

# Purposes and Definitions

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## THE STUDY OF MYTHOLOGY

### Why Study Myths?

The study of myths—mythology—has a long, rich, and highly contested history of debate about exactly what myths *are*, what they *do*, and why they are worthy of systematic study. Because of the complexity of such considerations about myths, any short answer to the question “Why study myths?” will be, at best, only a starting place. Yet this very complexity is one of the reasons why such study can be so exciting. The study of myth is a field of inquiry that ranges from the earliest known history of humanity up to and including contemporary cultures and societies and even our own individual senses of self in the world.

Every part of this introduction (and every part of this book) should serve more as a direction for further investigation than as a fully satisfactory explanation of settled facts. In our view, (1) the intertwined nature of the uses of myths in diverse cultures; (2) the myriad ways in which myths can be seen to embody cultural attitudes, values, and behaviors; and (3) the rich rewards awaiting questioners willing to approach myths from numerous points of view are all open-ended fields of inquiry. We see this book as an invitation to enter into these fields, whether briefly or as a life-long interest. The study of myth entails discovering a way of making meaning that has been part of every human society.

### What Are Myths?

Myths are ancient narratives that attempt to answer the enduring and fundamental human questions: How did the universe and the world come to be? How did we come to be here? Who are we? What are our proper, necessary, or inescapable roles as we relate to one another and to the world at large? What should our values be? How should we behave? How should we *not* behave? What are the consequences of behaving and not behaving in such ways?

Of course, any short definition, however carefully wrought, must oversimplify in order to be clear and short, so accept this definition as a starting point only. If this

definition holds up under more extensive examination of myths across the world and in our own backyards, then what a promise with which to start a book, what an answer to the opening question, “Why study myths?”

Engaging thoughtfully with the myths in this book and with research projects that go far beyond what space constraints allow us to present in this book will deepen and complicate the elements of our starting definition. For example, myths are *ancient* narratives. But they are not static artifacts. They are not potsherds and weathered bone fragments. In many cases, they are living texts with which living people continue to write or narrate or perform their unique answers to basic human questions. This never-ending quality to myth is one reason we have included in this book not only ancient or “primary” versions of myths but also more contemporary tales, such as “Out of the Blue” by Paula Gunn Allen (see pages 68–75), which take up ancient myths and refashion their constituent elements in order to update answers to perennial questions and participate in ongoing cultural self-definitions.

Modern Native Americans, for example, who take up myths from their varied heritages and retell them do so in a context that includes the whole history of their people, from their ancient roots and primordial self-definitions to their contacts with European-American culture and modern self-definitions that search for meaning in a world forever changed by that contact. Today’s Irish poets, for another example, who use Celtic myths as source material and inspiration and who write in Irish, a language which came perilously close to extinction, are engaged in cultural reclamation on a number of levels, and Irish myths, ancient and modern, are an important part of that effort. Looking at examples of ancient and more contemporary uses of myths introduces their varied cultural values and behaviors to us, and, at the same time, such study helps us develop intellectual tools with which to look at and question our own ancient and contemporary mythic self-understandings. In this sense, studying myths introduces other cultures to us and, at the same time, provides us with different lenses through which to view our own.

## WHAT IS MYTH HISTORICALLY?

### *Mythos and Logos*

The English word “myth” derives from the Greek word *mythos* and has been distinguished from the Greek word *logos*, both terms having been translated into English as *word* or *story*. In early uses of the term—for example, in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (approximately 700 BCE)—*mythos* seems to have meant divinely inspired, poetic utterance, whereas *logos* was more often associated with crafty “legalese” as well as everyday, transactional discourse. The lines that open Hesiod’s *Theogony* illustrate the original distinction made between the two terms.

The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing  
 beautiful songs as he tended his flocks  
 on Mt. Helicon.  
 And so what follows here  
 are the very first words [*muthon*]  
 these goddesses said to me:

“Country shepherd, a disgrace to your name,  
 thinking only of your next meal:  
 We know how to say [*legein*] many things  
 that aren’t true yet seem to be,  
 and whenever we want, we know how  
 to tell the truth.”

Sincere or not, this is what Great Zeus’ daughters said  
 and they gave me a staff,  
 snapping one verdant branch from a laurel tree  
 —it was amazing—and they breathed into me  
 the breath of divine song so that I could tell  
 of what will happen in the future  
 and what took place in the past;  
 and they told me to praise the immortal race  
 of the blessed gods,  
 yet always to sing of them first and last.

As you can see, Hesiod’s use of the word *mythos* in this passage is meant to legitimate both the Muses’ words and his own. For the ancient shepherd-poet, *mythos* is breathed from the divine and, whether a *mythos* is, literally speaking, a fiction or a truth, its origin is divine, its meaning sacred. Hesiod uses a form of the word *logos* when he quotes the muses as declaring “we know how to say [*legein*] many things that aren’t true yet seem to be.”

## The Devaluation of *Mythos* in Ancient Times

**Xenophanes and Heraclitus** Like all words, the semantic meanings of *mythos* and *logos* were not forever fixed. By the time of Xenophanes and Heraclitus (middle and late 500s BCE, respectively), Hesiod and Homer were under attack for attributing to the gods “all/The shameful things that are blameworthy among humans:/Stealing, committing adultery, and deceiving each other” (Xenophanes, Fragment B11, in Lincoln 1999). Heraclitus sneered at the gullibility of the common folk (*hoi polloi*) for believing in, among other things, the divine inspiration of poets. Heraclitus appears never to have used the word *mythos*. Rather he focuses on the term *logos*, which, according to Lincoln, “is more likely to be a discourse of written prose than one of oral poetry, and more likely to be one of argumentation than of narrative” (27). In general, the pre-Socratic philosophers appear to have said little about *mythos* and, by comparison, a great deal about *logos*—a kind of discourse which could be true or false, a means of arguing propositions, tricking someone, or accurately describing reality. The sixth-century-BCE critique of Homer and Hesiod suggests, however, that the term *mythos* was, for some, beginning to mean something like “fanciful tale.”

**Plato’s Rational Myth** Plato (427–347 BCE) permanently complicated the definition of *mythos* by treating the ancient use of the term as synonymous with falsehood; ironically, his own use of the word, when applied to philosophical speculation about origins and the nature of reality, reaffirmed the ancient meaning as a form of truth.

Thus Plato created a new myth to “clarify” the traditional meaning of *mythos*; this reconfiguration of terms to “restore” the vitality of myth’s claim to truth-telling has been borrowed repeatedly by mythologists ever since. Doniger amusingly summarizes the great philosopher’s use of the term:

Plato used the word [*mythos*] in both senses, to mean “lie” and “truth” . . . [he] “deconstructed” the myths of Homer and Hesiod, contrasting the fabricated myth with the true history. But since people have to have myths, Plato was willing to construct new ones for them, and so he invented the drama of the philosophical soul and made it a reasonable, logical myth to challenge the old myths of centaurs and so forth. He transformed ancient mythic themes to make the myth of Eros and the myth of the creation of the universe, and he actually applied the word myth (which he called *mythos*, since he spoke ancient Greek) to the story of the world that he created in the *Phaedo* and to the myth of Er that he created at the end of the *Republic*. The myths that Plato didn’t like (that were created by other people, nurses and poets) were lies, and the myths that he liked (that he created himself) were truths. And this ambivalence in the definition of myth endures to the present day. (1998, 2–3)

Plato’s argument, that myths about gods, heroes, and centaurs contain irrational and therefore false elements and that philosophical myths about origins were rational and therefore true, was crucial to his political and philosophical vision. Leveling a charge that has been made occasionally against art down to our own time, he argued that poets manipulate their audiences and present them with cheap imitations of reality which have the effect of making their hearers lazy consumers of stories and images rather than active seekers of the truth. In Plato’s ideal political state, poets—if not banished altogether—would be subject to philosopher-kings who would have the power to censor the irrational and morally suspect elements of their *mythoi* (*mythoi* = more than one *mythos*). As Lincoln puts it,

The space that [Plato] assigned to [the poets] is that which lies between the state and its lowliest subjects, where they craft *mythoi*, at the direction of philosopher-kings, for mothers and nurses to pass on to their charges. . . . What others had taken to be primordial revelations or undeniable truths now were treated as state propaganda, best suited for children and those incapable of adopting the discourse and practice of the ruling elite, within an emergent regime of truth that called (and calls) itself “philosophy.” (1999, 42)

