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Mythical language and truth: The "affair" between Ares and Aphrodite in Aristotle

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ABSTRACT: This paper tackles the problem of the relationship between traditional myths (specifically, the myth of Ares and Aphrodite being in love) and truth in Aristotle: are myths false, or do they convey truth in an allegorical language? and, in the latter case, does the lack of exactness of such language make the myth useless for the progress of philosophy, which proceeds by logical inference? In order to understand the relationship between myth and truth, the usage of the term *mythologein* (to tell mythic tales) by Aristotle is systematically analyzed, by checking, for each instance of this term: (1) who is the subject of the act of telling the myth? (2) is the tale true? (3) if it is not true, does it reflect some aspect of reality? (4) why does the myth teller relate the tale? (5) what is the role of the myth in Aristotle's argument? Answering these questions will make it possible to exactly understand the meaning of Aristotle's reference to the myth of Ares and Aphrodite.

KEY WORDS: Aristotle, philosophical allegory, myth and reason, truth, desire.

In the *Politics*, Aristotle states that the myth about Ares and Aphrodite being lovers is right, because, as one can see by observing different communities, those who are prone to war always also have a strong inclination to sexual intercourses (Aristotle *Pol.*: 1269b27–31). In this paper, I try to show what the meaning of this reference to the myth is, and why Aristotle mentions these two Olympians while talking about the psychology of different races.

1. The problem of allegory

One of the main problems discussed in the literature citing the passage about Ares and Aphrodite is whether Aristotle considers these and other myths as allegories.[1] That Aristotle practiced an allegorical reading of myth has been the standard view for several decades, at least since the studies of Jean Pépin (1958: 121–124). One of the recent proponents of this thesis is Luc Brisson (2004: 38–40), who thinks that Aristotle sees the myth as a narrative embellishment of an original truth about the gods. Even though Thomas K. Johansen (1999) did not refer to allegory when discussing the role of myth in Aristotle's philosophy, he, too, thinks that for Aristotle at least some myths hide a rational content, which is nothing else than the conclusions reached by philosophy before the last global cataclysm. The original form of these conclusions has been lost because of the catastrophe, but its content has been somehow preserved in a fictional form. Consequently, the myths are among the starting points of the current philosophical discourse.

However, Richard Bodéüs (2000: 83) has refuted the idea that Aristotle interprets myths allegorically. In fact, an allegorical interpretation requires two steps, as first the interpreter has to prove by the means of a rational argument that the literal meaning of the myth is not true, and then has to show that the myth conceals a hidden truth. Since Aristotle starts from the *assumption* that the myth is absolutely false, neither of these steps can be found in his works: he does not check whether the tales about the gods are true or not, because he already knows that they are false; and he does not look for a hidden truth in the myths, because his premise is that there is no such thing. Rather, according to Bodéüs, Aristotle is interested in how the sublimation of human experiences into myth reveals the mythmaker's conception of men and women. This is how one should interpret the passages where Aristotle links the fables about the gods to some given features of human beings.

Similarly, Fabienne Baghdassarian (2013) has argued that, for Aristotle, the content of a myth is not a hidden truth to be revealed, but rather an idea about reality that can be false. For this reason, Aristotle cannot accept the traditional form of allegory as uncovering a truth concealed by enigmatic language. Rather, the philosopher suggests a "non-intentional

[1] In addition to the studies I mention in the next pages, one can cite Robert Mayhew's (2019: 187) assertion that for Aristotle the myth of Ares and Aphrodite is not an allegory, but rather a story based on a fact.

allegorical interpretation" that is based on the distinction between the mythical form of expression and the content, the latter being an opinion about the universe or a part of it. Such opinion, while lacking the universality and causal explanation of the philosophical discourse, can shed some light on reality, and as a consequence, is something that the philosopher should address.

Baghdassarian's conclusions are in agreement with the results reached by A. P. Bos (1983), who, while not focusing on the topic of allegory *per se*, has provided important insights about Aristotle's conception of myths. Specifically, Bos has shown that, for Aristotle, *mythologoi*, like philosophers, talk about aspects of reality that transcend human daily life. However, myths have neither the logical soundness nor the abstract nature of philosophical arguments. A similar conclusion has been reached by Toula Vassilacou-Fassea (2002), who has argued that for Aristotle, while the myths retain the vestiges of a now lost wisdom, they convey this wisdom by the way of an unscientific, unverifiable language. As a consequence, the philosopher should admire the myths, but he cannot use them as a starting point for the progress of science. If this is Aristotle's approach to myths, it seems pointless for him to devote himself to the allegorical reading of the tales transmitted by the ancients.

