THE LITERARY NATURE OF GREEK Myths
A critical discussion of G. S. Kirk's views

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Until recently Greek myths have been regarded with great admiration as the example, par excellence, of what myths should be. It is true, however, that critics have not always agreed as to the special qualities in which Greek myths excelled. In the first half of the twentieth century the rationalism of Greek myths was particularly emphasized. Martin Nilsson expressed this view in his *History of Greek Religion* (1925). Speaking of the Greeks he says: 'Their marvellous qualities of mind, their rationalism, and clarity of thinking could brook no ambiguity or confusion. Hence was born among them that independent searching after truth which is Science, the greatest offspring of the spirit of Greece. We have seen that the same quality in a lower form, for which I should perhaps use the term rationalism, gave to the Greek myths their peculiar character, in contradistinction to the primitive tale and folk-tale out of which they sprang. An outgrowth of the same kind is the humanizing of the myths, the anthropomorphism characteristic of Greek mythology. It is due not only to the plastic imagination of the Greeks, with its power of intuition, but also to their antipathy to the primitive and fantastic ideas and characteristics of the folk-tale, which led them to clear away all that too sharply contradicted the experiences of human life. The Greek myth has thus become something other than the ordinary folk-tale, and rightly bears a separate name.'

This attitude towards Greek myth is shared by H. J. Rose: 'The Greeks at their best were sane, high-spirited, clear-headed, beauty-loving optimists, and not in the least other-worldly. Hence their legends are almost without exception free from the cloudiness, the wild grotesques, and the horrible features which beset the popular traditions of less gifted and happy peoples. Even their monsters are not very ugly or uncouth, nor their ghosts and demons paralysingly dreadful. Their heroes . . . meet with extraordinary adventures but there is a certain tone of reasonableness running through their most improbable exploits. As for the gods and other supernatural characters, they are glorified men and women, who remain extremely human, and on the whole neither irrational nor grossly unfair in their dealings. Such tales as contain savage and repulsive elements tend to drop into the background or to be modified.'

Thus both these writers stress the human-ness, the reasonableness and the realism of

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1. This article is a shortened version of a paper read at the conference of the Classical Association of South Africa in January 1977.
Greek myths which lead to the elimination of fantastic, mystical and repulsive elements.

This view of Greek mythology is completely rejected by G. S. Kirk. He first expounded his own views in his book *Myth, its meaning and functions in ancient and other cultures,* and then elaborated them in an article entitled 'Greek mythology: Some new perspectives'. In his latest book on the subject, *The Nature of Greek Myths,* he does not retract his opinions and even repeats some of them, but he lays more stress on the positive qualities of Greek myths and thus gives a more balanced view. Since Kirk has challenged the traditional view of Greek mythology it seems worth while to examine his approach more thoroughly. He deserves credit for the courage with which he has tackled this intractable subject, and also for the fairness with which he states all the relevant arguments, even those which are unfavourable to his own views. I do not agree with all his opinions, as will be clear from the following discussion, but most of the arguments with which I attempt to refute his point of view are taken from Kirk's own exposition.

Kirk discovers three main defects in Greek myths: 'the thematic limitations of Greek divine myths; the number, superficial variety and conventionalised plot of the heroic ones; and in general the lack of fantastic and imaginative themes in comparison with many other cultures' (Perspectives, p. 77). All three points really amount to the same charge, namely that Greek myths show a 'lack of imagination', a 'rarity of deeply imaginative fantasy' (Myth, p. 241). Because of this defect Kirk uses some very disparaging expressions when speaking of Greek myths. They are 'quite heavily polluted in the form in which we know them' (Myth, p. 50); Heracles 'is for the most part an uninteresting performer'. 'The sample given so far is adequate to demonstrate the thematic simplicity, almost shallowness of most Greek myths'. (Myth, p. 187). He speaks of 'the desiccated remains of Greek mythology' (Myth, p. 233), and of 'the emasculated kind of invention so admired by Nilsson and Rose (Myth, p. 245). Even in *The Nature of Greek Myths* he states: 'In a way they have already become ossified by the time we first see them in Greek literature.' (p. 109).

