

Discuss the relationship between cult and myth.

This essay will discuss the relationship between cult and myth, using the example of the Eleusinian Mysteries. It will investigate how mythology relates to the formation of cults, how certain cult practices could be inspired by myth, how myth gave the cult its purpose and how closely the myth was associated with the cult.

In the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries (a secret cult founded in Eleusis, one of the demes of Attica¹) the primary source for the myth associated with the cult is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*². West, in his introduction to his translation, dates the *Hymn* to the early sixth century BCE³ however Clinton places its origin at the end of the seventh century⁴. West's dates are supported by reasoned argument so are more believable. As well in the early sixth century, the nature of the cult changed to become a mystery cult with emphasis on individual choice and a promised, pleasant afterlife⁵. This is significant as the *Hymn* mentions the founding of the Mysteries at Eleusis and the secret knowledge that Demeter is said to have given them⁶. Whether the cult took the form it was known by through antiquity based on the words of the *Hymn*, or if the *Hymn* were relates to another cult, such as the older and wide-spread Thesmophoria⁷, it is hard to say.

As a mystery cult, the Eleusinian Mysteries had a strong emphasis on secrecy⁸. Andocides references a previous court-trial where 'the Prytanes decided to clear the meeting of non-initiates' when a man was accused of showing the rites of the Mysteries to non-initiates⁹. This secrecy links strongly to the myths as it says in the *Hymn* that Demeter gave 'the solemn mysteries which one cannot depart from or enquire about or broadcast, for great awe of the gods restrains us'¹⁰. This quote implies that to share the Mysteries would earn punishment from the gods, which would give a reason for the secrecy, highlighting the link between myth and cult.

According to Johnston the two main purposes of the Mysteries were 'to ensure post-mortem bliss and to enhance agricultural fertility'¹¹. I agree that 'post-mortem bliss' was a purpose of the cult as to in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Heracles describes initiates in the underworld: 'there'll be brilliant sunlight, just like ours, and myrtle groves, happy bands of men and women, and a great clapping of hands.'¹². As *Frogs* would have been performed to an audience¹³ and this description is clearly of people enjoying themselves, that the Mysteries would ensure a happy afterlife for initiates is a strong suggestion. Johnston links this belief to Persephone's role as Queen of the Underworld¹⁴.

¹ Clinton 1993:110

² Johnston 2013:378

³ Homeric Hymns pp9

⁴ Clinton 1993:110

⁵ Johnston 2013:26

⁶ HHDem. 470-480

⁷ Johnston 2013:374

⁸ Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:27

⁹ Andoc. On the Mysteries 12

¹⁰ HHDem. 475-480

¹¹ Johnston 2013:379

¹² Aristoph. Ran. 154-155

¹³ *Frogs*. Assemblywomen. Wealth. pp3

¹⁴ Johnston 2013:378

While there is no mention of this belief in the *Hymn*, it could be inferred from Persephone's position as Hades' wife¹⁵ that she had the power to ensure a pleasant afterlife¹⁶.

The second purpose suggested by Johnston is shown in the *Hymn* when Demeter makes the crops grow and teaches 'the lawgiver kings' the Mysteries and sacred rites¹⁷, including Triptolemos, who was accredited with spreading of grain and the Mysteries across the world¹⁸. In Ancient Greece, this was taken as fact, as seen in its use as an argument when a treaty was being suggested by Athenian diplomats¹⁹. While Demeter and Kore, both associated with agriculture²⁰, were the primary deities of the cult²¹, there is also evidence Triptolemos was worshiped in the Mysteries²². With the connections to agriculture this gives the Eleusinian Mysteries, I am inclined to agree with Johnston's second purpose of 'enhancing agricultural fertility'²³.

However, according to Clinton there are several episodes present in the *Hymn* that are ignored in what we know of the cult practices²⁴. There was almost certainly a 'Hunt for Kore', which was an unusual re-enactment of an event in the mythology²⁵. Clinton claims that it would have been impossible for the nursing of Demophon, one of the central parts of the *Hymn*, to be part of the cult enactments of the myth²⁶. As well Hekate has a large role in the *Hymn* but does not have a role in the Mysteries²⁷. The Callichoron Well where Demeter sits and weeps in the *Hymn* is replaced by the Mirthless Rock which is near the entrance of Hades²⁸. As such, Clinton concludes that it is possible that the *Hymn* is connected to another cult as Eleusis was not only home to the Mysteries²⁹. I agree with this conclusion and have noticed several points to support it. Sourvinou-Inwood suggests that 'the sacred drama' would have consisted of the search for Kore, Demeter's arrival at Eleusis and her withdrawal from her duties as a goddess, her reunion with Kore and the establishment of the new order afterwards³⁰. It ignores the interactions between Demeter and Keleos' household which make up a substantial segment of the *Hymn*³¹. In addition to the discrepancies mentioned, I have noticed several references to Iacchus as part of the Mysteries but not in the *Hymn*. For example, Herodotus tells of a vision of a crowd crossing the Thriasian plain from Eleusis, singing the 'Iacchus-song of the mysteries'³². As well, in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, the initiates sing 'the Iacchus Hymn'³³.

To conclude, there is evidence for a strong relationship between mythology and cult, particularly in the purposes and practices, however, in the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries, it is unlikely that the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is the myth we should be referring to.

¹⁵ HHDem. 445-450

¹⁶ Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:25

¹⁷ HHDem. 470-480

¹⁸ Clinton 1992:44

¹⁹ Xen. Hel. 4.6

²⁰ Parker 2007:416

²¹ Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:25

²² Clinton 1993:113

²³ Johnston 2013:379

²⁴ Clinton 1992:96

²⁵ Parker 207:378

²⁶ Clinton 1992:97-98

²⁷ Clinton 1992:98

²⁸ Clinton 1992:98

²⁹ Clinton 1992:98-99

³⁰ Sourvinou-Inwood 2003:30

³¹ HHDem. 105-304

³² Hdt. 8.65

³³ Aristoph. Ran. 320

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