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PSYCHOLOGY AND MYTH

Edited with introductions by
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THEORIES OF MYTH

*From Ancient Israel and Greece
to Freud, Jung, Campbell,
and Lévi-Strauss*

Series Editor

ROBERT A. SEGAL

University of Lancaster

A GARLAND SERIES

SERIES CONTENTS

1. PSYCHOLOGY AND MYTH

2. ANTHROPOLOGY, FOLKLORE, AND MYTH

3. PHILOSOPHY, RELIGIOUS STUDIES, AND MYTH

4. LITERARY CRITICISM AND MYTH

5. RITUAL AND MYTH

Robertson Smith, Frazer, Hooke, and Harrison

6. STRUCTURALISM IN MYTH

Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Dumézil, and Propp

SERIES INTRODUCTION

The modern study of myth is already more than a hundred years old and is the work of many disciplines. This six-volume collection of 113 essays brings together both classic and contemporary analyses of myth from the disciplines that have contributed most to its study: psychology, anthropology, folklore, philosophy, religious studies, and literature. Because myth has been analyzed for so long by specialists in so many fields, knowledge of the range of sources and access to them are difficult to secure. The present collection provides a comprehensive and systematic selection of the most important writings on myth.

All of the essays in this collection are theoretical. All are concerned with myth *per se*, not with a single myth or set of myths. Many of the essays make explicit claims about myth generally. Others use individual myths to make or to test those claims. Most of the essayists are proponents of the theories they employ. Some are critics.

By no means has each of the disciplines considered here developed a single, unified theory of myth. Multiple, competing theories have arisen within disciplines as well as across them. The leading theories from each discipline are represented in the collection.

Theories of myth are never theories of myth alone. Myth always falls under a larger rubric such as the mind, culture, knowledge, religion, ritual, symbolism, and narrative. The rubric reflects the discipline from which the theory is derived. For example, psychological theories see myth as an expression of the mind. Anthropological theories view myth as an instance of culture. Literary theories regard myth as a variety of narrative. Within a discipline, theories differ about the nature of myth because they differ about the nature of the rubric involved. At the same time, theorists qualify as theorists of myth only when they single out myth for the application of the larger rubric. Writings that completely subsume myth under its larger rubric—discussing only religion or symbolism, for example—fail to qualify as writings on myth.

Theories of myth purport to answer one or more of the fundamental questions about myth: what is its origin, what is its function, what is its subject matter? Theories differ, first, in the answers they give to these questions. For most theorists, myth originates and functions to satisfy a need, but that need can be for anything—for example, for food, information, hope, or God. The need can be on the part of individuals or on the part of the community. Similarly, the subject matter, or referent, of myth can be anything. It can be the literal, apparent subject matter—for example, gods or the physical world—or a symbolic one—for example, human beings or society.

Theories differ even more basically in the questions they seek to answer. Few theories claim to answer all three of the major questions about myth. Some theories focus on the origin of myth, others on the function, still others on the subject matter. The answer a theory gives to one question doubtless shapes the answer it gives to another, but most theories concentrate on only one or two of the questions. Writings that merely describe or categorize myths fail to qualify as theories, as do writings that are skeptical of any universal claims about myths.

Still more basically, theories differ in the definition of myth. By some definitions myth can be a sheer belief or conviction—for example, the American “myth” of the frontier or of the self-made man. By other definitions myth must be a story. By some definitions the agents in a story can be humans or even animals. By others the agents must be either gods or extraordinary humans such as heroes. Theories employ definitions that reflect the disciplines from which they come. For example, theories from literature assume myth to be a story. Theories from religious studies assume the agents in myth to be gods or other superhuman figures.

Theorizing about myth is as old as the Presocratics. But only since the development of the social sciences in the last half of the nineteenth century has the theorizing become scientific. Some social scientific theories may find counterparts in earlier ones (see Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson’s introduction to *The Rise of Modern Mythology* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972]), but social scientific theorizing still differs in kind from earlier theorizing. Where earlier theorizing was largely speculative and philosophical in nature, social scientific theorizing is far more empirical. The anthropologist John Beattie best sums up the differences, which apply to all of the social sciences and to the study of more than myth:

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; to say nothing of earlier times, in the eighteenth century Hume, Adam Smith and Ferguson in Britain, and Montesquieu, Condorcet and others on the Continent, had written about primitive institutions. 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 for the most part implicit in their own cultures. They were really philosophers and historians of Europe, not anthropologists. (*Other Cultures* [New York: Free Press, 1964], 5-6)

By no means do all of the theories represented in this collection come from the social sciences. But even theories from philosophy, religious studies, and literature reflect strongly the impact of these fields.