To understand Kirk's approach it is necessary to examine more closely what he means by 'lack of imagination'. In the first place he thinks that Greek mythology has a 'restricted range of themes' (Myth, p. 248); he also speaks of the 'thematic simplicity of the myths'. This remark he applies not only to the myths about the gods, where he has some justification for it, but also to the heroic myths, which is more surprising. He does not deny that these myths have a great variety of incidents and characters, but he finds that the same themes and plots are being used again and again. Therefore he speaks of 'the conventionalised

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4. Cambridge, 1970 (henceforth referred to as *Myth*).
5. *Journal of Hellenic Studies,* xcii (1972), p. 74–85 (henceforth referred to as 'Perspectives').
plots' and 'the schematic qualities' of Greek myths. There may be a great number of myths, but they show only a 'superficial variety'. The comment of Walter Burkert is amusing and very much to the point: 'So droht nun auch der klassischen Mythologie die edle Einfalt und stille Grösse zum Verhangnis zu werden'? He asks whether 'simplicity' in this respect does not really mean that Greek myths concentrate on the fundamental issues of human life and especially pays attention to the tension in the family circle. Elsewhere Kirk practically admits this: 'The emphasis on family tensions in ancient Greece should be seen as a broad response to a continuing human characteristic rather than as a specific reaction to extreme social conditions.' (*Myth*, p. 194).

In the second place Kirk finds Greek myth wanting because there is too much reasonableness and orderliness in it. It was the increasing influence of reason that led to the decline of the myths: 'the process of rational attrition' began long before Hesiod; we do not know 'the point at which its adulteration by reason began' (*Myth*, p. 241). The supreme quality of myth, in Kirk's opinion, is that of 'imaginative unreason'. There is an amazing contrast between the views of Nilsson and Rose who praise the rational qualities of Greek myths and the absence of fantastic themes, and that of Kirk who regards these very qualities as deficiencies. It must be admitted that Nilsson and Rose give a one-sided impression of Greek myth; they praise it for the qualities one would expect to find in a modern realistic novel. Of course Kirk is reacting against this attitude but he, in turn, goes to the other extreme in extolling 'inconsequential fantasy' and in regarding the influence of reason in myth as harmful. Elsewhere he protests against the view that myths are completely irrational: 'The dichotomy between myths and reason has done further damage by encouraging the belief that myths are completely irrational. Naturally they are nothing of the kind.' (*Nature of Greek Myths*, p. 286).

Kirk finds a third defect in Greek myth, namely the relative absence of incidents dealing with sex and other bodily functions. As Burkert points out, this absence is only relative, for it is possible to find quite a number of incidents dealing with strange sexual adventures, but it is true that, on the whole, these themes play a less prominent rôle. The contrast between the different attitudes is again amazing. While Rose praised the Greek for modifying the 'repulsive elements' in their myths, Kirk as a typical modern critic deplores the scarcity of these elements. He is somewhat disappointed that 'Greek myths are freer of "horrible features" than some, and relatively lacking in the franker and more inquisitive type of sexual and excretory description.' (*Myth*, p. 244). He admits that these themes do appear in Greek mythology, especially in the theogony, but he finds that the heroic myths were impoverished by the taste which deprived them of these elements: 'Why did the Greeks elevate (or reduce) so many of their traditional themes to the moral level of a parish magazine, leaving only the

theogony with the uninhibited vigour of myths in other cultures?" (Perspectives, p. 83). Here Kirk really goes too far and is unfair to the Greeks. As he admits, they were not in the least prudish, and they must have had other reasons for eliminating these elements. One can accept the frank descriptions in other myths without criticizing the Greeks for not admitting them in the heroic myths.