**Euhemerism and Euhemerism** Another early doubter of myth’s truth-value was Euhemerism of Messene (330–260 BCE). Like many others since, Euhemerism assumed that his ancestors were primitives who lacked the scientific method, philosophical principles, and cognitive sophistication of the “modern” world in which he lived. He believed that the ancients, who were dominated by superstition and fancy, exaggerated the facts of actual historical events and created imaginative explanations of historical events because they did not have access to better forms of knowledge. Euhemerism claimed to have taken a journey across the Indian Ocean to the land of Panchia. There, he read an inscription which stated that Kronos and Zeus were at one time living kings on earth. Euhemerism reasoned that the beneficence of these kings was so great during their lifetimes that their legends lived on in the popular imagination. Eventually, their deeds were romanticized and sentimentalized to the

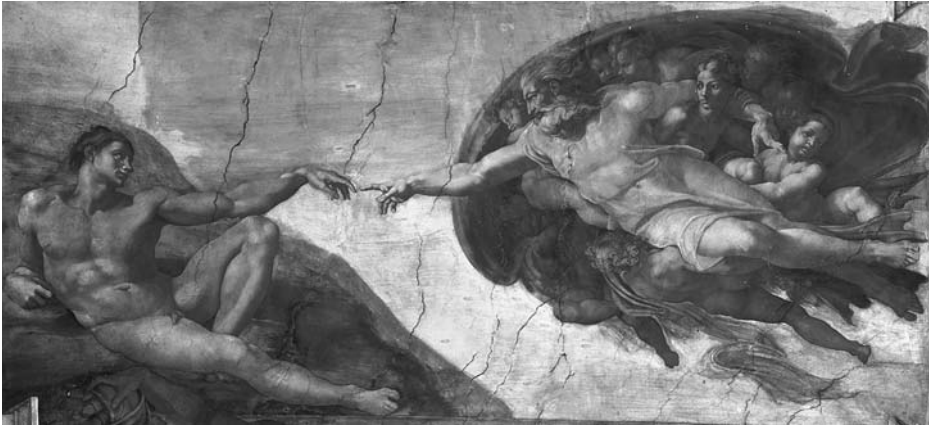
point that they became honored as gods—as were others after them. In short, Euhemerus believed that myths were not true per se but that they contained the kernels of historical truth. Today, *euhemerists* are those who interpret myths as primitive explanations of the natural world or as time-distorted accounts of long-past historical events. As Doty (2000) points out in *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Ritual*, the “rationalistic anthropology of Euhemerus was not paid much heed by his Greek contemporaries . . . [but] the euhemeristic attitude was revitalized and developed by Roman writers. Later it became an important apologetic tool in the hands of Christian writers who used euhemeristic analysis to demonstrate the secondary nature of the Greek pantheon” (10).

### Myth of the Golden Age

Hesiod, in his *Works and Days*, tells a devolutionary tale of origins that most scholars have come to call the myth of the Golden Age. Hesiod writes of the gods on Olympus creating mortal men numerous times (current humanity is actually the fifth race of mortal men in this scheme). Each race of mortals is associated with a metal, and each is a significant comedown from the previous race (with one exception). Thus the first creation is a golden race that lived perfect, harmonious, and peaceful lives. The second, markedly inferior but still highly honored, is silver. The third, dedicated solely to might and violence, is bronze. The fourth, the one exception to the devolutionary pattern, which Hesiod calls a “better and more just” race, is not labeled by a metallic association. Finally, associated with iron, the fifth mortal race, which Hesiod laments to be part of, is a “blend of good and bad” and will suffer “growing cares” imposed by the gods (1983, 110–201).

In this myth, Hesiod articulates a common motif in which nostalgia for a “golden” past—when mortals, living in harmony with the world and with each other, did not know suffering or care—is combined with criticism of the present age—when children are hostile and ungrateful and adults are violent and morally bankrupt. This hearkening back to a time when things were still warm from the divine touch has been both a conscious and subconscious motive guiding mythologists since the time, at least, of Plato. Impelled by quests for the original human language, myth’s deep structure, or myth’s universal meanings, mythologists have hoped to gain a glimpse of the world as it was when the cosmic clay had not yet hardened and actions and words still had power to create physical law and shape human society. As Plato knew, myth is extraordinarily powerful; how it is defined and who gets to do the defining have far-reaching implications for what counts as knowledge and therefore far-reaching cultural and political consequences. Thus there is a great deal more at stake in the study of mythology than the exciting tales of heroes and their fantastic adventures.

The rest of this chapter will show that the meaning of myth has always been in contention. For two and a half millennia, debates over the importance and meaning of myth have been struggles over matters of truth, religious belief, politics, social custom, cultural identity, and history. The history of mythology is a tale told by idiots—but also by sages, religious fundamentalists and agnostic theologians, idealists and cynics, racists and fascists, philosophers and scholars. Myth has been



Michelangelo's "The Creation of Adam" from the vault of the Sistine Chapel. The images, scenes, and characters of myth frequently become the raw materials from which painters and sculptors, poets and prophets draw inspiration. Often these secondary elaborations, which include folktales, legends, movies, novels, and short stories, are more familiar to a people than the sacred stories which inspired them.

Source: © Scala/Art Resource, NY.

understood as containing the secrets of God, as the cultural DNA responsible for a people's identity, as a means of reorganizing all human knowledge, and as a justification for European and American efforts to colonize and police the world. Our telling of the story of mythology will, we hope, make clear that there is a great deal at stake in study of myths.

## THE RISE OF MYTHOLOGY

### Myth and Mythology

Until the Renaissance, the Platonic and euhemeristic notions that myths other than their own were, at best, degraded forms of philosophical truth were little questioned among the educated. This understanding of mythic truth-value did not, however, dampen popular interest in them. Even among those who, like Plato, saw nothing sacred in the old myths, enough intellectual reward was found in them to encourage consideration of and debate about *myth* and *mythology*. To be clear, we will combine our definition of *myth* with Hesiod's of a divinely inspired utterance of a literary (poetic) truth and distinguish it from *mythology*, which we define as the scholarly study of myths.

### Early Christian Mythology

The early church had an important role in transmitting Plato's "demythologized" definition of *mythos* down to our own day. As we have already suggested, the early church fathers used a form of euhemerism to contrast the "false" gods of the Greek

and Roman pantheons with Jesus. Doniger tells us, for example, that Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian developed the “Thesis of Demonic Imitation,” which held that the demons, perceiving that Jesus would soon come, “suggested to the poets who created [Greek] myths that they give Zeus many sons and attribute monstrous adventures to them, in the hope that this would make the story of Christ appear to be a fable of the same sort, when it came” (1998, 69–70). In this doctrine, the gods of non-Christian myths are demonic deceptions and the story of Jesus’ life was not myth at all but unquestionably fact.

In addition, the term *logos*, at least in the New Testament, had come to mean something like “transcendent truth.” Thus the Gospel of John opens with the famous claim: “In the beginning was the Word [*logos*] and the Word [*logos*] was with God and the Word [*logos*] was God; and the Word [*logos*] became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1). Here, *logos* has the divine associations of Homer’s and Hesiod’s *mythos*, but there is no suggestion of an inspired poet singing his truth. Instead, the *logos* exists, like one of Plato’s Ideal Forms, unchangeable and timeless, outside the corruption and flux that characterize the material cosmos and human history. *Logos* and *mythos* had switched connotative places. *Logos* now transcended the corrupting limits known to human users of language, and *mythos* was mired in associations of make-believe or, even worse, outright falsehoods designed to damn souls to Hell. This negative Platonic/Christian definition of myth prevailed for the next 1,500 years. Only when Classical Greek and Roman texts became more widely available during the Renaissance did the old myths enjoy a rebirth in literature and the arts, paving the way for a later reevaluation of the stories themselves.

## MYTHOLOGY DURING THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Toward the end of the Renaissance, a rage for roots swept Europe, as attested by books and essays that speculated on the primordial “Ur-language” from which all others developed after the calamity at Babel. But there was more at stake than simply establishing which language had been spoken in the Garden of Eden. European scholars hoped also to name the “Ur-people” and the true location of Eden (the Ur-place), thus bringing the prestige and presumed political power of being God’s “firstborn” to their respective nations. Olender’s *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century* provides a detailed and readable history of this early search for linguistic origins. In it we learn that patriotic scholars from many nations—often using ingenious if specious linguistic comparisons—each “discovered,” not surprisingly, that the original language spoken in the Garden was their own.

