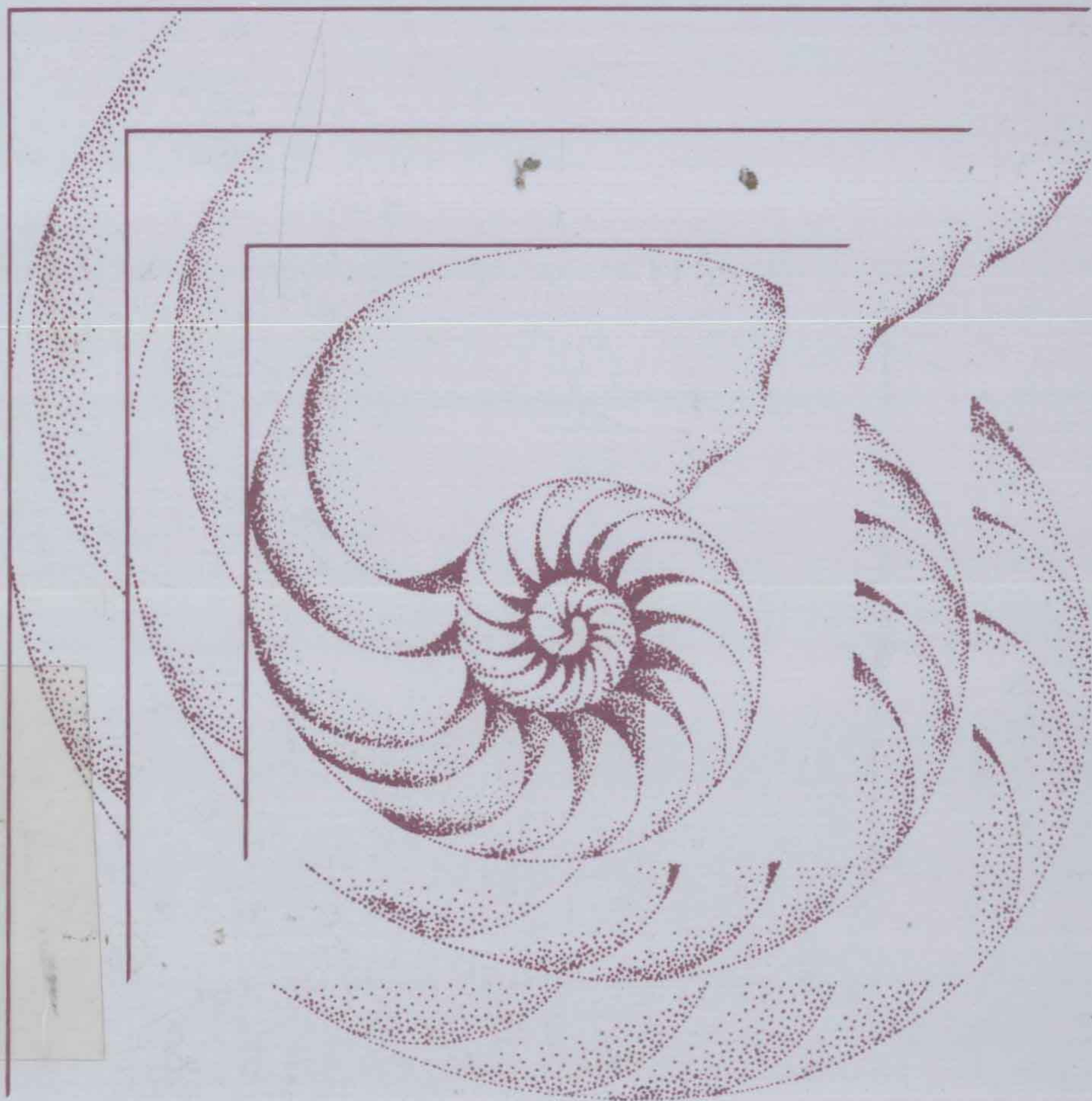


# Northrop Frye

## The Secular Scripture

*A Study of the  
Structure of Romance*





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A Study of the  
Structure of Romance

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## Preface

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THERE IS NOT much to say about this book except that it contains the lectures which I gave as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University in April 1975. This came at the end of an exhilarating and most profitable year in residence at Harvard. To record the personal obligations of my wife and myself to the kindness and hospitality of my Harvard colleagues would swell this preface into a long, and for them embarrassing, catalogue. So I have simply dedicated the book to my students: the fact that there were several hundred of them indicates another aspect of Harvard's friendliness to a visitor.

