



THE  
RISE OF MODERN  
*MYTHOLOGY*

*1680 - 1860*

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BURTON FELDMAN

AND

ROBERT D. RICHARDSON

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T H E  
RISE OF MODERN  
*MYTHOLOGY*



*For Peggy and for Elizabeth*

WE DO NOT KNOW MUCH ABOUT GODS;

BUT HERE ARE SURELY GODDESSES.

## FOREWORD

ONE IS GRATEFUL TO PROFESSOR BURTON FELDMAN AND PROFESSOR Robert Richardson for reading so many thousands of pages of both illustrious and half-forgotten authors, and for selecting, presenting, and competently annotating the texts of this rich and illuminating anthology. Such a source book on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century myth exegesis and historiography has not existed until now; one may be confident that it will not be equalled for a long period of time.

It was to be expected that the interest in myth and mythical thought, which has expanded spectacularly in recent decades, would incite more adequate investigation into the myth historiography of the past. Understandably, attention has been concentrated on nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors: that is to say, on those authors who, following the example of Max Müller, claimed a "scientific" approach to the study of myth. (Strangely enough, we do not as yet have at our disposal a comprehensive source book of this period.)

But a great surprise awaits the reader of the present anthology. He will discover that many of the rather "modern" post-Müllerian interpretations of myth prolong, although in a different perspective, some of the theses popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It seems as if certain approaches and methodological presuppositions—for instance, the "naturalistic" or "astral," the psychological or historical, and specifically the "diffusionist" interpretations—periodically regain a more or less durable authority or, in some cases, even an unexpected vogue. Authors denouncing myth and mythical thinking as "irrational" abound in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as in modern times (for example, Andrew Lang, Wilhelm Schmidt, Émile Durkheim, Freud, and others). Likewise, the old and venerable opinion that the myths contain noble and elevated ideas or conceal scientifically correct descriptions of cosmic structures and norms is periodically reformulated. Thus, for example, at the beginning of our century E. Siecke and E. Stucken enthusiastically reactualized the central interpretation of the world mythologies. Siecke protested against the "rationalistic" depreciation of myth. Against E. B. Tylor, he emphatically stated that myths do not reflect animistic experiences and conceptions; they have nothing to do with belief in the soul, or with dreams and nightmares. Myths, argued Siecke, must be understood literally, because their contents always refer to specific celestial phenomena.



Stucken went even further. In his three-volume work, *Astralmythen* (Leipzig, 1896–1907), he tried to prove the direct or indirect Mesopotamian origin of all the mythologies of the world. For Stucken, as for the majority of pan-Babylonianists, all myths are concerned with the movements of the sun, the moon, and the planet Venus. Celestial revolutions were regarded by the Mesopotamians as the expression of the power, will, and intelligence of the deities. As early as 3000 B.C. this system had been completely developed in Mesopotamia, from which it was then diffused over the whole earth, being found even today in the myths of the “primitives.” The pan-Babylonianists saw evidence of this diffusion in the astronomical knowledge implied in every mythological system. Such scientific observations, they argued, were certainly impossible for archaic peoples.

Thus, Siecke, Stucken, and the pan-Babylonianists linked the *naturalistic* origin of myths with their *historical* diffusion. Against the supporters of animism and of the theory of “elementary ideas” of Bastian, who explained the similarity of myths by the basic unity of the human mind, the pan-Babylonianists emphasized the highly elevated, “scientific” origin of mythology and its diffusion even among the most primitive tribes. One recognizes in this theory the prolongation of the astral interpretations of myths proposed by such men as Abbé Pluche (*Histoire du Ciel*, Paris, 1739) and Dupuis (*Mémoire sur l'origine des constellations et sur l'explication de la fable par le moyen de l'astronomie*, Paris, 1777–81). But, of course, these eighteenth-century authors were, in their turn, only correcting and improving the Neoplatonic exegesis of late antiquity.

But the interest of the texts collected in the present anthology is not limited to such examples of “continuity and change” in the understanding of mythology and mythical thinking. A close reading of these seventeenth- to nineteenth-century writers is revealing for the history of the Western mind. As has been abundantly illustrated in the present century, the evaluation of myth goes together with a specific understanding of religion and, accordingly, with a specific conception of man. After the collapse of Max Müller’s solar mythology and of his *nomina-numina* theory, that is, of his explanation of myth as a “disease of language,” most of the scholars writing between 1880 and 1920 considered myth as a secondary product, namely, as a verbal explication and justification of ritual. As Jane Harrison stated with regard to the ancient Greeks, *mythos* was primarily “just a thing spoken, uttered by the *mouth*”; its correlative was “the thing done, enacted, the *ergon* or work.” Thirty years earlier, while investigating the origin and growth of Semitic religion, W. Robertson Smith had emphatically declared that “the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth.”