An intermediate position has been proposed by Mor Segev (2017: 137–139), who thinks that according to Aristotle, while *all* myths serve the need of generating a sense of wonder in the people that form a political community, only *some* myths conceal a hidden philosophical truth, included by the mythmakers either intentionally or not, that can be found by the means of an allegorical interpretation. From a different point of view, Glenn W. Most (2010) argues that Aristotle's position on allegory is ambivalent. On one hand, when Aristotle talks about epic poetry, he never introduces an allegorical reading of the verses; this makes sense, since he argues that poets do not grasp truth in the same complete and deep way as the philosophers, but just depict human experience. On the other hand, in Aristotle's cataclysmic view of history, myths convey forgotten philosophical truths, and this implies that such truths can be brought to light by the means of an allegorical reading. Glenn Most sees this contradiction as an inner tension between Aristotle's conscious rejection of allegory and the influence on him of the cultural context in which he operated.

It is telling that the difference between these perspectives is not due to these scholars highlighting different passages of the Aristotelian corpus or even to interpreting the same passages in different ways. Al-

most all agree on some basic truths about Aristotle's approach to myths: for Aristotle, *mythos* means, at least in some contexts, a false invention; Aristotle does not treat the tales about the gods and the heroes narrated in the myths as true (that is, he does not state that a god named Zeus did such and such thing); for Aristotle, each myth conveys a worldview; myth transmits a philosophical truth whose original form has been lost because of cataclysms; mythical language lacks the exactness that characterizes philosophy.[2] The disagreement is rather about the consequences of these basic truths. Should the original worldviews conveyed by myths be attributed to the poets or to the pre-cataclysmic philosophers? Does Aristotle associate *mythos* and falseness in the case of the worldviews conveyed by all, some or none of the traditional myths? These first two questions are related, as poets can hold true or false opinions, but the philosophers whose views have been transmitted in a mythical form are supposed to grasp reality correctly. In the case of truthful myths, is the lack of exactness of the mythical language enough to make the core truth useless for the progress of philosophy or not?

2. *Mythologein* in Aristotle

The statement about Aphrodite and Ares is part of a passage where Aristotle argues that the reason why, in Sparta, women have a significant amount of political power is that among all people who are devoted to war, women rule men. The only exception to this general rule is the case of those belligerent societies where homosexuality is openly practiced (Aristotle *Pol.*: 1269b23–32). It is in this context that Aristotle states that:

> For (γάρ) the first man who told mythic tales (ὁ μυθολογήσας πρῶτος) seems (ἔοικε) to have coupled (συζεῦξαι) Ares with Aphrodite not irrationally (οὐκ ἀλόγως), as (γάρ) all such men [that is, all men belonging to the "military and warlike races" whom Aristotle referred to in the previous sentence] appear to be (φαίνονται) inclined either to sexual intercourse with males (πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἀρρένων ὁμιλίαν) or to sexual intercourse with women. (Aristotle *Pol.*: 1269b27–31)

In order to better understand this statement, it is useful to analyze Aristotle's usage of *mythologein*, which means "to tell mythic tales", possibly implying the invention of some story that has not really happened. One can ask five questions about *mythologein*: (1) who is the subject of this

[2] Brisson (2004: 39) asserts that philosophy is completely lost after each cataclysm, but he also calls "metaphysics" the kind of knowledge about the gods that the mythical tradition carries across the catastrophes.

act? (2) are the tales true? (3) in any case, do they reflect some aspect of reality? (4) why do people tell such tales? (5) what is the role of the tale in Aristotle's account?

(1) The act of *mythologein* is attributed by Aristotle to different subjects: the poets (*oi poiêtai*, Aristotle *EE*: 1230a3) and Herodotus (Aristotle *GA*: 756b6–7). In several cases, moreover, the verb has "some" (*enioi*, *tines*) as its subject (Aristotle *HA*: 609b10, *Mete.*: 359a17), or has no explicit subject at all (Aristotle *EE*: 1229a24, *HA*: 578b23–25, 585a14, 585b23, 617a5, *Ph.*: 218b24). It is also notable that in three cases, to *mythologein* a given story is limited to a given region: one tale about a courageous main is told in Crete (Aristotle *EE*: 1229a24), another about what happened to Heracles in Chaonia is narrated in that region (Aristotle *Mete.*: 359a27), and one about people sleeping among the heroes can be heard in Sardinia (Aristotle *Ph.*: 218b24). In the second case, the inhabitants of that region are the subject of the *mythologein* (in the other two passages, the verb is used in the passive voice). The local circulation of these tales may hint at their falseness: as truth is universal, it naturally tends to be known by all humankind; as a consequence, a tale that does not cross the borders between different people seems to be false. However, it is also possible that these tales extend only locally because they are about a local event.[3]

(2a) Sometimes *mythologein* means to tell something that is not true about a natural phenomenon. For example, Aristotle mentions the tales about the hind being particularly long-lived, noting that none of these tales is manifest (*saphes*), i.e. has been actually verified. Indeed, according to the philosopher the features of hinds that can be easily observed, like how much time it takes for them to fully form in the womb and then to become adult, match the ones of animals whose lives are way shorter than the ones of fabled hinds (Aristotle *HA*: 578b23–26). It is important to highlight that the idea that hinds live a particularly long life is labeled as a *mythos* not because nobody has *directly* observed a very old hind, but because nothing we see of these animals is *consistent* with the duration

