What can be in our days the interest of mythology? What is it to us that Kronos was the son of Uranos and Gaia, and that he swallowed his children, Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Pluton, and Poseidon, as soon as they were born? What have we to do with the stories of Rhea, the wife of Kronos, who, in order to save her youngest son from being swallowed by his father, gave her husband a stone to swallow instead? And why should we be asked to admire the exploits of this youngest son, who, when he had grown up, made his father drink a draught, and thus helped to deliver the stone and his five brothers and sisters from their paternal prison? What shall we think if we read in the most admired of classic poets that these escaped prisoners became afterwards the great gods of Greece, gods believed in by Homer, worshipped by Sokrates, immortalized by Pheidias? Why should we listen to such horrors as that Tantalos killed his own son, boiled him, and placed him before the gods to eat; or that the gods collected his limbs, threw them into a cauldron, and thus restored Pelops to life, minus, however, his shoulder, which Demeter had eaten in a fit of absence, and which had therefore to be replaced by a shoulder made of ivory?

Can we imagine anything more silly, more savage, more senseless, anything more unworthy to engage our thoughts, even for a single moment? We may pity our children that, in order to know how to construe and understand the master-works of Homer and Virgil, they have to fill their memory with such idle tales; but we might justly suppose that men who have serious work to do in this world would banish such subjects forever from their thoughts.

And yet, how strange, from the very childhood of philosophy, from the first faintly-whispered Why? to our own time of matured thought and fearless inquiry, mythology has been the ever-recurrent subject of anxious wonder and careful study. The ancient philosophers, who could pass by the petrified shells on mountain-tops and the fossil trees buried in their quarries without ever asking the question how they came to be there, or what they signified, were ever ready with doubts and surmises when they came to listen to ancient stories of their gods and heroes. And, more curious still, even modern philosophers cannot resist the attraction of these ancient problems. That stream of philosophic thought which, springing from Descartes (1596–1650), rolled on through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in two beds—the idealistic, marked by the names of Malebranche (1638–1715), Spinoza (1632–1677), and Leibniz (1646–1716); and the sensualistic, marked by the names of Locke (1632–1704), David Hume (1711–1776), and Condillac (1715–1780), till
the two arms united again in Kant (1724–1804), and the full stream was carried on
by Schelling (1775–1854) and Hegel (1770–1831),—this stream of modern philo-
sophic thought has ended where ancient philosophy began—in a Philosophy of
Mythology, which, as you know, forms the most important part of Schelling's final
system, of what he called himself his Positive Philosophy, given to the world after the
death of that great thinker and poet, in the year 1854.

I do not mean to say that Schelling and Aristotle looked upon mythology in the
same light, or that they found in it exactly the same problems; yet there is this
common feature in all who have thought or written on mythology, that they look
upon it as something which, whatever it may mean, does certainly not mean what it
seems to mean; as something that requires an explanation, whether it be a system of
religion, or a phase in the development of the human mind, or an inevitable cata-
trophe in the life of language.

According to some, mythology is history changed into fable; according to others,
fable changed into history. Some discover in it the precepts of moral philosophy
enunciated in the poetical language of antiquity; others see in it a picture of the great
forms and forces of nature, particularly the sun, the moon, and the stars, the changes
of day and night, the succession of the seasons, the return of the years—all this
reflected by the vivid imagination of ancient poets and sages.

Epicharmos, for instance, the pupil of Pythagoras, declared that the gods of
Greece were not what, from the poems of Homer, we might suppose them to be—
personal beings, endowed with superhuman powers, but liable to many of the
passions and frailties of human nature. He maintained that these gods were really the
Wind, the Water, the Earth, the Sun, the Fire, and the Stars. Not long after his time,
another philosopher, Empedokles, holding that the whole of nature consisted in the
mixture and separation of the four elements, declared that Zeus was the element of
Fire, Here [sic] the element of Air, Aidoneus or Pluton the element of Earth, and
Nestis the element of Water. In fact, whatever the free thinkers of Greece discovered
successively as the first principles of Being and Thought, whether the air of
Anaximenes, or the fire of Herakleitos, or the Nous or Mind of Anaxagoras, was
readily identified with Zeus and the other divine persons of Olympian mythology.
Metrodoros, the contemporary of Anaxagoras, went even farther. While Anaxagoras
would have been satisfied with looking upon Zeus as but another name of his Nous,
the highest intellect, the mover, the disposer, the governor of all things, Metrodoros
resolved not only the persons of Zeus, Here [sic], and Athene, but likewise those of
human kings and heroes—such as Agamemnon, Achilles, and Hektor—into various
combinations and physical agencies, and treated the adventures ascribed to them as
natural facts hidden under a thin veil of allegory.

Sokrates, it is well known, looked upon such attempts at explaining all fables alle-
gorically as too arduous and unprofitable; yet he, too, as well as Plato, pointed
frequently to what they called the hypónoia, the under-current, or, if I may say so,
the under-meaning of ancient mythology.

Aristotle speaks more explicitly: "It has been handed down," he says,

by early and very ancient people, and left to those who came after, in the form of
myths, that these (the first principles of the world) are the gods, and that the divine