These early, chauvinistic researches into the world’s original culture and language were precursors of the 18th-century’s Volkish school, named after Johann Gottfried Herder’s theory that the rural German *Volk* (i.e., folk, nation, or ethnicity) still retained much of the vitality of their nation’s original character. While these early attempts to identify the source-language and the first people might strike us today as naive nationalism, they are important because they are provocative examples of mythological thinking having extensive political consequences. Herder’s Volkish



theories were influential in numerous settings, including the national romanticisms of the 19th century and the racist ideologies of 20th-century fascism. Noting the connection between Herder's mythology and its uses by the Nazis in the mid-20th century is not to argue Herder's Volk theories caused the Nazis' Aryan monstrosities. In other places, the notion of a "folk spirit" has led to very different behaviors and political institutions. Nevertheless, the Nazis' use of such theories does highlight our contention that mythology is not merely about quaint stories. In thinking about myths, a central question should always be "What are the potential political ramifications of this or that way of thinking about myths and their uses?"

### **Giovanni Battista Vico and *The New Science***

As late-Renaissance fascination with roots, scientific method, and classical texts grew into the obsession for rational order that characterized the Enlightenment, a number of thinkers began to examine what ancient myths might tell them about the very beginnings of human history. Early mythologists sifted through myth, hoping to peel away the layers of irrationality and error.

Stunningly original, *The New Science*, first published in 1725, exemplifies the key elements of mythology during the Enlightenment and thereafter. The writer of this work, Giovanni Battista Vico, claimed to have discovered the scientific principles that finally could make sense of the confused histories, geographies, and linguistics of his time. The result of his lifelong effort was an "ideal eternal history" (Vico 1968, 12) which organized the ancient accounts in Egyptian, Greek, and Roman classical literature and presented them in a rational order. Among Vico's research methods were careful attention to "hieroglyphs"—pictographic symbols such as those found in coats of arms, carvings, and military emblems—and to etymology, the study of word origins. Vico used these tools to theorize that languages and cultures experience recursive evolutionary cycles. He reasoned that human society began after the flood in a primitive state without language, moved through a heroic phase when language was identical with poetry, and culminated in our current stage in which language serves a wide variety of prosaic, transactional purposes. Eventually, Vico speculated, an upheaval will occur starting the cyclical, progressive process all over again. Thus Vico sought to rescue myth from the clutches of irrationality by reorganizing its chronology and meanings into a logical system—a system, as it happened, that used history, linguistics, iconography, and a great deal of ingenuity to align Egyptian, Greek, and Roman myths with the key beliefs of his Christian culture.

### **Sir William Jones's Science of Language**

Though Vico's work did not enjoy wide circulation, his suggestion that languages evolve over time was reiterated much more visibly and explicitly in the late 18th-century work of Englishman Sir William Jones. Jones was a prodigy who, even in his twenties, was an international authority in five languages and possessed a respectable grasp of several others. Jones took a post in India, where he noticed remarkable similarities among the Arabic and European languages in which he was



fluent and Sanskrit, the priestly language of India. Jones began to compare the roots of many key words among these languages methodically. Rather than attempting to fit his observations into the predetermined conclusion that English or another European language was the language of Paradise, Jones let the evidence take him in a different direction, suggesting instead that these similarities could be explained by the existence of “a common source [language],” which, he suggested, “perhaps, no longer exists” (Jones 1807/1984, 3:34–35).

Following Jones’s suggestion, linguists methodically demonstrated that nearly all the languages of India, Southwest Asia, and Europe derive from a single ancestor language which is today known as proto-Indo-European, a language existing only in linguistic theory. This scientific approach to language study gave direction, method, and legitimacy to the search for the original *Volk* from whom all European culture and achievement emanated. As linguistic research advanced, interest in myths intensified as well. As Lincoln shows us, a translation of the Norse Eddas by Paul Henri Mallet, the counterfeit translation of the blind Gaelic bard Ossian by James Macpherson, the linguistic and mystical speculations of Johann Georg Hamann, and the books of Herder all attest to the fact that, by the middle of the 18th century, myth was widely assumed to be “a crucial resource for collective identity” and that “myths convey historic, cultural, and practical knowledge while also guarding a *Volk*’s distinctive values—and errors—against forgetfulness and change” (1999, 53).

### Herder’s Organicist *Volk* Mythology

Herder’s work was particularly influential. Tapping into growing feelings of nationalism all over Europe, enthusiasm for the new comparative science of language, and an emergent romanticism valuing irrational forces of the mind, Herder theorized an original, divinely sanctioned unity of humanity. From this unity, Herder claimed, humans devolved into the various linguistically, geographically, and culturally separate *Volk* that we see today. While Herder saw these differences as resulting from a fall from the original divine plan, he also affirmed the importance of modern cultural distinctions. Like Vico, who theorized that language influenced human physiognomy, Herder also suggested that a people’s environment shaped not only their myths, culture, and language but also their bodies and characters. His theory of an organic relationship between *Volk* and landscape had great emotional resonance not only in Germany but throughout Europe, and with very different long-range effects. For example, if, as we noted earlier, Herder’s Volkish theories were seized upon to justify Nazi fantasies, in Denmark Herder’s theories fueled a romantic folklore movement in which the idea of a “pure folk spirit” contributed to Danish resistance to Nazi racism.

Herder’s romanticism, like that of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England, was founded in part on a nostalgic view of rural life in which close connection to the soil and other natural elements produced simple, honest *Volk* whose language was believed to possess a spontaneous vitality and transparency of meaning not found among city dwellers. Indeed, myths were important to Herder and those influenced by him in part because it was believed that they embodied the

Volkish purity and simple power from which the “civilized” nations had been receding for centuries. Or, as Lincoln puts it, “if the environment impresses itself directly on the bodies of a *Volk*, it impresses itself on their customs and mores through the medium of myths, which *Völker* use to reflect on their surroundings and history and to transmit ancestral traditions from one generation to another” (1999, 53).

## Rise of Comparative Mythology

Herder’s suggestion that physical environment has a direct influence on a people’s collective disposition and body type and, indirectly, on their sociocultural values gave impetus to three closely related mythological schools. The first group of theorists, who came to be called practitioners of comparative mythology, sought, using methods borrowed from linguistics, to identify myth types and trace them back to their presumed original versions. The second group, known as the “Nature School,” used comparative methods to identify *the* environmental cause of a given people’s myths. Thus, for example, the Solar Hypothesis proposed that all myths could be referred back to the ancients’ fascination with the sun’s waxing and waning throughout the year. Others found that such meteorological conditions as thunderstorms or wind formed the basis of all myth. The third group of theorists were particularly interested in Herder’s suggestion that the various *Völker* had specific and defining qualities. This group came to be known as “ethnologists.” It is a sobering and often neglected fact that mythology, in its most literal sense as the study of myths, was until World War II closely and openly identified with the “science” of race. Each of these lines of inquiry had an important influence, though often a negative one, on 20th-century mythology, and thus they merit a closer look here.

Arguably, in the 19th century the study of myths was primarily a matter of sorting out the races according to similarities and dissimilarities in their languages and sacred narratives. Herder’s ideas about the organic links among *Volk*, soil, and myth were not, especially by the standards of the time, particularly racist, but a virulent and racialized strain of nationalism in Germany—as well as European colonization worldwide—fueled a widespread interest in theories accounting for racial differences. We can perhaps most quickly grasp the racial dimension of early mythology by taking a “core sample” of 19th-century German thought on the “Aryan hypothesis” about race, language, and culture. Extrapolating from Jones’s theory of Asian origins for the world’s largest linguistic group, a variety of German intellectuals posited the existence of a strong, technologically superior race that conquered the prehistoric world from India to Iceland, thus leaving their indelible mark on the languages, myths, and gene pool of this vast territory. This race, which they called the Aryans, provided 19th-century German nationalists with an ancient, heroic “golden age” of their own upon which to base their theories of German nationhood. If, they reasoned, Germans were actually descendants of the Aryans, then they weren’t the Barbarians so vilified by the Roman Tacitus or the vassals of French-speaking Prussia, but the inheritors of an ancient patrimony of conquest, superior strength, and mighty deeds. It was, many felt, the German branch of the Aryan family’s turn—even their destiny—to take a preeminent role on the world stage.

In the midst of—and to some degree creating—this fierce search for German national identity were a number of important figures. In linguistics and mythology, there were Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm whose *German Grammar* exhaustively demonstrated the relationship between their native tongue and the other Aryan languages. The Grimm brothers' famous "Fairy Tales" were one result of another line of inquiry: the search for narratives that would demonstrate that which was distinctive in the German character.

In music, there was Richard Wagner, whose famous Ring Cycle was a highly imaginative operatic synthesis of various Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and other Germanic myths about the dragon-slaying hero Siegfried. It is in Wagner that we see an almost religious devotion to the values of the Aryan *Volk*. The composer asked for and received royal patronage to build Bayreuth, which he described as a modern "temple" wherein the *Volk* could celebrate this exemplary hero's Germanic spirit. The dark side of Wagner's interest in Siegfried is revealed in his theoretical writings. In them, we find his racist thesis that Jews are physically and irretrievably "other" than the descendants of the Aryan race. For example, in "Artwork of the Future" and "Judaism and Music" Wagner goes to some lengths to argue that, because they had no homeland, Jews were incapable of producing any original art or music.

