor is saying, and to the class discussion, making selective notes on these, secure in the knowledge that he has a basic understanding of the work. They are also helpful in preparing for an examination, eliminating the burden of trying to reread the full text under pressure and sorting through notes to find that which is of central importance.

THESE NOTES ARE NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE TEXT ITSELF OR FOR THE CLASSROOM DISCUSSION OF THE TEXT, AND STUDENTS WHO SO ATTEMPT TO USE THEM IN THIS WAY ARE DENYING THEMSELVES THE VERY EDUCATION THAT THEY ARE PRESUMABLY GIVING THEIR MOST VITAL YEARS TO ACHIEVE.

These critical evaluations have been prepared by experts who have had some years' experience in teaching the works or who have special knowledge of the texts. They are not, however, incontrovertible. No literary judgments are. There are many interpretations of any great work of literature, and even conflicting views have value for student and teacher, since the aim is not for the student to accept unquestionably any one interpretation, but to make his own. The goal of education is not the unquestioning acceptance of any single interpretation, but the development of an individual's critical abilities.

The experience of millions of students over many years has shown that Notes such as these are a valuable educational tool and, properly used, can contribute materially to the great end of literature (to which, by the way, the teaching of literature is itself only a subsidiary)—that is, to the heightening of perception and awareness, the extending of sympathy, and the attainment of maturity by living, in Socrates' famous phrase, "the examined life."

MYTHOLOGY

including
Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian, Greek,
Roman, and Norse Mythologies
Arthurian Legends
Introduction to Mythology
Narratives and Commentaries
Bibliographical Essay
Review Questions
Recommended Reading
Genealogical Tables
Comprehensive Index

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Preface

In writing a concise *Mythology* of seven different cultures, it is not only necessary to choose the stories carefully, it is essential to select the most pertinent details from several variations of a myth. Frequently there are many versions of a legend or myth. And this accounts for discrepancies between what one writer will say and another's telling of the same tale. Any comparison of the various mythology books on the market will show marked divergences, running from the spelling of names to details of events to the shape and emphasis of the myths. It is impossible to achieve uniformity in this field, both practically and theoretically.

Nor is this surprising. People reporting the same event give widely varying versions of it. So multiply this by centuries of oral transmission through eras of cultural stagnation and upheaval and in distinct geographical locales often separated by hundreds of miles. Then multiply these versions by a conversion into literature, where every author has a unique personality and viewpoint. Finally, watch the myths change over a thousand and more years of literary tradition. The confusion is bound to be truly bewildering. It is perhaps lucky for mythographers that so much of classical literature has been lost, for they would never be done sorting it all out. As it is, there is more than enough disorder in this field. Theories are superabundant.

If one were to combine each account of a myth into one story the result would be as chaotic as life itself. The basic function of myth is to order reality into significant patterns. Therefore, we have tried to organize the various stories in this volume into readable and coherent units, while giving the reader important variations when they occur. Where this work differs in details, spelling, or in the form of a story from other books on the subject, it does not mean that anyone is incorrect, for every writer has had to face the awesome task of making selections on the basis of his own judgment.

The principles of choice behind this volume are these: Does a story reveal something important about the culture from which

it came? Does it have interest? Does the shape of the story have meaning? Do the details of a story make sense? Are they important? When variants of a story exist, which details contribute the most to the overall effect? Do the contradictory versions also make sense? Which spelling is the easiest for the reader, and the least obtrusive? Are all of these choices consistent with common sense and faithful to the myths themselves? Does the writing style show some of the fascination of the myth? Is it readable?

This book is not simply an introduction to mythology, it is an introduction to the study of various civilizations as these are revealed in their myths and legends. It is intended to get you started on exploring the fabulous realm of the human imagination in history.

Introduction to Mythology

The simplest and most direct way to approach mythology is to look at its subject matter. In the broadest terms myths are traditional stories about gods, kings, and heroes. Myths often relate the creation of the world and sometimes its future destruction as well. They tell how gods created men. They depict the relationships between various gods and between gods and men. They provide a moral code by which to live. And myths treat the lives of heroes who represent the ideals of a society. In short, myths largely deal with the significant aspects of human and superhuman existence.

