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MYTHS AND FOLKTALES

By Stith Thompson

WHEN I agreed many months ago to add to this symposium some remarks about the relation of myth and folktale, the editor suggested that I might wish to comment on the other papers which form a part of this series, and he very kindly placed them at my disposal in manuscript.[1] I shall, however, confine myself largely to my own subject and only incidentally refer to the other papers.

As I have taken time out to prepare this paper, I find myself in the midst of the revision of my *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* where for many months, and, indeed, many years I have been in daily contact with thousands of narrative motifs from all parts of the world. These motifs, of course, have come from many places, but they all belong to the large area of traditional literature. An exercise of this kind has a tendency to keep one's feet definitely on the ground and to discourage theorizing. One is daily impressed with the variety of cultural patterns in all parts of the world and becomes suspicious of general statements about them. Generalizations made for Central Polynesia will probably have very little in common with those made for the marginal peoples of South America, or the Congo tribes of Central Africa. Insofar as all these people are human and have human needs, there will be similar acts and thoughts because of the limitation of possibilities in solving human problems. The origins of myths and folktales over the world must be extremely diverse, so that it is not safe to posit any single origin even for those of a particular people.

Such is the general attitude to which this purely empirical approach has led me. To many this will seem only a negative reaction for I have no answer to make to those who claim to know exactly where myths came from and how they are related to tales.

In spite of this bias against what seems to me oversimplification, I have taken time to reread a good deal of literature upon mythology and to discuss it in some detail with a very excellent seminar of graduate students at Indiana University. This quest began with the general question of what people were talking about when they discussed myth; but most of the authors who have written about myth make very little effort to connect their work with such myths as one actually finds when he reads collections from all parts of the world. We need not now consider the recent perversions of the word "myth" which some of the modern literary critics are employing. Most of the writers whom we read in this seminar do at least refer, generally speaking, to stories that have become traditional. But of those traditional stories, which ones shall be called myth, which ones legends and traditions (the German *Sagen*), which shall be called folktales, and which animal tales—all of that never seems very clear to the reader of many books on mythology. Among the writers of the present symposium, there seems, however, to be some agreement. All agree that stories about the gods and their activities in general are myths. But shall we also include hero tales? I imagine that Raglan and Hyman would. Wheelwright would include them perhaps

[1] The author had no opportunity to read the manuscripts of Lévi-Strauss and Eggan. [Ed.]

under his second stage. I doubt whether any of the others would speak of his third category of myth, that which he calls the consummatory, at all. It would seem to me only to add great confusion to an already confused subject.

When reviewing the treatments of myth sometimes as originally presented and sometimes in excellent summaries—such as those of Bidney where one passes from Euhemerus and the ancients through the mediaeval allegorizors, through the Brothers Grimm and the weather-myth advocates; and the sun-myth, astral-myth, and moon-myth schools which Dorson has so well reviewed for us; through Freud and Jung and Erich Fromm, Roheim, Saintyves, and Malinowski, and some at least of the imposing array of writers on the ritualistic theory—one continually gets a sense of unreality, of living in a world of phantasmagoria, in a never-never land where nothing ever says what it means, or means what it says, where people have only one thought and only one interest. They are either contemplating day in and day out the movements of the sun and are never able to tell a simple story without dragging the sun in, as Mr. Dick always had to drag in the execution of Charles I. Or they may be a world of star-gazers, who, instead of looking around them and telling tales of the men and beasts with which they are acquainted, must always tell stories about the stars, or if not actually about the stars, stories which meant the stars to their ancestors. But then we find that that is all a mistaken impression, that the moon is the center of attention of all peoples, especially primitive peoples, and in spite of manifest evidence to the contrary, that all stories and myths are made up of the moon and its phases and its monthly course, its eclipses and its effects upon terrestrial life. But all these ideas are negated when it is realized that the actual reason for the existence of stories about the gods, and perhaps about the heroes, is the fact that there are certain psychological compulsions which impel people to tell tales of particular kinds. Dreams, fears, and stresses—it is from these that come the gods, the heroes, and the tales about them. Whether these patterns are thought of in the terms of Freud or Jung or Erich Fromm does not matter much. If Jung is right, Freud is wrong. If Fromm is right, Jung and Freud are wrong. Unless, therefore, the searcher is very persistent, he is likely to look elsewhere for the explanation of his myths, especially after he reads some of the fantastic explanations given to stories which he knows very well. By this time he is prepared to pass into a *selva oscura* even more revolting and unlikely, a world filled with phallic symbols and fertility rites.