[3] The reference to the *mythos* about the reproduction of fish told by Herodotus (Aristotle *GA*: 756b6–7) may also hint at a local nature of the tale, at least if one accepts Platt's reading of the passage. As a matter of fact, Platt translates these words in the following way: "even the fishermen repeat the same simple tale, so much noised abroad, as does Herodotus the story-teller" (Platt 1912). Given that Herodotus is talking about the fish that can be found in the swamps of Southern Egypt (Herodotus: II.93), Aristotle may mean that this explanation of how fish reproduce is told in Egypt, where Herodotus learned about it. This possibly local tale, too, may refer to a local phenomenon, but in this case it is surely false, as Aristotle explicitly states so.

of their life being significantly longer than that of other similar animals. In other words, the difference between *mythos* and science is that only in the latter case nature is presented as an ordered, regular set of facts. Other *mythoi* that Aristotle seems to not accept – even though in these cases he does not explicitly disagree with them, nor does he provide alternative explanations – are the one about the orioles being born from funeral pyres (Aristotle *HA*: 609b10) and the one about starred herons being originally slaves (Aristotle *HA*: 617a5–6).

In other cases, the act of *mythologein* is less about inventing a phenomenon that does not actually occur than about linking two real but unrelated phenomena. In these cases, what is false is not, as in the previously mentioned passages, the description of a fact, but rather its explanation. This is the case of the fishermen who assert that fish are conceived by the mother swallowing the semen of the father. This would be impossible, because the mouth is connected to the nutritive system, not the reproductive one. Actually, this *mythos* is given not only by fishermen, but also by Herodotus, who is in this context defined as a *mythologos* (Aristotle *GA*: 756a5–756b12). As Aristotle is referring to the part of Herodotus' book on Egypt where the historian describes the wildlife of the swamp region (Herodotus: II.93), it is clear that in this case *mythologein* means to relate something that is not only false, but even impossible, while believing to be truthful. It is important to notice that in the case of the wrong description of how fish reproduce, the mentioned facts are true: the mother actually swallows the semen, and of course new fish are conceived. What is wrong is that the description of the first phenomenon is incomplete (as the female fish swallows not only the semen produced by the male, but also her own eggs), and above all that the two phenomena are linked. New fish are actually conceived and their mother actually swallows the semen of the father, but they are not conceived *by* their mother swallowing the semen.

(2b) Some occurrences of the verb *mythologein* are in contexts where Aristotle does not take a stand about the truth value of the tale. This is specifically the case of the *mythos* about the existence of a lake in Palestine with some very peculiar features, for instance that something thrown in it does not sink but stays afloat, and that it is very salty. The latter characteristic is confirmed (at least within the tale) by two supposed phenomena that are equally odd: first, no fish live in the lake; second, dipping clothes in it is an efficient washing method. Now, Aristotle says that, *if* this tale is true, it would confirm his own theories (Aristotle *Mete.*: 359a16–22). The case of the people who sleep among the heroes is

similar, as Aristotle says that their perception of time as reported would corroborate the theory of time proposed in the *Physics* (Aristotle *Ph.*: 218b21–27). This way of framing *mythologein* seems to imply that the tale that is recounted may be true, but this is not certain. The status of this *mythos* is not certain: it may be true, but it also may be false.

In some cases, to *mythologein* is to tell tales about figures in the mythical tradition. As a matter of fact, mythical tales are told about Heracles (Aristotle *HA*: 585a14, 585b22–24, *Mete.*: 359a27–30) and Chiron (Aristotle *EE*: 1230a3–4). The truth value of these tales depends on Aristotle's assessment of the mythical tradition itself. It is not clear whether Aristotle refers to an invented story when he says that an example of courage due to an irrational passion is "the man whose mythic tales are told in Crete" (Aristotle *EE*: 1229a23–24). In fact, it is not clear who the legendary figure is whom Aristotle is thinking of (see Rackham 1935: 316); it may be Theseus, but this is just a hypothesis (see Inwood and Woolf 2013: 44).

(3a) When the *mythos* is just the invention of a natural phenomenon or a failed attempt to explain what happens in the sensible world, it seems to refer to no truth at all.

(3b) However, the other *mythoi*, despite not necessarily being true, are internally consistent, that is, the facts they depict could be true. For example, the tale that the immortal Chiron desired death when painfully wounded reflects the fact that sometimes death is sought to avoid a grater evil, which in turn proves that not everyone who does not fear death is brave (Aristotle *EE*: 1229b32–1230a4). The tale that Heracles and Iphicles were born together from Alcmena despite having different fathers (respectively Zeus and Amphitryon) is not impossible, because, if a woman is impregnated twice within a short time, she can bear a child from each sexual act, and they will be gestated together (Aristotle *HA*: 585a12–14). Heracles having seventy-one sons but only one daughter is consistent with the fact that some people only have male children, while others only have female (Aristotle *HA*: 585b21–24). That whoever sleeps among the heroes in Sardinia does so for a long time but has no perception of time (on this legend, see Simplicius *in Ph.*: 707.27–708.5, Philoponus *in Ph.*: 715.16–19, Minunno 2013, Renberg 2017: I.107–108) makes sense, because, when the state of one's soul does not change, one is not aware that time has passed (Aristotle *Ph.*: 218b21–27).

