

Relation and Relationships Between Folk Literature and Classical Literature: Taking Autochthony as a Case Study*

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According to current discipline classification, folk literature is usually categorized as an individual research field, distinguished from classical literature or classical canon, which leads to the fact that in current research, the study of folk literature is often separated from the study of classical texts, or even opposed to it. This paper intends to review the relations and relationships between the two and argues that, at least, in ancient Greek world of culture, there is a considerable intersection between folk literature and classical literature. In many cases, a myth appeared both in the two literary fields, and thus these two fields were often intertwined and in conversation. Taking Athenian autochthony as a case study, this paper shows that this myth not only appeared as a folk story in daily occasions such as symposium, architecture, and vase painting, but also entered classic texts such as the tragic works of the three great tragedians and even Plato's philosophical works, becoming one part of "classical literature". By examining the application of the myth in folk literature and classical literature, it can be seen that in ancient Greece, folk and classical literature not only communicated and borrowed from each other, but also formed a dialogue between the two, thus constructing a lively and living literary world.

Keywords: folk literature, classical literature, ancient Greek myth, autochthony

Under the current system of academic disciplines, folk literature has established itself as an independent field with a clear disciplinary position and research focus. Thanks to the efforts of several generations of scholars, significant research achievements have been made in areas such as myth, epic, and folktales, stories, and ballads both domestically and internationally. As a modern concept, "folk literature" is often contrasted with "classical literature"; the former mainly focuses on literature created by the community (the people), emphasizing features like orality, collectivity, variability, and transmission, while the latter centers on the canonical texts¹ of professional writers, highlighting attributes like their written form, individuality, classicality, and professionalism. Under this definition, folk and classical literature practically do not intersect, resulting in little discussion of classical texts in current folk literature research.

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¹ In Western classical studies, one of the most important concepts is that of canonical texts—determining which works and which authors can be included in the collection of "classics" and which cannot. The academic community has had quite different views on the list of canonical texts across different eras (see the relevant discussion in Anthony Grafton and Glenn W. Most eds., *Canonical Texts and Scholarly Practices*, Cambridge University Press, 2016). However, regardless of how the contents of the list change, it invariably includes written texts while excluding all oral and folk narratives. This phenomenon particularly highlights a key difference between the concepts of "classical literature" and "folk literature": classical literature always consists of written texts, whereas folk literature encompasses a large amount of oral and non-textual narratives, such as songs and images.

Although folk and classical literature do not always communicate across all civilized societies, at least in ancient Greek civilization, the divide is not as pronounced as commonly thought. The so-called classical works of ancient Greece, such as epic poems, tragedies, and philosophical texts, are closely linked to folk myths and legends. These works not only derive from folk literature but also integrate and connect with it extensively. A classic example of the intersection between ancient Greek folk literature and classical literature is the Homeric epics. Since the establishment of modern academic disciplines, studies on Homer's epics have focused on their folk and classical qualities. In the context of 19th-century oral theory, great scholars in classical studies and anthropology such as Gregory Nagy raised the "Homeric Questions", discussing the relationship between these epics—held in biblical esteem in ancient Greece—and oral tradition. A key question is whether Homer truly existed, or if the so-called Homeric epics are collective works refined by multiple generations.² The essence of this inquiry is to assess the folkloric and classical elements of Homer's works, seeking to clarify the subject, form, nature, and significance of the literary creation of the Homeric epics. However, the complexity of the Homeric epics lies in the fact that, historically, few deny their oral origins and folk storytelling tradition, yet their literary quality and coherence suggest they may be the creation of a great poet's genius rather than mere compilations of folk tales. In academic discourses, two camps—"Unitarian" and "Analyst"—debate endlessly over the Homeric question without reaching a consensus.³ Nevertheless, both camps agree on one point: Whether authored by one or many, the Homeric epics went through a process of transformation from folk to classical literature, as many mythological stories existed in oral traditions before being embodied in the classical texts seen today, regarded during the late classical period as fundamental educational material or "textbooks" of ancient Greece. Therefore, it is clear that the Homeric epics themselves intermingle folk and classical literature.

