

THE METHODS OF THE GERNET CLASSICISTS

The Structuralists on Myth

Roland A. Champagne

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Volume 2

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THE STRUCTURALISTS ON MYTH
An Introduction

Roland A. Champagne



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DEDICATION

For Nina, who is my model for demythologizing
as she always finds the heart of the story.

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

As a theory of myth, not to say of culture as a whole, structuralism peaked in popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was superseded by one or more varieties of "poststructuralism." While Claude Lévi-Strauss, the key founder of structuralism, continues to write, Jacques Derrida and others have succeeded him as reigning intellectuals of the moment. Still, the impact of structuralism, like that of functionalism and psychoanalysis, will doubtless endure.

While no longer in vogue in anthropological and literary circles, structuralism continues to be employed with even increasing fervor by classicists. It is not merely disparate individuals who have been using the theory but a formal, organized group of French classicists headed by Jean-Pierre Vernant. In 1975 Vernant founded the "Center for Comparative Research on Ancient Societies." The Center was subsequently named the "Gernet Center" in honor of Vernant's influential teacher, Louis Gernet. The most prominent members of the Center, besides Vernant himself, are Marcel Detienne, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Nicole Loraux. "Second-generation" members of the Center include François Hartog, Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, Annie Schnapp-Gourbeillon, François Lissarrague, Laurence Kahn, Jesper Svenbro, Alain Moreau, and Jean-Louis Durand.

The members of the Center have not simply applied but adapted Lévi-Strauss' brand of structuralism. Over the years Lévi-Strauss has regularly been lambasted by critics for isolating myth from its various contexts—social, cultural, political, economic, even sexual. In a famous 1964 essay on the Tsimshian Indian myth of Asdiwal, Lévi-Strauss did provide a detailed ethnographic analysis of a myth. He examined and integrated geographical, economic, sociological, and cosmological factors. Yet thereafter, as before, he largely analyzed myth in the abstract.

Vernant and his fellow classicists at the Gernet Center have sought to tether Lévi-Strauss' structuralism to the more conventional classicist concern with context. Preferring for that reason to label their approach "structural" rather than

"structuralist," they have taken Lévi-Strauss' analysis of the Asdiwal myth as their model. They scrutinize myths not only for their internal order, or structure, but at least as much for their external one—for the relationship between a myth and other aspects of classical culture. The relationship may turn out to be causal, functional, or merely symmetrical. The aspect examined may be social, cultural, political, economic, or sexual. As the heirs of Lévi-Strauss, the members of the Center seek to decipher underlying, often latent patterns in the myths they scrutinize, but they then seek to connect those patterns to comparable ones in the culture at large.

Because the context studied is the Greek one, the members of the Center are necessarily particularists rather than, like Lévi-Strauss, universalists. Myths are taken as the expressions of distinctively Greek ideas and practices rather than, as for Lévi-Strauss, manifestations of the working of the human mind *per se*. The meanings and functions of myths are also seen as evolving—in response, for example, to the rise of the city-state—rather than, as for Lévi-Strauss, fixed.

The Gernet Center scholars are especially concerned with distinguishing written myths, with which they deal, from oral ones, with which Lévi-Strauss deals. Classical myths are those of a literate rather than a nonliterate society. While initially oral, they were written down and are examined in their written versions.

By training a professor of French rather than of classics, Roland Champagne treats the Gernet School as a distinctively French movement. He traces the influences on Vernant of not only Lévi-Strauss but also Roland Barthes, the other pioneering French structuralist. He then traces the influence on Detienne, Vidal-Naquet, and Loraux of Vernant and Lévi-Strauss alike. He also considers the influence on Vernant and in turn on the others of the pre-structuralists Gernet and Ignace Meyerson. Champagne explains the distinctive topics to which each leading member of the Center is devoted. He uses the case of the Oedipus myth to illustrate the distinctive approach of each member. He continually demonstrates how members of the Center modify Lévi-Strauss' approach to suit their individual purposes. At the same time he notes the

influences of members on one another. His book provides a most helpful overview of the work to date of French structuralists both in classics and in general.

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The Structuralists on Myth

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Chapter One

THE STRUCTURE OF MYTH

According to the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, myths are the products of the resourceful ingenuity (in French, *bricolage*)¹ of indigenous peoples selecting narrative materials from their environments. The nature of this resourceful ingenuity has intrigued a group of French intellectuals during the past thirty years. This group is called "structuralist" because its members attribute the survival, the origin, and the function of myths to common crosscultural factors they identify as "structures." These structures are bundles of information not obvious either to the narrator or to the listener. The bundles are collected features that reveal either the reasons for the survival of myths, or their origins, or their functions within their contexts. The structuralists consider themselves to have talents as the collectors from myths of these bundles of information. The structuralists do not always agree about the application of the word "structuralist" to myth. However, they can be generally classified according to whether they bundle myths by 1) the survival of myth, 2) the origin of myth, or 3) its function within a specified context.