In philosophy, Ludwig Feuerbach, Ludwig Schemann, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and, early in his career, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche provide some of the clearest examples of this racist thinking among the educated elite. Nietzsche wrote with great emotional force about the importance of German art, poetry, myth, ancient religions, and native soil:

We think so highly of the pure and vigorous core of the German character that we dare to expect of it above all others the elimination of the forcibly implanted foreign elements, and consider it possible that the German spirit will return to itself. Some may suppose that this spirit must begin its fight with the elimination of everything Romanic. If so . . . let him never believe that he could fight similar fights without the gods of his house, or his mythical home, without "bringing back" all German things! (*Birth of Tragedy* 23.138–39)

Nietzsche also coined the term "blond beast," which describes the noble (Aryan) warriors of the past as

not much better than uncaged beasts of prey. There they savor a freedom from all social constraints . . . [and] go back to the innocent conscience of the beast of prey, as triumphant monsters who perhaps emerge from a disgusting procession of murder, arson, rape, and torture, exhilarated and undisturbed of soul . . . One cannot fail to see at the bottom of all these noble races the beast of prey, the splendid blond beast prowling about avidly in search of spoil and victory. (*On the Genealogy of Morals* 11.40–41)

Despite the complexity of Nietzsche's work and scholars' continuing debates about the degree to which his personal biases and ethnocentrism affected that work, this tale of the "noble races" and their "innocent" exercise of bloodthirsty and animalistic power—itsself a prime example of mythologists reconfiguring ancient myths to create powerful modern myths—proved a sinister inspiration for German fascists in the 20th century.

As reprehensible as we now find anti-Semitism, in particular, and racism, in general, it was nevertheless a fact that respected artists, intellectuals, and academics wrote extensively about the fundamental differences in spirit and kind between Jews (and other non-Aryans) and the “Nordic tribes” descended from the great Aryan race of warriors. Even today, when such overt racism or ethnocentrism is no longer the norm, we may notice that a lingering academic bias in favor of Greek, Roman, and Nordic myth continues to influence mythology texts and course reading lists. More subtly, and to varying degrees, the writings of such eminent 20th-century figures as Sir James Frazer, Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell carry forward the 19th-century bias against the “primitive” races who still believed in their myths. That such understandings were not merely the accepted thoughts of the times is made evident by the fact that another major thinker on these same issues, Claude Lévi-Strauss, explicitly appreciated non-Western societies and systems of thought. Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind* is, for one example, an effective and powerful argument against the dismissive attitudes too common in the works of the writers mentioned above.

Even though the Aryan hypothesis was a central concern of comparative mythology in the 19th century, there were other, less insidious lines of inquiry as well. One of Nietzsche’s early influences, Adalbert Kuhn, for example, was Germany’s most enthusiastic proponent of the Nature School of comparative mythology. Kuhn took Herder’s earlier ideas about the integral connection between a *Volk*’s values, history, culture, and practical knowledge and their natural surroundings seriously. From this starting point, Kuhn borrowed the principles and discoveries of comparative linguists to posit an Aryan Ur-myth from which numerous cross-cultural variants emanated.

Kuhn determined that the structural features of this “original” myth were a division between earth and sky and a protagonist who mediated between these two realms by stealing something from the gods and bestowing it upon humanity. Sometimes, as in the case of Prometheus, the stolen gift was fire; sometimes it was the elixir of immortality. In all cases, Kuhn saw these variants as allegories of natural phenomena—particularly the rainstorm that bestows fire in the form of lightning and the life-giving elixir of rain which makes all life possible. Many others in Germany, France, Denmark, Switzerland, and England employed Kuhn’s methods to uncover the basic plot of the Ur-myth, often reaching significantly different conclusions. Some preferred to see the Ur-myth as an allegory of the phases of the moon, others argued for the sun, still others found that prevailing winds or other meteorological conditions formed the archplot.

In England, Friedrich Max Müller was the Joseph Campbell of his time—a man of immense learning, tremendous charisma at the lectern, and a single idea about myth that he vigorously promoted long after others had found it intellectually suspect to do so. Müller argued that myth was “a disease of language” through which poetic descriptions of such meteorological features as the sunrise and the thunderstorm became distorted into the bewildering array of deities, rituals, and superstitions one finds in the world’s myths. Müller’s concept of mythic language echoes the devolutionary elements of the Golden Age myth. In his view, the pristine language of Paradise fell from an original unity between truth and language into the confu-

sion of multiple and competing versions of the truth. Müller's ideas also resonate with Euhemerus in that both believed that the ancients lacked the scientific and religious sophistication of their own enlightened day and, as a result, twisted reality into the irrational pretzel-logic of myth.

## The Decline of Comparative Mythology

By the middle of the 19th century, mythology was dominated by a single methodology. Whether focusing on the Aryan homeland, the relationships between environment, *Volk*, and myth, or the Ur-myth from which all myths arose, each specialist employed the comparative method. Comparative mythology, as practiced by the mid-19th century, was a matter of locking oneself in a library and reading. Comparative mythology could be cross-cultural, with the scholar comparing a story's Indian, Arabic, German, and Celtic versions; it could also specialize in the stories of a single *Volk*. Mythology relied on insights from linguistics, archaeology, and art history, but the myths themselves were regarded as static cultural artifacts from the primitive past.

Beneath the apparent methodological unity of 19th-century mythology, however, a fundamental contradiction had begun to make itself felt. On one hand, a profound longing for a simpler, more organically unified Golden Age manifested itself in the reevaluation of myths and search for the Ur-*Volk*. On the other hand, an equally profound euhemerism worked in the opposite direction, manifesting itself in a nearly universal view that myths and mythmakers traded in the irrational and crudely primitive. Part of the growing rift among mythologists amounted to a debate over answers to what Segal, in his *Theorizing About Myth*, calls the "three major questions [that] can be asked of myth: what is its subject matter, what is its origin, and what is its function?" (1999, 67). Primarily, the comparatists were interested in origins and content, and they were not particularly interested in how myth functioned; or, rather, they saw explanation of natural phenomena as its sole function. Toward the end of the 19th century, as Segal demonstrates, early anthropology's view of myth emphasized function above all else. Interest in this functional approach to mythology led to the breakup of the largely bookish and tendentious study of literary myth. What emerged were various approaches toward myth driven by disciplinary concerns within anthropology, psychology, literary criticism, and the history of religions.

## MYTHOLOGY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

### Early Anthropology

**The Golden Bough** The first of these disciplines, anthropology, came to view myth as primarily a living, oral, culture-preserving phenomenon. Led by such pioneers as Edward B. Tylor, Andrew Lang, Franz Boas, Sir James George Frazer, and Emile Durkheim, emphasis switched from textual comparisons and blood-and-soil

interpretive theories to discovering the ways in which myths *function* in living societies. Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* is the best-known and remains the most widely read example of the early versions of this anthropological work. *The Golden Bough*, which grew to 12 volumes, depicts the widely dispersed stories of dying and resurrecting gods as literary transformations of primitive, magical-religious rituals in which "sacred kings" were slaughtered in hopes of ensuring agricultural fertility. Frazer approached myth and culture from an evolutionary perspective, assuming, not unlike Vico, a progression from the "mute signs" of primitive magic (e.g., rituals believed to create desired effects) to the largely allegorical use of ritual in primitive religion (e.g., the substitutionary death of a "scapegoat") to the abstract symbolism of civilized religion (e.g., the doctrine of transubstantiation).

Frazer also assumed that myth was "primitive science," which attributed to the will of deities, people, or animals that which modern science attributes to the impersonal functioning of various physical laws and biological processes. While Frazer shared the new anthropological science's interests in myth's function in living cultures, he nevertheless did not completely break with comparative mythology's armchair approach.

**The "Myth-and-Ritual" School** Frazer's quasi-anthropological work had wide influence and inspired, at least in part, the also quasi-anthropological "myth-and-ritual" school. This relatively short-lived branch of mythological research was intensely functionalist in its approach, caring little for the origins of myth and looking at content only as a means of demonstrating the contention that myth is a script from which early religious rituals were performed. As Fontenrose puts it in the preface to *The Ritual Theory of Myth*: "Some . . . are finding myth everywhere, especially those who follow the banner of the 'myth-ritual' school—or perhaps I should say banners of the schools, since ritualists do not form a single school or follow a single doctrine. But most of them are agreed that all myths are derived from rituals and that they were in origin the spoken part of ritual performance" (1971, n.p.).