But proclaiming the myth “secondary” was not without consequences for the general evaluation of religion. All these authors tacitly took for granted that



the primary and fundamental element of religion, and hence of human culture, is the *act* done by man, not the *story* of divine activity. Freud accepted these presuppositions, but he decided to push them much further: he identified in the "primeval murder" the primordial unique *act* which established the human condition, and consequently opened the way to religious and mythical creations.

The priority of ritual is no longer unanimously accepted today, and we witness again a stimulating tension between the partisans of "in the beginning was the *word*" and those who hold that "in the beginning" was the *act*. It would be a fascinating inquiry to decipher and investigate corresponding analogous tensions among the authors presented in this anthology. Of course, one can easily distinguish the "rationalists" and agnostics (Voltaire, Bayle, etc.) from the "illuminists," "occultists," and romantics (Pernety, Novalis, Schelling, etc.): the first group disparaging, the second group exalting the myth and mythical thought. But all these writers were nevertheless the heirs of the Greek and Judaeo-Christian understanding of *mythos* as fable or fiction, opposed to both *logos* and *historia*. Accordingly, Swedenborgians, illuminists, and occultists alike tried valiantly to defend the value of myth by elucidating its secret allegories and disclosing its profound symbolic meaning. It was only recently that, thanks to the work of three generations of anthropologists, the Western world has discovered that in archaic and traditional cultures the myth represents a sacred and *true* story, and constitutes the exemplary model for all significant human activities. Thus, only recently has one been able to speak of the *truth* of myth, that is, of its meaning, function, and power, while acknowledging its fictional character on the plane of cosmic or historical realities.

Consequently, it is no wonder that both the "rationalists" and the "illuminists" and romantics paid almost no attention to a number of supposedly well-known historical facts. Indeed, some of the rationalists and skeptics, like Voltaire and Bayle, went very far in their criticism of religion in general and Judaeo-Christianity in particular; but none of them suspected the mythical structure of other, more recent phenomena. Among these were many powerful and highly significant collective movements, popular enthusiasms, and millenaristic and apocalyptic systems, such as the doctrine of Antichrist and the Last Emperor, the eschatological theology of history of Gioacchino di Fiore and his prophecy of the imminent third *regnum*, the Angelic Pope and the *Renovatio mundi*, the Children's Crusade, the mythology of Frederick II, cosmocrator and cosmic Messiah who was supposed to bind the elements of the universe together, or even the esoteric mythology provoked by the rediscovery of the *Corpus hermeticum*, the millenarian implications of Giordano Bruno's heliocentrism, and the mystico-political prophecies of Campanella and Guillaume Postel. How important these messianic and prophetic movements

were for the mediaeval and Renaissance Western world, how powerful their appeal was for all social classes, and how superbly *mythical* their structures were—we now begin to realize after the researches of K. Burdach, E. Kantorowicz, E. Buonaiuti, A. Dupront, and many others; it suffices to recall such books as *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957) by Norman Cohn, *Concordia Mundi* (1957) by W. Bousma, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) by Frances A. Yates, or *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study of Joachimism* (1969) by Marjorie Reeves.

We would like to know how our “rationalist” and “illuminist” or “occultist” authors would have judged the value and meaning of myth if they could have investigated *these* mediaeval and Renaissance mythologies. But, of course, they were trained to consider all such material as being simply popular superstitions, heresies, or, worse, fanatical, and thus spiritually irrelevant, movements. When they analyzed and discussed the “myths,” our authors opened their Homer and Ossian; or they enthusiastically devoured the memoirs of travelers and missionaries, or the newly discovered (and badly translated) Asiatic texts, or the remains of Teutonic mythology.

But, in spite of their limitations, how refreshing and illuminating are their writings! The compilers of the present anthology are to be congratulated for bringing them again to light.