However, the study of the relationship between ancient Greek folk and classical literature, as presented through single texts like the Homeric epics, showcasing "folk literature's classicization", is merely a "vertical" aspect of this relationship within Greek literature. A more "horizontal" perspective, examining various texts centered around a particular myth, reveals the parallel, intersecting relationship between folk and classical literature. In transmitting any piece of ancient Greek folk literature (including myths within the Homeric epics), their relationship is not merely one of diachronic, linear development but often parallel and intersect at the same

² The theory of Homeric oral poetics can be traced back to Friedrich Wolf's pioneering work, *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, in 1795. Following this, nearly all German analytic classical scholars in the 19th century were influenced by Wolf, focusing on the study of Homer's oral tradition and the "multiple authorship" theory. These scholars argued that the Homeric epics' numerous contradictions and anachronisms indicated that the long poems were composite works, typical of compilations in folk oral literature. See Wolf, A. Friedrich, *Prolegomena ad Homerum, sive de operum Homericorum Prisca et genuine forma variisque mutationibus et probabili ratione emendandi*, Halis Saxonum: Libraria Orphanotropei, 1795. After the 20th century, scholars like Milman Parry began to view the oral poetics of the Homeric epics from a more complex perspective, opposing the analytic viewpoint. On one hand, they did not deny the oral poetic characteristics of the Homeric epics, but on the other hand, they discovered the Homeric formulaic system, suggesting the possibility of unified authorship by a single author. See Parry, Milman, *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, edited by Adam Parry, Oxford University Press, 1987. Following this, scholars such as Albert Lord supported Parry's perspective from various angles. See Lord, Albert, *The Singer of Tales*, Harvard University Press, 1960. By the end of the 20th century, Gregory Nagy's renowned work, *Homeric Questions*, further developed the evolutionary theory of oral tradition, supporting the premise of Parry's unified authorship and emphasizing features of oral poetic tradition in the process of epic creation, performance, and dissemination. This advanced the scholarly understanding of Homeric oral poetics. See Nagy, Gregory, *Homeric Questions*, University of Texas Press, 1996. From Wolf to Nagy, the central debate and focus have revolved around whether the Homeric epics were the product of a professional author or multiple oral authors, and whether they are unified masterpieces or composite works. Thus, it can be said that the essence of the Homeric question is the relationship between folk literature and classical literature.

³ For a more detailed discussion of the debates between the two camps, refer to Chen Siyi's *Homeric Epics and Heroic Tragedies*, East China Normal University Press, 2021, Chapter 1, "The Homeric Question".

time. A myth appears both in folk creations and, concurrently, in classical writings. Notably, classical narratives of these folk themes in ancient Greece are not mere recordings. Professional authors engaged with these themes distinctly using “folk” manners of storytelling and re-narration. This “folk manner” means that the classic literary creations not only draw their stories from folk literature, but also maintain its fluidity. Taking mythology as an example, although myths are “written” and fixed in classical works, they still follow the traditions of folk literature characterized by “orality”, “fluidity”, and “transformation” through continuous “adaptation”. In this way, the spirit of folk literature does not disappear in classic writing; instead, it gains new vitality. Thus, the original boundaries between folk and classical literature become blurred, forming a close interactive relationship that can be seen as a unified whole in certain respects.

From the perspectives of social and cultural history, exploring the “horizontal” and “synchronous” interactions between ancient Greek folk and classical literature is of significant importance. This investigation not only reveals the flow of social ideas between the folk and intellectual strata of Greek society but also illustrates how they collectively construct a complete social-cultural mechanism. This understanding helps us form a multidimensional insight into the layered cultural thought of ancient Greece. Moreover, it extends our current understanding of the relationship between “folk literature” and “classical literature”. Therefore, based on the Homeric epics that lay the groundwork for recognizing the “diachronic” relationship between Greek folk and classical literature, this study will emphasize their “synchronous” relationship. To elaborate, this paper will examine the specific myth of “autochthony” during the Athenian democracy period and explore its application in folk and classical literature, thereby discussing the horizontally intertwined characteristics of folk and classical literature.

