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**Myth, Ritual and Communication: Exploring the religious
significance of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Brauronia.**

Sophie Johns

Abstract

This paper explores the shared communicative purposes of ancient Greek myth and ritual and evaluates their interdependence, through an examination of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Brauronia. I begin by attempting to define the distinction between a myth and a story, before exploring the aetiology of both myth and ritual by reviewing the theories of Jane Harrison, a key figure in ritual studies and one of the 'Cambridge Ritualists'. Afterwards, I concentrate on the Eleusinian Mysteries, discussing the relationship between the origin myth and the actions of the ritual itself, and I evaluate that in this case the ritual serves predominantly to represent the myth, which I argue is the more effective tool of communication. Subsequently I examine the Brauronia, especially its role as a rite of passage for young Greek girls, and discuss whether this particular ritual requires the presence of the origin myth, or whether its nature as an expression of the transition from girlhood to womanhood gives it independent efficacy. I conclude that, although each ritual is different, in the majority of cases the authority of ritual is maintained by the presence of myth, which gives context to otherwise incoherent actions, connects the ritual to state religion, and elevates the connection to the divine.

Keywords: *myth, ritual, communication, representation*

When scholars of classical antiquity contemplate the elements of ancient religion, the two that frequently spring to mind are myth and ritual. This is not coincidental, as the features of myth and ritual are designed to entice the mind, and just like the ancients, we are enraptured by the lucidity of myth, and the apparent impenetrability of ritual. We are enthralled by their sense of the sacred, and scholars have long been striving to rationalise their otherworldliness. This essay will illustrate the relationship between these two core components of ancient religion, explaining their joint purpose of conveying religious ideology and spiritual experience, and examining the complexities of their origins, through the case studies of two ancient Greek mystery cults, the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Brauronia. It will evaluate the differences between the judgements of the 'Cambridge Ritualists', a group of influential classical scholars active in the early 20th century who posited that myth and drama originated in ritual, and modern ritual theory, represented in this essay by Eric Csapo, Professor of Classics at Warwick and specialist in classical mythology, in order to understand the long-lasting cultural impact of both myth and ritual. Ultimately, it will argue that myth, due to its longevity and narrative precision, is the more effective tool of communication.

The first matter at hand when exploring myth and ritual is understanding the meaning and purpose of both. This section will attempt to provide clear definitions of each concept in order to establish similarities and differences between the two, using the contrasting theories of Jane Harrison, who asserts that ritual is entirely independent from myth, and Eric Csapo, who considers myth to be essential to the significance of ritual. Ultimately, this section will demonstrate the improbability of ritual originating before myth and thus conclude that ritual is to some extent dependent on myth. Where is the boundary drawn between a story and a myth? In answering this, we must look at the reception – a story cannot become a myth after being told once, by a single individual. In order to hold any sort of influence over an audience it must, for example, be repeated, told by an authority figure, or have an established sense of the ancient. This is clarified by Csapo – 'What makes a story a myth is the fact that it is received by a given society and that a given society participates in its transmission.'¹ A myth is distinct from a story in that it is consistently told, revered, and actively interpreted – it holds cultural and religious significance. Often, myth provides an explanation for something that a culture does not understand – Prometheus brings fire to humanity, while Atlas holds up the sky. The uniting factor between myth and ritual is that they are both forms of expression, though Jane Harrison, prominent 'Cambridge Ritualist', makes a clear distinction between the methods, arguing that ritual 'is the utterance of an emotion, a thing felt, in action, myth in words or thoughts.'² According to Harrison, though both myth and ritual serve as emotional catharsis,

¹ Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p. 134.

² Jane Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912), p. 16.

ritualistic actions do not involve thinking or an understanding of what these actions are symbolising. For Csapo, however, Harrison's argument is much too simplistic, as action 'can be the direct or spontaneous discharge of emotion...But "ritual"...must always already contain mental imagery and symbolism'.³ Residing somewhere between the two, Burkert describes ritual as 'compulsive' but he simultaneously accepts the religious and symbolic aspect of it, characterising it as 'sacred and mysterious'.⁴ Harrison's argument is a product of her time – arguably it is too restrictive, as her separation of thoughts and actions in regard to religious expression fails to take into account the emblematic nature of ritual, and reduces it to a simple outlet for compulsion. Thus, we can conclude that ritual is in fact a method of representation of religious or spiritual beliefs *through* actions, rather than meaningless, thoughtless actions purely for the sake of emotional catharsis.