## Modern Anthropology

Another of Frazer's admirers was Bronislaw Malinowski, whose fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands contributed much to the evolving methods of modern anthropology. In a 1925 lecture given in Frazer's honor, Malinowski lavishly praised the elder writer and then proceeded to outline what has been taken, until recently, as field anthropology's gospel:

Studied alive, myth . . . is not symbolic, but a direct expression of its subject-matter; it is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, moral cravings, social submissions, assertion, even practical requirements. Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom. (1926/1971, 79)



Malinowski's outline of anthropology's view of myth contains several crucial remarks. First, the anthropologist states emphatically that myth is not an "explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest." This view contrasts sharply with the euhemerism of Frazer, Tylor, and the comparatists, who believed to one degree or another that myths are little more than primitive or mistaken science. Second, Malinowski saw myth as profoundly "true" in the sense that it had a visible role as "pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom." He also saw myth as real in the sense that it could be observed by the field researcher in the form of oral performance, rituals, and ceremonies, and that it visibly influenced a living people's sociopolitical behavior. As his later fieldwork makes clear, Malinowski's views are considerably broader than those of the myth-ritualists, who would have limited myth's functionality to religious ritual only.

But we can also see from Malinowski's remarks that he did not entirely part ways with his mentor. Even though the younger man claimed to have also disputed the older's evolutionary theory of culture, it is significant that he nevertheless discusses myth's role in the "primitive faith" and in the "primitive psychology" of his research subjects. It can be argued that Malinowski and his contemporaries were not explicitly dismissive of "primitive" societies, that they were even respectful of the "face-to-face" nature of such societies when compared with more institutional and "impersonal" developed ones. Yet the effects of ethnocentric assumptions make it extremely difficult to avoid such hierarchical valuations, even if there is some question about the motives or intentions of the researchers.

Nevertheless, folkloric and anthropological methodologies profoundly influenced 20th-century mythology. For example, anthropological and folklorist approaches to myth emphasize field research and have thus underscored the importance of the real-world conditions in which myths perform their functions. As a result, those working in other disciplines have come to respect myth's functions as cultural charter and socializing agent. In addition, anthropology's correlation of myths to the material, social, political, and economic facts of living cultures helps those interested in the myths of extinct cultures to understand some of the obscure references and actions in the stories they study. Moreover, the insistence of anthropologists and folklorists on examining the function of myths in *living* societies demonstrates how ignorant the 19th century's armchair mythologists had been of what so-called primitives actually *do* understand about the physical world and the degree to which they are and are not naive about the truth-value of these narratives. In short, anthropology and folklore have encouraged all mythologists to relate their theories about myth to the lived experience of human beings.

## The Rise of Psychology

About the time that Frazer and the early anthropologists were beginning to turn the focus of mythology away from questions of racial identity and to replace the comparative method of the Nature School with theories of social functionalism, psychiatric pioneers Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung had begun to investigate the relationship between myth and the unconscious. Freud and Jung believed that mythic symbols—both as they are encountered in religion and as they manifest themselves



in dreams and works of the imagination—emerge from the deepest wells of the psyche. Although their conclusions about the landscape of the human mind differed, both men shared a belief that our gods and other mythic characters, as well as our dreams and works of fiction, are projections of that which the unconscious contains. For Freud, “the unconscious is the true psychological reality” (*Complete Works* 1953–1966, 612–13), but our conscious minds censor our impulses, desires, fantasies, and preconscious thoughts because they are too raw and dangerous to face unmediated. Freud saw the images that appear to us in dreams and in such imaginative works as novels and myths as tamed projections of the unconscious’s ungovernable terrors. From this point of view, myths are the conscious mind’s strategy for making visible and comprehensible the internal forces and conflicts that impel our actions and shape our thoughts.

Jung’s view is similar to but not identical with Freud’s. Jung viewed the unconscious not as the individual’s personal repository “of repressed or forgotten [psychic] contents” (1959/1980, 3). Rather, he argued, “the unconscious is not individual but universal [collective]; unlike the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behavior that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals” (3–4). Jung defined “the contents of the collective unconscious . . . as archetypes” (4). Just exactly what an archetype is psychologically is far too complex to discuss here, but, briefly, Jung defined them as “those psychic contents which have not yet been submitted to conscious elaboration” (5). Indeed, Jung and Freud believed that we never see the unconscious and its contents; rather, we see only projected and therefore refined images that symbolize the things it contains.

Jung and his followers argued that such mythic archetypes as the Wise Woman, the Hero, the Great Mother, the Father, the Miraculous Child, and the Shadow are aspects of every individual psyche, regardless of gender, culture, or personal history. The healthy mind, they reasoned, learns to view the contradictory impulses represented by these archetypes in a balanced pattern, or “mandala.” Those with various neuroses and psychoses, however, can’t balance these impulses and are overwhelmed by the unconscious’s self-contradictory forces. Jung saw the universalized symbols and images that appear in myth, religion, and art as highly polished versions of the archetypes lurking in the collective unconscious. Therefore, Zeus, Yahweh, Kali, and Cybele are their respective cultures’ elaborations of universally available psychic material. Jung called these elaborations “eternal images” that

are meant to attract, to convince, to fascinate, and to overpower. [These images] are created out of the primal stuff of revelation and reflect the ever-unique experience of divinity. That is why they always give man a premonition of the divine while at the same time safeguarding him from immediate experience of it. Thanks to the labors of the human spirit over the centuries, these images have become embedded in a comprehensive system of thought that ascribes an order to the world, and are at the same time represented by . . . mighty, far-spread, and venerable institution[s like] the Church. (1959/1980, 8)

### Joseph Campbell: Literary and Cultural Critic

Whereas in the 19th century what passed for literary criticism of myth was largely a matter of antiquarians, classicists, biblicists, and specialists in dead languages reading myths and theorizing the linguistic and cultural events that explained and

connected them, in the 20th century literary approaches to myth grew more sophisticated. Important literary critics interested in reading myths include Robert Graves, author of *The White Goddess* and *Greek Myths*, and Northrop Frye, whose *Anatomy of Criticism* makes the case that four basic motifs corresponding to the seasons (spring—comedy, summer—romance, autumn—tragedy, and winter—satire) give shape to all literature. Many scholars wrote extensively about myth and were influential in their disciplines, but Joseph Campbell achieved a much broader popular following.

Campbell was the best-known mythologist of the 20th century if for no other reason than because he was able to present his ideas on television. His six-part series in the 1980s with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, reached a wide audience eager to hear about “universal human truths” in an age of increasing social fragmentation. At first glance it might seem odd to highlight Campbell’s television success here, but in terms of general awareness of myth in America today and in terms of the argument that myth has powerful resonance even in today’s modern world, Campbell’s television success is precisely to the point. His first book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, continues to be widely read, and, according to Ellwood, “George Lucas freely acknowledges the influence of reading . . . [it] and [Campbell’s] *The Masks of God*” (1999, 127–28) on his science fiction epic, *Star Wars*. Campbell wrote voluminously throughout his life, but the ideas he lays out in *Hero* form a core that changed little during his career—even when criticism and discoveries in other fields urged the necessity to revisit them.

Campbell openly acknowledged the influence of Jung and Freud on his work. Yet he never seems quite at home with Jung’s *collective* unconscious. Rather, the American mythologist always saw myth as the story of the rugged *individual* who realizes his true nature through heroic struggle. Archetypal symbols and universals there may be, Campbell seems to say, but mythology is ultimately and always the vehicle through which the individual finds a sense of identity and place in the world. Like Jung and Frazer, Campbell sought to present *the* master theory through which all myths could be understood. In his view, there was a single “monomyth” organizing all such narratives. Ellwood summarizes Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces* in this way:

The basic monomyth informs us that the mythological hero, setting out from an everyday home, is lured or is carried away or proceeds to the threshold of adventure. He defeats a shadowy presence that guards the gateway, enters a dark passageway or even death, meets many unfamiliar forces, some of which give him threatening “tests,” some of which offer magical aid. At the climax of the quest he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward: sacred marriage or sexual union with the goddess of the world, reconciliation with the father, his own divinization, or a mighty gift to bring back to the world. He then undertakes the final work of return, in which, transformed, he reenters the place from whence he set out. (1999, 144)

Campbell arrived at his theory of the monomyth by synthesizing insights from psychoanalysis, methods from 19th-century comparative mythology, and analyses typical of literary and cultural criticism. He was *not* a member of the new wave of anthropology and folklore that searched myths for references to material, political, and social culture. Nor did he seem particularly interested in questions of translation, of



Still from *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*. According to Campbell, the hero's quest occurs in three phases: the separation, the initiation, and the return. As the hero separates himself from his home, he often encounters a helper that guards and guides him through the trials that initiate him into the true nature of reality. When he achieves mastery, he may return home to enrich his former community.