The first four volumes in this collection are organized by disciplines. The selections in each volume typify the nature of the theorizing in the discipline. By far the most influential psychological theories of myth have been Freudian and Jungian. Anthropological theories have proved both more numerous and more disparate, with no one theory dominating the field. Folklorists have been particularly concerned with distinguishing myth from other verbal genres. Many theories of myth from philosophy and especially from religious studies grow out of attempts to decipher the classics and the Bible. Literary critics have understandably been preoccupied with both the similarities and the differences between myth and literature.

The final two volumes of the collection are grouped by theories rather than by disciplines. While the number of essays written on any major theory would readily fill a volume, the number written on the myth-ritualist theory and more recently on structuralism has been so large as to necessitate individual volumes about them. The burgeoning of writing on these theories stems in part from the array of disciplines that have adopted the theories. The myth-ritualist theory originated in the fields of classics and biblical studies but soon spread to the study of myth everywhere and, even more, to the study of secular literature. As a theory of myth, structuralism began in anthropology but has since been incorporated by many other fields.

Space does not permit inclusion in this collection of any essays that survey the field of theories of myth. Some useful surveys in

English are the following:

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INTRODUCTION

By far the most influential psychological theories of myth have been those of Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung. Both Freud and Jung see myth as the manifestation of the unconscious. They differ over the nature of the unconscious, which for Freud contains socially unacceptable drives that have been made unconscious, but which for Jung contains undeveloped, by no means antisocial sides of the personality that are innately unconscious. As a consequence, Freud and Jung also differ over the function of myth. For Freud, myth serves to release unconscious drives in disguised, indirect form. For Jung, myth serves to enable one to discover unknown sides of oneself. Myth for both serves primarily the individual and only secondarily society.

Freudian and Jungian theories are among the few that seek to answer all three of the main questions about myth: its origin, its function, and its subject matter. Both theories seek to account for the means by which myth arises and lasts. They do not just name the need served. Furthermore, both theories provide rich glossaries for translating the apparent subject matter—be it gods, heroes, or the world—into the yearnings and dimensions of the unconscious.

This volume contains Freud's and Jung's own analyses of myth, extensions and revisions of their theories by followers, the application of the theories by anthropologists and folklorists, criticisms of the theories, and surveys of the psychological study of myth.

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EGO PSYCHOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF MYTHOLOGY¹

JACOB A. ARLOW, M.D.

Descending like a meteor from the heavens, then wafted gently earthward on the streams of the terrestrial atmosphere, in a boat especially fashioned to protect him from the terrors of the sun-filled darkness of outer space, the first cosmonaut of history emerged from his capsule. In less than twenty-four hours, at a speed incomparably greater than any ever ascribed to the winged Hermes, messenger of the Gods, there raced around the world the echoes of an ancient story. This hero, the son of a Soviet carpenter, the report said, was actually descended from distinguished nobility. Within the day, the mythopoetic function of mankind had already embraced the first hero of the space age.

Joseph Campbell (11) writes:

Man apparently cannot maintain himself in the universe without belief in some arrangement of the general inheritance of myth. In fact, the fullness of his life would even seem to stand in direct ratio to the depth and range not of his rational thought, but of his local mythology. Whence the force of these insubstantial themes, by which they are empowered to galvanize populations, creating of them civilizations, each with a beauty and self-compelling destiny of its own? And why should it be that whenever men have looked for something solid on which to found their lives, they have chosen not the facts in which the world abounds, but the myths of an immemorial imagination—preferring even to make life a hell for themselves and their neighbors, in the name of some violent God, rather than to accept gracefully the bounty the world affords?

From Freud on, psychoanalysts have studied the compelling, unknown, and oftentimes irrational forces of the human mind. In neurosis, art, character, and religion, in the sum of the individu-

¹ Presidential Address, presented before the American Psychoanalytic Association, Chicago, May 7, 1961.

al's and of the community's mental creations, psychoanalysis has traced the derivatives of the compelling infantile psychic conflicts, conflicts which involve man's instinctual life, rooted in his essential, biological nature, and transformed by his childhood experiences. In the stellar cosmogonies of ancient mythology, for example, psychoanalysis sees writ large, in the heavens, projections of grandiose elaborations of the instinctual conflicts of childhood.

Psychoanalytic study of myths holds great promise for the social scientist. Róheim (60, 61), for example, has shown how the analysis of mythology can be used to understand the dominant, current, psychological conflicts in members of a particular culture. Bonaparte (9), in her *Myths of War*, studied rather typical, mental creations of the group during periods of great catastrophe. Through these "spontaneously generated" myths one could discern the reactivation of latent unconscious wishes, together with defensive maneuvers instituted to keep anxiety in check. These are but two examples. The list could be extended at length.

