

# Classical Myth

## Lifelong Learning Course

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The prevailing theories of myth might be summed by the following paraphrase of Robert Brockway<sup>1</sup>

Myths are stories, usually about gods and other supernatural beings (Frye). They are often stories of origins, how the world and everything in it came to be in *illo tempore* (Eliade). *They* are usually strongly structured and their meaning is only discerned by linguistic analysis (Lévi-Strauss). Sometimes they are public dreams which, like private dreams, emerge from the unconscious mind (Freud). Indeed, they often reveal the archetypes of the collective unconscious (Jung). They are symbolic and metaphorical (Cassirer). They orient people to the metaphysical dimension, explain the origins and nature of the cosmos, validate social issues, and, on the psychological plane, address themselves to the innermost depths of the psyche (Campbell). Some of them are explanatory, being prescientific attempts to interpret the natural world (Frazer). As such, they are usually functional and are the science of primitive peoples (Malinowski). Often, they are enacted in rituals (Hooke). Religious myths are sacred histories (Eliade), and distinguished from the profane (Durkheim). . . . They are both individual and social in scope, but they are first and foremost stories (Kirk).

Mythologists (mythologers) are a relatively new academic invention, but sophisticated, educated, even secular thinkers have always known the value of myth:

“These things never happened, but always are.”

Sallust, Roman historian, 86~35 BCE, *Of Gods & of the World*

“Racine, Goethe, Shakespeare, knew very well why their use was so effective. . . . I have always preferred myth to history, because history consists of truths which turn into lies [i.e. ideologically slanted interpretations], while myth consists of lies [i.e. inventions] which turn into truths.”

Jean Cocteau (1889~1963), from the

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<sup>1</sup> paraphrased from *Myth from the Ice Age to Mickey Mouse*