What is the reason for this deterioration in the quality of Greek myths, as Kirk sees it? The principal blame, in his opinion, lies with literacy. Time and again he speaks in disparaging terms of the influence of literacy. The epic tradition 'had already acquired some of the destructive qualities associated with literacy', although one might have expected Homer and Hesiod to reflect the true tone of Greek mythology 'before it became adulterated by literate elaboration'. Apart from writers 'there were other agents of distortion, too' (Perspectives, p. 77). Elsewhere he prefers to regard Greek mythology in its present form as 'a censored, derivative and literary affair' rather than believe that the Greeks never had any important body of fantastic myths (Myth, p. 241).

To see Kirk's uncomplimentary remarks about Greek myths in the right perspective it is necessary to draw a clear distinction between two stages in the development of myth, stages which are so different that they can be regarded as two separate forms of myth, namely pre-literate and literate myth.

Presumably owing to the conditions of oral transmission pre-literate myths have a particular form of their own. They are generally very loosely organized and consist of incidents strung together like beads. The causal relation between the incidents is not always clear and many unexpected developments occur. It is because of this peculiar structure that these myths show the 'inconsequential fantasy' consisting of 'unusual combinations' and 'unexpected juxtapositions' which Kirk praises so much. He believes that 'mythical truth . . . reveals itself like that, by almost random association' (Perspectives, p. 81). Pre-literate myths further show a tendency towards exaggeration; fantastic and grotesque elements are very common, elements which are remote from real life. It is these elements which Rose describes in less complimentary terms as 'horrible, savage, repellent'.

Kirk, however, admires this inconsequence and fantasy as richer in imaginative content and more functional: 'Inconsequence is not just a nasty accident of primitivism, it is a valid facet of the mythical imagination, one of the ways in which traditional tales fulfil some of their most crucial sociological and psychological functions'. Fantastic myths have the same functions as the ritual rejection of normal life: 'For the liberating effect of myths is not caused just by a mysterious and evocative subject or symbol; it can be the result of restructuring experience in an apparently random or secret way . . . it enables one to see life quite differently, to sense strange, archaic possibilities behind the facade of existence.' (Perspectives, p. 81). He also thinks that inconsequence has more narrative charm: 'in narrative terms this kind of fantastic exaggeration needs no explanation—it gives the tale a kind of extra dimension and even a bizarre charm . . . that is how a tale should be—surprising and fantastic'. (ibid.)
Pre-literat e myths also show a naïve curiosity as to sexual and other bodily functions, especially excretion, and descriptions of incidents dealing with these are quite common. Of course pruriency plays no part in these descriptions; it is a childlike preoccupation with the mysteries of the body. Frequently quite fantastic sexual adventures are related. Kirk gives a number of examples, e.g. the male Hurrian god who becomes pregnant and does not know how to give birth.

Pre-literate myth is closely related to the feelings of the people as a whole. We must not underrate the rôle of the individual narrator in pre-literate myth, but it is true that his changes and additions had to be accepted by a substantial number of listeners, otherwise they would soon have been forgotten. Therefore pre-literate myths reflect the preoccupations of the people fairly faithfully. They are, as Kirk puts it, ‘organically connected . . . with the problems and paradoxes of social and personal life’ (Perspectives p. 78). They also change in accordance with the changing views of the people: ‘a tale’s emphasis can alter from generation to generation in response to changing social pressures and preoccupations’ (Perspectives p. 75). Kirk admires ‘the social continuity’ of this process, and elsewhere calls it ‘organic change’ (Nature of Greek myths, p. 108). Thus, to sum up in Kirk’s words: Pre-literate myth is ‘a primary mode of communication and discourse and an important factor for stability or, if necessary, for change’ (Perspectives p. 75).