One would imagine therefore that sixty years after the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud's first foray into the study of mythology, social scientists would have a clear understanding of what psychoanalysis can contribute to the study of mythology. This is hardly the case. In the name of a later-day scientism many students of folklore and mythology have rejected out of hand the contribution which psychoanalysis has to make to their field. They have disowned it in a manner as Philistine as characterized the repudiation by the early critics of Freud's monumental *Interpretation of Dreams*.

The principal criticism, to quote Dorson (15), is directed against the arbitrary use of "symbolism of the unconscious." With this method, he says,

. . . everything falls neatly into place, and dreams, myths and fairy tales tell one common story, a genital-anal saga. . . . Just as the celestial mythologists wrangled over the primacy of sun, stars and storms, so now do the psychoanalytical mythologists dispute over the symbols of the unconscious. . . . The language of the unconscious is as conjectural and as inconclusive as Sanscrit, when applied to myths and tales.

The interpretations differ widely from each other; which is right? The psychoanalysts, like the philologists, come to the materials of folklore from the outside, anxious to exploit them from their own a priori assumptions.

This critique written less than two years ago contains arguments which might have carried considerable weight in the past, before the development of ego psychology. Psychoanalytic interpretations of myths do not necessarily approach the materials of folklore from the outside, nor is it inevitably true that no validation of symbolic interpretations is possible. What we encounter in this critique is another manifestation of "cultural lag." Dorson's estimate of psychoanalytic methodology is based primarily on materials studied from the topographic point of view and from a type of interpretation practiced before the impact of ego psychology made itself felt on the technique of psychoanalysis. Of course, not all anthropologists or students of mythology share this view of psychoanalytic methodology; nor are they all victims of this cultural lag. We can hardly expect workers in allied fields, however, to keep abreast of the subtler implications of newer psychoanalytic concepts when a similar lag often exists in our own ranks. Even among the better informed mythologists a number of misconceptions have developed and persist. They believe that psychoanalysts assume that myths and dreams are indistinguishable. While they recognize the closeness of mythology to literature, they do not appreciate the difference which psychoanalytic ego psychology introduces in the evaluation of the function of dreams, myths, and literary creations.

One purpose of this communication is to demonstrate how our knowledge of ego psychology may enable us to establish a frame of reference within which psychoanalytic study of mythology may be based on methods which can be validated. A brief historical retrospect may serve to put the problem into focus. Rank's first contribution to the study of mythology, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (52), and Abraham's "Dreams and Myths" (1) appeared only nine years after *The Interpretation of Dreams* and only four years after the *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*. This was at a time when psychoanalysis was still a very new science. The scientific world rejected its basic concepts and ridi-

culed its findings. Rereading Rank's book one appreciates how his efforts were directed toward securing, from the study of myths, evidence which would validate the correctness of what psychoanalysis had learned about the Unconscious, especially infantile sexual wishes. His method was to use the manifest content of myths to prove what psychoanalysis had discovered about the latent content of dreams and symptoms. The difficulties in his method (and the methods of those who followed him in this field) began when he carried the argument one step further. Rank reversed the process of study. He used the "mechanisms of the unconscious," especially symbolism, to find new or latent meanings in the manifest content of the myth. Having thus reinterpreted the myth, he used these data once again to validate the correctness of the psychoanalytic concept of unconscious infantile sexual wishes. It was the simultaneous pursuit of two independent scientific goals which laid works of this kind open to the criticism of being arbitrary and proceeding from a priori assumptions.

It must be admitted, however, that the theory of technique as based on the topographic hypothesis facilitated the use of arbitrarily stated interpretations and of ready access to explanations based on symbolism (33). Some of these ideas were discussed recently in a contribution to the problem of silence in the therapeutic situation (6). Technique based on the topographic theory was directed toward the goal of making what was unconscious conscious. The dream was the royal road to the unconscious, and symbolism was the easiest avenue to the interpretation of dreams. The notion that it was necessary to modify the ego's defenses, to alter its automatic operations, came much later (44). Interpretations based on symbolism emphasized the importance of content over the role played by resistance (39, 45). When the patient was in a state of positive transference, the theory went, he accepted the therapist's interpretation of the dream, and this translation of the unconscious material, accompanied by a sense of conviction, had its therapeutic effect.

Freud, Abraham, and the other pioneers had commented on the similarity between dreams and myths. Myths could be interpreted like dreams, and in the absence of associations, psychoanalytic knowledge of symbolism could be used to elucidate the