The case of the fabled lake in Palestine is similar to these. In fact, Aristotle states that, if this lake actually exists, its peculiar features are consistent with what philosophers have said about salty water. Indeed,

Aristotle did explain that water becomes thicker and able to support heavier weights when salt is added to it. Now, the Palestinian lake is said to hold even a man totally above water, but also to be very salty. These two features make sense together, because a body of water should be very salty in order to fully support a man, and, conversely, if that lake is actually as salty as is said, it would be so thick that one could walk on it (Aristotle *Mete.*: 359a5–22).

(4) In some cases, people *mythologousin* because this is the best they can do in order to explain what they see. For example, in the aforementioned case of the reproduction of fish, the truth is that, just as in other animals, reproduction happens by copulation. However, since in fish copulation is very quick, it is seldom observed by humans, even by those who, like fishermen, spend a lot of their time at sea. What fishermen see is actually female fish swallowing the semen and the eggs together after they have been laid in the act of copulation. Based on what they see, fishermen explain reproduction referring only to the second part of the actual reproductive act (Aristotle *GA*: 756a5–756b12). Assuming that this explanation of the error made by fishermen also applies to Herodotus, here *mythologein* is a failed attempt to interpret a natural phenomenon. Another case in which the *mythologein* arose in order to explain what is directly perceived is the tale about Heracles in Chaonia. It is told that the hero gave Chaonians the chance to choose between two gifts, fish and salt, and they preferred the latter. This *mythos* would explain why in Chaonia there is a spring of salty water that flows into a river where no fish can be found (Aristotle *Mete.*: 359a24–35).

Aristotle may hint at a similar genesis of a *mythos* when reporting the tale that the first starred herons were slaves who had been turned into birds. The sentence is actually ambiguous, as two key words can have two very different meanings, both consistent with the sense of Aristotle's statement:

> The ἀστερίας, which is called ὄκνος, is fabled (μυθολογεῖται) to be originally generated from slaves, and it is, in accordance with its name, the ἀργότατος of the herons. (Aristotle *HA*: 617a5–7)

The sense of the sentence depends on the meaning of the three words I have not translated. Ἀστερίας means "the bittern" (Liddell, Scott and Jones 1996: 261)[4] or "the starry heron" (Thompson 1910).[5] These

[4] Liddell, Scott and Jones mention *History of Animals* (Aristotle *HA* 609b22), but it is the same classification of herons that one finds in the passage I am analyzing.

[5] Thompson translates ὁ ἀστερίας as "the starry heron (or bittern)" at 609b22 and as "the

are not necessarily two different meanings, as it is possible that "the starry heron" is the name Aristotle uses for the bittern. However, the word "starry heron" highlights the color of this bird. Ὄκνος is a word which, according to Liddell, Scott and Jones, can mean "shrinking, hesitation", but can also be a synonym of ἀστερίας (Liddell, Scott and Jones 1996: 1212). Ἀργότατος is the superlative of ἀργός. Now, there are two homonymous adjectives with the same spelling ἀργός. One of them means "shining" and is often predicated of animals, whereas the other denotes laziness (Liddell, Scott and Jones 1996: 236). One can see that two quite different translations of the sentence are possible:

> The bittern, which is called "hesitation", is fabled to be originally generated from slaves, and it is, in accordance with its name, the laziest of the herons.

> The starry heron, which is called *oknos*, is fabled to be originally generated from slaves, and it is, in accordance with its name, the most shining of the herons.

In the former interpretation, Aristotle is stating that this species of heron is the most indolent, as its name "hesitation" shows. In the latter reading, the meaningful name of the bird is the one cited first: not ὄκνος, but ἀστερίας, "starry". This name would show that it is the heron's plumage that shines the most. The correct understanding is seemingly the one I cited first,[6] because in the very next line, summarizing what he has just said, Aristotle says that he has shown the different ways herons live. If the first reading is in fact the right one, there may be a link between the character of this kind of heron and its origin according to the *mythos*, for the bird's unwillingness to use energy may be the reason why it has been thought that they were originally slaves.

An interesting hint about the reasons why people tell mythical tales can be found in the passage where Aristotle refers to Herodotus as *mythologos*. Just before stating that the historian repeats a wrong explanation of the reproduction of fish, Aristotle may be saying that this explanation amply circulates abroad (*honper*, Aristotle *GA*: 756b6).[7] Given that Herodotus is talking about fish that can be found in swamps of southern Egypt, it is possible that Aristotle implies that the historian

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speckled heron" at 617a5. Thompson's translation makes it clear that "bittern" and "starry heron" are not two different meanings (even though in a note he states that the identification of this bird as the bittern is not strongly supported).

[6] This is how Thompson interprets the passage. As a matter of fact, Thompson translates it in the following way: "The speckled heron, which is nicknamed 'the skulker', is said in folk-lore stories to be of servile origin, and, as its nickname implies, it is the laziest bird of the three species." (Thompson 1910).