The Athenian Folk Myth of “Autochthony”

The myth of autochthony serves as an apt starting point for exploring the relationship between ancient Greek folk and classical literature because it was extensively narrated and utilized across both the folk and intellectual spheres of the society at the same time. It is a quintessential example of the horizontal interweaving of folk and classical literature.

The term “autochthony” first appeared in the Homeric epics, but its mythological prominence rose during the 5th century BCE in democratic Athens.⁴ From the perspective of its origins, the popularity of the autochthony myth largely developed from its use as a rhetorical device for Athenian colonization. The Greek term “autochthōn” translates to “born of the native soil” or “native”, and was employed by immigrants of Athens following early classical Greece’s mass migrations to assert their ancestral ties to the land and justify their colonial claims to Athenian territory.⁵ Over time, Athenians began to elaborate this concept into a full-fledged myth, framing it as

⁴ Homer’s *Iliad* 2.546-547. Only a brief mention is made of Erechtheus, the ancestor of the “earth-born”, without detailing any specific story. It was not until the 5th century BCE that the Athenians referenced this Homeric allusion to trace their origins back to Erechtheus and created the mythological story of the “autochthony”.

⁵ For studies on the etymology of “autochthony”, see Vincent J. Rosivach’s “Autochthony and the Athenians”, *The Classical Quarterly (New Series)*, 37(2), 1987, pp. 294-306, and John Roy’s “Autochthony in Ancient Greece”, in *A Companion to Ethnicity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, edited by Jeremy McInerney, Wiley: Blackwell, 2014, pp. 241-255. It should be noted that the rhetoric of “autochthony” was not unique to Athens. Many other city-states at the time, such as Thebes and Argos, also claimed to be “earth-born”. Thus, “autochthony” as a colonial rhetoric was largely a pan-Hellenic phenomenon that many colonial city-states used to assert the legitimacy of their colonies, Athens being one of them. For discussions on the history of “autochthony” in the pan-Hellenic region, see Tanja S. Scheer’s “Ways of Becoming Arkadian: Arkadian Foundation Myths in the Mediterranean”, in *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*, edited by Erich S. Gruen, Getty Research Institute, 2011, pp. 11-25.

a prehistoric history to further legitimize these claims—this begins the myth of autochthony.⁶

According to Pseudo-Apollodorus, who specialized in collecting folk myths and legends, the autochthony myth in folk traditions tells the story of the birth of the Athenian ancestor and city founder Erichthonios (or Erechtheus⁷).⁸ In this tale, Hephaestus pursued Athena, who rejected him. During the chase, Hephaestus's semen dripped on Athena's leg. Disgusted, Athena wiped it off with wool and threw it to the earth, who received it and from which an infant was born. Athena named him Erichthonios and entrusted him to the daughters of ancient hero Cecrops to raise. Upon maturing, Erichthonios became Athens' founding king, with Athena as the city-state's protector.

Regarding the content of the autochthony myth, there is a clear connection to the earlier mentioned colonial rhetoric. First, the emphasis on being "born of the earth" underscores the notion that Athens' founding king originated from this specific land, establishing him as a "homegrown" native. Secondly, in the myth, autochthony is portrayed as both the origin of humanity and a divine act, thanks to the involvement of deities. This mythical linkage of Athens' origins to its patron goddess Athena not only provides a narrative legitimizing colonization efforts but also imbues Athenians with a noble sense of origin. It is understandable that such a narrative would be popular among the Athenian populace, continually recited to affirm their rightful settlement in Athens and celebrated as a source of pride due to their perceived noble—and even sacred—origins. Indeed, as Lori observed, during this period, the myth of autochthony circulated widely throughout Athens, appearing not only in everyday conversations but also depicted in vase paintings and public architectural sculptures, marking a widespread cultural presence. As per classicist Jean-Pierre Vernant's famous expression, the era of democratic Athens can be described as a moment belonging to "autochthony".⁹

⁶ It should be noted that the myth of "autochthony" is not unique to Athens. Other city-states that employed "autochthony" as colonial rhetoric, such as Thebes, also developed their own myths of being "earth-born", like the Theban myth of the "Spartoi" born from dragon's teeth. However, the consensus in mainstream scholarship is that among all these myths, the Athenian myth of "autochthony" is the most significant and has received the most attention. Consequently, the Athenian "earth-born" myth is considered the most prominent. This is why the Athenian myth of "autochthony" is the focus of this discussion. For more on the importance of the Athenian myth of "autochthony," see Yan Di's *Autochthony and Athenian Democracy*, SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2022, pp. 25-26 and its footnotes.

