

A CAT ON THE HEAD:  
IN SEARCH OF A NEW WORD TO BETTER READ ANCIENT MYTHOLOGY

The term I am proposing here is mythourgy: Gr. *mythourgia*, used in antiquity as a synonym for *mythopoieia* (Liddle-Scott s.v. *mithourgeo*, e.g. in Sch. Lyc. 17), denoting the art of making myths. I would argue that the introduction of such a term is both justified and necessary. It is justified because the word is ancient and reasonably well defined, but not yet included in disciplinary terminologies and thus sufficiently susceptible of semantic narrowing (in contrast, *mythopoeia* is part of the language of modern literary scholarship and refers to the genre exemplified by the work of J.R.R. Tolkien and the whole group of *Inklings*). It is useful because it focuses our attention on myth, ancient or modern, as creative action - intellectual production following specific rules and techniques –, and on discursive aspects of production of myths, thus avoiding the pitfalls of value-laden classifications (primitive / archetypal / misinterpreted / mistaken - idea / narrative / mind / mentality).

«Babbo, sei un mito»

Laura

I found the above text on the information board of a small church outside the city of San Severino in Marche, Italy, in September 2009: a daughter posted her announcement of the death of her father. Besides providing basic information and conveying admiration for the deceased, as well as an assurance that he is remembered in the community, this minimalist text gives us insight into the construction and working of myth. There is nothing there to explicate or justify the deceased's newly reached status; the death emerges as the minimum and sufficient ritual condition for becoming a myth. Besides the name and date of birth and death, nothing else is needed - just an affirmative statement by a reliable witness: a good example of the use of the term in everyday language, but also a fine reminder of the anthropological content of a basic mythical narrative.

On the much debated topic of (ancient) mythology, Jean-Pierre Vernant re-elaborated his position in 1996: before publication, he presented his ideas in Ljubljana, at a seminar at ISH<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the lecture, delivered in May 1996, was published in GEORGOUDI - VERNANT 1996.

Suspicious of firm typologies and precise definitions, he opted for a simpler and at the same time more all-inclusive terminology. By pointing to the social role and the liberating and emancipating potential of myths, he opened an intriguing dimension in the working of myths. Curiously, his intervention both reinforces and deconstructs Roland Barthes' notion of personal mythologies and their relation to ruling social-ideological narratives<sup>2</sup>: it permits linking present practices of myth-making to mythologies of the past, part of high culture protocols.

In line with Vernant's ideas, I would like to suggest that to cover aspects of myth underlined both by Barthes and Vernant, a new term is needed, invested with semantic values that the somewhat awkward 'myth-making' cannot convey. Picking an appropriate Greek word may seem banal, but this is certainly standard procedure, and *mythourgy* has the advantage of not yet being used in any modern discipline of the human sciences. It was used in antiquity as a synonym for mythopoeia, the term which has been adopted by literary scholars to denote modern literary procedures and the literary genre exemplified by the work of J.R.R. Tolkien – sometimes defined as 'high fantasy'. While mythopoeia or high fantasy denotes inventions marked with a deep religious feeling, mythourgy should underline the freedom from any established (and necessarily controlling) system of narratives related to beliefs – as Vernant put it. Referring as it does to practices contemporary with recorded (ancient) use of the word, mythourgy has the potential to open a new semantic field for the study of myth, where scientific terminology and everyday language intersect. Mythourgy would thus denote a certain arbitrary handling of things mythified – 'collage' as the main method of making myths, with fragments of ideological and cultural patterns: all of these were recognized long ago as characteristic of the techniques used by the Balkan singers of tales<sup>3</sup>. The parallel, however, is not perfect: prosodic patterns and formulae are not there just for mnemotechnics, and besides, mythourgy relates to a larger choice of utterances, speech styles, discourses. Its use is justified also by the absence of norm: *ex tempore*, improvised, *bricolage* can describe the processes by which myths are made.