Those familiar with my other work will find many echoes of it here, from the Schiller reference at the beginning to the Hippolyta one at the end. However, the book has its own place in my writing as a very brief and summary geography lesson in what I call the mythological or imaginative universe. Most of my scholarly interests at present revolve around the thesis that the structure of the Bible provided the outline of such a universe for European literature. The present book is based on that thesis, though concerned with secular literature, and there are many references in it, including its title, to this aspect of its argument.

A book based on public lectures can hardly be organized on a basis of documentation: there are practically no notes, and only two or three examples are given out of many hundreds of possible ones. Many readers will readily think of better examples; but if they are interested in the general idea, they may use this book as a kind of figured bass on which to develop their own progressions. Even if there is ultimately only one mythological universe, every reader sees it differently.


N.F.

Victoria College  
Massey College  
University of Toronto  
July 1975

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# The Word and World of Man







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THIS BOOK is concerned with some principles of storytelling. The discussion revolves around fiction, and especially around what I am going to call naive and sentimental romance, using two critical terms derived from Schiller's essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*. I am not using these words precisely as Schiller uses them—I could not bring myself to call Goethe a naive poet, as he does—but they are not used in quite their ordinary English senses either. By naive romance I mean the kind of story that is found in collections of folk tales and *märchen*, like Grimms' Fairy Tales. By sentimental romance I mean a more extended and literary development of the formulas of naive romance. Most of this, in early and modern times, has been in prose narrative.

Sentimental romance begins, for my purposes, in the late Classical period. There is Greek romance in Heliodorus, Achilles Tatius, Longus, Xenophon of Ephesus, and others. There is Latin romance in Apuleius and (probably) the Apollonius story, used twice by Shakespeare. And there is early Christian romance in the Clementine Recognitions, in the story of Barlaam and Josaphat, and the more legendary lives of the saints. This literature covers a period of many centuries, and none of it except Apuleius'



*Golden Ass* is generally familiar, but I have to refer to it occasionally because it shows the stock themes and images of romance with special clarity, as early works in a genre so often do.

Medieval romance presents different structural problems, which I shall have to touch very lightly. But in sixteenth-century England, with Sidney's *Arcadia* and similar works, the late Classical conventions reappear. When the novel developed, romance continued along with it in the "Gothic" stories of "Monk" Lewis and his Victorian successors. William Morris is to me the most interesting figure in this tradition for many reasons, one of them being his encyclopedic approach to romance, his ambition to collect every major story in literature and retell or translate it. In the twentieth century romance got a new lease of fashion after the mid-fifties, with the success of Tolkien and the rise of what is generally called science fiction.

No genre stands alone, and in dealing with romance I have to allude to every other aspect of literature as well. Still, the conventions of prose romance show little change over the course of centuries, and conservatism of this kind is the mark of a stable genre. In the Greek romances we find stories of mysterious birth, oracular prophecies about the future contortions of the plot, foster parents, adventures which involve capture by pirates, narrow escapes from death, recognition of the true identity of the hero and his eventual marriage with the heroine. We open, let us say, *Guy Mannering*, written fifteen centuries later, and we find that, although there are slight changes in the setting, the kind of story being told, a story of mysterious birth, oracular prophecies, capture by pirates, and the like, is very much the same. In Greek romance the characters are Levantine, the setting is the Mediterranean world, and the normal means of transportation is by shipwreck.



In science fiction the characters may be earthlings, the setting the intergalactic spaces, and what gets wrecked in hostile territory a spaceship, but the tactics of the storyteller generally conform to much the same outlines.

One of the roots from which these chapters grew was an abandoned essay on the *Waverley* novels of Scott. The home I was brought up in possessed a good edition of the *Waverley* novels, and I had, I think, read them all in early life, with utter fascination. Some years later, at college, *Guy Mannering* was on a course and I reread it, but I had entered the age of intolerance by then, and *Guy Mannering* now seemed to me only a clumsy and faked narrative with wooden characters and an abominable style. I read Scott as little as possible through my earlier professional life, but about twenty years ago I was talking to a late friend whose name it is a pleasure to mention here, Richard Blackmur, about the amount of tedium in modern life caused by plane journeys and waiting in airports. He remarked that he had got through a long and exhausting trip himself with the aid of Scott. "I love Scott," he said. I tried the recipe. Richard was right, as he so often was: when one is traveling by jet plane it is deeply reassuring to have a stagecoach style for a traveling companion.