At journey's end, we come to the ritual origin and we observe something that no anthropologist has told us about—that all the rituals in the world have a single pattern and a single purpose, and that the only way a story could be made up originally was in imitation of a ritual. But though they show some undoubted instances of this occurrence, none of these writers tells us how the ritual itself evolved and how the inventive process which moved from ritual into a story about the gods and heroes is any easier than any other form of invention.

All the writers we have mentioned, as well as the philosophers such as those Bidney discusses, approach the problem of the origin of myth as if it were capable of a single solution. It is this monistic approach that brings each of them to claim finality and to say categorically that all others are wrong. If one is devoted to a particular faith, he must have no traffic with heretics.

After this experience with the writers on mythology of the last century or more, one comes back to safer ground and resumes his quest for a definition that will afford

a central point of attack. But why should myth be accurately defined? Is there actually any need to differentiate, for example, between such concepts as mythology and hero tales? It would seem that the only possible use of definitions of this kind is to enable us to name something when we see it. This means that a useful definition of myth must be substantive, it must declare that certain kinds of material form the subject of myth and certain kinds do not. I find myself astonished that Raglan should begin his article by saying that a myth is simply a narrative associated with a rite. He then proceeds to show that a myth (that is, a narrative associated with a rite) is indeed associated with a rite. I feel certain that he did not mean to make such a circular statement as this serve as a definition, for later in the paper it turns out that not only myths, but ballads, folktales and *Sagen* are also associated with rites and, that therefore this special association breaks down as a definition. The other supporter of the ritual theory, Hyman, apparently hopes to include practically all human activities—dance and jazz and we know not what else—so that eventually from a single ritualistic act of a single type of ritual all of narrative art can eventually be traced. The ritualistic school seems little concerned with the definition of myth.

And yet there is a practical value in defining myths according to the type of subject matter they include and not according to their origin, since their origin is one of the very points at issue. The practical definition which I have suggested and which seems to be rather well agreed upon is that myth has to do with the gods and their actions, with creation, and with the general nature of the universe and of the earth. This is a minimum definition, for it must be recognized that the word myth is frequently used with a much broader meaning. If we confine ourselves to European literature, we find myth sometimes applied also to the hero tales, whether those hero tales deal with demigods or not. Ovid, in his *Metamorphoses,* seems to have considered that he was dealing with myths, and here his criterion was that of primordial transformation. He must also have considered one purpose of myth to be the explanation of some existing forms in nature. But as in so many so-called etiological myths, the explanation which he gives is nearly always merely tacked on and is certainly not the reason for the existence of the tale. This often happens with stories of primitive peoples: explanations are added almost as an afterthought to an ordinary folktale. In the past too much weight has certainly been given to the importance of the explanatory elements in myths. It is frequently there, as any one who reads the literature can testify, but it is not important enough to constitute an actual definition of myth.

As we get away from Western cultures and enter the circle of more primitive peoples, there is less concern about separation of folktales into the mythical and non-mythical. This fact is vividly brought out in any bibliography of North American Indian tales. The authors of such collections call them with seeming indifference tales, myths, legends, or traditions. Some students of these primitive tales have indeed observed that the tribes themselves have a tendency to differentiate between ordinary tales and those about an ancient world preceding the present. But in this respect there is the greatest difference between individual tribes, and a strict classification of these tales into myths and non-myths is quite impossible.

Another aspect of the myths of primitive peoples which makes any such differentiation difficult is the way in which their superior beings, whether thought of actually as gods or as culture heroes, are usually treated in two aspects, one of them serious and the other in which the god or hero is the center of tales of buffoonery. Wherever

this trickster-hero idea occurs there is a tendency to tell of the foolish trickster at any time, but to confine the tales of the serious culture hero to special occasions, sometimes at rituals and sometimes merely at the proper hour or proper season.

With such a group as the North American Indians, then, it is often possible to speak of certain tales as essentially mythological because they deal with origins and with higher powers. But in the study of a particular tale, as it spreads over the continent, it is often impossible to know whether the native teller thinks of it as myth or ordinary story. Mostly the question never occurs to him. For, in spite of the distinction that has just been drawn, it refers to only a very small group of the hero tales, and for most of the rest of the body of folk narrative for primitive peoples everywhere, any differentiation between ordinary tale and myth is very minor.

Whether we use the strict definition of myth suggested or include hero tales and those of animal origins, there is a point at which any confusion between folktale and myth ceases. The European fairy tales, for example "Cinderella" and "Snow White," have few of the usual characteristics of myth. They are filled, of course, with the supernatural, but most narratives going back a long way *are* filled with the supernatural. In Europe, at least, they generally function as pure fiction and are not the subjects of real belief. Yet there is a difficulty in any such assertion, because stories with exactly the same plots are frequently told among tribes where they seem to be implicitly believed in. The attempts to define *Märchen* or fairy tale turn out to be almost as unsatisfactory as those to make a strict definition of myth. The two forms continually flow into each other, and it is likely that the distinction between *Märchen* and other types of folk narrative is largely confined to Western culture. Though some correspondences exist in other continents, it would be a mistake to try to carry over to the rest of the world the definitions made on the basis of European collections.

