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神话密钥

Myth

A Very Short Introduction

Robert A. Segal 著
刘象愚 译

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Introduction: Theories of myth

Let me be clear from the outset: this book is an introduction not to myths but to approaches to myth, or theories of myth, and it is limited to modern theories. Theories of myth may be as old as myths themselves. Certainly they go back at least to the Presocratics. But only in the modern era – specifically, only since the second half of the nineteenth century – have those theories purported to be scientific. For only since then have there existed the professional disciplines that have sought to supply truly scientific theories of myth: the social sciences, of which anthropology, psychology, and to a lesser extent sociology have contributed the most. Some social scientific theories of myth may have earlier counterparts, but scientific theorizing is still different from earlier theorizing. Where earlier theorizing was largely speculative and abstract, scientific theorizing is based far more on accumulated information. The differences summed up by the anthropologist John Beattie apply to the other social sciences as well:

> Thus it was the reports of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century missionaries and travellers in Africa, North America, the Pacific and elsewhere that provided the raw material upon which the first anthropological works, written in the second half of the last century, were based. Before then, of course, there had been plenty of conjecturing about human institutions and their origins ... But although their speculations were often brilliant, these thinkers were

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> not empirical scientists; their conclusions were not based on any kind of evidence which could be tested; rather, they were deductively argued from principles which were for the most part implicit in their own cultures. They were really philosophers and historians of Europe, not anthropologists.
>
> (Beattie, *Other Cultures*, pp. 5–6)

Some modern theories of myth hail from the hoary disciplines of philosophy and literature, but they, too, reflect the influence of the social sciences. Even Mircea Eliade, who pits his theory from religious studies against those from the social sciences, enlists data from the social sciences to support his theory!

Each discipline harbours multiple theories of myth. Strictly, theories of myth are theories of some much larger domain, with myth a mere subset. For example, anthropological theories of myth are theories of culture *applied* to the case of myth. Psychological theories of myth are theories of the mind. Sociological theories of myth are theories of society. There are no theories of myth itself, for there is no discipline of myth in itself. Myth is not like literature, which, so it has or had traditionally been claimed, must be studied as *literature* rather than as history, sociology, or something else nonliterary. There is no study of myth as myth.

What unite the study of myth across the disciplines are the questions asked. The three main questions are those of origin, function, and subject matter. By 'origin' is meant why and how myth arises. By 'function' is meant why and how myth persists. The answer to the why of origin and function is usually a need, which myth arises to fulfil and lasts by continuing to fulfil. What the need is, varies from theory to theory. By 'subject matter' is meant the referent of myth. Some theories read myth literally, so that the referent is the straightforward, apparent one, such as gods. Other theories read myth symbolically, and the symbolized referent can be anything.

Theories differ not only in their answers to these questions but also in the questions they ask. Some theories, and perhaps some disciplines, concentrate on the origin of myth; others, on the function; still others, on the subject matter. Only a few theories address all three questions, and some of the theories that address origin or function deal with either 'why' or 'how' but not both.

It is commonly said that theories of the nineteenth century focused on the question of origin and that theories of the twentieth century have focused on the questions of function and subject matter. But this characterization confuses historical origin with recurrent origin. Theories that profess to provide the origin of myth claim to know not where and when myth first arose but why and how myth arises wherever and whenever it does. The issue of recurrent origin has been as popular with twentieth-century theories as with nineteenth-century ones, and interest in function and subject matter was as common to nineteenth-century theories as to twentieth-century ones.

There is one genuine difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories. Nineteenth-century theories tended to see the subject matter of myth as the physical world and to see the function of myth as either a literal explanation or a symbolic description of that world. Myth was typically taken to be the 'primitive' counterpart to science, which was assumed to be wholly modern. Science rendered myth not merely redundant but outright incompatible, so that moderns, who by definition are scientific, had to reject myth. By contrast, twentieth-century theories have tended to see myth as almost anything but an outdated counterpart to science, either in subject matter or in function. Consequently, moderns are not obliged to abandon myth for science.

Besides the questions of origin, function, and subject matter, questions often asked about myth include: is myth universal? is

myth true? The answers to these questions stem from the answers to the first three questions. A theory which contends that myth arises and functions to explain physical processes will likely restrict myth to societies supposedly bereft of science. By contrast, a theory which contends that myth arises and functions to unify society may well deem myth acceptable and perhaps even indispensable to all societies.

A theory which maintains that myth functions to explain physical processes is committed to the falsity of myth if the explanation given proves incompatible with a scientific one. A theory which maintains that myth functions to unify society may circumvent the issue of truth by asserting that society is unified when its members *believe* that the laws they are expected to obey were established long ago by revered ancestors, whether or not those laws really were established back then. This kind of theory sidesteps the question of truth because its answers to the questions of origin and function do.

Definition of myth

I have attended many a conference at which speakers fervently propound on 'the nature of myth' in novel X or play Y or film Z. Yet so much of the argument depends on the definition of myth. Let me make explicit my own proposed one.

To begin with, I propose defining myth as a story. That myth, whatever else it is, is a story may seem self-evident. After all, when asked to name myths, most of us think first of *stories* about Greek and Roman gods and heroes. Yet myth can also be taken more broadly as a belief or credo – for example, the American 'rags to riches myth' and the American 'myth of the frontier'. Horatio Alger wrote scores of popular novels illustrating the rags to riches myth, but the credo itself does not rest on a story. The same is true of the myth of the frontier.