By this time I was ready to become fascinated once more by Scott's formulaic techniques. The same building blocks appeared every time: light and dark heroines, outlawed or secret societies, wild women chanting prophecies, heroes of mysterious and ultimately fortunate birth; but the variety with which they were disposed was what now impressed me. I noticed that much of the criticism of Scott attempted to assimilate him to standards that were not his. It was said that his characterization was what was important and that his plots were of secondary interest: this is nonsense, of course, but was said about him because it is



believed to be true of more fashionable writers. After I began to glimpse something of the uniformity of romance formulas over the centuries, I understood that my interest in Scott belonged in a larger context.

Meanwhile, an early absorption in Blake had expanded in two directions. One direction took me into the Bible by way of Milton: this is to be explored in another book. The other direction was one that connected Blake with two other writers in particular, Spenser and William Morris, both writers of sentimental romance. So Spenser, Scott, and Morris appeared as three major centers of romance in a continuous tradition, and, these once identified, other centers, like the tales of Chaucer and the late comedies of Shakespeare, soon fell into place. This left me with a sense of a double tradition, one biblical and the other romantic, growing out of an interest in Blake which seemed to have contained them both. The title of this book, *The Secular Scripture*, suggests something of its relation to a study of the Bible. The distinction underlying this relation is our first step.

Every human society, we may assume, has some form of verbal culture, in which fictions, or stories, have a prominent place. Some of these stories may seem more important than others: they illustrate what primarily concerns their society. They help to explain certain features in that society's religion, laws, social structure, environment, history, or cosmology. Other stories seem to be less important, and of some at least of these stories we say that they are told to entertain or amuse. This means that they are told to meet the imaginative needs of the community, so far as structures in words can meet those needs. The more important stories are also imaginative, but incidentally so: they are intended to convey something more like special knowledge, something of what in religion is called revela-



tion. Hence they are not thought of as imaginative or even of human origin, for a long time.

The more important group of stories in the middle of a society's verbal culture I shall call myths, using that word in a rather specific way which would not apply without modification outside the present argument. The more peripheral group, regarded by its own society, if not necessarily by us, as less important, I shall connect chiefly with the word folktale, though other words, such as legend, also belong to it. It is difficult to make an adjective out of the word folktale, so I shall speak of my two types of verbal experience as the mythical and the fabulous.

In European literature, down to the last couple of centuries, the myths of the Bible have formed a special category, as a body of stories with a distinctive authority. Poets who attach themselves to this central mythical area, like Dante or Milton, have been thought of as possessing a special kind of seriousness conferred on them by their subject matter. Such poems were recognized, in their own day, to be what we should now call imaginative productions; but their content was assumed to be real, if at one remove, and not only real but about what most deeply concerned their readers.

When we turn to the tales of Chaucer or the comedies of Shakespeare, the primary motive of the author seems to be entertainment, in the sense of the word just used. Here we notice an influence from folktale, so pervasive as to make it clear that folktale is their direct literary ancestor. There are hardly any comedies of Shakespeare, and few tales told on the Canterbury pilgrimage, that do not have some common folktale theme prominently featured in them. In Greek literature, the central mythical area is provided mainly by the Homeric epics and the tragic poets. The comic writers are allowed to be more inventive, and tell



stories that have no connection with the Greek equivalent of revelation, though, as in *The Birds* and *The Frogs*, they often parody it. Again we notice, as we go from New Comedy to the later prose romances, an increasingly close connection with folktale.

Most myths are stories about or concerning the gods, and so the distinction between the mythical and the fabulous overlaps a good deal with the distinction between the sacred and the secular. But it is not identical with it, since many stories may be mythical, in the present sense, without being sacred. The largest and most important group of these are the national stories, which as a rule shade insensibly from the legendary to the historical. "In addition to the Bible," says George MacDonald, "each nation possesses *a* Bible . . . in its history." Thus the legends of the dynasties of Argos and Thebes were mythical for the Greeks in our sense, but were not strictly sacred even in the Greek sense. In Western literature, the overlapping of mythical and sacred is much closer, but even there national history has a particular seriousness. The alternative title of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, "All Is True," perhaps indicates a seriousness of this kind, and one that the audience would not have expected from *The Tempest*, even though *The Tempest* has held the stage so much better.

