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TRACKING THE TRICKSTER:
CRITICAL COMPARISON OF ANCIENT GREEK,
AFRICAN, AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN
TRICKSTER FIGURES AND MYTHS

Pascale Stain

Mentor: Timothy Moore

Myths play key social roles as they help individuals understand the world around them. Global myth often focuses on preserving order. Despite this enduring theme, the trickster, a highly disordering presence, remains one of myth's most ubiquitous figures. The trickster is both creator and destroyer. Clever, mischievous, intelligent, and cunning, tricksters use deception to disrupt established order. Although they are disordering figures, tricksters are also often depicted as heroes. As tricksters defy authority and disrupt order, they play important roles in the creation and reinvention of the world, humankind, and civilization. Even though myths tend to condemn malicious deceit, particular types of trickery are praised. Tricksters' use of intelligence and bravery to subvert despotic individuals or institutions is exalted and framed as crucial to the vitality of human culture and society. Tricksters are often portrayed positively, as they are willing to defy order at critical moments to benefit themselves or their communities.

Ancient Greek, African, and African-American trickster figures and myths reveal much about the definition, function, and meaning of the trickster. Though separated by thousands of years, Ancient Greek, African, and African-American tricksters bear core commonalities. These trickster myths highlight the power of intelligence, indicating a path through which conventionally weak figures can achieve their goals. Audiences often identify with trickster figures. Tricksters show that despite perceived weaknesses, with keen intelligence and harsh grit, individuals can rise to change and shape their world. These tricksters help maintain a necessary balance in human life between order and chaos. As tricksters deploy socially acceptable forms of disorder, they often spur creation or bring benefits to themselves or their communities. Comparison between the trickster figures of these three different cultures points both to the particularities of specific cultures and the overarching universalities of humankind.