⁷ These two names are often used interchangeably in the myth of the founding of Athens. However, some scholars have pointed out a more detailed distinction between them in certain contexts. For example, in Homeric texts, only "Erechtheus" appears, while "Erichthonios" is absent. See Parker, Robert, "Myths of Early Athens", in *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, edited by Jan Bremmer, Croom Helm, 1987, pp. 190-201. This text does not intend to delve into the issues surrounding the use of these names; therefore, in this discussion, "Erichthonios" and "Erechtheus" are used to refer to the same mythological figure.

⁸ Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca*, or the "Library", written in the 1st-2nd century CE, is the earliest and most comprehensive collection of Greek myths we have today. A notable feature of this work is the author's attempt to compile all significant narrative versions of Greek myths known at the time. As a result, myths with multiple versions often appear in the *Library*, and these versions may contradict or conflict with each other. Nonetheless, Pseudo-Apollodorus recorded them all, making the book an encyclopedic work. See Graf, Fritz, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*, translated by Thomas Marier, Johns Hopkins Press, p. 193. Therefore, although Pseudo-Apollodorus's writing is somewhat removed in time from the classical "autochthony" myths, he still provides the popular narrative versions. When supplemented by physical evidence, it is possible to establish a version of the myth that was widespread among the general population.

⁹ This from Jean-Pierre Vernant's understanding of ancient Greek tragedy. Vernant believed that the reason tragedy became a crucial and mainstream genre in 5th century BCE Athens is closely related to the socio-cultural environment of Athens itself. It was the vibrant spirit of competition fostered by democracy that created fertile ground for the flourishing of ancient Greek tragedy. Therefore, it can be said that the period of Athenian democracy was a "tragic moment". See Jean-Pierre Vernant, "The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece: Some of the Social and Psychological Conditions", in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, edited by J.-P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, translated by J. Lloyd, New York: Zone Books, 1988, pp. 8-23. By borrowing Vernant's concept, we can assert that the "autochthon" also belonged to the democratic Athenian society, and it was precisely the city's socio-cultural atmosphere that led to the popularity of the "autochthony" myth. Thus, democratic Athens was also an "autochthony moment". Notably, the "autochthon" myth underwent rich transformations and applications in ancient Greek tragedies, and the narratives of the "autochthony" myth in tragedies almost always reflect on the democratic city-state of Athens. In this sense, it can be said that the "autochthony" myth and ancient Greek tragedy were virtually inseparable.

Despite the scarcity of other contemporary texts beyond Pseudo-Apollodorus due to the lack of material evidence and the passage of time, much evidence from ceramics and architecture substantiates that the story he documented was the most widely propagated and well-known folk version circulating within the Athenian city-state. The extant 5th-century BCE ceramics frequently feature illustrations consistent with this version, depicting scenes such as Erichthonios's emergence from the earth, Hephaestus's pursuit of Athena, or Cecrops's daughters tending to the newborn. This thematic continuity in folk art persisted into the late classical period, remaining popular until the 4th century BCE. Apart from everyday ceramics, contemporary Athenian architecture also presented this popular myth, with dedicated temples like the Erechtheum on the Acropolis and even the pediments of the Parthenon illustrating the myth's narrative.¹⁰ Based on the ceramics and architectural sculptures, it is apparent that during Athens's democratic period, the narration and depiction of the autochthony myth pervaded everyday life, though differing details likely existed in oral tellings. The main storyline, however, remained fairly consistent, as evidenced by Pseudo-Apollodorus's written accounts.

