

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Introduction to Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Myth and Enchantment
Weekly Introduction
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The purpose of this week's class is two-fold: to examine the nature of myth, and to explore the concept of enchantment.

Most ancient cultures located myths in the sky, as is evident from the stories told about the Constellations. Modern astrologers derive astrological meaning from such myths, while ethno- and archaeoastronomers examine myth as a means to understanding non-western astronomies.

Rollo May, the psychiatrist and author, considered (a) astrology's nature as myth and (b) its appeal and function as myth. He wrote 'Astrology is a myth and requires the language of myth. It has both the shortcomings and the positive effects of myth'.* But he also bemoaned the directionless, frantic people who, at the end of the twentieth century, ere flocking to cults, longing for relief from the guilt and anxiety of their lives, searching for something to fill the vacuum in their souls. Such people, he suggested 'also beg guidance from astrologers.** Myth, he argued, fulfils a vital need. Hence the title of his book – *The Cry for Myth*.

Myth has various competing definitions, which tend to define it as more-or-less true (or false) or based in history (as opposed to the imagination). Such contrasts are not mutually exclusive. Myth has been defined, at least since Plato, against *logos*, where *mythos* is an intuitive, imaginative way of describing, or relating to the cosmos, as opposed to the reason-based world view of *logos*.

Even if we consider 'myth' in a conventional sense as 'stories invented about the gods', there are different versions, from chthonic (earth/nature-based) animism, polytheistic pantheons, single transcendent deity, and the modern 'myth of mythlessness' (in Mary Midgley's phrase), according to which modern people (especially scientists and atheists) do not have myths (an idea which Midgely challenges as itself a myth). In contrast to this notion, the cultural milieu within which modern astrologers has a high regard for myth, particularly through the work of the great populariser, Joseph Campbell. I call Campbell a populariser because his work was unoriginal – but he carried other people's theories to a wide audience because he was a fluent writer and influential teacher. In particular, he popularised the myth of the hero's journey, in which mythical heroes in different epic cycles pursue journeys which follow a common structure and which, in Jungian terms, could be seen as 'archetypal'. Campbell is influential, and therefore features as an important cultural figure but a cautionary note needs to be sounded (1) he himself is, ironically, subject to mythologisation as a great, original teacher and (2) the scholarly work in his books is frequently inaccurate or poorly referenced.

There are a number of points of consideration this week:

- Is it possible not to live according to (a) myth?
- Do astronomy and scientific cosmology have their myths?
- Did myth originate as a means of explaining ritual, or is ritual a means of enacting myth (and to what extent might astrological readings or consultations, along with many other acts, emphasise ritual)?
- Is astrology mythical?
- And to what extent is rooted in ancient myths?
- Is there a relationship between astrological deities and astrological planets? (a question which it may be too early to consider, but which should be kept in mind).
- And, if so, is this ancient or recent in origin?
- Do myths possess common structures?
- Do myths contain meaning?

* May, Rollo, *The Cry for Myth*, New York: Delta, 1992, p. 22, n.

** May, Rollo, *The Cry for Myth*, New York: Delta, 1992.

Enchantment and Disenchantment

This week's work also considers the attribution of the popularity of New Age beliefs and practices attributed to the quest for 'enchantment'.

Separate notes are posted for Enchantment

Forum Question

Either

What do you consider to be either the most influential, or useful, or meaningful, contemporary or modern myth about the cosmos.

OR

Is the quest for enchantment a satisfactory explanation for astrology's popularity?

(*Tackle whichever question attracts you, but address both if you wish).

A note on this week's reading.

The week's PDFs are a mixture of the strictly academic (Scarborough, Most, Lincoln, Segal and Brower), personal statements by academics (Coupe and Kane), work by psychologist from different perspectives (May, Kerenyi), by an academic with a pronounced psychological (Jungian) slant (Eliade). Of all this week's reading, Kane's perhaps provides the most imaginative context. I haven't prioritised the reading in order, so it's a matter of making your own way.

Reading

Brower, Reuben A., 'Visual and Verbal Translation of Myth: Neptune in Virgil, Rubens, Dryden', in Geertz, Clifford (ed.), *Myth, Symbol and Culture*, New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1971, pp. 155-182.

Coupe, Laurence, *Myth*, London: Routledge 1997, chap. 1 (pp. 20-42).

Eliade, Mircea, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 2nd impression, London: Collins 1970, chap 1, 'The Myths of the Modern World', pp. 23-38)

Eliade, Mircea, *Myth and Reality*, New York, Harper and Row, 1963, chapter II ('Magic and Prestige of Origins').

Jonas, Hans, 'Myth and Mysticism: A Study of Objectification and Interiorization in Religious Thought', *Journal of Religion* Oct 1969.
JSTOR.

Kane, Sean, *The Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, 2nd edn, Peterborough, Broadview Press, 1998, Chap 1 (pp. 32-51).

Kerényi, C., 'The Primordial Child in Primordial Times', in Jung and Jung, Carl and C. Kerényi, *The Science of Mythology*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, chapter 1, ('The Primordial Child in Primordial Times', pp. 29-82).

Lincoln, Bruce, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, chap 2 (pp. 19-43).

May, Rollo, *The Cry for Myth*, New York: Delta, 1992 (chap 2, 'Our Personal Crises in Myth', pp. 30-44).

Most, Glenn W., 'From Logos to Mythos', in Buxton, Richard, *From Myth to Reason: Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 25-47.

Scarborough, Milton, *Myth and Modernity: Postcritical Reflections*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, chap 2 (pp. 9-31)

Segal, Robert A., *Jung on Mythology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998, Introduction (pp. 3-45).

Segal, Robert A., *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, Chap 4 ('Myth and Ritual', p. 61-78).

Other Reading Suggestions

Calasso, Roberto, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1993.

Rappaport, Roy A., *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Lefkowitz, Mary R., *Women in Greek Myth*, 2nd edn, London: Duckworth, 2007.
An important book for the re-reading of myth, Lefkowitz challenged conventional views of woman in Greek myth, such as the Amazons as the memory of a lost matriarchy, , Clytemnestra as a frustrated individualist and Antigone as an oppressed revolutionary.