In order to further evaluate their interdependence, we must consider the origins of both myth and ritual. Participants of a ritual would likely say that its origin is the myth which accompanies it, as this gives them a clear reason for its performance. However, arguably the aetiology is much more complex – which came first, ritual or myth? Did one originate from the other, or did they come into existence hand in hand? According to Csapo, Harrison's explanation for the origin of ritual again foregrounds her theory that ritual can exist independent of myth – primitive man is excited by the feeling of human companionship, which he demonstrates with frenzied dancing, a form of emotional discharge for him and his friends. This becomes rhythmic, and 'mimetic', i.e. they start to act out the events of, for example, the hunt they have recently been on.⁵ The dance becomes specific to the hunt, allowing participants to feel united with the community over a shared experience, and express emotions which rely on this sense of togetherness. The dance is re-enacted before every hunt, causing participants to believe that it has a direct effect on the outcome. Related animals become integral to the ritual itself, in the form of totems, idols and sacrifices, and the participants soon forget that the ritual originated from human emotion – the ecstasy created by the collective consciousness of the group is so immense and alien that it becomes sacred, and they credit their idols. At this point, myth comes into being as reasoning for the supposed religious power of these objects, and Csapo writes that these early myths were 'proto-ritual utterances she [Harrison] regarded as a sort of proto-myth'.⁶ This implies that Harrison views the existence of (proto-)myth as dependent on ritual, and therefore ritual as originating at an earlier stage. If we accept this to be true, we might subsequently conclude that ritual can exist without the presence of myth. However, this conclusion is reliant on us accepting that these first examples

³ Eric Csapo, p. 160.

⁴ Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (California: University of California Press, 1979), p. 35.

⁵ Eric Csapo, p. 152.

⁶ Eric Csapo, p. 152.

of frenzied dancing can be defined as ritual, but arguably these cathartic actions only become ritualistic when they become representative of the hunt – i.e., when they begin to ‘contain mental imagery and symbolism’ which only appear when a narrative is added to the actions.⁷ Therefore, we cannot confidently claim that ritual pre-dated myth, or that it can exist without the presence of mythological symbolism.

To further explore the relationship between myth and ritual and the efficacy of each as tools of communication we must look at arguably the most famous mystery cult in ancient Greece, the Eleusinian Mysteries, and its partner myth, Hades’ abduction of Persephone. This section will use the Mysteries to demonstrate ritual’s reliance on myth to maintain cultural significance. The exclusive rites at Eleusis were known only by initiates, and the process of becoming an initiate directly reflected the journey of the myth of Persephone. In accordance with Victor Turner’s analysis of women’s cults, the Mysteries are essentially a tripartite model – the departure from Athens, the arrival at Eleusis, and the subsequent return to Athens mirrors Persephone’s abduction, her time spent in the Underworld, and her yearly return to the upper world.⁸ It’s therefore evident that the structure of the rites at Eleusis serve to reinforce the content of the myth – once again, Harrison separates the two, arguing that the ‘things done’ of ritual helped to intensify mythological impersonation as much as, or perhaps more than, the ‘things spoken’ of the poet.⁹ Harrison’s assertion is that ritual is more powerful than myth in communicating ideas about religion, but what exactly were the Eleusinian Mysteries, and the rape of Persephone, attempting to communicate?

Nature allegory was integral to the ritual – the Mysteries were dedicated to Demeter, goddess of agriculture, and initiates drank a special barley drink during the night vigil. Similarly, the myth served as both an explanation of and a celebration of nature and fertility – Persephone’s time in the Underworld was an explanation for winter, while her return to the upper world was an occasion for exaltation. Additionally, both the myth and the ritual served as an allegory for death – the innocent Persephone ‘died’ in her descension to the Underworld, while the participants of the Mysteries experienced a pseudo-death during their journey to complete initiation. The Eleusinian Mysteries demonstrate effectively the most notable similarity between ritual and myth, which is their shared purpose of communicating religious stories and explaining natural phenomena. Additionally, the Mysteries provide an insight into which is the more effective means of communication – evidently, Harrison is firmly on the side of ritual. However Dowden, writing in the late 1980s, argues that rites ‘are mere behavioural patterns...Unnoticed and unremarked, they gradually lose importance and pass out of

⁷ Eric Csapo, p. 160.