How, then, was the myth of autochthony narrated among the people? The parodic setting in Plato's "Symposium" may offer some insights. The Greeks, particularly Athenians, had a tradition of symposia, which is a gathering usually occurring after competitions or festivals, where people would enjoy entertainment, dining, and drinking while engaging in leisurely conversation encompassing various topics, including social, political, and cultural matters. Myths and folk stories often featured as discussion themes. In Plato's "Symposium", Aristophanes animatedly recounts the myth of autochthony as a response to the other participants.¹¹ Naturally, the symposium was not the sole venue for this myth. It is likely that it appeared in everyday social conversations and family educations as a well-known topic among the Athenian populace.

Perhaps due to the wide popularity of the autochthony myth in Athenian society, it transcended folk narratives and entered the political realm. There, it became a "semi-official" narrative connected to Athenian democratic politics and ideology, widely accepted by the public. In many political speeches, orators would invoke the noble origins described in the myth to inspire citizens to serve the city-state.¹² Additionally, the idea of autochthony, which attributes the power of birth to the earth rather than women, was used to justify the exclusion of women from the democratic system of Athens.¹³ This political usage illustrates that the story of autochthony was very familiar to the Athenian people; orators could simply reference "being born of the earth" without retelling the entire story, as it already resonated deeply with their audience. Thus, it is clear that the myth of autochthony not only permeated various facets of Athenian life—from folk literature to political rhetoric—but also wielded significant cultural and political influence on the civic life and governance of Athens. This broad

¹⁰ For the architectural structure of the Erechtheion and the connection between the Parthenon's pediments and the "autochthony" myth, see Yan Di's *Anthropogony, Myth and Gender: Athenian Autochthony as a Case Study*, Cambridge University (Ph.D. thesis), 2018, pp. 79-90.

¹¹ Plato, *Symposium* 189d-193a.

¹² For example, see Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.40; Hippocrates' *Speeches* 6; and Demosthenes' *Speeches* 4.10, among others. For research on the "autochthony" and political speeches, refer to Nicole Loraux's *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Harvard University Press, 1986.

¹³ The "autochthony" myth attributes the origin of birth to the earth, implying that Greeks are not born from women but from the "non-woman" earth. Thus, all men are brothers who come from the same earth, while women are excluded from the category of "human" as a different class. For discussions on the relationship between the "autochthony" myth and the political thinking of democratic Athens, see Yan Di's "Autochthony" and Athenian Democracy, Chapters one and two, and Nicole Loraux's *The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas About Citizenship and the Division Between the Sexes*, translated by Caroline Levine, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 37-71.

influence underscores its powerful role in forming social and political ideologies, suggesting a profound interplay between myth and the socio-political narrative of the city-state.

The Myth of “Autochthony” in Classical Texts

The widespread popularity and cultural-political power of the “autochthony” myth are significant reasons to draw the attention of the intellectual class. In existing classical literature, both tragedy and philosophy show considerable interest in the “autochthony” myth. However, unlike folk narratives, tragedies and philosophical texts are works of professional authorship. As mentioned earlier, as “written” forms of classical texts, tragedies and philosophical texts differ significantly from folk “autochthony” in terms of authorship, creation form, content, and intent. Tragedies and philosophies are written by clearly defined, independent authors, thus possessing a strong personal style and a writer’s consciousness. This results in fundamental differences in form and content: Under the genres of tragedy and philosophy, the “autochthony” myth no longer stands alone as an independent literary unit but becomes a motif that is adapted and incorporated into the broader narratives of tragedy or philosophy, resulting in significant and intentional reinterpretations. Accordingly, the intended meanings of “autochthony” in tragedies and philosophy inevitably differ from those in folk literature. While folk literature treats “autochthony” more as a defense for the legitimacy of colonial rule and the noble origins of Athenians, we will see how, in tragedies and philosophy, traditional “autochthony” narratives become subjects for adaptation, reflection, and even critique by tragedians and philosophers, challenging its acceptance as a popular narrative of origin. Here, we explore three specific examples.