Source: Everett Collection.

variants, or in the possible social, religious, and ritual contexts of the myths he used. Rather, Campbell promoted what he called “living mythology,” a nonsectarian spiritual path through which the individual might gain a sense of spiritual and social purpose and through which society might be returned to simplicity and moral virtue.

### Claude Lévi-Strauss and Structuralism

At the other end of the spectrum from Campbell's individual-centered mythology is the work of French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose search for “deep structure” in myth had a profound influence on anthropologists and literary critics alike. Lévi-Strauss's search for the skeletal core of myth—and the related searches for organizing principles in literature carried out most famously by Vladimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov, and Jonathan Culler—came to be known as structuralism. The influence of structuralism on the mythologies of the 20th century would be difficult to overstate, and structuralism as a critical model can be applied far beyond the boundaries of mythology or literature. It is the search for the undergirding steel that holds up the buildings of all human artifacts and endeavors, including those of meaning-making through myth and literature.

As Robert Scholes discusses the application of these ideas to literature (and, in fact, to any written text), structuralism sought “to establish a model of the system of

literature itself as the external reference for the individual works it considers” (1974, 10). As such, structuralism can be seen as a reaction against 19th-century comparatist and literary approaches to myth and classical literature, especially to their subjective, even idiosyncratic, interpretations of these stories. What Lévi-Strauss and others sought was an objective way of discussing literary meaning. By borrowing from linguistics such structural notions as syntax, grammar, phonemes, and morphemes, the French anthropologist attempted to develop a model that would describe how all myths worked—and do so in a way that any literature specialist could duplicate without resorting to his or her personal impressions and imagination. With its focus on discovering an unchanging core of patterned relations giving shape to narratives of all kinds, structuralism promised to put literary criticism and anthropological investigations of myth on the firm ground of empirical science.

A quick way into the issues that structuralism wanted to raise would be to look at the work of one of Lévi-Strauss’s contemporaries, Vladimir Propp, who worked almost exclusively on the Russian folktale, attempting to distinguish between constant and variable elements in that genre. After studying more than a thousand stories, he concluded that the characters in fairy tales change but their functions within the plot do not. Propp argued that fairy tales have 31 functions. For examples, Propp’s folktale structures begin with (1) the hero leaves home, (2) an interdiction is addressed to the hero, and (3) the interdiction is violated. The 31 total possible plot functions include (12) the hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, which prepares the way for his receiving either a magical agent or helper, (17) the hero is branded, (24) a false hero presents unfounded claims, (30) the villain is punished, and (31) the hero marries and ascends the throne (Scholes 1974, 63–64).

Lévi-Strauss, like Propp, gathered and analyzed as many versions of certain myths as he could find, hoping to penetrate their myriad surface elements and see into a basic grammar of meaning. Working among the natives of South America, Lévi-Strauss took inventory of the various references found in each myth. Ultimately, he determined that mythic structure reveals itself through a limited number of codes. For example, “among South American myths he [distinguished] a sociological, a culinary (or techno-economic), an acoustic, a cosmological, and an astronomical code” (Kirk 1970, 43). Lévi-Strauss further determined that these codes embodied polar opposites, or “binary oppositions.” Thus, within the culinary code, as the title of one of his most famous books puts it, one finds the binary of the “raw and the cooked.” Within the sociological code, one would find such binaries as married versus unmarried, family versus nonfamily, and *the* people versus the other.

Lévi-Strauss concluded that myths mediate the tension created by these always-present oppositions, whether individuals within a society are aware of it or not. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss discusses the codes and structures that manifest themselves in myths in much the same way that Freud and Jung discuss the unconscious. Whereas the psychologists described the unconscious as the hidden source from which individual consciousness arises, Lévi-Strauss viewed the structures of myth and language as the hidden bedrock upon which narratives are built. In fact, he sounds more like a metaphysician than a scientist when he claims that the deep structures of narrative exist—like Plato’s ideal forms or St. John’s *logos*—in a realm beyond and untouched by actual stories and storytellers. As Lévi-Strauss writes in *The Raw and*

*the Cooked* (1964), “we cannot therefore grasp [in our analysis of myth] how men think, but how myths think themselves in men, and without their awareness” (1990, 20). In other words, people don’t think myths into existence; mythic structures inherent in language do a people’s thinking for them, expressing themselves when people use language. Ultimately, he reduced the codes and the patterned relations he discovered among South American Indian myths to a kind of algebra, a symbol system intended to express that which was always true of these stories, regardless of such surface details as plot, character, and setting.

### Mircea Eliade’s Time Machine

Mircea Eliade has been described as “the preeminent historian of religion of his time” (Ellwood 1999, 79), and his ideas about the essential connection between myth and religion remain influential among students of myth. As a young man Eliade invested himself in nationalist politics. Believing in the power of myth to give a downtrodden people the courage and vision necessary to stage a spiritually motivated political revolution, Eliade became involved with a proto-fascist group called the Legion of the Archangel Michael.

Recent criticism of Eliade’s political associations has begun to erode his reputation as a mythologist to some extent. However, it is important to contextualize his sympathy with a political ideology that fused, in its early days, a Christian commitment to charity for the poor and outrage at injustice with a myth of a Romania that had a special destiny to fulfill. Like so many of the 19th- and early 20th-century mythologists who explored the connection between myth and *Volk*, Eliade looked to his people’s Indo-European heritage for stories that would impart a spiritual authority to a people’s revolution.

In his *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return; The Sacred and the Profane; Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*; and *Myth and Reality*, Eliade demonstrates his own brand of structuralism. Space, time, and objects are perceived by the religious imagination, he argues, in binary terms, as either sacred or profane. Thus such objects as icons and religious utensils, such places as temples and special groves, and such times as religious festivals are designated as *sacred*. Only certain limited activities can properly be performed with or within them. The *profane*, on the contrary, are those things, places, and times available to people without special ceremony or ritual.

Another important binary in Eliade’s mythology is the distinction he makes between “archaic” and modern man. In his view, archaic peoples are more attuned than modern, history-obsessed peoples to the sacred and express this understanding more clearly in their relationships to nature and in their myths. Eliade’s mythology proposes yet another opposition—that which exists between cosmic time, or the time of origins, and human history. From his perspective, moderns live in unhappy exile from the Paradise of cosmic time in which a vital connection to the sacred is natural. Myth, for Eliade, provides moderns with a vehicle through which they can periodically return to the time of origins and thus begin their lives anew. This time-machine function resembles the myth-ritualists’ view that sacred narratives facili-

tate the putting to death of stale, profane consciousness, restoring the participants to the virgin possibilities of creation. Thus we can see that from the perspective of religious studies—at least insofar as Eliade still represents that discipline—that myth has a religious function. Like going to confession, fasting on Yom Kippur, making animal sacrifice, or doing penance, myth permits human beings, who are continually contaminated by exposure to the profane, to wipe the slate clean and make a fresh start.

### Considering 20th-Century Mythology Critically

Our overview of 20th-century mythology has so far described the lenses through which myth has been studied in the past 100 years. One could easily imagine that the history of mythology presented here has been leading up to a happy ending: at last, we come to the end of the 20th century and the curtains will part to reveal state-of-the-art mythology. After millennia of deprecating myths as child's prattle and the fevered dreams of savages, after centuries of romanticizing the simplicity of our pre-modern past, after decades of trying to make the square peg of literature fit into the round hole of science, we have finally gotten it right. Surely we have a mythology that fairly and objectively examines the object of its study, that is methodologically but not blindly rigorous, and that duly considers history, custom, material culture, and sociopolitical and religious institutions without turning a story into a code to be cracked or a “to-do” list. But the fact is that no such mythology exists.

None of the mythologies of the past century has had it quite right—and it is instructive to see why not. Clearly, 19th-century comparative mythology was deeply flawed in its search for irrecoverable Ur-languages and highly dubious speculations about *the* German or Italian or Indian or Jewish character. The nature, ethnological, and myth-ritual schools, like Procrustes, made theoretical beds and then stretched or lopped off evidential limbs in order to achieve a perfect fit. While we owe the comparatists and their literary descendants gratitude for the thousands of myths they collected, and while we should not deny that natural environment and ritual, for example, are an important part of mythic content, we should also learn the lesson that no universal theory “explains” myth.