⁸ Victor Turner, *Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 14.

⁹ Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), p. 283.

currency...Narratives, on the other hand, are memorable, entertaining and capable of reuse.¹⁰ The truth in this statement is undeniable – while the practice of the Eleusinian Mysteries has disappeared into antiquity, the myth of Persephone and Hades has been told over and over, and still retains its relevance today. Even in ancient times the exclusivity of the Eleusinian Mysteries would limit it from having a widespread influence, while the myth would be spread much more freely via word of mouth. Ultimately, it is clear that the actions of the Eleusinian Mysteries serve predominantly to express the myth, and that the myth itself is the more effective and enduring method of communication.

However, this is not invariably the case. This section will use a lesser-known festival held in honour of Artemis Brauronia to demonstrate that, on occasion, ritual *could* exist independently, especially when there is a less significant link to religious expression. During the Brauronia, young girls were dressed as bears in reference to the ‘origin’ myth. According to Dowden, the myth recounts that a girl from Brauron poked fun at a tame bear, causing it to scratch her, and in retaliation her brothers killed the bear.¹¹ This deeply angered Artemis, who sent a plague down on the people. An oracle was consulted which told the people of Brauron that the plague would be lifted if they created this ritual. Dowden states that every Athenian girl was required to participate in the bear ritual before marriage, between the age of 5 and 10, and so we can assume that the festival at Brauronia served as a rite of passage for young girls, demonstrating their transition from child to woman.¹² In this case, it appears as if the ritual was inevitable, with or without the inclusion of the myth – the transition to womanhood was integral to the lives of ancient Greek girls and needed no mythological narrative.

As Dowden argues, the myth here only ‘reinforces and gives sense to the ritual: it reinforces the issue of the relationship of the girls to the community and its gives sense to the use of the bear as a vehicle for the expression of that issue.’¹³ In contrast to the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which the ritual reinforces the myth, at Brauron the ritual is simply a celebration of an innate, natural transition, and the myth serves as extra embellishment. The insight into the difference between the significance of these two rituals is compelling, as it suggests that there is, after all, no single answer for whether myth reinforces ritual, or ritual reinforces myth. In this case it is justifiable that a ritual created as a commemoration of a natural transition or an innate part of human development does not necessarily need the accompaniment of a myth to be powerful or effective, while rituals which have a more integral basis in religion, such as the Eleusinian Mysteries, require the presence of a myth for credibility and longevity.

¹⁰ Ken Dowden, *Death and the Maiden* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 203.

¹¹ Ken Dowden, p. 21.

¹² Ken Dowden, pp. 26-28.

¹³ Ken Dowden, pp. 34-35.

As demonstrated in this essay, the relationship between myth and ritual is much more complex than at first glance. While it is now evident that both share the purpose of religious communication, the answer to whether they are dependent on each other, and which one is more effective, remains, to an extent, indefinite. Harrison and the 'Cambridge Ritualists' would argue that ritual is permanent, and holds greater power over participants than myth. It is true that myths are prone to change, but I would argue that they have a more widespread influence than ritual – perhaps the very fact that they can be altered and still retain their meaning allows them to endure the passage of time. Meanwhile, the significance of ritual is based on a number of established, obscure rites, which can fall out of practice when the explanations behind them are removed. Arguably, ritual without the presence of a narrative is simply a set of actions – the emotion that is discharged during ritual begs for an accompaniment of narrative, as Csapo argued.¹⁴ Contemporary literature is evidence of the persistence of myth throughout history, for even now there are numerous retellings of famous myths. The origin of myth and ritual may always be unclear, as may the question of which preceded the other, but the more important question to ask is whether myth and ritual are reliant on each other to be effective, to which I offer Burkert's argument that 'they are close to, but not necessarily dependent on, each other'.¹⁵ As we have seen, the answer to this question varies depending on the ritual, but I am inclined to argue that many rituals require the presence of myth to maintain authority, for without it, the connection to the divine would be much less persuasive. However, myth does not necessarily require ritual to have a lasting impact. Indeed, perhaps the persistence of myth lies not in its religious content, but because it offers us a direct window to the past. Granted, we may no longer believe in the religion that myth venerates, but the classical world still pervades our culture, literature and art, and myth is what has allowed it to remain very much alive and relevant.

¹⁴ Eric Csapo, p. 161.

¹⁵ Walter Burkert, p. 56.

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