This also entails loose temporality, or historicity: so in the mythourgic process, very archaic elements and contemporary narratives may mix with elements of modern scientific and popular discourse, as well as with bureaucratic language.

Two such examples will be presented in this paper. My selection is from the theme of women and gender relations, where stereotypes still operate freely, especially in cultures and in social settings ungoverned by discourse regulations ('political correctness' and similar).

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<sup>2</sup> BARTHES 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. LORD 1960.

My first example is from a news report released on May 26<sup>th</sup>, 2008<sup>4</sup>:

ATHENS - Four Moldovan women accidentally violated a 1,000-year-old ban on females entering the all male monastic community of Mount Athos, when they were left on Greek shores by human traffickers. Police said on Monday the women -- aged between 27 and 32 -- as well as a 41-year-old Moldovan man were smuggled from Turkey by boat to the Greek Orthodox community of 20 monasteries, long off limits to women. The(y) reached land on Sunday. «They told police and the monks they were sorry but they couldn't have known this was a no-women area», said a police officer, who declined to be named. «They were forgiven». Monks spotted the women late on Sunday and alerted police. Under Greek law, the violation of the ban on women on Mount Athos, considered Orthodox Christianity's spiritual home, is illegal and can be punished with up to two years in jail.<sup>5</sup>

Let us see what is mythourgical in this text. The man was a pimp, a trafficker: his guilt was simply not taken into account, because he was male, therefore admitted to the holy ground. The women were prostitutes – the monks could have demanded punishment, because as women, they are not admitted to the holy ground. They were forgiven, however: the value of forgiveness grows when sin is observed and pardoned; animals of the female sex (cows, sheep, goats, cats, hens and so forth – perhaps also flying birds and fish) that wander into the sacred ‘garden of the Mother of God’ are systematically removed, so the Moldovan prostitutes are essentially treated as animals there. This is a Christian intervention into the mythical story, but we certainly recognize a most archaic layer, in which women are considered closer to animals than to male citizens. There is a whole ancient genre exploring the ‘animality’ of women, probably related to traumatic agrarian experiences<sup>6</sup> and the social changes they fostered. In this case, historicity was put upside down, rituals were mixed, social norms crushed: we recognize a rather chaotic method, clustered from various elements in order to put the mythical narrative to work. We can understand this mythourgy only if we deconstruct the narrative and then read in historical-anthropological elements.

The other case is a prize-winning documentary fiction by Christian Bauer and Nikos Dayandas, produced in 2007. The film features the archaeologist Alexander McGillivray<sup>7</sup>, who found a rare male idol at Palaiocastro on the island of Crete. There is a triple line in the plot of the

<sup>4</sup> Reuters, 26 May 2008, reporting by Renee Maltezou, editing by Elizabeth Piper

<sup>5</sup> Greek laws on human trafficking are much more severe

<sup>6</sup> *Ehoiai* by Hesiod and Semonides (and other Ancient authors) might reflect the anxiety of an agrarian society dealing with the fear of famine and the patriarchal rules: types of women who are good to marry, with the majority of types who are not good to marry, are all connected to food production and food consumption: the best of wives is a bee, who does not consume food but produces it, with a practically non-existing body, voice and invasion of space.

<sup>7</sup> MCGILLIVRAY 2001.

film: McGillivray is following suspicious travels of the so called 'Boston Snake-Goddess' and revealing it is a fake, which makes for a tense detective story. The second is a kind of ritual-emotional praise of the male god, proclaimed 'Zeus' by the enthusiastic discoverer of the figurine. 'Zeus' is bigger than any figurine of snake-goddesses, and was violently dismembered. The reconstruction of the statue, which itakes up a good portion of the film, is in many ways a ritual procedure: although the reconstruction of the face by an artist is purely arbitrary, poorly imitating highly popular forensic TV programs, the result is received with admiration by the archaeologist and presented as the come-back (or epiphany) of the male god, long repressed by other archaeologists and by feminists, both in culture and in academia. The third plot line is, as expected, a backlash aimed at those who falsified history and produced the 'myth' of the Cretan goddess dominating over the male god. McGillivray eventually finds the main advocate of this feminist twist, which is at the core of the problem: this is Sir Arthur Evans, whose mother and spouse died early in his life, leaving him especially sensitive and vulnerable regarding women, and consequently more prone to succumb to feminist interpretations in his excavations on Crete. The banality of the explanation is disarming: it is not even touched by modern psychoanalysis, and leaves no room for ambiguity and doubt. Yet, it appears to work fine as a product of popularization, i.e. in popular archaeological genres in the media, especially on TV.

