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Religion

Relating the landscape and the family of the Greek *imaginaire* to the world behind and beyond them involves, as we have seen, considerable methodological complexities. When we focus on narratives about gods, matters become more problematic still, since the world which the stories transform may be seen as either (1) the whole fabric of social life, or (2) the practices of ritual, or (3) 'ordinary' beliefs about divinities. Later I shall have a little to say about (2) – a subject which has exercised a perhaps excessive dominance over recent scholarship – and rather more to say about (3), which has, by comparison, been neglected. But I begin by recalling some general features of the Greeks' narratives about gods, in order to raise certain issues relevant to (1).

The nature of divinity

The first general characteristic of the divinities of Greek mythology is that they are neither good nor evil, but powerful.¹ Their powers range over the entire field of experience: whatever a human being is doing – being born, fighting, stealing, sleeping, getting married, committing adultery, dying – his or her activity is related to a

¹ This applies even to Zeus. Cf. Nilsson 1951–60, on the inconclusiveness of connections between Zeus and justice: 'Zeus war der einzige Gott, der, abgesehen von blutlosen Personifikationen, sich der Gerechtigkeit annehmen konnte, sie war aber nicht in seinem Wesen begründet, und schwer wog es, dass die Mythen viele ungerechte Taten von ihm erzählten' (p. 315).

structure mapped out at the divine level.² Even Ares and the Furies, for whom it is quite possible to express hatred or revulsion, represent activities which are part, perhaps even a necessary part, of human experience: brutal warfare, and vengeance upon kin-murderers.³ The second characteristic is that divine activities, interrelationships and behaviour towards mortals are to some extent modelled on the institutions and customs of Greek society. But only to some extent: *some* divine activity is, as we shall see, beyond human comprehension, incommensurate with any pattern of real intra-human behaviour.

The presentation varies, of course, according to context. The most detailed picture appears in epic, since it was a convention of the genre that the action unfolded on two levels, to both of which the narrator claimed to have access. As a first illustration we may take the *Iliad*, not because it was typical, but because it was uniquely authoritative.

Relations between the Iliadic Olympians are based on a combination of violence, deception, negotiation and reciprocity. The violence is evident already in Book 1, when Hephaistos ruefully reminds his mother Hera that

It is too hard to fight against the Olympian.

There was a time once before now I was minded to help you,
and he caught me by the foot and threw me from the magic threshold,
and all day long I dropped helpless, and about sunset
I landed in Lemnos, and there was not much life left in me.

(1.589-93)

But there are more ways than one of cooking a goose. The use of trickery is famously exemplified in Book 14, when Zeus's wife outwits him 'with deceitful purpose' (300), aided by the irresistible power of Aphrodite. More subtle still is the situation at the beginning of Book 4. Hera wants to enforce the sacking of Troy, a city hateful to her. Acquiescing, Zeus nevertheless retorts that, if ever there is a city

² The analysis of the structured division of divine power seems to me to be the aspect of the work of J.-P. Vernant and M. Detienne which is most likely – and most justifiably – to endure.

³ Hatred of Ares: Hom. *Il.* 5.890 (expressed by Zeus himself), S. *OT* 190ff. Revolting Furies: A. *Eum.* 52-4.

which *he* wants to sack, Hera is not to stand in his way. Hera's reply is complex:

Of all cities there are three that are dearest to my own heart:
 Argos and Sparta and Mycenae of the wide ways. All these,
 whenever they become hateful to your heart, sack utterly.
 I will not stand up for these against you, nor yet begrudge you.
 Yet if even so I bear malice and would not have you destroy them,
 in malice I will accomplish nothing, since you are far stronger . . .
 Come then, in this thing let us both give way to each other,
 I to you, you to me, and so the rest of the immortal
 gods will follow.

(4.51-64)

Within the general framework of the imbalance of power in Zeus's favour, there is room for movement. Even one of the humblest figures in the divine power-hierarchy, Thetis, can rely on the mighty argument of reciprocity to support her case:

Father Zeus, if ever before in word or action
 I did you favour among the immortals, now grant what I ask for.

(1.503-4)

Again, although Zeus is the most powerful, each divinity has a sphere which the others may not infringe:

[Hera] went into her chamber, which her beloved son Hephaistos ~
 had built for her, and closed the leaves in the door-posts snugly
 with a secret door-bar, *and no other of the gods could open it.*

(14.166-8)⁴

In relationships between Iliadic gods and mortals, imbalance of power is always the decisive factor. The mortals sweat, bleed and die, but Athene can protect Menelaos from an arrow 'as lightly as when a mother brushes a fly away from her child who is lying in sweet sleep' (4.130-1). This is not to say that the gap is unbridgeable. The gods can be emotionally involved in the mortals' actions, as when Zeus weeps

⁴ Cf. *Od.* 8.280-1: Hephaistos' workmanship is so fine that its products are imperceptible even to the other gods.