It is easy to forget this in reading about the many absurd, barbaric, comic, grotesque, or sentimental occurrences in various mythologies. Yet, on the whole, myths have a certain dignity and eloquence precisely because they do grapple with important matters.

Myths are generally stories that have been handed down for generations, popular tales that embody a collective knowledge. While some may have originated with shamans, priests, or poets, myths belong to a primitive or pre-scientific people as their cultural heritage. Usually they have been shaped by the folk imagination.

Very often myths are accepted as the literal truth. They are not presented as engaging fictions but as fact. Even in the sophisticated, intelligent culture of classical Greece myths were frequently viewed as actualities. And when they were regarded skeptically writers reshaped them to make them more probable and humane.

Forget for the moment that the myths of other cultures are considerably more bizarre and savage. It must seem incredible to us, conditioned as we are by materialism and scientific rationality, that the ancient Greeks for the most part could take seriously a philandering deity like Zeus, an incredible hero like Perseus, or a monster like the Medusa. It would seem to presuppose much ignorance and gullibility. However, the primary

appeal of myth is to the imagination, to man's intuitive faculty. In a society where reason is poorly developed or nonexistent, the imagination is the only arbiter of truth. And even where reason is predominant, as it was in classical Greece, the imagination still exerts a strong hold on one's beliefs. A culture, after all, can never abandon its age-old traditions without undergoing disintegration.

In their vital stage, when they are accepted as truth, myths represent the learning of a society, its accumulated knowledge and wisdom. Any body of myths tries to give a comprehensive account of the world and of the people to whom it belongs. It does this through narrative, through memorable stories that deal with matters that perplex and intrigue primitive man. The crude mythology of an Australian tribe; the priestly mythologies of Egypt, Babylonia, and India; the liberating mythology of Greece and Rome; and the heroic mythology of Scandinavia—all offer a way of apprehending reality, of making sense of nature and human life, no matter how irrational they might appear to us. Every mythology has its obscurities, inconsistencies, and absurdities, but the crucial point is that myths attempt to give form to the cosmos and meaning to human life. We shall see this ordering impulse in each of the mythologies in this volume.

Most modern scholars divide the subject into three principal categories: pure myth, heroic saga, and the folk tale. Pure myth is both primitive science and primitive religion. It consists of stories that explain natural phenomena such as the sun, stars, flowers, storms, volcanoes, and so on, or of stories that show how men should behave toward gods. These myths recount how the world came into being, who the various gods are and what powers they control, how these gods affect the world and men, and the means by which men can propitiate these powers.

Gods can be personified natural agents such as fire, sky, earth, water, and the like. But more often they are beings that use specific areas of nature to effect their purposes, just as men operate machines to produce some end. Gods are often visualized as having human shape, feeling human emotions, and performing human acts, even if they are immortal and infinitely more powerful than men. This renders the cosmos more intelligible than it would be if it were ruled by impersonal, capricious forces

that were indifferent to man's welfare. Gods, even at their cruelest, are much preferable to stark chaos. And gods that look and act as human beings do make the world appear more bearable, because they sanctify human beauty and strength by giving them supernatural precedent.

In interpreting nature, myths use analogical reasoning, relating the unfamiliar to the familiar by means of likeness. Thus, things in heaven happen the same way they do here on earth. Why does the sun move across the sky? Because some deity is pushing it, riding it, or sailing it through the universe each day. And just as beasts and men beget progeny by copulation, so the primordial elements of nature procreate on each other in most mythologies. Or to give another example, the ancient Greeks must have wondered why the constellations of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor never set below the horizon, whereas other groups of stars did. The mythological solution, related by Ovid in his tale of Callisto, is that they were outcasts. Hera hated those stars and ordered the sea never to let them sink, since they were once the living mistress and son of Hera's mate, Zeus. This shows mythological reasoning and the projection of human feelings onto the natural world.