Literate myth is in many respects completely different. As soon as a myth is committed to writing it tends to become more fixed in form. The myths became more organized; inconsistencies and contradictions were increasingly eliminated. Thus we find less and less of that ‘inconsequential fantasy’ and the juxtaposition of disparate elements, which Kirk admires. Coupled with this goes the gradual disappearance of the more grotesque and fantastic elements of pre-literate myths. The myths deal less with bodily functions. Kirk notes with regret: ‘Excrement was ruled right out’ (Perspectives p. 83).

What were the reasons for these changes? I think that Kirk describes them correctly in the following statement: ‘Greek mythology as we know it is a literate mythology, one based on genuinely traditional tales (no doubt) but one that was elaborated and adjusted for several generations in accordance with developed literary criteria’ (Perspectives p. 77). He rightly draws attention to the importance of literary criteria. Their influence led to the remoulding of the myths and the elimination of many elements which are characteristic of pre-literate myths. Reason and realism played a greater rôle and led to the reduction of fantastic elements which were too remote from everyday life. The myths became more sophisticated, and I wonder whether this is not the main reason for the disappearance of descriptions of bodily functions; they were regarded as too naïve.

The individual writer plays a more important part in literate myth. We must keep in mind that Greek writers and poets had no idea of recording myths exactly as they were told, like modern anthropologists and missionaries, but changed them according to their own views. Thus the myths develop, but not
always in accordance with the changing views of the nation as a whole. The writer treats the myth in his own way and sometimes even chooses a minor incident in the traditional tale to put in the centre of his personal interpretation. Kirk rightly says: 'A distinction needs to be drawn between the instinctive use of a tale for the expression of refinement of an attitude, and the conscious choice of a familiar fictitious situation as a means of presenting a deliberate and personal analysis.' (Nature of Greek Myths, p. 106). He seems to regret this development for the poets 'departed radically from the social continuity of the process by recording their own individual reactions rather than those of the community as a whole' (Perspectives p. 77). As a result of this 'the functional emphases of myths suffered severe erosion' (ibid., p. 78).

I think that it is now clear why Kirk talks in such disparaging terms of Greek myth. Pre-literacy myths have made a deep impression on him and he has conceived a great admiration for their 'inconsequential fantasy' and social function as a means of communication. Compared with them the Greek myths, as we know them, seem to him to be deficient in imagination. Intellectually he is clearly aware of the difference between pre-literate and literate myth. He himself says: 'Literacy makes an enormous difference to a mythical tradition' (Perspectives, p. 77). But emotionally he has not really accepted the consequences of drawing such a distinction and keeps on regretting that Greek myths do not have the 'admirable' qualities of pre-literate myths. This is the reason why he uses all those pejorative adjectives of which I have given examples. The best examples of this hankering after the glories of pre-literate myth may be seen in the following remarkable passage: 'I suppose I have already made it plain that in my view Greek mythology is not the better but the worse for its lack of fantasy, its highly conventionalized form, and its diminution of the speculative functions of myth. And yet I, like Nilsson and Rose, admire the Greeks and am temperamentally disposed to see the best in them. For me, however, this prejudice takes the form not of claiming that they never had any real myths, but of supposing that they must have had them, at some time in the irrecoverable past; that they could never have become the people they were if they had been deprived of this essential element in the formation of a coherent, developed, and yet deeply imaginative culture.' (Myth, p. 244).

Kirk even seems inclined to reserve the term 'true myth' for preliteracy myth and to imply that later 'sophisticated' developments of myth do not deserve to be called myths at all: 'Yet the elaborate divine setpieces . . . appear to be sophisticated Ionian developments belonging to the latest stages of the true oral tradition. They are not myths in any strict sense, but literary inventions that have something in common with the ingenious mythological elaborations of Euripides'. Further on he calls these scenes 'bastard mythology' (Myth, p. 174). This point of view is in absolute contrast with that of Nilsson who thinks that only the rationalized Greek form of myth should be called by that name. Of course both these views are extremely one-sided and must be rejected. Both preliteracy and literate forms must be included under the general term 'myth',
even though they differ greatly, and the one form must not be criticized because it does not have the qualities of the other.