Since these *genre* are not really valid applied to a world-wide study of folk narrative, it must be recognized that when we use such European terms as myth, etiological story, *Märchen, Sage,* or the like, we are merely using these terms as points of reference and we must understand that they have only vague analogues in various countries of the world. The primitive tale-teller cares little for such distinctions. Even in the European setting, the scholar finds that for most kinds of problems such differentiation is of small importance.

Even if we were able to reach more satisfactory definitions we would only have made ready for other objects of study in the field of myth and the folktale. Nearly all of the writers cited in this paper manifest great interest in origins. Where did myths and folktales come from? How were they invented in the first place? We have earlier suggested some of the answers given to this intriguing question. The greatest difficulty with writers on the subject in the past has been their slowness to recognize that the problem is not simple. We are dealing with some thousands of tales, many hundreds of them certainly mythological. These occur in all parts of the world and in tribes of the most diverse cultures. It must be recognized that each myth and each tale constitutes a problem in itself if one is to know its life history. One can, of course, take high ground, as many of the schools already mentioned have done, and tell us offhand that all myths and all tales have come to us by a particular, favored route. The problem, however, is surely not "where do myths come from?" but rather "where does each individual myth come from?" Every myth has its own history as every folktale has its own history. Even the adherents of some of the monistic schools

already mentioned recognize the vast amount of give and take there has always been in the behavior of myths and folktales. But while they give lip service to dissemination, they seldom give sufficient weight to the facts of cultural borrowing.

It is always easier to borrow a myth or a tale than it is to construct one. The body of narratives of any particlular primitive people is not likely to exceed several hundred, and of these several hundred it is usually possible to find that the great majority are held in common with their neighbors. Now such simple facts as this must be thoroughly worked out and understood before one begins to talk about the origins of a story. From this point of view there is no distinction whatever between the ordinary folktale and the myth. They both disseminate, they both take on accretions and are subject to the vicissitudes of memory and forgetting. Before any search for origins is proper, one should ideally know all the facts of the history of the item which is being studied. Of course not all of the facts can be known, but there is a scholarly obligation to know as many of them as possible. If a scholar is going to work with a folktale, for example, he must have before him all the known versions, even though these may run to a thousand. If he analyses these and takes into consideration all of the historic facts available and studies his geography well, he may be able to see something of the general place of origin and of the vague earliest form of the story he is studying. And he may be able to explain much of the subsequent history of the tale.

Can he go back to the actual origin? I am in great doubt whether he can go further than to trace the full-blooded tale or myth to its earliest known home. If one is a folktale student, one can, of course, speculate as to the way in which various motifs have been brought together to constitute a certain tale. But though I have concerned myself for half a lifetime with the history of narrative motifs, I am very skeptical of any success in working out what we may call the prehistory of a particular tale or myth. Naturally, the fact that I am skeptical about this does not mean that it cannot be done. Perhaps when we know enough about all the various myths and tales and have studied them carefully and objectively through proper analysis, we may be able to come to some general conclusions about particular classes of them. But the ultimate origin of nearly all folktales and myths must remain a mystery, just as the origin of language is a mystery. There is of course nothing mystical about it: it is merely impossible to recapture the needed facts. And in the absence of the facts, I would wish to leave the ultimate origin of any tale or myth with a large question mark rather than with a dubious answer. I prefer the methods of the student now writing a dissertation on one of the best known of all folktales. He has laboriously assembled about a thousand versions from all parts of the world and has studied them analytically. Though he cannot tell us exactly where and when and why this tale was first told, he has as nearly as possible all the facts available, and he will certainly be wary of accepting easy answers.

With such a background he will certainly not take the interpretations of Saintyves seriously. So far as I know, no living folktale specialist today does so, for Saintyves was obviously not concerned with the life history of the tales he discussed. The story which is cited in Raglan's paper exists in not fewer than a thousand known versions, none of which would indicate any connection with the French ritual he is talking about.