[7] This is how Platt interprets the passage (Platt 1912).

learned the wrong explanation from people who had not yet reached the level of scientific account of natural phenomena. So it may be that according to Aristotle the reason why Herodotus *mythologei* is that he is influenced by a pre-philosophical civilization.

Even though trying to explain some perceptible phenomenon is the only reason for people to *mythologhein* explicitly mentioned by Aristotle, it cannot be the only one. As a matter of fact, it is hard to see how tales such as Heracles having a different father than Iphicles (Aristotle *HA*: 585a12–14) and having many more sons than daughters (Aristotle *HA*: 585b22–24), or Chiron being in so much pain that he desired death (Aristotle *EE*: 1230a3–4), could explain something people experience.

(5a) In some cases the philosopher introduces his own description or explanation of a natural phenomenon as true, as opposed to the *mythos*. In this category, i.e. among the *mythoi* to which Aristotle opposes his own true account, there are the tales of hinds living exceptionally long lives and Herodotus' description of how fish reproduce.

(5b) However, as we have seen, some tales are not introduced by Aristotle as false. In these cases, the philosophical theory does not confute the tale–rather, *logos* and *mythos* agree. One should distinguish two different Aristotelian approaches to these tales.

(5b1) The first approach is to mention the *mythos* as a possible proof of one of Aristotle's own statements. This is what Aristotle does when he states that, if the salty and dense Palestinian lake really exists, it confirms the link between saltiness and density that Aristotle himself has highlighted (Aristotle *Mete.*: 359a5–22). Aristotle is very clear about this:

> If in Palestine there is, as some tell as a mythic tale, a lake such that, if someone threw a man or a beast into it, it would float and not sink down into the water, it would be a proof of the things I said (μαρτύριον ἂν εἴη τι τοῖς εἰρημένοις). (Aristotle *Mete.*: 359a16–20)

(5b2) Other *mythoi* that are internally consistent are those linked to traditional religion. These *mythoi*, too, are mentioned because they agree with Aristotle's theories: Chiron being willing to give up immortality because of an unbearable pain agrees with the theory that not being afraid of death is not the same as being brave (Aristotle *EE*: 1229b32–1230a4), Heracles and Iphicles are an example of brothers from different fathers being born at the same time (Aristotle *HA*: 585a12–14), the gender proportion in Heracles' offspring is mentioned in the context of the thesis that some people are far more likely to have sons than daughters (Aristotle *HA*: 585b21–24). Similarly, the man whose deeds are recounted

in Crete is an example of irrational courage (Aristotle *EE*: 1229a20–24). While not directly about figures from age-old mythology, the story of those who sleep for an extraordinary length of time is related to traditional religion, as these people lie at the tombs of heroes. This tale, too, is reported by Aristotle because it matches his own theory that when nothing changes in the soul, it does not perceive the passage of time (Aristotle *Ph.*: 218b21–27). However, unlike the tale of the Palestinian lake, these myths are not introduced by Aristotle as proofs of his own theories, as he just notes that what is told by the *mythologoi* is consistent with what he has said. In all these cases, Aristotle introduces the myth with an expression meaning "just as": "just as (ὥσπερ καί) the poets tell the mythic tale that Chiron…" (Aristotle *EE*: 1230a3), "just as (καθάπερ) also they tell the mythic tale that Iphicles…" (Aristotle *HA*: 585a13–14), "just as (οἷον) also the mythic tale is told of Heracles…" (Aristotle *HA*: 585b21–23), "just as (ὥσπερ) […] the man whose mythic tales are told in Crete" (Aristotle *EE*: 1229a23–24), "just as (καθάπερ) the ones whose mythic tales are told in Sardinia…" (Aristotle *Ph.*: 218b23–24). This kind of link between the conclusions of philosophy and the tales of myth suggests that Aristotle is using some vivid, widely known stories in order to make his point clearer.[8]

(5c) In some cases Aristotle mentions that someone *mythologei* neither to confute him nor to show that his tales agree with his philosophical thesis, but rather just as a parenthetical aside. This is the case of the *mythos* about the generation of orioles, which is a little tangent within an account of interspecies animal conflicts (Aristotle *HA*: 609b1–11). This is also the case of the tale regarding the origin of the starry herons, a tale that is at best related to what Aristotle says about the behavior of this species but is not used as a proof of that behavior. Also the tale of Heracles in Chaonia seems just a erudite remark, as Aristotle does not explicitly refute it, but on the other hand he does not introduce it as agreeing with his own theory.

