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A Very Short Introduction

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北京 BEIJING

京权图字：01 - 2006 - 6847

Myth was originally published in English in 2004. This Bilingual Edition is published by arrangement with Oxford University Press and is for sale in the People's Republic of China only, excluding Hong Kong SAR, Macao SAR and Taiwan Province, and may not be bought for export therefrom. 英文原版于 2004 年出版。该双语版由牛津大学出版社及外语教学与研究出版社合作出版，只限中华人民共和国境内销售，不包括香港、澳门特别行政区及台湾省。不得出口。© Robert A. Segal 2004

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

神话理论 = VSI: Myth / 西格尔(Segal, R. A.)著; 刘象愚译. — 北京: 外语教学与研究出版社, 2008. 10

(斑斓阅读·外研社英汉双语百科书系)

ISBN 978 - 7 - 5600 - 7861 - 8

I. 神… II. ①西… ②刘… III. ①英语—汉语—对照读物 ②神话—理论研究 IV. H319.4: B

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2008) 第 154780 号

出 版 人: 于春迟

项目负责: 姚 虹 周渝毅

责任编辑: 徐 宁

美术编辑: 牛茜茜

版式设计: 袁 璐

出版发行: 外语教学与研究出版社

社 址: 北京市西三环北路 19 号 (100089)

网 址: <http://www.fltrp.com>

印 刷: 中国农业出版社印刷厂

开 本: 787×980 1/32

印 张: 10.25

版 次: 2008 年 11 月第 1 版 2008 年 11 月第 1 次印刷

书 号: ISBN 978 - 7 - 5600 - 7861 - 8

定 价: 18.00 元

* * *

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物料号: 178610001

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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

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.

Myth

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.

Myth

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.

Myth 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

point of hanging herself to be free from her distress when she was saved by her old nurse, who pried loose the source of Myrrha's despair and, as in Apollodorus, arranged for Myrrha to bed her father without discovery. But when, on the third night, he called for light to discover who it was who loved him so, he, as in Apollodorus, drew his sword and she fled. For nine months the pregnant Myrrha wandered. Also as in Apollodorus, the worn-out Myrrha prayed and was turned by the pitying gods into a tree – though here at the end, not the beginning, of her pregnancy. Yet Myrrha remained human enough to weep, and from her tears came the perfume myrrh. The baby, still alive in her, had to fight its way out of the tree to be born.

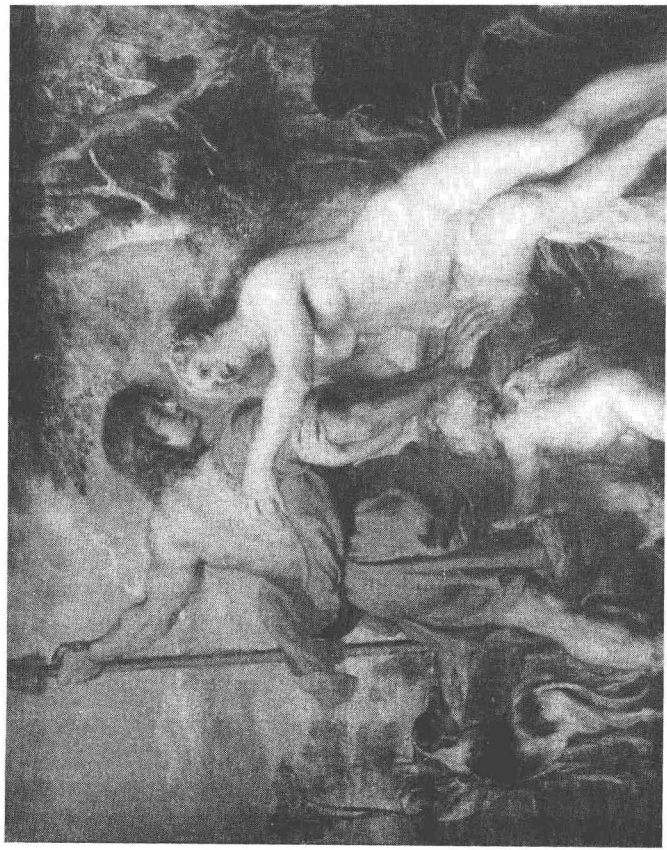
Myth

In Ovid, in contrast to Apollodorus, Venus (the Roman name for Aphrodite) encountered Adonis only as a young man but was likewise immediately smitten. There was no rivalry with other goddesses, so that Venus had him all to herself. They went hunting together. While Venus continually warned him to stick to small game, he heedlessly took on big game and, as in Apollodorus' version, was gored to death by a boar, though not one sent by any rival for Venus' love.

Where Apollodorus' story ends with Adonis' death, Ovid's continues with Venus' mourning for him. As a memorial, she sprinkled nectar over his blood, from which sprouted the flower anemone. Like Adonis, it is short-lived.