tears of blood over Sarpedon, whom he is – Hera has convinced him – powerless to save from death (16.459); and Thetis' tenderness for Achilles frames the poem.⁵ Yet in other contexts the relationship is more dispassionate, as with the distancing image of Zeus's two urns, from which derives mankind's fate (either a mixture of good and evil, or unrelieved evil) (24.527ff.). This oscillation between divine involvement and divine aloofness constitutes the uncomfortable and unpredictable setting within which Iliadic heroes act. If a god's protégé is insulted, intervention will follow, as with the priest of Apollo in Book 1. If the gods' honours are skimped, there will be consequences: the Greeks' walled ditch, constructed without proper sacrifices, was not to stand for very long (12.8–9). Yet at the crucial moment, mankind may be alone (22.208–13). In the end divine power asserts itself by re-emphasising the boundary with mortality. Although Diomedes is given temporary permission to see the difference between gods and men, and even to wound Aphrodite, his attempt to go too far is rebuked:

Take care, give back, son of Tydeus, and strive no longer
to make yourself like the gods in mind, since never the same is
the breed of gods, who are immortal, and men who walk groundling.
(5.440–2)

When the horses which the gods had given to Peleus, and which had seen the death of Patroklos, weep for their dead master, Zeus remarks conclusively:

Poor wretches,
why then did we ever give you to the lord Peleus,
a mortal man, and you yourselves are immortal and ageless?
(17.442–4)

Features of the Iliadic picture recur throughout Greek mythology in respect both of god/god and god/mortal relations. As to the

⁵ On the general capacity of Greek myths about immortal beings to be *moving*, one may note the remark of Rudhardt 1958, p. 76: 'La légende toutefois oublie l'immortalité des dieux en traitant un épisode limité de leur histoire; elle les soumet à la durée, à l'intérieur de l'épisode, et, dans cette limite, à la souffrance et au changement; elle achève ainsi de les humaniser.'

former, relationships continue to operate at a variety of points on the scale which leads from violence to negotiation. The use of force in the constitution of the universe is a central theme of Hesiod's *Theogony*; in the same poem, the mode by which wily Prometheus chooses to circumvent Zeus is deception. But negotiation was another option. An amicable arrangement is reached in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, where the honour-dispute between Apollo and Hermes is resolved through Zeus's authoritative arbitration; in Aischylos' *Eumenides* the differences between Apollo and the Furies are settled without violence – though Athene has the keys of Zeus's thunderbolt if her persuasion fails (827–8). A more bitter boundary-dispute forms the plot of Euripides' *Hippolytos*. Artemis maintains (1328–30) that on principle the gods avoid confrontations with each other (which has indeed been true of Artemis and Aphrodite in this play). The balance will simply be restored by the wronged divinity taking it out on a human favourite of the wronger (1420–2). As usual, cookery varies with context. In Pindar, when Helios is accidentally omitted from an apportionment of lots, Zeus helpfully offers to hold the draw again, though Helios gets what he wants anyway (*Ol.* 7). Even violent Ares warms his heart to Apollo's lovely music, and conflict is resolved in the harmony of choral song (*Pyth.* 1.10–12).

The immortal/mortal boundary, so fundamental to the *Iliad*, is explored elsewhere in a variety of ways (though never with greater poignancy than in that work). A typically Pindaric version of the relevant similarity and difference is set out at the beginning of *Nemean* 6:

There is one
 race of men, one race of gods; both have breath
 of life from a single mother. But sundered power
 holds us divided, so that the one is nothing, while for the other the
 brazen sky is established
 their sure citadel for ever. Yet we have some likeness in great
 intelligence, or strength, to the immortals,
 though we know not what the day will bring, what course
 after nightfall
 destiny has written that we must run to the end.

Herakles gained Olympos after hard effort; Asklepios raised the dead, and was thunderbolted; Cheiron was agonisingly wounded and wanted to die, but could not unless he found someone (Prometheus) willing to take over his immortality; Tithonos, blessed with immortality but not with immortal youth, shrivelled up beside his eternally young bride: myths about heroes explore the perilous interface between mortality and immortality.

An important area in which this is true is that of reciprocity. Humans nowadays owe the gods certain things; the implications of these debts are examined through myths. One thing humans owe is sacrifice. The reason why Hera supported the expedition of the *Argo* was that Pelias, Jason's foe, forgot her when making offerings to the gods; when Admetos failed to sacrifice to Artemis on the occasion of his marriage, the bridal chamber turned out to be full of coiled snakes.⁶ A related debt concerns giving the gods due honour and respect. In Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Athene's wrath towards the Greeks derives from Ajax's crime of dragging Cassandra from her temple in Troy; she urges Poseidon to wreck their fleet 'so that in future the Achaeans will learn to respect my power and to worship the other gods' (85-6). At an earlier stage in the history of Troy, King Laomedon failed to pay the wages of Apollo and Poseidon, who had fortified his city for him; he got a plague and a sea-monster for his reward.⁷ Another kind of respect is due acknowledgement of superiority. Here again, heroic myths narrate what happens when proper distances are elided: Thamyras, Arachne, Marsyas and a host of others fail to appreciate the riskiness of competing with those who are, by definition, *hors concours*.⁸

Many of the themes noted above – power, violence, deception, negotiation, reciprocity, conflicts over interests and honour – have obvious echoes and models in the human sphere. Yet there are striking differences. One has been highlighted by John Gould in a paper which stresses the alien, uncanny and horrific dimension of divinity.⁹ This is exemplified in the narrative in Euripides' *Hippolytos* in which the messenger relates the overthrow of Hippolytos on the appearance of

⁶ Pelias: A. R. 1.13-14. Admetos: Apollod. 1.9.15.