Summing up, it is possible to state that for Aristotle, *mythologein* happens when (1) a single person or many people who, at least in some cases, all live in the same region, tell something that is either (2–3a) impossible and, as a consequence, false, or (2–3b) internally consistent, even though Aristotle does not present it as true. (5a) Aristotle mentions

[8] Of course, it is possible to imagine other reasons for Aristotle to show the agreement between his philosophy and myth. For example, one can think that he wanted to show that his philosophy was not ungodly, that his rational conclusions were consistent with traditional religion.

tales of the former kind to confute them, but (5b) he shows that the latter kinds of myth agree with his own thesis. It looks like the fact that a tale is the object of *mythologhein* has no automatic implication about truth value for Aristotle, as only the examination of the tale by a philosopher, who has a grounded knowledge of nature and causes, can tell if the tale is false because impossible or is internally consistent, even if not true. By the way, this means that, even though one myth is cited by Aristotle as a support, however weak, for his own theory, logically it must be the other way round, i.e. it is the agreement with his philosophical theory that proves the story possible. It is also interesting to note that none of the traditional religious myths mentioned by Aristotle is impossible in his eyes, as indeed they are mostly shown to be internally consistent. (4) One of the reasons why people *mythologousin* is that they try to make sense of the world around them; however, there must be other motives for people to tell such tales.

3. The meaning of the passage about Ares and Aphrodite

What does all this tell us about the myth of Ares and Aphrodite?

(1) First of all, this tale is special because it is the only case in which Aristotle talks about the man who *emythologêse* first.[9] This is an important specification, as it tells us that the activity of *mythologein* had a beginning. There have been other people who have told stories about supernatural figures (we have seen that the tale of Chiron is narrated by "the poets"), and, above all, one can presume that there have been other people who were *the first* to tell such stories. If the story of Heracles' gifts to Chaonians is repeated only in Chaonia, it is likely that its source is different from the story of e.g. Ares and Aphrodite. The latter story is known by all Greeks, so, if the former was originally told by the same person, it, too, would have been in wide circulation. But this is not the case, so the origin of the two stories is different. Only some of the myths of traditional religion were originally told by the man who *emythologêse* first.[10]

(2) As for the truth of the tale, the passage about Ares and Aphro-

[9] One may interpret the phrase ὁ μυθολογήσας πρῶτος as the first man who told *the story about Ares and Aphrodite being lovers*. I do not think this is the correct interpretation, though, as the specification about who told a specific tale first (or invented it) is not mentioned in the other occurrences of *mythologein*. If Aristotle meant the first man to talk about Ares and Aphrodite specifically, he would have referred to the first man to describe Chiron's pain, the first man to tell the story of Heracles and his twin, and so on.

[10] This man may be Homer, as he was – as Plato put it – "the poet who educated Greece" (Plato *R.*: 606e2–3), and told the story of Ares and Aphrodite (Homer *Od.*: VIII.266–367).

dite is particularly interesting, because here Aristotle states that it was the first mythologer who coupled Ares and Aphrodite (on this myth, see Cyrino 2010: 17–18; also 49–52, on Aphrodite and warfare; Pironti 2015a). The other passages in which Aristotle mentions tales about figures of traditional religion are neutral about the truth value of the tales; that is to say, those passages are compatible with the hypothesis that Aristotle believed those tales to be true. However, this is not the case with the passage about Ares and Aphrodite, as here Aristotle states that the relationship between those two deities was invented by a man.[11] Theoretically this does not necessarily imply that Ares and Aphrodite themselves are human inventions, but there is strong possibility that this is the case. Also, insofar other religious myths are similar to the one about the affair between Ares and Aphrodite, what Aristotle says about the latter means that the former, too, are false. It is now possible to specify the nature of the tales related by people who *mythologousin*: with the possible exception of the report of the very salty Palestinian lake, all these tales are false, even though some of them are straightforwardly impossible, while others are internally consistent.

Three questions remain. Even though a mythic tale is false, one may wonder (3) whether it is related to something true. The answer to this question allows us in turn to understand (4) why this tale was invented and (5) why Aristotle mentions it. The most important statement from this point of view is that the first mythologer acted "not irrationally". This comment implies that *mythologein* is something that can be done *alogôs* or not *alogôs*. It is tempting to match this distinction with the one that I have proposed on the basis of the analysis of the passages about *mythologein*. The tales told by people who *mythologousin* irrationally are impossible and false, so the philosopher cites them only in order to confute them. Those who *mythologousi* not irrationally tell stories that are internally consistent, and for this reason are not presented by Aristotle as false, but rather are mentioned as agreeing with his philosophical conclusion. Of course, the

[11] Maybe it is not by chance if the made-up nature of the myth is explicit in the one passage about the first *mythologos*. In fact, it seems that in the other passages Aristotle talks about the people who *mythologousin* in the sense of repeating tales they have heard, whereas here he refers to the man who *emythologêse* in the sense of inventing the myth (the difference being marked by the specification that this was the *first* man to *mythologein*). Now, nothing changes in the act of repeating a tale one learned some time ago if the tale is true or false, so it makes sense for Aristotle, when he talks about people who echo mythic tales, to not take a stand about the truth values of the tales themselves. If, on the other hand, referring to the first mythologer implies that the tales this man told were fabricated by him, it may have been natural for Aristotle to use a phrase like "to couple Ares and Aphrodite" in this context.

fact that for Aristotle it is possible to tell myths not irrationally also has interesting implications about the relationship between *mythos* and *logos* according to Aristotle. The fact that a given story is a *mythos* does not automatically mean that is not consistent with *logos*; neither, of course, does it mean that it does conform with the results of a rational analysis. Rather, being a *mythos* and being *logikos* are two independent features of each tale. Moreover, stating that the coupling of Ares and Aphrodite was not contrary to reason confirms that Aristotle, rather than looking for validation of his philosophical theories in myths, appraises the *mythos* in light of the *logos*. Here it is explicit that the mythic tale is evaluated by philosophical reason.