A coordinate branch of myth deals with the art of getting the gods to effect human purposes. This involves primitive religion with a technological overcast. The gods, having some human qualities, may respond to worship, ritual, supplication, and sacrifice. They are never obliged to help human beings, but they can if they so desire. Gods sometimes show partiality by rewarding a few mortals with good fortune. But generally nature is incalculable. One can never tell where lightning will strike, storms sink ships, wars and plagues ravage, earthquakes wreck cities, or flood, drought, and hail ruin crops. Yet psychologically a man is never totally impotent if he has gods to whom he can appeal. Myths frequently deal with the tributes one should pay a god, the chief of which is piety.

Yet there is an older, darker region of myth involving magic. Magic is also an attempt to influence the gods to fulfill human wishes. The Greeks pretty much expurgated or transmuted this element in their myths, but it has a fairly sizable place in the myths of primitive peoples and in the ancient Near Eastern and

European mythologies. Magic seeks to influence nature by imitation, by mimicking the results one wants. It depends upon analogical thought, whereby like produces like. The savage rite of human sacrifice was supposed to guarantee a plentiful harvest in neolithic societies, because the sprinkling of human blood on the ground would bring the necessary rain to the crops.

In ancient cults throughout the Near East and Europe magic was associated with the worship of the triple-goddess, usually in agricultural communities presided over by a matriarchal queen. The triple-goddess stood for the three phases of the moon—waxing, full, and waning; the three phases of nature—planting, harvest, and winter; and the three phases of womanhood—virgin, mature woman, and crone. In her earthly incarnation as queen she often took a male lover each year, and when his period was through he was ritually murdered. Traces of this archaic religion can be found in Greek mythology, but the Greeks with their patriarchal worship of Zeus managed to suppress it fairly thoroughly.

While men might use religious ritual or magic to induce the gods to grant their requests, it was extremely dangerous to antagonize a supernatural force. The gods were invariably ruthless in punishing acts of impiety or overweening pride. King Ixion, for attempting to ravish the goddess Hera, was struck dead by Zeus's thunderbolt, lashed to a turning wheel in hell, and bitten eternally by snakes. In the *Gilgamesh* epic the mighty Enkidu contracted a fatal illness for insulting Ishtar, the Babylonian fertility goddess. Dozens of myths vividly portray the folly and dire results of neglecting or provoking the gods. This is equally a matter of morality and of influencing nature.

In addition to explaining natural phenomena as the work of gods and showing how men should relate to these powers, myths can explain other things, such as the source and meaning of some ritual. A sacred rite can be impressive in itself, satisfying man's need for comforting repetition in an all-too-unstable world. But myth adds a spiritual dimension to ritual and gives it supernatural sanction. The story of Demeter and Persephone gave a transcendent significance to the Eleusinian rites. And Hesiod, in his tale of how Prometheus tricked Zeus, gave divine precedent to the fact that men get the hide and meat of a sacrificial animal while the gods get the fat and bones.

Myths can also account for the origin of names, whether of places or peoples. The story of Helle falling off the ram with the golden fleece into the sea explains how the Hellespont got its name. Icarus, of course, fell into the Icarian Sea after flying too close to the sun. The legend of Ion tells of the founder of the Ionian race, who also gave his name to the Ionian Sea. And the tale of Zeus creating a formidable race of men from an ant heap explains how Achilles' warriors, the Myrmidons, got their name, since *myrmex* is the Greek word for ant. Fanciful as they are, these stories made ancient geography and racial inheritance more intelligible to a people whose origins were in the remote and misty past.

Myths always express man's need to be aware of his roots. An important part of any mythology is the genealogy of gods, kings, and heroes. The lordly families of Homeric and post-Homeric Greece traced their ancestry to the legendary heroes of the Trojan War—heroes who in turn traced their ancestry back to the gods. The scrupulous attention paid to genealogical lines in myths all over the world stresses that mythical and legendary figures were not created out of the blue but had distinguished blood lines behind them. Even the gods had parents in the cruder, primal elements of nature. Here again in myth divine processes reflect human processes and interests.