Therefore Greek myth must be regarded as a literate, or rather literary genre, and judged accordingly. It may be admitted that owing to this development it lost some of its imaginative qualities, but it also gained others. Kirk may well be right in asserting that in the remote past Greek myths did have those qualities of 'imaginative unreason', but such a theory cannot be proved and is of no practical use today. We must concentrate on Greek myth as we know it.

Kirk himself admits that Greek myths have many admirable qualities. He admires the concept of anthropomorphic gods as 'one of profound fantasy, far surpassing in importance the neatness and rich detail that are the more obvious hallmarks of Greek myths as we perceive them. Once invented, the gods could never be entirely stripped of their imaginative implications . . . Their essence provided a continuing commentary on human aspirations and limitations and the absurd conflicts between them' (Myth, p. 193). In the heroic myths too, he sees positive qualities which he enumerates in a memorable passage. (Myth, p. 248). In the first place he mentions 'narrative interest'. Secondly, he speaks of the complexity of Greek myths, a point which is repeatedly stressed. They are 'unusually rich in characters, in personnel', and these characters are involved in a great variety of episodes. 'The thematic base of the episodes involving this large number of mythical characters may be narrow, but the manifold combinations of themes, and their varying application to strikingly different local circumstances, produce a sense of both richness and realism'. It is noticeable that he couples richness and realism, and in another passage he again mentions these two qualities together. He suggests that the heroic myths make such a deep impression on us 'because of their careful complexity, their rich and realistic elaboration of place and personnel' (Perspectives p. 80). Thus the realism of Greek myths, which Kirk does not always admire, may be regarded as a third positive quality. In the fourth place he mentions 'their neatness, their rounded-off quality', and with this may be coupled their consistency of which he speaks frequently. Because of these qualities Greek myths 'seem to lay hold on the emotions' and acquire 'an emotional value that transcends mere narrative appeal'.

In my opinion it is precisely owing to the above-named qualities that Greek myths have had such an enormous influence on European literature, thought and culture. And it is possible that the qualities of preliterate myths, admirable as they are, make them less suitable for literary elaboration and reinterpretation. Pre-literate myths are so closely intertwined with the life of the tribe that they do not appeal in the same measure to people living in different circumstances. The same remark applies also to the qualities of inconsequence and exaggerated fantasy, and to the 'franker and more inquisitive type of sexual and excretory description' in those myths. The Greeks, who were not prudish, apparently thought that sex did not belong in serious literature, as Kirk himself suggests (Perspectives p. 83). It is obvious that these descriptions would not
have appealed to the taste of classicistic and Victorian times. And even modern writers who try to cast all inhibitions aside, would find it difficult to make significant use of some of the strange events described in primitive myth, e.g. the pregnant male god trying to give birth. Perhaps the less fantastic but more universal emphasis of Greek myths increased their literary influence.

If we agree to regard Greek myth as a thoroughly literary form, we must also study its development as such. And that leads me to the next point. All literary reinterpretations, even the modern ones, should be regarded as forming part of the genuine myth. Kirk and other classical scholars show a tendency to regard the oldest form of the myth as the only ‘authentic’ one and later versions as ‘polluted’ owing to ‘literary interference’ (Myth, p. 50). In his review of Kirk’s book J. G. Griffiths remarks: ‘He properly objects also to the theory that “myth consists of all its versions”’. Humbler students have regarded it as of some importance to establish the early and authentic as opposed to the later and more sophisticated form. But this is a very restricted view of myth and if we accept Greek myth as a literary form, that is a traditional story retold by an individual writer, it is arbitrary to regard only the oldest retelling as genuine.