In tragedy, a typical case of adapting and reinterpreting the “autochthony” myth is Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*. In this trilogy, which narrates the myth of Agamemnon’s family, Aeschylus innovatively places the trial of Orestes for the murder of his mother in democratic Athens is a place that venerates the idea of autochthony. Whether Orestes’s act of matricide to avenge his father was a crime is decided in a trial by the democratic court. Athena, having herself been born from a father and not a mother, votes that a father’s role is more significant, thus acquitting Orestes of the crime of matricide. Athena’s decisive vote not only releases Orestes but also establishes the gender order within the democratic politics of Athens. Although the “autochthony” myth is not directly mentioned, for audiences familiar with it, Athena’s reasoning undoubtedly echoes the myth’s repudiation of female birthrights (Goldhill, 2018, p. 51; Blok, 2009, pp. 251-275; Zeitlin, 1978, p. 179). *Oresteia*, through Athena’s judgment, theatrically demonstrates the application of “autochthony” thinking within the democratic Athenian polis. However, Aeschylus’s portrayal of the myth is not merely an endorsement; the draw of votes and Athena’s persuasion of the Furies indicate that the principles related to “autochthony” did not gain universal acceptance even through the democratic judicial system, reflecting the tensions and issues inherent in this ideology.¹⁴

¹⁴ There are many controversies surrounding the conclusion of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*. Mainstream scholarship in the last century, such as that by H. D. F. Kitto, argued that the trilogy ultimately establishes a just order through the Athenian court’s judgment and marks the victory of patriarchy. However, in the past two decades, classical scholars tend to believe that this standard interpretation significantly overlooks the complexities of Aeschylus’s language and dramatic presentation. They argue that the reconciliation in the play is not achieved through the legal justice system; the voting does not resolve the issues. Instead, it is Athena’s persuasion, and even intimidation, of the Furies that defuse the conflict. For the former perspective, see Kitto, H. D. F., *Greek Tragedy*, Routledge, 1966, Ch. 3; Kitto, H. D. F., *Form and Meaning in Drama*, London: Methuen, 1979, p. 69; John Herington, *Aeschylus*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986, p. 122; Friedrich Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1949, pp. 154-155, etc. For the latter perspective, see Thalmann, W. G., “Speech and Silence in the *Oresteia* 2”, *Phoenix*, 39(1985), pp. 236-237; Simon Goldhill, *The Oresteia*, pp. 110-115; Vellacott, Philip, “Has Good Prevailed? A Further Study of the

A more direct adaptation of the “autochthony” myth by a tragedian is found in Euripides’ *Ion*. The main character Creusa is explicitly linked as a descendant of the autochthonous king Erichthonius. The play tells of Creusa’s illegitimate child after she was raped by Apollo, who, after many hardships, returns to Athens, symbolically reborn, to be recognized as a descendant of the “autochthony” lineage.¹⁵ Though the conclusion is generally seen as satisfactory, it is undeniable that the illegitimacy theme directly challenges traditional “autochthony” narratives (Yan, 2022, pp. 72-80; Saxonhouse, 1986, pp. 252-273). The narrative of the illegitimate child demands a reevaluation of the role of female reproduction in a real gender society. The core question is: If a child’s maternal origin is unclear, how can they be accepted and acknowledged as legitimate? In Euripides’ dramatization, Ion cannot escape the quest for maternal identity, and his return to his “autochthony” lineage is premised upon recognition by his mother (Yan, 2021, pp. 36-39). This ironic ending forces the audience to reconsider the societal value of the “noble origins” depicted by the “autochthony” myth.

The final example of a classical text reinterpreting the myth of “autochthony” is Plato’s *Republic*. While outlining his ideal state with a philosophical lens, Plato starts not with philosophical construct but with a myth he calls the “noble lie”¹⁶, which is essentially a variant of the folk “autochthony” myth. The tale depicts the origin of the first humans, who are also earth-born and encouraged to defend their polis. However, unlike the traditional myth, Plato’s story asserts that these earth-born individuals are inherently unequal, predetermined to either noble or ignoble statuses before birth, resulting in a naturally hierarchical societal structure post-birth. This is Plato’s most radical reformulation of the “autochthony” myth (Yan, 2022, pp. 108-114). In the original folk myth, all descendants of autochthons claimed noble birth, a requisite from the rhetoric of Athenian colonization and a cornerstone for the emphasis on equality within the Athenian democracy. However, Plato’s version disrupts this equality. By reimagining the origins of humankind, he prompts a reevaluation of societal systems and social order, thus diverging significantly from the democratic political reality of Athens. This reformation of the “autochthony” myth illustrates Plato’s intention to establish a hierarchical social form, ultimately governed by philosopher-kings, contrasting sharply with the democratic values underpinning Athenian society, which relied on the flatter construct of “autochthonous” political thought.