It is interesting to wonder why the myth of Ares and Aphrodite is not *alogos*. Aristotle states that coupling these two deities was not irrational *because* men who love to fight also like to have sex. Now, this causal relationship can be interpreted in two different ways, which have different implications.

First, Aristotle may mean that Ares is just an example of a warrior having an affair.[12] If this is what he means, this passage would be similar to the other references to traditional religious tales we have noted when examining the meaning of *mythologein* in Aristotle. The relationship between the tale "Ares has an affair with Aphrodite" and the theory "all warriors like sex" would be the same as the one between the tale "Chiron would welcome death because his pain was unbearable" and the theory "not everyone who is not afraid of death is brave", or between the tale "Heracles and Iphicles had two different fathers despite being born at the same time" and the theory "if a woman is impregnated by two different men one within a short time, she will give birth to the two children at the same time", and so on. Under this interpretation, the affair between Ares and Aphrodite would be an *example* of the theory, not an *allegory* for it. Ares having an intimate relationship with Aphrodite would be an internally consistent tale, something that could be true even though it is false, just as in the case of all the other tales that are characteristic of traditional religion. The reason why Aristotle does not introduce the myth of Ares and Aphrodite with an expression meaning "just as", as he does in the case of other religious myths, would be that in this case the philosophical theory is mentioned after the myth and not before it. Usually, Aristotle says e.g. "some persons tend to have children all of the same gender, *just as* Heracles has seventy-one sons and only one

[12] This seems to be Mayhew's interpretation of the passage (Mayhew 2019: 187).

daughter". Here, he says instead "the warrior god Ares had an affair with Aphrodite, *for* all warriors like sex". All in all, there is no difference between the myth that is introduced as being the work of the first *mythologos* and other tales about similar topics. This means that, just as in the case of those tales, perhaps Aristotle mentioned the story of Ares and Aphrodite in order to provide his audience with an evocative example of a general law of nature. Also, here, too, Aristotle seems not to make assumptions about the reason why the myth was told.

However, it is also possible to interpret the causal link between the principle "who likes to fight also likes to have sexual intercourses" and the story of Ares and Aphrodite in a different way. Aphrodite is not just someone whom the warrior Ares has an affair with, but the goddess of sex herself; of course, Ares is for his part the god of war. This suggests that the affair between Ares and Aphrodite is, rather than an example of the sexual appetites of a warrior, an allegory (using this term broadly) of the close relationship between a warrior spirit and sexual appetites. Ares stands for enthusiasm for fighting and Aphrodite stands for physical attraction, so their relationship stands for the close connection between war and sex. If it is so, the causal relationship between the principle that who likes war also likes sex and the story of Ares and Aphrodite is like this: war and sex are related, *so* the mythologer told that the god of war and the goddess of sex had an affair. Under this interpretation, this passage would be quite different from the other references to *mythologein* where traditional characters are mentioned. Not only would this be an allegory while those would be examples, but several other differences would be significant. Here we have a reference to two proper deities, while there Aristotle talks about heroes (Heracles, the heroes buried in Sardinia), centaurs (Chiron) and possibly men (Theseus). Here Aristotle refers to the first person who *emythologêse*, whereas there he talked about tales told by poets or common people. Here Aristotle explicitly stresses that the tale is not irrational, there he does not. Here the link between the mythic tale and the philosophical theory is "myth, *because* theory", there the link is "theory, *just like* myth". Linking all these differences together, one can formulate the following hypothesis. The first man to *mythologein* talked about the gods and goddesses; he used them as allegories of some key features of reality; this way of talking about reality is not as strict as philosophy, but neither is it irrational; for this reason, Aristotle can introduce these tales as the first expression of a truth that philosophy can now express more correctly. In time other tales were added to the religious traditions; they are not about deities, but rather about

heroes, centaurs and the like, and even men; Aristotle does not say why these tales were invented, but he notes that the facts they depict are not impossible, as they are consistent with natural laws; as a consequence, he can cite these tales as examples of those laws, possibly to provide a powerful image that would help his audience more easily to visualize and remember the law.[13]