⁷ Apollod. 2.5.9.

⁸ See Weiler 1974.

⁹ Gould 1985.

the monstrous bull from the sea, despatched against him by Poseidon in response to the curse invoked by Theseus. The gods here exceed all human analogy, inhabiting a territory which can best be indicated through the Greek word *deinon*, 'terrible', 'awesome'.

Another quality shared by many mythical narratives is their laying bare of motives and explanations which in the superficial traffic of everyday life remain hidden. What mortal could know as much about the causation operative in his or her existence as the Homeric narrator claims to know about his subject matter? What human being could see with the clear eyes of the gods in Euripidean prologues? Once more, we can see myth as a device for making explicit, for highlighting what is behind life. But, paradoxically, one of the aspects of the world made explicit in myths is the *incompleteness* of human understanding of the world, and the *insufficiency* of human models of behaviour for comprehending divinity. This is above all true of tragedy, in which certain key episodes and scenes are simply inexplicable, certain divine actions baffling, because the drama either provides too few clues to reconstruct a coherent pattern of motivation, or incorporates too much, because conflicting, information. A classic example of the former is the notorious question of why, in the version of the tale given in Aischylos' *Agamemnon*, Artemis grew angry at Aulis before the departure of the Greek expedition to Troy. While explanations of her wrath are easy to find in other versions, this particular account shrouds the matter in mystery. On the other hand, Euripides' *Herakles* positively overflows with explanations for the reason for the downfall of the great hero, to such an extent that, here too, providing a coherent account involves disregarding some information at the expense of the rest.¹⁰ The purposes of the gods are sometimes opaque, their voices silent or beyond interpretation.

Telling and acting

In twentieth-century scholarship, the aspect of Greek social behaviour which has most frequently been juxtaposed with myth is ritual. The history of myth-and-ritual approaches is complicated, not least

¹⁰ Cf. Buxton 1988.

because it is inseparable from the larger question of the shifting relationships between the disciplines of anthropology and classics.¹¹ But from Jane Harrison to Walter Burkert a golden key to unlock the meanings of 'what is said' has been found in the investigation of 'what is done'. The terms of the enquiry have varied enormously, as have conclusions about, especially, the priority of one of these modes of symbolic expression over the other. There has even been an attempt (by C. Calame) to undermine the polarity altogether by calling into doubt the conceptual identity not just of myth but also of ritual, both being seen as products of western anthropological thought.¹² However, collapsing both into a general category of *énonciations de la pensée symbolique*¹³ would seem to leave us with an excessively blunt analytical tool, and in the brief remarks which follow I have, along with virtually all scholars, kept ritual as a potentially useful concept.

That the narration of a Greek myth might actually form part of a ritual is certain. At the mysteries of the Mother Goddess, observes Pausanias *à propos* of a bronze near Corinth representing Hermes with a ram, a story was told: 'I know it, but will not relate it' (2.3.4). Circumstantial details are often lacking, as here; usually we have to make do with suggestive parallels between myths and 'their' festivals, rather than with fully documented accounts which would enable us to describe in proper contextual detail the nature of the integration between the two. Even suggestive parallels have their fascination, however, and they can sometimes generate plausible guesses about a close symbiosis between myth and festival. The inhabitants of Lemnos celebrated a rite of New Fire, when for a nine-day period all fires on the island were extinguished, to be relit afterwards by fire brought from over the sea.¹⁴ Corresponding to this is a myth, according to which the women of the island incur the wrath of Aphrodite: they are afflicted with a bad smell which drives away their husbands and puts a stop to normal conjugal relations.¹⁵ The motif of the disruption of the everyday repeats itself in even more emphatic

¹¹ The best *mise au point* is Versnel in Edmunds 1990, pp. 25–90; see also Bremmer 1992.

¹² See ch. 1 of Calame 1990b. ¹³ Calame 1990b, p. 50.

¹⁴ Philostr. *Her.* 207 (Teubner edn).

¹⁵ For the myth and the ritual, see the classic account in Burkert 1970.

form when the husbands, who have consoled themselves with some Thracian slavegirls, are murdered by their wives. But eventually life begins again, as – from across the sea – Jason and the Argonauts sail in to rekindle that which had been extinguished.¹⁶ The structure of the mythical narrative corresponds to the rhythm of the festival, and confirms the observation of one ancient source that the fire was extinguished *epi tōi ergōi*, 'in consequence of the [murderous, Lemnian] deed'.¹⁷ Story and festival go together, even if we are not aware of any role which *narration* of the myth might have played in the ritual.