Besides these three examples, many other instances of the “autochthony” myth’s reinterpretation exist in surviving Greek classical texts, such as Herodotus’ understanding of “autochthony” and various rhetorical uses by other speechwriters. Due to space constraints, this discussion cannot cover each in detail, but these cases highlight the intense engagement of intellectual writers with the folk narrative of “autochthony”. These adaptations range from mild to radical, offering various perspectives that interact deeply with and dialogue with the well-known myth among the populace. These intellectual explorations serve not merely as reiterations but as platforms for critical reflection and discussion, revealing the complexities and multifaceted nature of seemingly simple folk narratives within classical literature.

Oresteia”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 81(1977), p. 120.

¹⁵ For discussions on the “rebirth” and “reenactment” of the “autochthon” tradition in the play *Ion*, see Nicole Loraux, *The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas About Citizenship and the Division Between the Sexes*, pp. 184-185; and M. K. Sokolon, “Euripides’ *Ion*: Identity, Legitimacy and the Ties that Bind”, in *Socrates and Dionysus: Philosophy and Art in Dialogue*, edited by Ann Ward, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, p. 33.

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic* 414c-415a. This marks the beginning of Plato’s formal construction of his ideal city-state in Book Three. He starts by discussing the origins of the city-state and employs a narrative style that is quite popular and folkloric, namely, “telling myths”. Plato specifically notes that this approach is intended to allow ordinary citizens to understand the formation of the city-state in a way that is appealing to them (389b). Thus, it is evident that Plato’s discussion of the myth directly targets the folk literature of the city-state.

Two Traditions and One Tradition

In discussing the creation and rewriting of the “autochthony” myth in folk and classical literature, it becomes evident that the myth originated as a necessary historical rhetoric. From there, Athenians developed a popular narrative that was orally transmitted within the polis. This narrative held significant vitality, not only being sung as a story but also appearing in art and architectural sculptures, demonstrating the high level of familiarity and acceptance among the Athenian populace. The myth even extended into the political realm, intertwining with the political ideology of democratic Athens and defending its democratic mechanisms and principles, showcasing its potent intellectual influence in the polis. Due to the profound impact of the “autochthony” myth on both popular and official levels in Athens, it garnered significant attention from professional writers in the intellectual elite, such as tragedians and philosophers. Unlike the general acceptance of the myth among the public, these writers did not simply document the popular versions in their texts but rather adapted and reinterpreted the myth, leading to profound critiques and reflections.

In the narratives of both folk and classical literature, the “Autochthony” myth in Athens was continuously narrated, rewritten, and recreated. Folk literature provided materials for classical literature, but this exchange was not one-sided; rather, classical literature engaged in a dialogue with folk stories and even gave back creatively and intellectually. Whether in tragedy or philosophy, adaptations of the “autochthony” myth were not merely new versions or stories but expressed a deep concern for and reflection on the traditional (or popularly held) narrative. Importantly, despite differing in form and intent from folk literature, tragedians and philosophers did not entirely dismiss the value of folk narratives of “autochthony”. Instead, they began by placing them within a significant narrative framework before reworking or recreating them. This indicates that while appearing as two distinct traditions, folk and classical literature in ancient Greece actually belonged to a single, broader tradition.¹⁷

The “autochthony” narrative is just one example among many. In fact, examples of interaction between folk literature and classical literature abound in the literary world of ancient Greece. From Hesiod and Homer to the Hellenistic period, Greek literature displayed a dual interaction between oral transmission and classical writing centered on various myths. This synchronic and horizontal weaving of folk and classical literature shows the vibrant life of Greek myths in Athenian society. Greek myths, as a narrative genre, are less distinctive representations within a singular narrative realm (such as folk literature) and more a highly interwoven cognitive medium. Through this medium, different agents—whether oral narrators or written authors—told diverse stories that communicated with each other, creating a unified and dynamic narrative landscape of the polis.

