MYTH

K. K. Ruthven

THE CRITICAL IDIOM
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Volume 30

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Myth/ *K. K. Ruthven*

Methuen & Co Ltd

To Simon, Guy and Patrick

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General Editor's Preface

The volumes composing the Critical Idiom deal with a wide variety of key terms in our critical vocabulary. The purpose of the series differs from that served by the standard glossaries of literary terms. Many terms are adequately defined for the needs of students by the brief entries in these glossaries, and such terms do not call for attention in the present series. But there are other terms which cannot be made familiar by means of compact definitions. Students need to grow accustomed to them through simple and straightforward but reasonably full discussions. The purpose of this series is to provide such discussions.

Many critics have borrowed methods and criteria from currently influential bodies of knowledge or belief that have developed without particular reference to literature. In our own century, some of them have drawn on art-history, psychology, or sociology. Others, strong in a comprehensive faith, have looked at literature from a Marxist or a Christian or some other sharply defined point of view. The result has been the importation into literary criticism of terms from the vocabularies of these sciences and creeds. Discussions of such bodies of knowledge and belief in their bearing upon literature and literary criticism form a natural extension of the initial aim of the Critical Idiom.

Because of their diversity of subject-matter, the studies in the series vary considerably in structure. But all the authors have tried to give as full illustrative quotation as possible, to make reference whenever appropriate to more than one literature, and to write in such a way as to guide readers towards the short bibliographies in which they have made suggestions for further reading.

John D. Jump

University of Manchester

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1

Introduction

What is myth? 'I know very well what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked and try to explain, I am baffled.' So wrote St Augustine in his *Confessions* (xi. 14), grappling engagingly with that elusive category called time, and anticipating the predicament of anybody who is pressed for a brief and comprehensive definition of myth. It is the question itself, we come to realize, which is at fault, for we have no direct experience of myth as such, but only of particular myths: and these, we discover, are obscure in origin, protean in form and ambiguous in meaning. Seemingly immune to rational explication, they nevertheless stimulate rational enquiry, which accounts for the diversity of conflicting explanations, none of which is ever comprehensive enough to explain myth away. Myths partake of that quality ascribed to poetry in Wallace Stevens' meticulously evasive aphorism: they appear to resist the intelligence almost successfully. This is why they attract systematizers who reassure us that the mighty maze is not without a plan, because myth is nothing more than primitive science, or history, or the embodiment of unconscious fantasies, or some other solvent currently in favour. Evidence adduced in support of each claim often convinces one that certain myths must have arisen exactly as the systematizer describes: his skeleton-key undoubtedly fits a certain type of lock. But systematizers are not content to contribute one more mythogony to the existent stock, nor to aspire towards that condition of pluralistic tolerance advocated by Melville and Frances Herskovits (1958, p. 121); on the

contrary, they are out to discover a comprehensive mono-mythogony of their own, some universal key to all mythologies. George Eliot caricatured their mentality in the person of Casaubon in *Middlemarch* (1871–2), but it would be wrong to deride their single-mindedness, for each of them is the inventor of one of those possibilities which now constitute our range of choice. Resolutely monistic in their approach (and ever prone to the *pars pro toto* fallacy, the hypostatizing of a method into an absolute, and other text-book errors of logic), they avert their gaze from those very exceptions and anomalies which will command the attention of the next investigator, or the one after that. Yet their initial insights are strokes of genius.

Mythogonies are invented by people who cannot bring themselves to accept Malinowski's view that myths simply mean what they say (1926, p. 79). On the contrary, mythogonists habitually assume that a myth conceals a 'real' meaning beneath its apparent meaning. They are generally innocent of the possibility that any tale may have purposive meanings which do not coincide with the purposeful intentions of the teller; and so they regard the intended meaning as the real meaning which their method (and their method alone) is capable of uncovering. They have equally little time for the simplistic view that myths are intended to elicit wonder. Mythogonists, like Poundian exegetes, are much more at ease when unscrewing the inscrutable. What a myth really means, they tell us, may have been lost accidentally through the hazards of oral transmission; or it may have been hidden deliberately by mythmakers reluctant to tell all they know; or it may have been tampered with by political or religious revisionists who produce what Robert Graves calls 'mythotropic' versions of stories originally quite different in meaning (1961, p. 219). Alert to such possibilities, they probe the hidden depths, hoping (like all deep-sea divers) to avoid the hallucinations consequent upon nitrogen narcosis.

It was Voltaire's opinion that the study of myths is an occupation for blockheads. Anybody who studies the study of myths, as I do here, must accordingly tremble to know precisely what qualifications he should bring to the task. Is one expected to be able to survey the field with magisterial superciliousness and compile a mythographic appendix to the Earl of Dorset's *Faithful Catalogue of Our Most Eminent Ninnies* (1683)? Or is it enough to prove oneself a superlative blockhead in being willing to undertake such a useless investigation? Hopefully neither. Mythology is a subject in its own right, although not recognized as such in our educational system. Nobody ever gets a B.A. in Mythology. Instead, we assume it to lie within the province of a variety of disciplines such as classics, anthropology, folklore, history of religions, linguistics, psychology and art-history. Each looks at mythology in the light of its own preoccupations, which means that an inquisitive outsider who drifts promiscuously from one to another is likely to conclude that the various specialists are not really talking about the same thing at all, but about different things under the same name. Simply to catalogue the nuances of the word 'myth' and its cognates (*mythos*, *mythus*, *mythologem*, etc.) would be a major undertaking; and although White (1972) has made a creditable attempt to produce working definitions of some of these terms for the benefit of literary critics, it is unlikely that others will respect his distinctions, for people engaged in literary studies seem to resent having their terminology refined to several decimal places. I have not made it my business here either to respect the autonomy of mythology (in whatever form it may be thought to exist) or to reconcile with one another the various theories concerning it. I offer instead a partial view of a vast and amorphous topic, and treat mythology as being important primarily on account of its associations with literature. This book is intended for those who are more familiar with English than with any other literature, but who recognize that because

English literature is made by people who read other literatures and absorb ideas from a variety of disciplines, it is sometimes necessary to look far afield in order to understand what goes on at home.

But enough of all this. Let us be guided by J. A. Symonds' somewhat frivolous remark that myths are 'everlastingly elastic' (1890, p. 147) and look now at some of the major theories concerning their nature and provenance. And let us remember that nearly all these approaches have at one time or another seemed so very plausible as to influence the ways in which writers themselves have treated myths in their own poems, plays and novels. Whatever their intrinsic value, therefore, these theories merit attention through having left indelible imprints on our literature.

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