In cases where correspondences between narrative and ritual make it reasonable to talk of symbiosis, we can frequently observe the now familiar process of clarification and making-explicit, whereby mythology expresses openly or in extreme form that which in ritual remains hidden or disguised. Jan Bremmer has argued convincingly that, in rites enacting the expulsion of a scapegoat, the victim, typically a person of low status who becomes temporarily the focus of attention, is chased alive out of the city; in the corresponding myths the victim is a person of *high* status who is *killed*.¹⁸ Myth translates ritual: to leave one's city is – if you spell it out – to die. Again, the women who worship Dionysos at the *oreibasia* return to their normal lives after the conclusion of the rites. By contrast, the corresponding myths express the disruption of family life in *irreversible* terms, as in the tale of Agaue's murder and dismembering of her son Pentheus. Temporary, ritual disruption of the family is translated mythically into permanence.

If the women who took part in the *oreibasia* had actually killed their kin as opposed to merely abandoning them temporarily, they would have been committing, in addition to murder, an unforgivable category-mistake. It did occasionally happen, or was said to have done; with predictable results.

¹⁶ Myrsilos of Lesbos records a custom on Lemnos according to which on one day in the year the women kept their menfolk at a distance 'because of their bad smell': the link between myth and rite is reinforced (*FGrH* 477 1a; cf. Burkert 1970, p. 7).

¹⁷ Philostr., *loc. cit.* in n. 14.

¹⁸ Bremmer 1983a.

They say that the daughters of Minyas, Leukippe and Arsinoe and Alkathoe, became frenzied and craved for human flesh, and drew lots about their children. The lot fell upon Leukippe and she gave her son Hippasos to be torn in pieces . . . And up to the present time the people of Orchomenos give this name to the women of the family descended from them. And once a year at the Agrionia festival there takes place a flight and pursuit of them by the priest of Dionysos holding a sword. And when he catches one of them he may kill her. *And in our own time Zoilos the priest did indeed kill one of them. But this resulted in no good for the people; for Zoilos fell sick of a chance ulcerous wound, and after it had long festered, he died.*¹⁹

The myth recounts cannibalism and the catastrophic destruction of a family. The corresponding ritual *should* dramatise a symbolic pursuit of women escapers, which should in turn lead to a return to normality after the ritual. By a mischance, the behaviour appropriate to myth has invaded ritual, bringing death upon the agent responsible as well as upon his innocent victim – innocent, because only in the symbolism of the ritual was she guilty. The return to normality has been blocked, the essential temporariness of ritual cancelled.

A further, related difference between mythology and its festival context is worth introducing here. Rituals are designed to fulfil their objectives.²⁰ They set up dramatic situations, enact them, and at the end return participants and observers to undramatised reality: from *Fest* to *Alltag*. Sacrifice, for example, is a procedure by means of which proper relations with the gods and solidarity between humans are achieved through correct apportioning of cooked meat. The rules of the game are carefully prescribed; if they are followed, the ritual, by definition, works. But myths are, or may be, rather different. They may reach an 'end', as with the finale to Aischylos' *Oresteia*, or the eventual arrival of the Argonauts at Lemnos in order to ensure a future. But they may also draw attention to the open-endedness and ambiguity of action, to dilemmas without solution and wounds

¹⁹ From no. 38 of Plutarch's *Greek Questions* (= *Mor.* 299e–f, trans. slightly adapted from that by W. R. Halliday; my italics).

²⁰ Cf. Burkert 1985, p. 264: 'Ritual creates situations of anxiety in order to overcome them . . .'

without healing. In tragedy, above all, we regularly find that the shapes into which myths cast experience are baffling and contradictory. Rituals set themselves achievable goals; some myths remind their hearers that any hope of tailoring reality to suit human desires is bound to fail.

We spoke earlier of the symbiosis which can exist between myth and festival. But this is not the only possible relationship between the two. Some deities worshipped in cult are unimportant or even absent from extant mythology.²¹ Again, many myths, while drawing on ritual, are not tied to one kind of ceremony, let alone to a particular cult at a particular time and place. Neither epics nor victory songs nor tragic dramas can be reduced to the status of libretti for ritual action, although the festival context undeniably affects the narrative perspectives adopted in those genres. The *Odyssey*, with its complex structure and its remarkable exploration of Greekness as contrasted with the behaviour of the diverse peoples visited by Odysseus, cannot be boiled down to a ritual pattern; yet its recitation at the Panathenaia must have lent it a special resonance, given the narrative's persistent opposing of Athene to Poseidon – the two rivals for the patronage of Athens.²² No more can Pindar's odes, rich and intricate and full of subtle allusion, be explained away as mere reflections of ritual action; yet the prevalence in the poetry of agonistic imagery and of myths about returning demonstrates a significant link between context and content. Nor, finally, have attempts to shoe-horn tragedy into a ritual pattern won lasting assent. As the Greeks' phrase 'nothing to do with Dionysos' should not mislead us into ignoring the link between this god of changing identities and the masked drama put on to honour him, no more should we mistake the regular *exploitation of ritual themes* in drama (supplication, laments for the dead, sacrifice) for some hypothetically all-pervading ritual structure.