Returning to the initial discussion of this text, it is argued that this integrative characteristic of Greek myths is closely tied to the robust oral tradition of Greek culture. Since the archaic period during Homer’s time, oral literature has been the most fundamental and mainstream form of literature in traditional Greek society. Even though writing became more prevalent in the classical period and literacy rates increased, oral literature remained an important textual form. For instance, in theater, although playwrights’ scripts were written, actors and choruses only memorized them by oral means, and thus performances often involved improvisation based on the script (Finglass, 2012, p. 11). Plato’s philosophy similarly embodied “oral” traits; his dialectical method relied on tailored, situational oral dialogues. Therefore, Plato’s dialogues appear more like a record of oral debates rather

¹⁷ Thus folk literature to classical literature, although folk myths have undergone a process of “classicization”—entering into later selected classical texts and becoming more widely accepted as canonical narratives—they simultaneously flow within both traditions when viewed from the perspective of their original mechanisms, that is, within the broader literary context.

than the writings of an independent author, and in this regard, the difference between Plato and Aristotle is particularly striking.¹⁸ Thus, it can be said that even during the classical period, the spirit of adaptation, rewriting, and diverse creation inherent in “oral literature” still resonated throughout the cultural society of Athens. This background helps explain why, during the classical period, classical literature demonstrated such variance and mutation in its writing about the same myths—testifying to a continuation and exaltation of the spirit of folk “oral literature”. Unlike the traditional canonization seen in the Hebrew Bible, Greek “classics” did not aim to standardize or singularize myths and stories; instead, their narratives engaged with broader societal adaptations and interpretations, making them integral parts of a wider tradition.¹⁹

Traditionally, folk and classical literature are often demarcated distinctly. However, in Greek society, not only did the two become intertwined, but they were also filled with enduring, deep interactions. If we extend the contexts of these texts to the social realm, we can see that the two types of texts frequently overlapped within society. Audiences of folk myths were inevitably the Athenian citizens, and although tragedies and philosophical works were written by professional authors, they were also created for the Athenian public (albeit with tragedies reaching a broader audience than the more niche philosophical texts). The same audience engaged with both, hearing stories at home and in the agora, while watching tragedies and discussing philosophy in theaters and symposia. Thus, in Greek society, folk and classical literatures coexisted in the same temporal and spatial contexts, serving as an ever-flowing source of Athenian intellectual vitality.

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¹⁸ For discussions on Plato's “dialectic” in relation to oral tradition, as well as broader considerations of the relationship between ancient Greek oral tradition and written literature, see Kadvany, John, “Dialectic and Diagonalization”, *Inquiry*, 34(1)(1991), 3-25; and Dmitri Nikulin, *Dialectic and Dialogue*, Stanford University Press, 2010, pp. 1-22.

¹⁹ On a deeper level, by the classical period, particularly during the era of democratic Athens, the shared spirit of “canonical writing” and “folk oral narrative” was linked to the combination of competitive and democratic ideals within ancient Greek culture, especially Athenian culture. On one hand, the “equality” among citizens promoted by Athenian democracy ensured equal and active dialogue among citizens, facilitating the widespread circulation of folk knowledge and narratives. This characteristic laid a solid social foundation for extensive discussions on various topics in the Athenian city-state. On the other hand, the pervasive competition in ancient Greek society added a vibrant argumentative dimension to these equal discussions. In public assemblies, individuals competed to propose and vote on motions; in athletic arenas, they competed in various physical contests. This ubiquitous spirit of democratic competition provided a relaxed environment for competitive myth-narration and even celebrated such competition. Thus, it is understandable how dialogue and debate among authors, texts, and narratives were strongly encouraged within a society that valued both equality and competition.