MIRCEA ELIADE

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I  
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## INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS A CRITICAL HISTORY, WITH EXTENSIVE DOCUMENTATION, of the rise and development of interest in myth from the early eighteenth century through the middle of the nineteenth century. What prompts such a volume is our sense that a reassessment of this period's contribution to the study of myth is long overdue—both for its intrinsic worth and for its decisive part in shaping twentieth-century views of myth. We hope to make clear that our own century's fascination with myth is part of a broader movement which spreads and intensifies from post-Renaissance times to our own. And, if only implicitly, we wish to suggest that the remarkable impact of such modern mythologists as Tylor or Frazer, Freud or Jung, Malinowski or Cassirer or others has partly contributed to but also importantly derived from the relative neglect of what has been said and thought about myth in the century and a half after 1700. One of our aims here is to redress this neglect, and to show that contemporary mythologizing is an indivisible part of a tradition—one that has become increasingly obscured. But our main interest is to try to demonstrate that this early modern work on myth is worth studying for its own sake: that from around 1700 to around 1860, theorists, scholars, and artists formulated and elaborated ideas that constitute a watershed in which radically new views of myth emerged and continue to emerge. And these may help to illuminate—from an unusual but nonetheless central viewpoint—some of the much-debated shifts in taste and thought described under such rubrics as the movement from neoclassic to romantic, or some of the problems involving, for example, primitivism, nationalism, or historicism. To remedy neglect, but convinced too that this early modern mythology can still show itself directly persuasive and interesting, we have given over a sizable part of this volume to documents. No comparable collection of texts on myth from this period exists; several of these texts have not appeared before in English, and even in the original languages and editions many of these are available only in very large or specialized libraries. Many of these texts are indeed widely and easily available, but their original concern with and importance for mythology is often overlooked: it is not usually remembered that Hume or Isaac Newton or Marx were also mythologists.

Some of the main reasons for reopening the study of early modern mythology begin with the recognition that the current study of myth seems unfortunately

fragmented. Literary people will be more likely to know about Sir James Frazer, Jesse Weston, and Northrop Frye than to value or be intimately acquainted with Bronislaw Malinowski, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, or Claude Lévi-Strauss. Psychological approaches to myth, such as those of Sigmund Freud or Carl Jung, remain apart from the symbolic-linguistic approaches of Ernst Cassirer or Suzanne Langer. The folklorist, such as Stith Thompson or Richard Dorson, shares material or approaches only in very small part with the historian of religion, such as Mircea Eliade; and a comparative mythologist, such as Joseph Campbell, will not necessarily share the same ground with a theologian, such as Rudolph Bultmann.

Existing histories of the study of myth reflect this fragmentation or specialization. Richard Chase's *The Quest for Myth* operates upon literary assumptions; Jan de Vries's *The Study of Religion* and his *Forschungsgeschichte der Mythologie* consider myth a subject for the historian of religion, as does Pinard de la Boullaye's *L'Étude comparée des Religions*; while Frank Manuel's *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* relates myth to broader eighteenth-century ideas about religion. Two recent symposia, Henry Murray's *Myth and Mythmaking* and Thomas Sebeok's *Myth: a Symposium*, have amply shown the range and diversity of modern approaches to myth, but offer no compelling reasons for preferring some theories to others.

One might conclude from this that myth is not a coherent subject; or that myth is in fact susceptible of several, perhaps many, approaches, even contradictory ones; or that there is a certain amount of confusion in the current study of myth. Since it is clear that myth is important to our century, and has been important for quite some time, we decided to examine the rise of the modern interest in myth, starting as far back as seemed necessary and proceeding on the assumption that no single theory or approach or definition or even attitude would be favored over any other. The period from 1680 to 1860 is, as we hope to show, the crucial one for an understanding of modern thought on myth; and this volume will try to show that almost every major theory about myth has roots and counterparts in that period. Indeed, we will suggest—indirectly, but with a sense of challenge—that almost every major approach to myth now in use was either originated, developed, or strongly foreshadowed during the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century.

The period from 1680 to 1860 is central to the study of modern myth for a variety of reasons. The end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth saw the rise and triumph of a rational spirit of inquiry, produced a flood of travel narratives revealing new customs and manners and myths, and saw the rise of deism and natural religion and the related attack on Christianity via the attack on pagan myth. It also witnessed the rise of the historical spirit and the rise of the comparative method of inquiry. All these factors encouraged and even demanded a complete reinvestigation of pagan

myth, for it appeared to be related to religious truth, prehistory, current savage ideas and practices, and philosophical and artistic expression of contemporaneous ideas. Later, from the middle of the eighteenth century on, myth became increasingly caught up in the movement usually characterized as romanticism. Myth was restudied, radically revalued, and widely applied to practical ends in art, religion, history, and social theory. The revival of interest in the folk, the primitive, the archaic, and the heroic all fed the interest in myth. Then too, myth often became, for the nineteenth-century artist, a great source of new energy and power.