Believing in myths

Paul Veyne's short book *Les Grecs ont-ils cru à leurs mythes?* was published in 1983; several translations soon followed, including one in

²¹ Cf. Rudhardt 1958, pp. 82–5. ²² Panathenaia: Pl. *Hipparch.* 228b, Lyc. *Leocr.* 102.

English.²³ Having achieved the status of *savant*, Veyne declaims from beyond the Flannel Barrier; but, if you persevere through the style, you are rewarded. The argument is in two parts. Only one is directly relevant here; I confine discussion of the other to an extended footnote.

The first part of the case can be stated simply: believing in Greek myths, indeed believing *tout court*, is essentially plural. This is already implicit in the Preface, where Veyne cites Dan Sperber's *Rethinking Symbolism*. The Dorzé of Ethiopia believe that leopards, being Christians, observe the fasts of the Coptic church on Wednesdays and Fridays. However, a Dorzé protects his livestock on *all* days of the week, including Wednesdays and Fridays. 'Leopards are dangerous every day; this he knows from experience. They are also Christians; this is guaranteed by tradition.'²⁴ Beliefs, that is, are plural: persons and communities may hold, without strain, apparently incompatible beliefs. Veyne's Christmas parallel (stockings are filled *both* by Mum and Dad *and* by Santa) is perhaps too close for comfort to the Tylorian equation of the primitive with the childlike; a better example is Veyne's reference to his own views about ghosts: 'For my part, I hold ghosts to be simple fictions but . . . I am almost neurotically afraid of them.'²⁵

More relevant for us are Veyne's discussions of plurality of belief in relation to Greek stories; or rather, plurality in *expressions* of belief. He is more concerned with the Hellenistic and Roman periods than with the Archaic and Classical, and cites telling examples from Galen and Pausanias. When Galen has a philosophical hat on, he refers at one point (siding with Plato in order to pour scorn on Stoic attempts to make sense of mythology by rationalising it) to 'Hippocentaurs' and the Chimaira; 'and a multitude of such shapes comes flooding in, Gorgons and Pegasuses and an absurd crowd of other impossible and fabulous natures'.²⁶ But elsewhere, when seeking to persuade, to proselytise, to give an account of medicine within a more generally accepted framework, Galen mentions, with no explicit statement of incredulity, such traditional figures in the early history of medicine as

²³ Veyne 1988.

²⁴ Sperber 1975, p. 95.

²⁵ Veyne 1988, p. 87.

²⁶ *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* 3.8.33 (Kühn v, p. 357; de Lacy p. 231). Trans. by P. de Lacy.

'the Centaur Cheiron and the heroes of whom he was the teacher', and Asklepios.²⁷ So belief can figure differently in different works by the same author. But more than that: Pausanias, within one and the same work, refuses to give credence to the myth of Medusa, yet accepts the authenticity of the tale about the werewolf Lykaon: '... I believe this legend, which has been told in Arkadia from ancient times and has likelihood on its side'.²⁸

Emphasis on the problems involved in deciphering Greek expressions of belief is by no means original to Veyne. In a beautiful article written in 1976, Tom Stinton showed how expressions of *disbelief* can function as 'signifiers' whose 'signifieds' are by no means what they seem.²⁹ For instance, Herodotos tells a story about men living beyond the Scythians who are bald from birth; beyond them are mountains inhabited, according to the bald men, by a goat-footed race, 'though I do not regard this as credible'; and beyond *them* are men who hibernate for six months: 'but this I *totally* refuse to accept' (4.23-5). The effect is both to convince us of Herodotos' *general* trustworthiness (for he is *so* sensitive to gradations of likelihood) and to encourage the reader to accept the existence of the bald men as going without saying – or with saying.³⁰ Knowing how to take expressions of belief depends on our assessment of the context and of the strategy of the writer; since Stinton, assumptions about Euripides' famous scepticism have needed very careful handling. Veyne is stylistically a million miles from Stinton, but he too leads us to recognise just how intractable some of the apparently straightforward evidence about belief actually is.³¹

²⁷ *Introductio seu medicus* I (Kühn xiv, pp. 674-5); cf. Veyne 1988, p. 55.

²⁸ Medusa: 2.21.6-7. Lykaon: 8.2.4 (trans. P. Levi). Cf. Veyne 1988, pp. 96 and 99.

²⁹ Reprinted in Stinton 1990, pp. 236-64. The Saussurian terms are not Stinton's, but seem appropriate to his argument.

³⁰ Stinton 1990, p. 237.

