



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1998 Volume II: Cultures and Their Myths

Introduction

This was an exploratory seminar. The topic was proposed by some teachers, and I was asked to lead the seminar. I wasn't at all sure that I belonged doing that: I felt at home in Greek mythology, and somewhat in Norse, but in no other, and not in theoretical matters related to mythology either. But what's a seminar if everyone isn't learning something? So I bravely said yes, and talked with various teachers to get their ideas, and worked up a proposal for a seminar that would start with some theoretical matters and with the Greeks, then move through Norse, Egyptian, African, Native American, and Indian mythologies. One thing I insisted on was that we make sharp distinction between myth and folktale, since I had led a seminar on folktales in 1993, and wanted to make sure this one was different.

Well, we made it through our reading list, and we all learned a lot, and read a lot of spectacular stories. My own favorites were Hesiod's Theogony, Snorri Sturleson's Prose Edda, George Hart's Egyptian Myths, brilliantly compiled from the most diverse source (many of them pictorial), the Blackfoot Indian story "The Orphan Boy and the Elk Dog," and a stunning tale from ancient India called "The Parade of Ants." And there were so many more. We gradually evolved a way of looking in a myth for the cultural values it embodies. But a lot of us still felt uncertain at the end about categories, and I was forced to acknowledge both that a good many folktales are mythic and that you can't get too theoretical with second-graders.

Meanwhile, all the teachers figured out their own ways to present this complex-and-yet-simple material to their students. In arranging this book, I have thought it best to group the units by the grade-levels they are aimed at. The first group is for the elementary grades: Christine Elmore on Egypt, Marcia Gerencser on Native Americans, Roberta Mazzucco on Africa and Linda Frederick-Malanson (more particularly) on three African trickster myths, and, finally, Pedro Mendia-Landa on animal and creation myths. The second is for the middle grades: Christine House on Hercules, Joseph O'Keefe on tricksters, and Michelle Sepulveda on Persephone. And rounding our collection is the one unit aimed at high-school students, Mac Oliver on using the Odyssey as a vehicle for teaching students to write - and much else.

I have learned not only from our readings and discussions but from each of these units, and I recommend them to other teachers. There is much of value here, for teachers and ultimately for students.

Traugott Lawler

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