Around 1700, the term *myth* meant mainly the inherited body of myths, principally Greek and Roman; but this was gradually enlarged to include Indic, Nordic, African, and indeed all mythologies, ancient and modern. Secondly, myth was often associated during this period with pagan religious beliefs and was contrasted with Christian religious belief; a most interesting shift took place as the nineteenth century came to respect or approve the nature-based polytheism of the now noble Greeks instead of treating it as "heathen idolatry." Myth also meant—or involved—the study of myth, or mythography. And increasingly during the first half of the nineteenth century, myth came to take on two additional meanings. Myth came to be thought of as a creative process, a mode of the imagination usually expressed via art or literature. Myth also came to have a religious quality. No longer simply derogated as pagan and therefore false, myth came to be seen as the inner vivifying principle in all religion, and that inner life became, happily, accessible to art again for perhaps the first time since the Renaissance. Myth even became a new way of redeeming modern man by seeking to restore him to his original oneness with nature and by reacquainting him with that oneness, with his own best self, or with divinity.

Indeed, one way to characterize this whole period is to say that before about 1700 myth was largely confined to ancient pagan mythologies and was a subordinate or secondary study, rarely studied for itself and not considered important in its own right. It might seem that the opposite has been true of the scholarly study of myth from the mid-nineteenth century to the present: myth has formed part of the modern fields of anthropology, literary criticism, folklore, psychology, and history of religion. And yet in our time myth has less and less been treated as a subject in itself. But from the Enlightenment down through the first half of the nineteenth century, myth was widely and increasingly thought of as a primary subject, even a synoptic one, a master field of the first importance. Myth was taken up because it was thought of as a key, variously, to history, to linguistics and philology, to religion, to art, to the primitive mind, and to the creative imagination. Rather than claiming, as we tend to do now, that one's own field or discipline can illuminate mythology, scholars during the period from 1680 to 1860 tended to think, or to hope,

that mythology would illuminate other fields around it. In various ways, Vico, Herder, Creuzer, K. O. Müller, and F. Max Müller share this point of view.

From 1680 to 1860, mythology grew from a concern with Greek, Roman, and at times, Egyptian myth into a concern with all myth. New mythologies were found in India, in China, in Persia, in Scandinavia, in Germany, in Africa, and in the New World. From bodies of myth, the writers and scholars of the time went on to consider the myth-making mind and to seek for the principles governing myths. As myth came to be considered more and more as a mode of thought or imagination and less and less as merely a body of knowledge about old stories, it was eagerly taken up by romantic writers in England, Germany, France, America, and elsewhere. By the mid-nineteenth century, the triumph of what might be called romantic conceptions of myth was notable in literature, religion, language study, and historical study.

Perhaps its very range, its interdisciplinary spread, as we would call it, led to the fragmentation of myth study by the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Myth had become important to a number of rapidly growing and increasingly narrow fields; but as a serious subject, myth had been unintentionally discredited by such puerile but popular compilations as Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable* and by the many books and essays of the widely esteemed F. Max Müller and his numerous followers. Thus mythology disappeared as the central or synoptic study that it had been with, say, Karl Otfried Müller, and became only a branch of each of half a dozen different academic fields. But within these fields, from the mid-nineteenth century on, myth study has continued at an ever-accelerating pace; and while the developments have not always kept track of each other, the major work is all easily available and need not take up space in this work.

Another reason for concentrating on the period from 1680 to 1860 is, as noted, that all the important modern approaches to myth may fairly seem to have been anticipated in one way or another during that time. The folklore approaches to myth may be seen in the work of the brothers Grimm, and in England, in the books of Thomas Keightley. Linguistic approaches to myth have a longer history, going back to the seventeenth-century etymological researches of Kircher, Bochart, and Fourmont, and coming down through students of language, such as Sir William Jones and Robert Lowth, to scholarly philologists, such as Heyne and F. Max Müller. The existential approach to myth was prefigured in Schelling; the racist use of myth, in Gobineau. Archetype criticism appears to have an early analogue, if not source, in biblical typology, and it can be seen reaching into myth study in our period in the works of Andrew Ramsay and George Faber. Symbolism as an approach to myth can be seen in the works of Herder, Goethe, Moritz, Creuzer, and the latter's followers. The modern myth work of biblical criticism and theology was prefigured and prepared by Lowth, by Eichhorn, and by D. F. Strauss. An interest in



myth as an aid to historical study, and even as history itself, can be traced in Vico, in Fréret, in Gibbon, in Karl Otfried Müller, in Michelet, and in Quinet. Early monomythographers or monomythologists include such Christian apologists as Fourmont and Faber, as well as such non-Christian synthesizers as Charles Dupuis and F. Max Müller. Psychological theories of myth may be seen in Fontenelle, Trenchard, Hume, and in many of the German romantics. Anthropological approaches were anticipated by Lafitau, De Brosses, and R. P. Knight.