³¹ At this point I include some comments about the second stage in Veyne's argument. This consists in holding that we must talk, not just of a plurality of beliefs, but of a plurality of truths, or of criteria for truth (p. 113). 'The *Iliad* and *Alice in Wonderland*', declares Veyne, 'are no less true than Fustel de Coulanges' (p. xi). (What shall we say? Finley's *Ancient Economy*? Hammond's *History of Greece*?) Now the nature of this plurality of truths is, intriguingly, itself multiple, or at least dual. At times it seems to be a matter of chronological succession, of one Kuhnian paradigm being replaced by another ('Once one is in one of these

Let us turn to some of this evidence. Scholars sometimes tend to operate, half-unconsciously, with a model which goes like this. Archaic Greeks, with the exception of odd-balls like the Presocratic philosopher Xenophanes, on the whole believed in myths. In the fifth century, more sceptical voices were raised, for example by Euripides. In Hellenistic times a still greater distance opened up between myths and belief. And as for the ultra-knowing Ovid . . . This model cannot, I believe, be dismissed as a straw one. Oswyn Murray was perhaps being over-optimistic when he alluded to 'one of the most dubious and insidious of all *nineteenth-century* postulates, [namely] the idea of social development from the primitive and religious towards the complex and secular'.³²

What do we do with this model? First, we have to distinguish between belief in myths, that is in *stories*, and belief in gods. It is quite possible to disbelieve in certain *stories* about Artemis while still believing in her existence. This may seem to be merely a trivial debating point, but it is in fact of considerable relevance when we

fishbowls, it takes genius to get out of it and innovate' (p. 118).) But at other times Veyne writes as if at all times a range of strategies – but, as far as one can see, the *same* range of strategies – has existed towards belief (scepticism, total credulity, rationalisation, etc.) – a view in apparent contradiction with the fishbowl approach. These and other inconsistencies have been highlighted in Méheust 1990. (To add another paradox, this time an authorial one, when I telephoned M. Veyne to ask him what he recommended that one should read about his work in general and *Les Grecs ont-ils cru* in particular, he immediately cited Méheust's rather critical article.)

If we are to assign a consistent view on the truth question to Veyne here, I think it should be done in the terms expressed by C. Brillante (in Edmunds 1990, pp. 116–17), who maintains that for Veyne 'any reflection, whether qualified as mythic or rational, is shown to be the creation of an *imagination constituante*, that is, of a reason that need not account for its own affirmations, except to itself'. If Brillante is right, this is a road down which I have no wish to follow Veyne. However, in the light of recent notorious attempts to deny the genocide practised by the Nazis during the Second World War, it is important to note this observation: 'It is clear that the existence or the nonexistence of Theseus and gas chambers in one point in space and time has a material reality that owes nothing to our imagination . . . [However] the materiality of gas chambers does not automatically lead to the knowledge one can have about them' (Veyne 1988, p. 107). Even the most pachydermatous of epistemological relativists must (fortunately) think twice before espousing views compatible with a denial of that particular historical reality. (Parenthetically, we may observe that those who do follow an extreme 'no closure of historical interpretation' line risk getting into bed with some pretty dubious company.)

³² In O. Murray and Price 1990, p. 6; my emphasis.

think about what might count as evidence for belief. Whether belief is conceived of as a mental occurrence or a disposition, and whether we are concerned with believing *in* or believing *that*, establishing the nature of a belief held by someone else often entails making inferences from actions as well as utterances.³³ If we want to establish whether X believes in socialism, Y in free love, or Z that charity begins at home, we shall need to canvass their actions as well as what they profess. Of course, there is a potential gap between the two: people may *fail* to act upon their beliefs, or be obliged to act *against* their beliefs; but their actions will still count at least as relevant evidence. Now religion would seem to be one area where actions ought to be taken into account in assessing the extent and strength of beliefs: it is a matter of *ex votos* as well as *credos*. So when Robin Osborne points to the rapid spread of the cult of Pan in Attica after 500 BC as evidence for a changing perception of the countryside, we may well be tempted to describe this process as a development in religious *belief*.³⁴ Indeed, this is the more so because of the nature of Greek religion. Jean Rudhardt, and more recently Marcel Detienne, have argued that to 'believe' in the Greek gods just *is* to honour them in cult: to sacrifice to them, pray to them, sing and walk in procession for them: these are *ta nomizomena* (things 'thought', things 'customary').³⁵

But assessing belief in *stories* is a rather different matter, since in many cases it is not clear what kind of action could count as evidence for or against the presence of a particular belief – say, the belief that the madness of Herakles followed his Labours. In such cases we have characteristically to rely on the evidence of utterances – the fact, for example, that a narrator opts for this version of a tale rather than that. The bulk of our evidence, that is, will consist of explicit statements about, or expressions of, belief, together with mythical narratives from which belief-states have to be inferred. Of course, it would be absurd to deny *all* relevance to what we might inelegantly call the worship-situation: this would, presumably, figure in *some* way in the account we would want to give of a twentieth-century opera which

³³ See H. H. Price 1969, for a philosophical analysis of belief.

³⁴ Osborne 1987, p. 192.

³⁵ Rudhardt 1958, p. 142; Detienne and Sissa 1989, pp. 191–2.

included, say, Dionysos as a character. But in practice, in an ancient Greek context, we rarely find ourselves well enough informed about the extent or absence of relevant practised religion to limit our uncertainties about belief in myths.

So: utterances: texts in contexts. And the plurals should be emphasised; because the crucial element in the situation is contextual plurality.