Where for Apollodorus the annual cycle of death and rebirth *antedates* Adonis' 'final' death, for Ovid the annual cycle, in the form of the flower, *follows* Adonis' death. The planting of the flower anticipates the ritual associated with the myth of Adonis – a connection absent from Apollodorus.

Where for Apollodorus the main spur to events is anger, for Ovid it is love. Where for Apollodorus Adonis is the innocent victim of warring parents and of rival deities, for Ovid the inconsolable Aphrodite is as much the victim as Adonis.



1. *Venus and Adonis* by Rubens

Where Apollodorus presents the story as true, Ovid presents it as fictional. Where Apollodorus tells it straight, Ovid twists it to fit larger themes – notably, that of transformation, as in Myrrha's becoming a tree and Adonis' becoming a flower. Where Apollodorus intends his story to be taken literally, Ovid intends his to be read metaphorically. Where Apollodorus is serious, Ovid is playful.

I propose using the myth of Adonis not only because it is extant in versions so disparate but also because it has proved so popular with modern theorists of myth. It has been analysed by J. G. Frazer, by the then-Lévi-Straussian Marcel Detienne, and by C. G. Jung and his followers.

Applying theories to myths

Myth

To analyse a myth is to analyse it from the viewpoint of some theory. Theorizing is inescapable. For example, handbooks of classical mythology that matter-of-factly connect Adonis' annual trek to Persephone and return to Aphrodite with the course of vegetation presuppose a view of myth as the primitive counterpart to science. Being sceptical of the universality of any theory is one thing. Being able to sidestep theorizing altogether is another.

Theories need myths as much as myths need theories. If theories illuminate myths, myths confirm theories. True, the sheer applicability of a myth does not itself confirm the theory, the tenets of which must be established in their own right. For example, to show that Jung's theory, when applied, elucidates the myth of Adonis would not itself establish the existence of a collective unconscious, which, on the contrary, would be presupposed. But one, albeit indirect, way of confirming a theory is to show how well it works *when* its tenets are assumed – this on the grounds that the theory must be either false or limited if it turns out not to work.

Chapter 1

Myth and science

In the West the challenge to myth goes back at least to Plato, who rejected Homeric myth on, especially, ethical grounds. It was above all the Stoics who defended myth against this charge by reinterpreting it allegorically. The chief modern challenge to myth has come not from ethics but from science. Here myth is assumed to explain how gods control the physical world rather than, as for Plato, how they behave among themselves. Where Plato bemoans myths for presenting the gods as practitioners of immoral behaviour, modern critics dismiss myth for explaining the world unscientifically.

Myth as true science

One form of the modern challenge to myth has been to the scientific credibility of myth. Did creation really occur in a mere six days, as the first of two creation stories in Genesis (1:1–2:4a) claims? Was there really a worldwide flood? Is the earth truly but six or seven thousand years old? Could the ten plagues on the Egyptians actually have happened? The most unrepentant defence against this challenge has been to claim that the biblical account is correct, for, after all, the Pentateuch was revealed to Moses by God. This position, known as ‘creationism’, assumes varying forms, ranging, for example, from taking the days of creation to mean exactly six days to taking them to mean ‘ages’. Creationism arose in reaction to

Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), which contends that species gradually emerged out of one another rather than being created separately and virtually simultaneously. Surprisingly, creationism has become ever more, not ever less, uncompromisingly literalist in its rendition of the biblical account of creation.

At the same time creationists of all stripes vaunt their views as scientific *as well as* religious, not as religious *rather than* scientific. 'Creationism' is shorthand for 'creation science', which appropriates scientific evidence of any kind both to bolster its own claims and to refute those of secular rivals like evolution. Doubtless 'creation scientists' would object to the term 'myth' to characterize the view they defend, but only because the term has come to connote false belief. If the term is used neutrally for a staunchly held conviction, creationism is a myth that claims to be scientific. For creation scientists, it is evolution that is untenable scientifically. In any clash between the Bible and modern science, modern science must give way to biblical science, not vice versa.

Myth

Myth as modern science

A much tamer defence against the challenge of modern science has been to reconcile myth with that science. Here elements at odds with modern science are either removed or, more cleverly, reinterpreted as in fact modern and scientific. Myth is credible scientifically because it *is* science – modern science. There might not have been a Noah able singlehandedly to gather up all living species and to keep them alive in a wooden boat sturdy enough to withstand the strongest seas that ever arose, but a worldwide flood did occur. What thus remains in myth is true because scientific. This approach is the opposite of that called 'demythologizing', which *separates* myth from science. Demythologizing will be considered in the next chapter.

In their comment on the first plague, the turning of the waters of the Nile into blood (Exodus 7:14–24), the editors of the *Oxford*