If pure myth is explanatory, the heroic saga is often a primitive version of history. The saga condenses and dramatizes lengthy historical events into epic encounters. When Schliemann excavated and discovered the site of Troy in 1870, he lent some credence to the legend of the Trojan War. Archeological evidence has established that a brilliant civilization flourished around the Aegean Sea from about 1500 to 1260 B.C., and that this Mycenaean culture was destroyed by the Dorian invasions, which threw Greece into the dark ages for four centuries. If the actual Trojan War took place with even half the magnitude that Homer describes, Asia Minor and Mycenaean Greece must have been considerably weakened, preparing the way for the Dorian invasions.

Later Greece saw the fall of Troy as the victory of Hellenism over the barbarian East, but it was hardly a victory if the foregoing

is true. Yet peoples may rewrite legends to suit themselves. In fact, legends sometimes serve as propaganda to support an existing social structure, as the tale of Theseus was used by Euripides to bolster the faltering Athenian democracy in the Peloponnesian War. A legend is not infrequently a political tool to give added weight to some faction.

And here we come to the most important function of heroic saga—that of establishing a grand past for a people and setting forth the values by which a race is to live. Heroic legends embody the values of a society and orient the individual toward the standards and goals of his culture. They show what manhood consists of and how a great man lives and dies. In doing so they give meaning and direction to life.

Let's look at some of the heroes in this volume to see what values they represent. In general, there are those that fight beasts, those that fight other men, and those that fight forces within themselves. However, men who war with the gods are not heroes at all but evildoers and mountebanks who are properly punished. A hero is inconceivable without conflict and some enemy to overcome.

The most primitive kind of hero is the monster slayer. Beowulf is the perfect example, killing an ogre, an ogress, and a dragon, each of whom threatens the small human settlements of the frozen North. This type clears the earth of ghastly menaces and makes it safe for human habitation. Heracles is a more advanced type, since he not only kills monsters but captures wild beasts as well, preparing the way for animal domestication. Fittingly, Heracles has many offspring, populating the world he has rendered safe.

Of the warrior heroes there is the pure type like Achilles and the Norse heroes. This type fights for personal glory and fame, never mind what the cause of the war may be. Such a hero has no fear of death, lives by a rigid code of honor, and is permeated with the feeling that life is worthless but very delicious. A warrior like this lives to die in battle, winning renown for generations.

Then there is the warrior hero who fights for a dying but illumined culture, and one he knows is doomed. The Homeric hero Hector fights for Troy and for his family, but these

responsibilities tend to encumber him when he finally meets Achilles, who has nothing to lose by dying and who is completely dedicated to killing. And King Arthur, after all the splendors of Camelot, is fatally wounded in battle by his illegitimate son, Modred.

There is also the warrior who seeks to establish a kingship or build a city. Aeneas is the exemplar of this type, fighting for a new and coming civilization with the force of destiny in his breast. He represents the values that made Rome triumphant for centuries, even though he is a literary rather than a mythical personage.

Finally we have the metaphysical hero, who sets out on a strange quest. Gilgamesh in his journey to overcome death is such a hero, and his failure carries the sadness of human mortality. But the pure metaphysical hero is Buddha, who conquers within himself all the urges that prevent enlightenment.

Thus we see the spectrum of values and heroic codes that a society can use to shape a civilization. Epic legends show the direction of a culture and what it is likely to accomplish. Legends are not mere entertainments; they serve to educate and channel the energies of the young. Puberty rites in primitive cultures involve rigorous instruction in myth and legend. The boys of classical Greece were expected to memorize large parts of Homer and Hesiod. As Werner Jaeger points out in *Paideia*, the *Iliad* had a profound effect on the spectacular brilliance of Greek civilization. The Achillean thirst for glory helped promote a striving for excellence in every field, which created the stunning geniuses of the Classical Age. Essentially heroic legends are the stuff for which civilizations live and die.

Besides the pure myth and the saga there is another type of story common in primitive cultures: the folk tale or fairy tale. This is a story told for sheer pleasure without any pretense to being factual. The travelers' tales, such as the adventures of Odysseus, are stories of this kind. And the legend of Perseus has a large element of fairy tale and magic. Yet because folk tales are told for pleasure does not mean they cannot have meaning or beauty. The writings of Jung and other psychoanalysts dissuade us from lightly dismissing folk tales as nonsense. They may be a primitive form of fiction, but for that very reason they are close