And we ought to ask ourselves what is to be gained from reducing all myth to a single “pattern.” If we read all myths as allegories of the seasonal cycles of fertility and infertility as, for example, Frazer and Graves did, what is to be gained? Are we content to read the story of Jesus’ birth, ministry, and death as one of many instantiations of the “year spirit”? Here’s death and resurrection! A seasonal pattern! Is this label enough to satisfy our desire to understand mythic meanings and functions? Similarly, are we content to read all myths, as Campbell does, as yet another version of the hero’s passage from home, through trial, through apotheosis, and back home again? Surely this plot line accounts for some significant events in myth, but are we content to reduce even myths of creation, fertility, and apocalypse to the story of an individual’s separation, initiation, and return? What do we say after we identify, as Eliade does, the basic alienation that exists in myth between human beings and the sacred? A one-trick pony, even when the trick is pretty good, is still a one-trick pony.



But anthropology and folklore, despite the fact that they have done mythology an inestimable service by grounding it in observation-based science, are not quite the answer either. Following Malinowski, anthropologists have, to greater and lesser degrees, illuminated the relationships among myths, religion, custom, sociopolitical behaviors, and material culture. Working within this discipline, Lévi-Strauss and Propp attempted to create a completely objective typology of narrative functions through which all myths could be analyzed. To some degree, particularly in Propp's work on the morphology of the folktale, structuralism succeeded. Any student of myth can examine any number of fairy tales using Propp's model and will find that the Russian folklorist's functions are indeed present and in the described order.

Yet, for all that anthropologists and folklorists have contributed to the study of myth, their disciplined focus on the function of myths within a nexus of material, social, political, and economic phenomena has come at a considerable cost. Such concerns, as important as they are, are only partial, and they ignore the pleasures and power of narrative per se for us here and now as well as for the myth tellers and their more immediate audiences. And structuralist anthropology does not and really cannot answer one of the most important questions: So what? Once we have learned Propp's 31 elements of the folk tale, the various codes in creation myths, and the binary oppositions Lévi-Strauss claims they suggest, what do we really have? From our point of view as professors of English, anthropology's tight focus on the functionality of and within myth diverts attention away from the fundamental fact that myths are stories. We need only think of Lévi-Strauss's algebra of mythic functions or Malinowski's search for references to food, clothing, shelter, and political relationships in the myths of the Trobriand islanders to realize that something vital is lost when myth is cannibalized for its references to the "real" world. We can ask anthropologists, as we asked literary theorists, whether reducing myths to lists of material culture items or to a set of narrative functions isn't as distorting as reducing all myths to allegories of nature, the year spirit, or the hero's quest.

While anthropology and folklore focused on myth's functions and 19th- and early 20th-century literary criticism preoccupied itself largely with myth's contents, psychological approaches have contemplated those dimensions of myth and suggested a theory of psychic origins as well. Psychological approaches to myth, therefore, have been generally more holistic than others. After all, whatever else can be said about them, myths proceed from the human mind if for no other reason than the mind needs to understand "the self" in relation to the larger cosmos. For this reason, many in the latter half of the 20th century assumed that Freud's or Jung's views about myth are fundamentally sound. And the psychological approach to myth has been powerfully suggestive. Jung's archetypes, for example, offer a potent interpretation of widely distributed symbols, images, and plot lines. There's a satisfying symmetry to the notion that each individual contains and balances oppositions such as elder and child, male and female, sinner and saint. Innumerable mythic characters embody these and other human qualities. And although Freud overstates his case when he claims that myths are *nothing other* than the working out of the complex interrelationships among identity, sexuality, and family relationships, a great many myths *do* feature incest, rape, infanticide, and parricide. Myths are about re-



relationships among the irrational, the rational, and the individual's responsibility to society, or, in Freud's terms, among the id, the ego, and the superego.

However, a principal weakness of literary, psychological, and structuralist approaches is that they are ahistorical; they don't consider the specific material and social conditions that shape myth. Indeed, most of the major mythologists of the 20th century cared little for the cultural specifics of how living myths function in the day-to-day lives of the people who told them. They cared little for cultural distinctions that might explain why one version of a myth differs from another; and, in the cases of Jung, Campbell, and Eliade, they seemed interested in myth only as far as familiarity with its presumed "core" might provide the modern individual with a return to Paradise lost—to a sense of self closely connected to the soil and fully at home in a homogeneous sociopolitical order. Thus, while the mythologies of the early- and mid-20th century demonstrated considerable genius, their lack of concern for historical and cultural context and their insistence on reading myths through analytical schema that dispensed with all but a story's most rudimentary plot structure perpetuated most of the significant shortcomings of their 18th- and 19th-century predecessors. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, awareness of these shortcomings has bred approaches to myth that insist on the importance of context, particularly where gender, cultural norms, and the specifics of the performance events are concerned. Moreover, much like this chapter, modern scholarship has increasingly focused on mythology rather than on myth itself. We conclude with a brief survey of several of the most recent and important contributions to the study of myth and consider, even more briefly, what uses these new ideas might have for the classroom.

## MYTHOLOGY TODAY

### William Doty's "Toolkit"

Doty's *Mythography* concludes with a number of appendixes for "furbishing the creative mythographer's toolkit." Among these tools are "questions to address to mythic texts." Embedded in these questions is a comprehensive methodology that urges students of myth not to choose a single approach to myth but to use as many of the questions and concerns of various mythological schools as possible. Doty's questions arise from five central concerns: (1) the social, (2) the psychological, (3) the literary, textual, and performative, (4) the structural, and (5) the political (2000, 466–67). As the term "mythographer's toolkit" implies, Doty's approach to the subject is profoundly practical. Above all he is concerned with methodology and principles of analysis, and he has distilled the concerns of many fields, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, and literary criticism into a systematic series of exploratory questions and research procedures that are well within reach of most non-specialists. The questions that Doty poses for each of the five areas of concern just mentioned are particularly congenial to the kinds of thinking, discussion, and research performed in the classroom.

## Bruce Lincoln's Ideological Narratives

As suggestive as Doty's questions are, other approaches to myth have been advocated recently. Lincoln, whose *Theorizing Myth* is an important contribution to the current study of myth, would define myth and mythology as "ideology in narrative form" because, as he says, all human communication is "interested, perspectival, and partial and . . . its ideological dimensions must be acknowledged, ferreted out where necessary, and critically cross-examined" (1999, 207, 208).

Ultimately, Lincoln advocates making modern mythology the study of previous mythologies. This scholarly endeavor would revolve around "excavating the texts within which that discourse [mythology] took shape and continues to thrive . . . [explicating] their content by placing them in their proper contexts, establishing the connections among them, probing their ideological and other dimensions, explicit and subtextual" (1999, 216). How students should approach myths other than those told by scholars about myth Lincoln doesn't say—though it seems plausible that his approach would be approximately the same for myth as for mythology.

## Wendy Doniger's Telescopes and Microscopes

Wendy Doniger, in her *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*, argues for an updated and recalibrated version of the kind of comparative mythology that the Grimm brothers and Sir James Frazer practiced. Among the ways Doniger suggests improving the comparative mythology of the 19th century is, "whenever possible . . . to note the context: who is telling the story and why"; and, she argues, that context could also include—indeed would have to include—"other myths, other related ideas, as Lévi-Strauss argued long ago" (1998, 44, 45). Doniger advocates stripping individual myths to their "naked" narrative outlines—to symbols, themes, and similarities in plot—in order to manage the amount of detail that the comparatist will have to analyze. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, Doniger wouldn't reduce myth to a level where all myths look alike. Context would still matter. Accordingly, she says, we could include in our comparison the contexts of myths. Attention to the socio-political and performative contexts in which myths occur would, in Doniger's method, "take account of differences between men and women as storytellers, and also between rich and poor, dominant and oppressed" (46). Doniger would also have students of myth learn how to switch back and forth between the "microscope" of a single telling to the "telescope" of the world's numerous variations on a mythological theme.

Thus Doniger's comparative mythology respects the integrity of a single myth as a unique story and, at the same time, enriches our understanding of that story through comparisons with other stories with similar plots, characters, and symbolic imagery as well as through comparisons with other mythic stories with similar contexts of telling. For one example of this last sense of comparison, we might be enriched by considering myths specifically *told by women* even as we would likely be rewarded by comparing myths with women or goddesses as central characters.

