

We are often told that one of the hallmarks of Greek civilization was its "rationality." They were sensible, level-headed types, those Greeks; look how they developed philosophy and mathematics, and built geometrically perfect buildings like the Parthenon. Like most generalizations, there is some truth to this one; the Greeks *did* admire rationality, and they did possess logical minds. But they also had a great passion for life and explored the whole range of human emotion in their literature, art and politics.

This generalization about the Greeks' rationality has also been applied to their mythology. We are told that one of the characteristics of Greek myth is its lack of bold fantasy and imagination. The myths have been cleansed of their wilder, more primitive elements and made to seem more civilized and comprehensible. Greek myths tend to make sense in and of themselves as stories, whereas many other peoples' myths make heavy use of symbols and motifs which only make sense in the context of a particular society's traditions; if you are ignorant of these traditions, you may be utterly baffled about the real meaning of the myth.

It is true that Greek mythology does not as a rule offer us bizarre tales such as that of Geriguiguatugo (say *that* three times rapidly!), which was current among several tribes of South American Indians. It's a long story which I won't completely summarize here, but it involves a young man who at one stage in his adventures, for no apparent reason, has his posterior devoured by vultures. Upon waking from his faint, he is famished with hunger, but finds that anything he eats passes right through him; remembering some advice of his grandmother, he makes himself a new bottom out of mashed potatoes, and eats his fill, the hole being now plugged. At a later stage in his exploits he turns into a stag and heaves his father into a lake with his antlers; the father is devoured by piranha fish, but his lungs float to the surface and turn into a plant. These details may be enough to give a flavour of the whole; many of the events lack internal motivation and leave the reader wondering what on earth is going on. Greek myths do not often read like this; if a character does something, the reason is generally supplied in the story. It is a bizarre act when Medea kills her children, to be sure, but the story gives some kind of reason for her action: to gain revenge on Jason. Oedipus kills his father: the story explains it was a mistake — Oedipus didn't know it was his father and killed a man who was, to him, a stranger. Orestes kills his mother: the story explains that it was punishment ordered by Apollo for her killing her husband, Orestes' father.

Greek myths, then, are usually careful to make the story comprehensible. On the other hand, isn't it odd that so many of them *do* talk about things like killing your blood relatives? Some scholars have suggested that Greek myths weren't originally all that rational. They only seem so on the surface because we usually have them from highly sophisticated and civilized writers like Sophocles or Homer. These versions of the myths are highly literate and may have been improved over earlier, more primitive versions which are still lurking just under the surface. The earliest versions of myths are normally matters of oral tradition, being passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. They are possessions of all the people — a tribe, usually, in the primitive circumstances we are imagining — and deal with subjects deemed important in daily life, offering explanations about the origin of the world, the nature of the gods, and the functioning of human families and society. They are written in a private language inaccessible to outsiders and are not suitable stuff for high literature like the plays of Sophocles. Greek myths were probably like this in the beginning, and to characterize Greek mythology only from the versions of the great writers is to be misled by a very one-sided kind of evidence. The trouble in finding out about the primitive, oral kind of myths is that they *were* oral — and not often written down. If a myth wasn't written down, it is lost to us. However, we do occasionally hear unedited reports of such myths, and, as I explained above, if you look below the surface of the literary myths you can sometimes discern the weird background. Here are a few examples.

Tantalus was a man especially favoured by the gods; they even allowed him to dine with them. One day Tantalus decided to test their omniscience by serving his son Pelops to them for dinner. The gods were not deceived, and no one ate any of the horrible stew except for Demeter, who was distracted by her grief for her missing daughter (it turned out Hades had kidnapped her) and didn't really pay much attention to what she was doing. She ate a bit of Pelops' shoulder, so when the gods put him back together again they made a new one for him out of ivory. Tantalus was evicted from Olympus and after his death was punished by being forever thirsty and hungry. He stood up to his neck in a pool of water, and a bunch of grapes hung above him; but whenever he lowered his head to drink, or reached up to eat, the water would recede and the grapes would move further away. He was, in a word, forever "tantalized."

King Minos of Crete promised to sacrifice a certain bull to Poseidon, but welched on the promise. Poseidon punished him by making his wife fall in love with the bull. Attracting the bull was a problem, but the famous artisan Daedalus came up with a solution: a fake cow. Pasiphae hid inside. The result was the Minotaur, a dreadful man-eating monster, half-human, half-bull. Daedalus' wits were called on once more to devise a way to

contain this creature. He designed a labyrinth in which it would wander aimlessly forever, occasionally bumping into hapless victims sent in by King Minos to feed it. The monster was eventually killed by the young Athenian hero Theseus. This is a good story not only in itself but also for providing titles for modern journals of Classical studies.

Zeus, king of the gods, loved a mortal princess called Semele. While she was pregnant with his son Dionysus she tricked Zeus into agreeing to grant her one wish, whatever that might be. She then asked to see him in his true form. Zeus pleaded with her to ask for something else, but she would not be deterred. Zeus, therefore, revealed himself to her in his true form, a thunderbolt. Semele was instantly transformed into a cinder. Zeus rescued the foetus from her ashes, and (here comes the really weird bit) sewed it into his thigh, whence it was born at the appropriate time.

Teiresias of Thebes stumbled across a pair of mating snakes while walking in the mountains one day. He struck them with his stick and was changed into a woman. Some time later he came across the same pair, repeated the procedure, and was changed back to a man. Later still, Zeus and his wife Hera were arguing about who enjoys sexual relations more, men or women. Zeus claimed women, Hera claimed men. They turned to the only person in their acquaintance who had been both, Teiresias; he said that of ten parts of lovemaking, women had nine. Hera in a rage blinded him; Zeus, to make up for the injury, gave him the gift of prophecy. And so Teiresias became a blind prophet (the best there was, in fact). He is well known from Sophocles' play, Oedipus the King.

Various interpretations of these myths have been offered. In explaining the story of Pasiphae scholars point to the prominence of bulls in many Cretan myths and especially in the art of the pre-Greek Minoan civilization (named for King Minos) on the island. Bulls are a common fertility symbol, and many myths about fertility emphasize the essential unity of all nature's reproductive powers. Human, animal and vegetable fertility are all the doing of the Great Mother. Myths, especially the weird ones, are often connected with ritual. The rituals of early religion are overwhelmingly connected with fertility: survival depended on it. The actions of ritual normally have a magical character; people might dress up as animals, for instance, and perform dances and songs which imitate the animals and try to evoke their spirits. In this way, the practitioners believe, the elemental powers of animal fertility can be harnessed and made to work for them. Their crops will grow, their animals will give birth to healthy offspring and so will they. The myths told in relation to these rituals stress the interconnections of the human and animal worlds. Ritual may not work in a scientific sense, but it makes everyone who believes in its power *feel* as if it will work. They are secure

in the belief that the great powers are smiling on them, so long as they have worshipped them properly. This security has very real sociological benefits by reinforcing a society's sense of purpose, optimism, and togetherness.

Explanations are available for the other myths, too, although some are more speculative than others. The double birth of Dionysus has something to do with his function as a fertility god, and the story of Tantalus has recently been interpreted as an elaborately coded version of certain Greek beliefs about the nature of humans vis-à-vis the gods on the one hand and animals on the other (this theory doesn't explain the ivory shoulder, though). Teiresias' bisexual career has yet to be explained. Perhaps it is fitting to end with him as an unsolved puzzle, and to underscore the point that Greek myths can be just as weird as the story of Geri... that South American guy.