The survival of myth especially interests those concerned with the anthropological and philosophical aspects of myths such as Lévi-Strauss (b. 1906) and Roland Barthes (1915-1980). Those who discuss origins are often linked with philology, which studies the evolution of words in the narratives of myths. Jean-Pierre Vernant (b. 1914), Marcel Detienne (b. 1936), and Nicole Loraux (b. 1943) practice this

kind of structuralist analysis of myths. The function of myths appeals to those seeking to recover the cultural contexts of myths. Pierre Vidal-Naquet (b. 1930) and sometimes Vernant take this opportunity.

Barthes and Lévi-Strauss study the survival of myth in culture. Lévi-Strauss analyzes the oral folklore of North and South American Indian tribes to derive insights into how the "human spirit" (*l'esprit humain*) expresses itself. Barthes proposes broad formal categories for the survival of cultural unity in mythologies unconsciously constructed by the routines of daily life. Lévi-Strauss provides a model of survival known as ethnographic analysis, which is further developed by the other two camps. That model is best exemplified in his reading of the Asdiwal myth.

The functionalist position of Vernant and Vidal-Naquet takes the ethnographic method as its model and develops a social and historical context within which myths provide meaning. Vernant is the primary exponent of the social functionalist position. Vidal-Naquet advocates a historical context. The functionalist approach differs from that of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes in its emphasis on myth as a source of meaning for a particular culture rather than as a source of universal human expression.

The philological, or etymological, group of French structuralism explains the roots of a myth and its continuing meaning as changes or developments of those origins. Detienne and Loraux (as well as Vernant and Vidal-Naquet occasionally) use the etymology of Greek words to gain insight into some of the classical myths. They use the tracing of the origins of concepts to plot the historical development of myths along with pertinent concepts such as law, family, and equality. The philological method is often combined with the methods of the functionalists in the work of the Gernet Center, founded by Vernant in the early 1970s.

The three groups both seek connections within a specific myth and link groups of myths into common bundles of meaning. The survivalist view of myth finds connections that have nothing to do with the historical origins of myths. Both Lévi-Strauss and Barthes are generally concerned with non-

written, and therefore undocumented, myths. The ties of these myths to their culture are thus not so empirical and verifiable as they are speculative and abstract. By contrast, Vernant, Detienne, and Vidal-Naquet began to understand in the early 1970s that written myths had characteristics unique to their form as literature. Written myths were composed within a specifiable culture, at a specifiable moment, for a specifiable audience, with specifiable components. The connections made by the structural method had to address these distinctive marks of written myths. In some cases, the oral myths could not be studied together with them because of the unique form of written myths.

The Gernet Center was founded as a place where the structural method could be applied to the classics. At this Center, Vernant, Detienne, Vidal-Naquet, and Loraux have developed various examples of the functionalist and the philological structural methods. Before getting into the specifics of the various structuralist presentations of myth, let us look at the reasons for the use of the words "structure" and "structural" within a general theory of myth analysis. I will then provide an overview of the principal contributors of the "structuralist" ideology and of the way their views provide different readings of the Oedipus myth—a subject of much controversy among the French structuralists.

THE STRUCTURALIST THEORY OF MYTH

The word "structure" was borrowed from the discipline of linguistics, where a structure provides a diagram for the binary principles of contradiction residing in the logical explanations of language. For example, the science of pronunciation, phonetics, describes the letter "s" as pronounced in different ways depending on its environment. The opposition of voiced and unvoiced consonants constitutes a phonetic structure that helps to explain the phenomenon by grouping the pronunciation of the letter "s" into a diagram resembling an accountant's balance sheet to reveal what is known in phonology as minimal phonemic pairs. By analyzing

the absence or presence of the voiced or unvoiced "s" as a minimal pair in various environments (e.g., between vowels, as part of another syllable), rules can then be constructed about the changes in the pronunciation of the letter "s."

Similarly, Lévi-Strauss finds binary structures to be helpful in studying myth by setting up the parameters of values implied within the myth. By juxtaposing two contradictory factors in a myth such as human and divine intervention, he sets up polar opposites and a semantic line dividing the story into bundles, or clusters, of meanings—for example, according to whether an event represents human or divine intervention. This cluster of meanings is a whole structure which interacts with other structures to compose the system of a given myth.