Age and gender could be thought of as factors shaping attitudes to the stories. A passage from Plato's *Laws* makes the point in relation to the young:

'... yet it proved easy to persuade men of the Sidonian story [= the myth of Kadmos], incredible though it was, and of numberless others.'

'What tales?'

'The tale of the teeth that were sown, and how armed men sprang out of them. Here, indeed, the lawgiver has a notable example of how one can, if one tries, persuade the souls of the young of anything.'³⁶

Old men too are sometimes seen as subject to an intensification of belief. I quote two voices. The first is that of Kephalos, a very old man with whom the Platonic Sokrates likes (he says) to converse. Asked about how life is when one is so near the brink, Kephalos relates how he and other old men often meet together, and talk. They chin-wag about the past, of course, some regretting it, others bidding it good riddance. They speculate too about the future:

... when a man begins to realise that he is going to die, he is filled with apprehensions and concern about matters that before did not occur to him. The tales that are told of the world below and how men who have done wrong here must pay the penalty there, though he may have laughed them down hitherto, then begin to torture his soul with the doubt that there may be some truth in them.³⁷

³⁶ 663e-664a (trans. adapted from that by R. G. Bury, Loeb edn).

³⁷ R. 330d-e (trans. P. Shorey, Loeb edn).

The second voice belongs to the lyric poet Anakreon.

My temples are already grey,
my head is white,
delicious youth is here no more;
my teeth are old, and I no longer
have much time of sweet life left.
So I sob, often, in fear of Tartaros.
For Hades' house is terrible:
the way down is hard, and once you follow it,
there is no return.³⁸

True reflections of talk in the *leschē*? Perhaps. But we should remember that Plato is the greatest ironist of antiquity, while Anakreon is another Ovid for self-mockery.

Women are presented as another credulous group. According to Polybios, they are characterised by a love of the marvellous (12.24–5). Not only are they *tellers* of old wives' tales: they are also said to be particularly susceptible to them. Referring to the myth of Theseus' abandonment of Ariadne on Naxos, Philostratos observes that '[nurses] are skilled in telling such tales, and they weep over them whenever they will'.³⁹ It goes without saying that these ascriptions of degrees and kinds of credulity need not correspond to anything which an ancient opinion survey amongst children, the elderly or women might have come up with: we have the familiar problem of evaluating utterances – and it is (to say the least) no easier to evaluate a 'they believe' than an 'I believe'.

If age and gender constituted two kinds of relevant plurality, a third concerned a different sort of social division. We may take Martin Nilsson's views as representing a strong form of this approach. For Nilsson, the Greek 'folk' was one thing, the urban sophisticates, especially atypical intellectuals who might go so far as to embrace atheism, quite another.⁴⁰ This is an important point to make, in particular in relation to the Hellenistic period – it is easy to forget that the Kallimachean attitude to tradition is contemporary with a huge

³⁸ PMG 395 (my translation). ³⁹ *Imag.* I.15.1. ⁴⁰ E.g. Nilsson 1940.

proliferation of popular recitation and festival performance, at which myths were also retold. Yet at the same time Nilsson's dichotomy has to be subjected to massive refinement in relation to varying historical contexts. It is evident that analysis of the difference between 'the people' and 'the sophisticates' is going to look very different depending on whether we are dealing with Alkman's Sparta or Lykophron's Alexandria.

But there is another and more interesting kind of plurality which needs to be confronted: plurality of context for a single individual at any one time. Take the case of an Athenian adult male living at the end of the fifth century. His recent experience of mythology includes: looking at temple friezes, vases and coins; being present at a rhapsodic recital which presented excerpts from the *Odyssey*; singing one of Alkaios' hymns at a *symposion*; attending performances of the *Bakchai* and the *Frogs*; and holding those vague, basic, unfocused, lowest-common-denominator views about divine intervention and the afterlife which Jon Mikalson discusses in *Athenian Popular Religion*.⁴¹ Mikalson's essay is like a breath of fresh air in a room usually filled with methodological perfumes that are pungent, contrasting and not always expensive. But it does, quite deliberately, base its conclusions about Athenian belief on a very restricted type of evidence: oratory, inscriptions, Xenophon. And matters are perhaps not quite so clear-cut as Mikalson implies when he maintains that 'in the study of popular religion the need now is for some descriptive work; a theoretical bias would only impede this work'.⁴² On the contrary, the really taxing question seems to me to be precisely: how were such lowest-common-denominator attitudes (taking 'little interest in the bleak and uncertain prospect of the afterlife'; having views about *daimones* that were 'quite vague and imprecise')⁴³ – how were such attitudes integrated with those implicit in the artistic-performance contexts? Or *were* they integrated? For I suggest that we have no idea how, or whether, most people reconciled the perspectives implied by the various ways in which they might confront mythology. Few Greeks will have felt the need to work out for themselves, in the

⁴¹ Mikalson 1983.

⁴² Mikalson 1983, p. 7.