A coordinate question to that just discussed is often heard in connection with myths and tales; that is, what do they mean? Frequently this is asked as a general

question, and as such has no meaning to me. But often the matter is put much more specifically, so that we ask, "What does the tale of Cupid and Psyche mean?" I am inclined to agree with Bidney and to say that it means what it says. One important function of tales has been to fulfill pleasantly man's leisure, and there seems to be no evidence from those who have been familiar with storytellers in all parts of the world to make us believe that men everywhere cannot invent persons and scenes and project them upon a background, natural or supernatural, so as to make a story. It seems incredible that the further we go back, the more philosophical the tales should become, that they should contain allegories, or that the characters should represent heavenly bodies or stages of the weather. The psychoanalytical interpretations of various stories and myths seems equally unlikely, but they cannot all be dismissed lightly. Each one has to be studied on its own merits. It happens that those I have seen discussed in the books of various psychoanalysts have been handled quite fantastically. But this should not blind one to the fact that perhaps some of these interpretations have value. On the whole, however, a quest for meanings outside the tale or myth itself is doomed to failure, because we simply do not know the frame of mind of the unknown person in the unknown place and the unknown time and the unknown culture who first contrived the story. The search for the original meaning of any folk story is quite as impossible as the search for the origin of that story. For both quests adequate data are missing. We are left with a choice of making a guess according to our own predilections or of saying that we do not know. It is by all means preferable to say that we do not know.

It has just been suggested that one of the reasons for the invention of tales and myths is the filling in of leisure time. It is not only in modern Western culture that relief from boredom has been sought, though elsewhere this is often masked as something that seems more worthy—religious ceremonial, magic dance, a tale for the edification of youth, a pious commemorative exercise in honor of saint or ancestor. Actually such motives are very much mixed, but the man who can fill pleasantly with story or anecdote the long watches of the night or the tedious days of voyage or caravan must always have been a treasured companion, and the breaking up of the daily routine by ceremonies and saint's day holidays, not to speak of camp meetings and religious revivals in Protestant countries—these activities are far from being exclusively religious. Tales and myths do, of course, have their practical uses aside from mere amusement or pastime. It is this great variety of function that has given rise to so many theories of their origin and meaning. Investigators of one group of people see one aspect of the narrative and its function, and are likely to report such as the exclusive purpose of these human activities. No three blind men ever investigated the essential nature of the elephant with more surprising results than those who have sought the single answer which would unlock the mystery of the origin and nature of tales and myths.

Yet, for some parts of the world and for some special conditions, it is likely that hardly one of the upholders of theories which we have noticed has been altogether wrong. It would doubtless be rewarding for those who reject these single solutions of the origin of myth and tale to reread the works of the proponents of these theories and see whether or not at least a few of the examples they cite may be valid. Part of the elephant after all was actually like a rope. If one is examining the myths and folktales of a group of South American Indians, he will find that he is moving in a

considerably different world from that which he encounters in stories of the Indians of the North Pacific Coast or the natives of Polynesia. There have doubtless been actual sun-myths and star-myths and moon-myths, and I am persuaded by reading in Laistner and in von der Leyen's book on the folktale that some myths and tales may have come from dreams—always, of course, in terms of life as known by the dreamer. Though I find myself extremely resistant to the suggestion, I know that certain of my friends, well acquainted at firsthand with the stories of certain primitive peoples, are persuaded that occasionally psychoanalytical interpretations of some variety do actually apply. And my objection to the ritualistic school is not based upon a disbelief in the possibility of ritual producing myth or to doubt as to its actual occurrence in the Mediterranean area and sometimes in unlettered tribes of Australia and North America. It is to the exclusive claims of all these schools that objection is to be raised.

Finally, it should be pointed out that after a century or more of discussion we seem to know almost as little as ever about the mutual relations of the various types of oral narrative. That sometimes one form does lead into another cannot be denied, but this is likely to be a local manifestation and not something operating as a world-wide evolution. Only purely theoretical considerations would suggest an inevitable order, such as Raglan does in his book on *The Hero:* ritual—drama—ballad—tale. Students of the folk literature of the North American Indians will find such a suggestion fantastic. It happens that my own initiation into folktale studies came from this very quest. In those days, a half-century ago, there was a general feeling that the ballad preceded prose as a form of folk narrative. When I wished to investigate this matter among the North American Indians, a wise professor told me to get hold of a dozen American Indian stories told in poetic form. I searched the literature for weeks and found none, and except for a few extremely simple narrative chants, fifty years of rather close observation has failed to bring any such narrative poems to light. And yet, among these same peoples, not one tribe fails to have a good collection of myths and folktales.

The problems presented by myths and tales will certainly not be finally solved by this generation. We may be sure that a century from now students will still be analyzing and trying to reach some kind of syntheses of their analytical results, and by that time there may be a sufficient corps of scholars to investigate form and style as manifested in folk narrative. By that time we may well have settled the question as to whether there ever was a myth-making age, or whether we shall have to agree that the forces making for myths and tales are still active wherever conditions are right. Other monistic theories will doubtless be advanced and all of us will seem extremely old-fashioned; but it would be interesting to look at all these matters through their eyes and to see how our theories and ideas appear after a hundred years.

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