In the case of the Greek monks and police, a very old pattern of positioning women becomes visible when layers of social-cultural control are removed: political correctness was eliminated outright, and there was a communication on the level of ethnic / patriarchal signs, almost gestures of a local collective 'lexicon' referring to 'Greek', 'masculine', 'prostitute'. The most exclusive part of the population of Greek Orthodox monks was caught unprepared... In fact, what we can observe here are historical layers of gender construction conditioned by culture(s): a precious historical-anthropological record to be described and interpreted. We may ask questions about historical-anthropological continuities, and on the continuity of patriarchy as the most convincing among them: again we are dealing with fluid systems of improvisations, wandering narratives, *bricolage* at best, of fitting new ideologies and yet keeping alive basic premises such as control over women's sexuality and reproduction.

In the case of Alexander McGillivray, the archaeologist uses a mixture of academic and popular discourses: research and quests for the perpetrators who falsified the snake-goddess figurine are followed by the reconstruction of the statue of the unjustly forgotten male god, with the logical resolution, similar to crime/whodunit plots. Patriarchal intervention is discrete and builds upon a very basic psychological narrative, so as to be understood by even half-literate media consumers. The simplicity of the solution offered is manipulated through the scholarly authority of the

academic in charge. Every phase of research presented has a discursive addendum, part of a hidden patriarchal narrative, a hanging particle of meaning, which leads the public to the satisfying ‘personal’ conclusion on women and women-promoters in academia who always harm the truth... No distance or doubt, no ambivalence about the meaning of ‘truth’, or discussion of which notion of truth is operational in the author’s case: what reveals McGillivray’s ideological manipulation is exactly the absence of any shade of epistemological reflection. What he has produced is a mythourgy, in an appropriate genre (documentary fiction), and using appropriate discourses. The only public excluded from the horizon of expectation of this film is academia, but the output could still confuse some of them. By accepting the term mythourgy, one can save the author from serious charges of manipulating the public and disrespecting ethical gender concerns in the popularization of science.

These two examples show how mythourgy, the art of making myths, covers both myths from the past and new myths. I purposefully chose mythourgies at the intersection of discourses and genres (both rhetorical and narrative), not some blunt and transparent mythourgies concerning racist, nationalist or sexist stories and myths. But it was the technical - discursive aspect that convinces me that the term really makes sense. Vernant’s intentional fluidity in defining myth, and Barthes’ expansion of the term *mythologie* to contemporary everyday discursive practices of common people combined in supplying the term – and the concept behind it – with new semantic content.

Barthes offered methodological justification for his *mythologie* (which is an essentially intuitive ‘reading’), derived from de Saussure’s theory of the sign: in his reading of the front page of Paris-Match featuring an image of a young black saluting the French flag, Barthes saw the figuration of the photograph, that is to say the arrangement of colored dots on white background as constructing the signifier, and the concept of a black soldier saluting the *tricolore* as constructing the signified. Together, they form the sign. However, Barthes takes this reading one step further and argues that there is a second level of signification grafted on to the first sign. This first sign becomes a second-level signifier for a new sign whose signified is French imperialism, i.e. the idea that France’s empire treats all its subjects equally.