⁴³ Mikalson 1983, pp. 82 and 65.

manner of a Plato, an explicit reconciliation between or hierarchisation of the alternative modes of access to the sacred. They will simply have accepted as normal the fact that different ways of imagining the gods were appropriate to different contexts. To ask which constituted their real belief is to miss the point.⁴⁴

All this does not mean that we must rule out entirely the possibility of making generalisations about Greek belief in myths: for example, it would seem that no ancient author denies the *existence* of, say, Theseus, Meleager, or Agamemnon. Nor, needless to say, should we minimise the importance of relating the different kinds of myth-telling that we find in Pindar, Euripides or Kallimachos to the societies for which they composed, or of noting developments in attitudes towards the mythological tradition implicit in their works. The point is, rather, that to describe those changes in terms of strength or weakness in belief, or of the size of the credulity supply in circulation at any one time, needs at the very least to take account of the complicating factors just mentioned.

But there is another way out of the belief maze. For to ask about the extent of *belief* in stories is in fact to ask one of the least rewarding questions about them. Let us return to four images of mythical women which we discussed earlier: Penelope before her web; Polyneikes persuading Eriphyle; Tekmessa tending the dead Ajax; the abduction of Hippodameia by Pelops (Plates 12–14, 16). These are paradigms, types, models of behaviour – sometimes extremely ambiguous models – from which human conduct may diverge or to which it may correspond. The question of the extent of *belief* in such powerful, persistent images seems not just unverifiable, but irrelevant. It might be argued that the belief issue becomes more pressing in relation to verbal narratives in the past tense: 'Zeus hid fire'; 'Oidipous solved the riddle'. But even in such cases the crucial point in relation to functional importance is that the stories are told, retold, and gradually stop being told, to be replaced by other narratives.

A potentially fruitful analogy here is that between myths and

⁴⁴ Mikalson himself has subsequently attempted to integrate the evidence of tragedy with that of popular religion (Mikalson 1991), but with only mixed success; cf. the review by H. Yunis in *CR* NS 43 (1993), pp. 70–2.

proverbial expressions.⁴⁵ The analogy might seem flawed from the outset, since myths are narratives, while proverbs are not. However, in a Greek context at least, proverbs very often *depend* on narratives, which have to be supplied if the force of the proverb is to be understood. Moreover, many of these implied narratives are mythical. A few minutes' browsing in the standard collection of ancient maxims yields references to the nemesis of Adrastus (applied to those formerly happy but later unfortunate), the fiery robe (sent by Deianeira to Herakles; refers to those who inflame quarrels), the cap of Hades (which conferred invisibility on the wearer; said of those who practise concealment), the laughter of Ajax (manic laughter, recalling that of the crazed hero), the glare of Atreus (a baleful look like that on the face of the betrayed husband plotting a ghoulish revenge), the sleep of Endymion (applied to sleepy-heads: Endymion slept for eternity), the sufferings of Io (woe upon woe), not to mention a Kadmeian victory, a Troy of troubles, 'not without Theseus', the madness of Thamyras, Bellerophon's letters, and plenty of others.⁴⁶ Such expressions provided a ready-made way of 'locating' certain aspects of behaviour, by implicitly making generalisations about them. But these generalisations do not aspire to the status of *universal* truths: while a given maxim may work in one context, its opposite may be more relevant in another. That too many cooks spoil the broth does not mean that many hands don't make light work: what convinces in one context need not be required to convince in another. So too with myths, whose force, like that of proverbs, is essentially context-bound. (To repeat: myths are not *the same as* proverbs; they are, however, in one important respect *analogous* to them.) Hence the problem of 'reconciling', to which we referred earlier, is really not so intractable, since what are apparently contradictory propositions can happily coexist *provided they are embedded in different contexts*. Nor is the analogy with proverbs irrelevant to belief. If someone asks you how you can *really believe* that too many cooks spoil the broth, while at the same time *really believing* that many hands make light work, you may reasonably retort that they are barking up the wrong tree.

⁴⁵ *Muthoi* as similar to yet distinct from proverbs: Pl. *Lg.* 913b9–c3; cf. Brisson 1982, p. 124, Detienne 1986, p. 95. ⁴⁶ Leutsch and Schneidewin 1839–51.

Greek myths were retold because they were authoritative: partly in virtue of the various authorities conferred on tellers by the context (women in the house, bards at the feast, poets at archon-sanctioned, polis-organised dramatic performances); partly because of the authority which tellers created for themselves, thanks to the content of the tale and the manner of its telling; partly because the telling of similar tales in a variety of contexts and at all ages (from nursery stories to adolescent choirs to the old men's *leschē*) can hardly have failed to produce a reinforcing effect. But the authority of myths did not go without saying, in spite of the fact – perhaps even because of the fact – that tellers regularly claimed to be reporting the truth. An audience hears a poet maintain that he is inspired by the Muse; they find his song convincing. But they do so in the knowledge, not only that he is distancing himself from previous tale-tellers (as with Pindar in *Olympian* 1, where stories involving the gods in cannibalism are indignantly rejected), but also that the *next* poet in the tradition will tell his *own* tale, again inspired, again claiming the truth. Greek myths constitute a corpus of plausible, telling tales which aim, within their contexts, at achieving *peithō*, persuasion. But a fuller account of *that* must wait until the final part of this book.