The difference between the mythical and the fabulous is a difference in authority and social function, not in structure. If we were concerned only with structural features we should hardly be able to distinguish them at all. Most of the stories about the accepted divine beings are myths rather than folktales, but structurally this distinction is more one of content than of actual shape. The parallelism in structure between myth and folktale meets us everywhere in literature: an example is the exposed-infant theme of Greek New Comedy, which is not necessarily "derived"



from myth but is obviously similar to some myths. There are only so many effective ways of telling a story, and myths and folktales share them without dividing them.

But as a distinctive tendency in the social development of literature, myths have two characteristics that folktales, at least in their earlier stages, do not show, or show much less clearly. First, myths stick together to form a mythology, a large interconnected body of narrative that covers all the religious and historical revelation that its society is concerned with, or concerned about. Second, as part of this sticking-together process, myths take root in a specific culture, and it is one of their functions to tell that culture what it is and how it came to be, in their own mythical terms. Thus they transmit a legacy of shared allusion to that culture. Folktales by themselves, at least at first, lead a more nomadic existence. They travel over the world through all the barriers of language: they do not expand into larger structures, but interchange their themes and motifs at random, like the principles of chaos in Milton. But as literature develops, "secular" stories also begin to take root in the culture and contribute to the shared heritage of allusion.

The mythical poet, then, has his material handed him by tradition, whereas the fabulous poet may, up to a point, choose his own plots and characters. Aristophanes produced a distinctive "gimmick" for each of his comedies, and was expected to do so; Sophocles was expected to tell the mythical stories that had been made relevant to the Dionysus cult. Otherwise, the audience could ask, and feel that it had a right to ask, "What has all this to do with Dionysus?" The characters and plots of mythical poets have the resonance of social acceptance about them, and they carry an authority that no writer can command who is merely being what we call "creative." The transmission of tra-



dition is explicit and conscious for the mythical writer and his audience: the fabulous writer may seem to be making up his stories out of his own head, but this never happens in literature, even if the illusion of its happening is a necessary illusion for some writers. His material comes from traditions behind him which may have no recognized or understood social status, and may not be consciously known to the writer or to his public.

The fact that myths stick together to form a mythology is clearly shown in an explicitly Christian story, such as the Barlaam and Josaphat romance, which comes from about the eighth century. This is said to be a Christianized version of the story of the Buddha, though there is hardly enough story for many specific parallels to emerge. Prince Josaphat is kept in seclusion by his father, who hates Christianity: the hermit Barlaam gets through to see him on the pretext that he has a precious jewel to show him. The jewel turns out to be an interminable sermon in which Barlaam sets forth the entire structure of Christian mythology from creation to last judgment, with appendices on the ascetic life, the use of images in ritual, the necessity of baptism, and the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. What makes so long a harangue possible—its plausibility is another matter—is simply the interconnection of the individual myths in the total Christian mythology: every concept or doctrine involves all the others. This was similarly the reason for the proverbial length of Puritan sermons, many centuries later. Such sermons were not necessarily digressive or shapeless, but, as in other forms of oral literature, there were certain mnemonic hooks or couplings leading from one point to the next until everything that God had in his mind for man had been expounded.

According to the Venerable Bede, this was how English literature got started with Caedmon. When the harp was



passed around at a feast and guests were expected to take their turns chanting or improvising poetry, Caedmon had to retire to the stable in humiliation. On one such occasion an angel appeared before him and commanded him to sing. The theme suggested to him was the creation, that is, page one of the Bible. Once started on that, there was no stopping Caedmon until he had sung his way through the entire mythological corpus:

He sang of the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and the whole story of Genesis. He sang of Israel's departure from Egypt, their entry into the land of promise, and many other events of scriptural history. He sang of the Lord's incarnation, passion, resurrection and ascension into heaven, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the teaching of the apostles. He also made many poems on the terrors of the last judgement, the horrible pains of hell, and the joys of the kingdom of heaven. In addition to these, he composed several others on the blessings and judgements of God, by which he sought to turn his hearers from delight in wickedness and to inspire them to love and do good.

Caedmon was thus doing what the medieval miracle plays were later to do, in huge cyclical sequences that took several days to get through.

But while the difference in social function between myth and fable makes for these differences in characteristics, the identity in structure pulls in the opposite direction. Secular literature, even in the oral stage, also builds up an inter-connecting body of stories. Thus *Beowulf*, which is close in its conventions to oral literature, refers parenthetically to other stories about Siegmund, Offa, and Ingeld; and most of the Icelandic Sagas contain allusions or cross-references to other Sagas. Given a slightly different direction