Lévi-Strauss also refers to this attitude as ‘the quest for the true version, or the earlier one’ and thinks that he can eliminate it by his structural approach to myth: ‘We define the myth as consisting of all its versions’, and: ‘if a myth is made up of all its variants structural analysis should take all of them into account.’ But the way in which he applies this theory to the interpretation of myths makes it unacceptable. He seems to think that all variants of the myths should have one fundamental theme, and Kirk rightly criticizes this approach: ‘progressive literary interference can and often does completely alter the purport of a traditional myth’ (Myth, p. 50). Nevertheless there is an element of truth in his statement that the myth consists of all its versions. Peter Munz in his book When the Golden Bough Breaks shows a very sensible attitude. He criticizes Lévi-Strauss for not really taking the historical development of a myth into account: ‘The only thing that matters to Lévy-Strauss is the theme . . . its variations are nothing more than historical accidents.’ (p. 22). Munz himself wants to consider myth ‘first and foremost . . . as a historical phenomenon’. By this he means that all myths have had a certain development and are known to us in some historical form or other: ‘All myths have histories, and . . . no myth is known to us in an absolute version of which earlier and later versions are so many deviations.’ (p. 24). Therefore he strongly protests against the attempt to interpret a myth according to the original intention formulated in the earliest version: ‘If one thinks one has found that first intention in the original version of the tale one is bound to consider all later versions of the story as so many

corruptions. In short, the very idea that there is a golden age of myth and that all later versions are departures from and corruptions of the original version is not only imaginary but also flies in the face of the evidence. For the evidence shows us without the slightest shadow of a doubt that myths have histories; that we know of myths only in their historical dimension and that no one version of any tale as it has come down to us, whatever the method of tradition, is more "original" or more "true" than any other version (p. 27). This is a very common sense approach. All versions of a myth do not have the same meaning; there is a certain development in the treatment of the myth which can be traced. Munz has his own theory of the way in which myths develop, which he calls typology: 'Myths are not generated or created fully fledged but are gradually elaborated from simple, general tales into progressively more and more specific tales' (p. 26). Like all theorists Munz shows a tendency to prescribe a too precise pattern in which myths should develop in order to form a typological series but his general approach is extremely valuable. Henry Tudor also protests against the exaggerated value attached to the original form of a myth: 'So far as the content of a myth is concerned, it is not its origin which defines its character and direction. And there is no significant sense in which the content of the first version is more "real" than that of any subsequent version.'

We have now arrived at two general conclusions: Greek myth is a literary form, and it is also a form with a history, showing a certain development. If we accept the second conclusion, it is clear that we must not study Greek mythology as a whole, but must divide its development into periods and study each period on its own. In each period we must examine the rôle which Greek myths played in that society, even if it was only the society of the learned, and also the way in which poets, dramatists and prose authors reinterpreted them. The functions of myths and the attitude of poets towards them may differ greatly in the various periods, and therefore the rôle of the myths in each period must be studied objectively. This of course does not preclude criticism of the rôle the myths played in a specific period. It is obvious that in some periods, e.g. the fifth century B.C. myths were more important than in others like the third century B.C. But one should not start with a preconceived idea of what the function of myth in any society ought to be; rather one should examine its rôle in each period on its own merits.

Kirk has shown us how this can be done in the chapter 'Greek myths in literature' in The Nature of Greek Myths. After repeating that Greek myths have become 'a part of literature' he asks the following questions: 'How did they become so, what was the precise nature of this literary development, and what are the special tastes and concerns of the main literary sources for Greek myths?' (p. 95). He then examines the social significance of the myths and gives a critical analysis of the way in which different Greek authors handle the myths.

Unfortunately he does not go beyond Plato and does not seem to value the Alexandrian use of myth very highly. But this examination of the rôle and development of Greek myth should be taken further than the fifth century into Hellenistic and Roman times. And the reinterpretation of the myths in the literatures of modern Europe should also be included. Although Greek myth has in these countries developed in circumstances very different from those in ancient Greece, this development should also be regarded as part of the history of Greek myth as a literary form.
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