All of the theories considered in this book deem myth a story. True, E. B. Tylor turns the story into a tacit generalization, but the generalization is still conveyed by a story. True, Claude Lévi-Strauss ventures beyond the story to the 'structure' of myth, but again the structure is conveyed by the story. Theories that read myth symbolically rather than literally still take the subject matter, or the meaning, to be the unfolding of a story.

If, then, myth is to be taken here as a story, what is the story about? For folklorists above all, myth is about the creation of the world. In the Bible only the two creation stories (Genesis 1 and 2), the Garden of Eden story (Genesis 3), and the Noah story (Genesis 6–9) would thereby qualify as myths. All the other stories would instead constitute either legends or folk tales. Outside the Bible the Oedipus 'myth', for example, would actually be a legend. I do not propose being so rigid and will instead define myth as simply a story about something significant. The story can take place in the past, as for Eliade and for Bronislaw Malinowski, or in the present or the future.

For theories from, above all, religious studies, the main characters in myth must be gods or near-gods. Here, too, I do not propose being so rigid. If I were, I would have to exclude most of the Hebrew Bible, in which all the stories may *involve* God but, apart from only the first two chapters of Genesis, are at least as much about human beings as about God. I will insist only that the main figures be personalities – divine, human, or even animal. Excluded would be impersonal forces such as Plato's Good. Among theorists, Tylor is the most preoccupied with the personalistic nature of myth, but all the other theorists to be discussed assume it – with the exception of Lévi-Strauss. At the same time the personalities can be either the agents or the objects of actions.

Save for Rudolf Bultmann and Hans Jonas, all of the theorists considered address the function of myth, and Malinowski focuses on it almost exclusively. Theorists differ over what the function of myth is. I do not propose to dictate what the function of myth must somehow

be. I note only that for all the theorists the function is weighty – in contrast to the lighter functions of legend and folk tale. I thereby propose that myth accomplishes something significant for adherents, but I leave open-ended what that accomplishment might be.

In today's parlance, myth is false. Myth is 'mere' myth. For example, in 1997 historian William Rubinstein published *The Myth of Rescue: Why the Democracies Could Not Have Saved More Jews from the Nazis*. The title says it all. The book challenges the common conviction that many Jewish victims of the Nazis could have been saved if only the Allies had committed themselves to rescuing them. Rubinstein is challenging the assumption that the Allies were indifferent to the fate of European Jews and were indifferent because they were anti-Semitic. For him, the term 'myth' captures the sway of the conviction about the failure to rescue more fully than would tamer phrases like 'erroneous belief' and 'popular misconception'. A 'myth' is a conviction false yet tenacious.

By contrast, the phrase 'rags to riches myth' uses the term myth positively yet still conveys the hold of the conviction. A blatantly false conviction might seem to have a stronger hold than a true one, for the conviction remains firm even in the face of its transparent falsity. But a cherished conviction that is true can be clutched as tightly as a false one, especially when supported by persuasive evidence. Ironically, some Americans who continue to espouse the rags to riches credo may no longer refer to it as a 'myth' because the term has *come* to connote falsity. I propose that, to qualify as a myth, a story, which can of course express a conviction, be held tenaciously by adherents. But I leave open-ended whether the story must in fact be true.

The myth of Adonis

In order to drive home the differences among theories, I propose taking a familiar myth – that of Adonis – and showing how it looks from the standpoint of the theories discussed. I choose this myth,

first, because it is extant in such varying versions, thereby showing the malleability of myth. The main sources of the myth are the Greek Apollodorus' *Library* (Book III, chapter 14, paragraphs 3–4) and the Roman Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Book X, lines 298–739).

According to Apollodorus, who himself cites a version of the story from the epic poet Panyasis, Adonis' mother, Smyrna, was irresistibly attracted to her father and became pregnant with his child. When her father discovered that it was Smyrna with whom he was nightly having sex, he immediately drew his sword, she fled, and he pursued her. On the verge of being overtaken, she prayed to the gods to become invisible, and they, taking pity, turned her into a myrrh (smyrna) tree. Ten months later the tree burst open, and Adonis was born.

Even as an infant, Adonis was preternaturally beautiful, and Aphrodite, who apparently had kept watch over him, was irresistibly smitten with him, just as Smyrna had been with her father. To have him all to herself, Aphrodite hid Adonis in a chest. When Persephone, queen of the Underworld (Hades), opened the chest, which Aphrodite had entrusted to her without revealing its contents, she too fell in love with Adonis and refused to return him to Aphrodite. Each goddess wanted Adonis exclusively for herself. The king of the gods, Zeus, was appealed to by both sides, and he ruled that Adonis should spend a third of the year with Persephone, a third with Aphrodite, and a third alone. Adonis readily ceded his third to Aphrodite and was thereby never outside the custody of a goddess. One day, while hunting, he was gored to death by a boar. According to another, unnamed version of the story recounted by Apollodorus, the goring was the work of Ares, god of war, who was angry at having been bested by Adonis as the lover of Aphrodite.

Ovid similarly takes the story of Adonis back to incest between his mother, Myrrha, and her father, here Cinyras. Myrrha was on the

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