While I do not think that it is possible to know for sure which is the correct interpretation, I prefer the latter, that is, that Aristotle's reference to Ares and Aphrodite is an allegory of sort. In fact, all Aristotelian references to Aphrodite suggest something about sexual desire. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he says that the poets' words about the goddess show what appetite is: something that deceitfully deprives wise men of their wisdom (Aristotle *EN*: 1149b14–18). This note seems mirrored in the *Rhetoric*, where, while discussing the theory that names bear important meanings, Aristotle reminds the reader that Euripides said that it is not by chance that the name Ἀφροδίτη and the noun ἀφροσύνη (folly) stem from the same root (Aristotle *Rh.*: 1400b23–24). A different etymology is provided in the *Generation of Animals*, where Aristotle states that the name of the goddess derives from foam, because Aphrodite oversees sexual intercourses, i.e. the production of semen, which is a kind of foam (ἀφρώδης, Aristotle *GA*: 736a18–21; on the etymology of the name Aphrodite, see Cyrino 2010: 25–27; Pironti 2015b). Even more fittingly, in the possibly Aristotelian *Problems* it is said that the reason why Aphrodite's union with Dionysus is correct is that the divine couple corresponds to two pairs that are often observed in human existence: sexual pleasure and wine, lust and melancholy (Aristotle *Pr.*: 953b30–33).[14] In all these cases, Aphrodite is, in a broad sense, an allegory for sex.

[13] Even if this hypothesis is true, it would not affect the validity of the assertion that all the tales of the religious tradition are false for Aristotle. Given that the tales told by the first mythologer are inventions, it makes sense to think that the stories that have been told later are fictitious, too.

[14] Aphrodite is also mentioned in *On the Soul*, where Aristotle says that Democritus speaks like Philippus, a comic playwright who said that, in order to make the wooden Aphrodite he had built move, Daedalus put quicksilver in it (Aristotle *de An.*: 406b15–20). In *On Divination in Sleep*, Aristotle mentions that those who say "Ἀφροδίτην φροδίτην" as an example of the mental habits of melancholic people, whose thoughts and speeches are ruled by mere verbal association (Aristotle *Div. Somn.*: 464a32–464b4). In the *Rhetoric*, it is quoted the passage of the *Iliad* where Achilles states that he would not marry one of Agamemnon's daughters even if she was more beautiful than Aphrodite (Aristotle *Rh.*: 1413a33–34, Homer *Il.*: IX.387–388). It is also possible that Aphrodite is the implicit subject of λοχεύσατο κύκλοπα κούρην, "brought forth a round eye" (or "a round-eyed girl", depending on how one interprets κούρην), in a fragment of Empedocles quoted in the *Sense and Sensibilia* (Aristotle *Sens.*: 438a1); that the subject of this sentence is Aphrodite is the opinion of e.g. Beare (1906: 17), Johansen (1997: 51) and Kalderon (2015: 7, 11).

4. Concluding remarks

It is now possible for me to offer an answer to the questions about myths on which scholars disagree. Of course, the following answers only apply to the passage about Ares and Aphrodite.

Should the original worldviews conveyed by myths be attributed to the poets or to the pre-cataclysmic philosophers? Of course, the first mythologer Aristotle refers to is not a philosopher, as he is someone who fabricates a non-irrational tale, as opposed to someone who provides a rational argument. If he is a poet, he seems to have had a special status among his peers, as his tale is – if my reading of the passage about Ares and Aphrodite is correct – some sort of allegory, not an example like the tale of Chiron told by "the poets". Whether the link between inclination to war and sexual drive was a finding of the first mythologer or the trace of a pre-cataclysmic philosophy is not indicated in the passage; however, nothing in Aristotle's wording suggests the need to assume a pre-mythic philosophy.

Does Aristotle associate mythos *and falseness in the case of the worldviews conveyed by all, some or none of the traditional myths?* The worldview about war and sex conveyed by the tale of Ares and Aphrodite is for Aristotle true, so this rules out the latter option: it is not true that *no* traditional myth conveys a false worldview. It is also notable that the other religious tales that are *mythologemena* are consistent with natural laws.

In the case of truthful myths, is the lack of exactness of the mythical language enough to make the core truth useless for the progress of philosophy or not? Even though it may be meaningful that Aristotle mentions the tale of Ares and Aphrodite before the rational expression of the same core truth, it does not seem that the philosophical discovery of this truth depends on the myth, as the observation of the different behaviours of different races should be enough to reach the general conclusion that the people who are inclined to war also have more sex.[15]

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[15] Of course the results of this analysis of the reference to the affair between Ares and Aphrodite, and generally of the passages where Aristotle talks of *mythologein* and of his references to the goddess of love, should be checked against an examination of more texts, first of all the ones where gods and goddesses are mentioned and the ones where the noun *mythos* and the words that are derived from it are used.

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List of abbreviations

Homer
Il. = *Iliad*
Od. = *Odyssey*

Plato
R. = *Republic*

Aristotle
de An. = *On the Soul*
Div. Somn. = *On Divination in Sleep*
EE = *Eudemian Ethics*
GA = *Generation of Animals*
HA = *History of Animals*
Mete. = *Meteorology*
Ph. = *Physics*
Pol. = *Politics*
Pr. = *Problems*
Rh, = *Rhetoric*
Sens.= *Sense and Sensibilia*

Philoponus and Simplicius
in Ph. = *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*

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