### Robert Ellwood's "Real Myths"

Robert Ellwood, who, like Lincoln, was one of Eliade's students at the University of Chicago in the 1960s, suggests yet another approach in *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (1999). Ellwood argues that what we call "myth" does not exist. Or, to put it more precisely, modern students of myth do not study *mythos*, in Hesiod's sense of a poet "breathing" the divinely inspired utterance. Rather, what we call myth "is always received from an already distant past, literary (even if only oral literature), hence a step away from primal simplicity" (174). This is an important point for Ellwood and other modern mythologists because "official" myths like *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *The Theogony*—or the Bhagavad Gita or the Bible—"are inevitably reconstructions from snatches of folklore and legend, artistically put together with an eye for drama and meaning" (175). But "real" myths are, like one's own dreams, "so fresh they are not yet recognized as 'myth' or 'scripture,' [and] are fragmentary, imagistic rather than verbal, emergent, capable of forming many different stories at once" (175).

What students of myth study in mythology classes, then, are usually the *literary* product of many hands over the course of many generations. Even if a name like Homer or Hesiod gets attached to myths when they finally achieve their final form, they begin as folktales and campfire stories, as religious precepts, images, and rituals, as mystical revelations, and as entertaining fictional and speculative explorations of how the cosmos came into being and continues to operate. Over the generations, in the hands of gifted storytellers, a narrative capable of combining and artistically organizing these fragments and themes emerges. By the time a society officially authorizes a story as scripture or myth, the events it describes have slipped so far into the past that they can be believed—anything could have happened in the beginning—or disbelieved. Myth represents human truths in a variety of ways, few if any of which depend on mere plausibility of character or event. "To put it another way," as Ellwood says, "myth is really a meaning category on the part of hearers, not intrinsic in any story in its own right. Myth in this sense is itself a myth" (1999, 175).

## READING MYTHOLOGY

Ellwood, like Lincoln, doesn't explicitly articulate a methodology by which students can analyze myths for themselves, but his suggestion that myths, like those contained in this book, come down to us in *literary* form suggests a well-established methodology: close reading and a consideration of how literary conventions inform and enable various levels of meaning.

Doty, when speaking of Müller's and Frazer's euhemerism, remarked that not only these two but "many other 19th-century [and 20th-century] scholars regarded myth almost exclusively as *a problem* for modern rationality" (2000, 11). Müller and Frazer, the myth-ritualists, the sociofunctionalist anthropologists, and the psychoanalysts have all attempted to "solve" the problem of the mythic irrational and to articulate in authoritative terms what myths "really" mean. Their efforts were not

entirely wasted; they were simply too one-dimensional, too unable to engage with myth in a holistic sense. Our book takes the view that myths are *not* codes to be cracked or naive and mistaken perceptions that must be corrected. Rather, myths are literary truths told about the mysteries and necessities that always have and always will condition the human experience. These truths, these *mythoi*, have made sophisticated use of symbolic imagery and narrative strategy, have created unforgettable characters that continue to typify for us abstract realities such as love, bravery, wisdom, and treachery, and have enacted as compellingly as any modern novel the humor and horror, the ecstasy and anguish, and the fear and hope of the human drama.

One of the great strengths of the literary approach to myth is that one needn't dispense with the methods, concerns, and insights developed through other mythologies in order to pay appropriate attention to such features of narrative as plot, point of view, characterization, setting, symbols, and theme. Indeed, our understanding and enjoyment of myths is enhanced if, as Doty would say, we furbish our mythographer's toolkit with as many tools as possible. For example, by using such structural approaches as those developed by Campbell, Lévi-Strauss, and Propp we can sharpen our focus on such basic plotting issues as the events that constitute the rising action of the story, the precise moment at which the turning point is reached, and the events of the falling action that resolve the conflict or tension that gives the story its narrative energy. Yet, literary analysis offers students of myth more than charts and formulas because it also equips us with a conceptual vocabulary and specific language to understand and describe how the arrangement of a story's action and its setting affect our emotions and intellects. How, for example, are we affected by the opening lines that introduce the action in the Maya's *Popul Vu*?

Here follow the first words, the first eloquence: There is not yet one person, one animal, bird, fish, crab, tree, rock, hollow, canyon, meadow, forest. Only the sky alone is there; the face of the earth is not clear. Only the sea alone is pooled under all the sky; there is nothing whatever gathered together. It is at rest; not a single thing stirs. It is held back, kept at rest under the sky. Whatever there is that might be is simply not there: only the pooled water, only the calm sea, only it alone is pooled (see Chapter 2, page 93).

How do we feel about the difficulty the narrator seems to have expressing a state of existence that is simultaneously nothing and yet contains a primordial sea with sleeping gods shining in its depths? What questions does this paragraph raise for us? What expectations are created and what words and phrases create them? Literary analysis of such details invites us to consider the personal connections we develop to a story and encourages us to reflect upon how a gifted storyteller (or generations of gifted storytellers) can utilize and refine language to create thought-shaping, life-defining images, ideas, and feelings within their hearers and/or readers.

Similarly, consulting the methods and insights of the comparative and psychological approaches to myth can increase our sensitivity to the universality of certain character types and to a deeper appreciation of the motives, values, and actions of the various protagonists and antagonists that people the world's sacred narratives. Through close reading of myth, we can make the crucial distinction between characterization and the more ambiguous notion of character. The characterization of

Heracles (Hercules in Latin), for example, utilizes certain stock phrases that emphasize his strength, resilience, and resourcefulness. While pinpointing precisely the language through which storytellers have depicted characters has rewards, it can be even more rewarding to articulate and debate the psychological make-up of this Greek hero's character. For instance, does Heracles's alienation from his divine father, with all the rejection and confusion that such a separation implies, create in him the determination necessary to accomplish his famous twelve labors? Are Heracles's many mighty deeds motivated by an obsessive need to prove his worth to a distant father whose fame and influence far outmatch his own? While these questions are clearly speculative and center upon a fictional entity, they nevertheless take us to the heart of literature's mysterious power over us. How fascinating that people, places, and things that may never have had a literal existence off the page, can nevertheless live in our minds as vividly as any of our flesh-and-blood acquaintances!

Likewise, we can borrow from early anthropology its insights and raw data about the prevalence of certain themes in myth. Preoccupations with such matters as the seasons, fertility, and disastrous consequences of intimate union between gods and mortals abound in myth and some anthropological studies supply us with a vast wealth of cases in point. We can also follow the lead of more recent anthropological study and generate lists of material culture items, social strata, customs, and technologies and our understanding of some of myth's most obscure references can be illuminated by this discipline's focus on the ritual and performance contexts as well as the socio-political functions of myth in living cultures.

Literary analysis, however, urges us also to consider how a narrative's uses of various material goods, social arrangements, and technologies work as symbols and icons. Returning to the *Popul Vu*, we notice that the creation of human beings is the culmination of four successive attempts, a creative process that is successful only after the correct material—maize—is used. While the scientist might view this reference as evidence that the Maya cultivated corn from earliest times, making similar observations about the tortilla griddles, domesticated dogs and turkeys, pots and grinding implements the story also mentions, the literary critic would likely emphasize the symbolic value of corn to the story. The gods' spoken word vibrating in the air, mud, and wood all prove inadequate materials for producing beings capable of intelligible speech and rational thought. However, the premier product of settled living and scientific observations about soil conditions, seeding, and the seasons is the perfect medium.

And then the yellow corn and white corn were ground, and Xmucane [Grandmother of Light] did the grinding nine times. Corn was used, along with the water she rinsed her hands with, for the creation of grease; it became human fat when it was worked by the Bearer, Begetter, Sovereign Plumed Serpent, as they are called. After that, they put it into words: the making, the modeling of our first mother-father, with yellow corn, white corn alone for the flesh, food alone for the human legs and arms, for our first fathers, the four human works. It was staples alone that made up their flesh (see Chapter 2, page 98).

When the narrator places maize at the pivotal moment in the story when the gods' at last perfect their creation, it suggests not only were human beings the pinnacle of the creation (the fourth time is the charm!) but that the Maya viewed

themselves as literal children of the corn. While such archaeological evidence as carvings of corn stalks, farming implements, and the ruins of granaries and farms are sufficient to indicate that the mastery of agrarian technology supplied the nourishment and wealth necessary to build and sustain the Maya empire, those attending to the symbolic value of corn in their mythic charter know the degree to which the Maya themselves were aware of this fact.

Like an onion, a myth has many layers. Thus we urge students of myth to familiarize themselves with the methods and assumptions of each mythology and to combine them with the methods and assumptions of literary study. Euhemerism permits us to remove one layer of the myth-onion, the comparative method another, the structuralist and functionalist approaches further layers, and psychological and literary analyses still others. We should resign ourselves to the fact that, after all our efforts, we will find at the core, quite literally, no-thing, no *single* all-encompassing explanation of myth. But, those who exert the disciplined effort to peel away and examine the social, political, historical, psychological, cultural, functional, and literary layers of the myth-onion will certainly become permeated with its distinct essence. Given the fascinating subject we study, that is reward enough.

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