The recent study of myth, then, is perhaps less novel than it sometimes appears. And it is one object of this work to show that a wider acquaintance with earlier thought on myth will substantially illuminate our own modern concern with the subject.

The importance of, yet difficulty of access to, this material has in large part dictated our approach in this volume. Originally, a critical anthology had been projected: representative readings, with minimum notes. But the nature of our subject forced us to recast this plan, and to expand the critical and historical material radically. For one thing, the interest in myth in the period considered here spreads over every and any area, scholarly, religious, philosophical, anthropological, artistic. It was as enthusiastically taken up in England or Germany or France or America; it had many famous and also many quite obscure devotees; it often exhibited the less familiar side of famous minds (Isaac Newton or Gibbon, for example), or showed otherwise marginal figures participating genuinely in a mainstream of thought. This ferment and diversity of interest in myth is stimulated by, moves through, and cuts across almost every climate and movement of thought in the hundred and fifty or so years here considered. Although deep affinities or cores of agreement exist, the fluidity, flexibility, and eclecticism frustrate any effort to extract very neat positions or programs. This period's interest in myth offers almost a surfeit of riches. Thus, the texts given seemed to demand a substantial amount of preparatory historical comment and continuity; and yet the natural evolution of the subject had to be sustained. Our solution has been to give as much background and interpretation as seemed useful, whether biographical, historical, or philosophical, but placed as closely as possible to the actual texts.

Such an organization has the advantage of imposing and intruding our own biases or shortsightedness on any figure as little as possible. On the other hand, of course, to proceed from figure to figure means that a continuous narrative thread of history and description cannot be maintained. The advantages of the former seemed to us to far outweigh the disadvantages of the latter. One more disadvantage: the figures we take up are obviously likely to have been those who mainly wrote, theorized, or created, rather than those who explored or did important practical work: thus, our study scants archaeologists, field anthropologists, or philologists. But we must plead that this is a study of

attitudes, interest in and thought about myth in this period. In another way, this volume might have been called a study of the rise of modern mythography, that is, the historiography of mythology. But the term mythography is not sufficiently inclusive. It does not, for example, cover the *uses* of myth, such as the interest a poet takes in myth when he tries to turn ancient or received myths to new poetic account or when he seeks to grasp the inner principles or crucial experiences of myth itself, and so create new myth. Nor is mythography usually thought to include the interest in myth shown by theology, philology, anthropology, history, and classics. If myth and mythology are somewhat looser terms, they are also more inclusive; and one of the key aspects of interest taken in myth by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is the comprehensiveness and many-sidedness of myth.

T. S. Eliot once said that his study of Indian religion had brought him only to a state of enlightened ignorance. We may claim as much here. Our efforts to find in contemporary mythology a confident angle of departure or vision from which to synthesize our findings about myth soon foundered. The various and alluring mythologic persuasions of our own time—psychological, anthropological, literary, structuralist, history of religions, each sometimes derogatory of myth, sometimes nothing less than chthonic—are likely to send the unwary researcher back only to some eighteenth- or nineteenth-century version or root of a current position. We hoped to avoid this, and also to avoid here that too familiar phenomenon of contemporary interest in myth, that passionate and even learned bias toward some facet or other of myth as the true key or royal road. Certainly, as much was often true of the *philosophes* or romantics with their various certainties and enthusiasms. But even though alert to the dangers of such bias, our enlightened perplexity was only compounded since, as we moved back a century or so, we found all the same positions seemingly reappearing, if in different guise and with different data. The problem confronting the student of myth in the face of the richness and confusion of our time turns out to be the same problem found during the Enlightenment and romantic period. All the possible positions seem already there, only some dominant, some subdued: Blackwell was at the same time a “scientific” historian, a promoter of a sociologic view of myth, and a dedicated Orphist; that urbane *philosophe*, Fontenelle, very early saw most of the possible questions mythic interpretation might pose, including some arch-romantic ones, though he would not stay for an answer; Herder had much of the deist in his ardencies about the *Volk*, and even Marx occasionally sounded like Schelling or Friedrich Schlegel. If there is a conclusion to be reached here, it might be a quite tentative yet difficult one: that modern mythology—recent and earlier—is in urgent need of radical philosophic and historical examination of its own tradition, accomplishments, and presuppositions.

Inevitably, there have been omissions here, some deliberate, some unnoticed