The very title "structuralist" for the many contributors in this group is confusing in that no single philosophy, methodology, or ideology links them together as a school. In addition to French structuralism, there have been competing "structuralist" schools in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Denmark, and the United States.² The word "structuralism" in France is used to speak about a group of five individuals (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Louis Althusser) who from the period 1958 to 1968 were independently involved in bringing the methods of the social sciences to bear on humanistic endeavors. Only Barthes and Lévi-Strauss applied the structuralist attitude to the study of myths.

Barthes was one of the first structuralists to offer a theory of the structure of myths. Barthes (*Mythologies*, 1957) theorizes that myth is "a form ... defined not by the recipient of its message but by the way it expresses the message."³ Thus he is concerned not with what myth means to listeners (its content) but with how myth expresses its meaning (its form). As a formal entity, myth can be analyzed either structurally—by encompassing universal narrative strategies of how myths are expressed—or textually—by analyzing the rhetoric, diction, and syntax. Barthes chooses to focus on the structural properties of a myth's form.

Barthes was not the first to focus on the form of myths.

During the 1920s and 1930s Russian Formalism, as exemplified by Vladimir Propp in his *The Morphology of Folktales* (1928), had offered a method which identifies the structure of stories as the sequence of recurring motifs. The Formalist research established narrative meaning as an imitation of the structure of a sentence by linking the narrative motifs in the model of subject, predicate, and direct and indirect objects. In addition, the Prague School of linguistics led by Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), the Russian-born phonologist, had investigated the phonetic aspects of language during the 1920s and had advocated the formation of the discipline of structural linguistics. During the early 1940s Jakobson taught Lévi-Strauss this linguistic method. Lévi-Strauss adapted the model to investigate anthropological data such as the myths he had heard while in Brazil during the early 1930s. Lévi-Strauss objected to Propp's exclusion of content, so he adopted the word "structure" from linguistics to provide a concept that would encompass both content and form. Rather than concentrating exclusively on how a story is told (its form), as Propp is alleged to have done with his stringing together motifs, Lévi-Strauss also incorporates what a story has to say (its content). As Lévi-Strauss identified structures among myths from different peoples and disparate geographical and historical backgrounds, he began to maintain that the structure of myths would lead to the universal properties of the human mind. The structure gives Lévi-Strauss clues about how humanity processes information and narrates stories to compose meaning.

Despite the insights derived from the formal properties of myths Barthes and Lévi-Strauss both incited opposition to their methods. Both offended the traditional scholars who used historical context as the validating criterion for stories and myths. On the one hand Barthes was opposed by Raymond Picard (b. 1917), a Sorbonne professor and specialist on Jean Racine, who accused Barthes of being too arbitrary, impressionistic, and humorless in creating a "new criticism."⁴ According to him, Barthes was not respectful enough of the historical and cultural circumstances of myths. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss was castigated by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980),

the existentialist philosopher, for not engaging historical detail in the analysis of myths. Marcel Detienne, a practitioner of the functionalist and philological structuralist methods, accused Lévi-Strauss of being too abstract in his analysis of the Oedipus myth (see Chapter Three). Both Barthes and Lévi-Strauss were faulted for not properly using the scientific methods of the linguists by Georges Mounin (b. 1910), a leading linguist and semiologist.

This opposition to the formalist agenda led to the creation of an alternative version of structuralism by Jean-Pierre Vernant, then a professor of classics at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études. Inspired by Louis Gernet (1882-1962), a scholar of Greek law who had considerable theoretical influence on Vernant and his colleagues at the Ecole Pratique, Vernant advocated learning as much detail as possible about a culture and its historical and geographical setting before analyzing a myth structurally. With this agenda he organized in 1975 what is now the Louis Gernet Center for the Comparative Study of Ancient Societies to conduct structural analysis within a philological context. Marcel Detienne soon joined him there. In addition, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, a historian with a background in journalism and investigative reporting, and Nicole Loraux, a philologist with interests in the psychology of women in classical Greece, have provided the core for the contextualist school of French structuralist myth analysis.

Before continuing with detailed presentations of each contributor, let us consider what is meant by the concept "structure" and why is it that the French have invested so much in this kind of myth analysis.

STRUCTURE AS A BUILDING BLOCK

The word "structure" comes from *struere* in Latin meaning "building." The term refers to the framework or scaffolding of a building. In the linguistic circles of Europe during the 1920s and '30s this "structure" was used to describe the sound (phonetic) components of language. Nikolai