The central modification to Saussure’s theory of the sign is the articulation of the idea of primary or first-order signification and secondary or second-order signification. This is central to Barthes’ intellectual preoccupation in *Mythologies* because it is at the level of secondary or second-order signification that myth is to be found. Indeed, Barthes attempts to define myth by reference to the theory of second-degree sign systems. What myth does is to appropriate a first-order sign and use it as a platform for its own (hidden) signifier, which in turn will have its own signified, thus

forming a new sign. Recurrent images used by Barthes to describe this process pertain to theft, colonization, violent appropriation and to parasitism:

«... le mythe est ... un langage qui ne veut pas mourir: il arrache aux sens dont il s'alimente une survie insidieuse, dégradée, il provoque en eux un sursis artificiel dans lequel il s'installe à l'aise, il en fait des cadavres parlants»<sup>8</sup>.

I am not in favor of interpretations that imply that Barthes invented personal mythologies in order to stress the parasitical aspect of myths and the strategy of lifting personal responsibility in making ideological myths and adhering to them. *Cadavres parlants*, however, is a powerful image, whose ethical impact is obvious. The concept of mythourgy subverts the mythical about myths, demythifies the myth: it opens a clear view on doing things with myths. The second-degree signification reappears as a transparent technique, which enables readers and makers of mythourgies to see through what they do.

Doing things with myths has a long and sinuous history: let us just recall ancient myths serving as a 'thematic passport' for any presentation of naked body, sexuality, or democratic ideas; or the later use of myths (ancient, in modern interpretation, collages from different myths, new ideological myths) in politics. Different uses and degrees of ideological manipulation are easier to detect if a technical key is applied, and the second-degree signification is the most powerful tool available. Barthes' distinction between denotation and connotation is not relevant in our case, however: only connotation exists in discourse, there is no denotation without a more or less heavy package of additional significations, which by definition makes it a connotation, and thus a myth. Using the concept of mythourgy is a shortcut to reading and deconstructing, and excludes the negative utopian aspect of Barthes' thinking of myths. A certain neutrality of the term could be useful in dealing with the Barthesian trauma – totalitarian invention of ideological myths on one side of his world, and totalitarian consumerist/capitalist myths on the other. The landscape of inventions has been enlarged since, allowing for more discursive possibilities: they may well be equally or even more distressing, and that certainly calls for some more technical, distanced, and less engaging critical perspective.

Both Vernant's and Barthes' interventions aim at liberating the production of myth from elite imagery and lofty associations, mostly with discourses of power. Following upon that, I will in conclusion propose my own piece of mythourgy based on archaeological data.

One of the Cretan figurines of goddesses was found separately from its head-gear, which is a figure of a cat. The ritual role of the cat has not yet been explained. We could speculate upon symbolic meanings of the cat, which differ from culture to culture: results are predictable and

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<sup>8</sup> BARTHES 1957, p. 219.

definitely not promising; they remain more or less clever analogies. Certain technical aspects suggest a different interpretation: the figure of the cat has a 'stick' at the bottom, fitting the hole on top of the goddess' head. One possible explanation is that different head-gears could be put on the same figurine, in accordance with the requirements of ritual. I would just add that the form corresponds perfectly to that of a USB key; whatever the ritual use, the goddess was in need of some additional memory. In this case, the goddess would need the memory, or the set of meanings and significations contained in the (figurine of the) cat. The second-degree signification is switched off here, allowing for more interpretative options and readings. Any reading of the Cretan goddess, *potnia theron*, must establish some relation with patriarchy - positive, negative, denying, glorifying, critical. Instead of speculating on rituals, where data at hand are very limited, we could try and explore possible related discursive needs: in our case, there is apparent need to communicate with animals, to plug-in others' memories, other than patriarchy in any case. The 'cat on the head' thus becomes an emancipatory discursive figure. Does this mythourgy make me a Barthesian *cadavre parlant*? This is not a rhetorical question. Understanding mythourgy as the process of making myths excludes both myth as a 'pre-truth', which was the main object of Vernant's criticism, and Barthes' mythology as an everyday activity of producing compulsive lies in order to adapt to social discursive rules. As a result, the concept behind the term proposed may facilitate our deciphering and understanding of myth, ancient and modern.

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