In Search of Mythology: Introduction

The readings that we have collected together in this book demonstrate both the depth of tradition and the extent of recent innovation that exists ~~within~~ in the study of mythology. The academic exploration of mythology has been a cornerstone of a range of nested disciplines (a~~A~~nthropology, c~~C~~lassics, l~~L~~iterary s~~S~~tudies and r~~R~~eligious s~~S~~tudies) since their foundation. These disciplines continue to produce important reflections on (and analyses of) mythology. However, they have been joined in recent years by insightful work coming from the newer disciplines of c~~C~~ultural s~~S~~tudies and m~~M~~edia s~~S~~tudies. Despite the centrality of mythology to all these disciplines, the study of mythology remains divisive, with little agreement about either the substance of mythology or its function. In this book we aim to introduce the reader to these lively, interdisciplinary~~,~~ debates, and we have deliberately chosen to showcase a range of established and emerging voices. It is hoped that through direct engagement with the full range of insight that these diverse thinkers represent the reader will be given a firm foundation for further exploration, reflection and analysis.

Outline of the ~~B~~book

This Reader is organized thematically and follows the track for understanding mythology that we have found most successful as a way of introducing this material to undergraduate students. Therefore, while it is not necessary to follow the readings in the order that they are presented here, the Reader has been deliberately constructed to give the material a sense of development and flow. This book is organiz~~s~~ed into four main parts, which ~~that~~ cluster readings around the central questions of the origin, form, function and future of mythology. These, large, sections of the book are further divided into groups of three readings, which all cluster around a unifying topic (such as dreams, history~~,~~ or place), often

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providing competing approaches or ~~/~~interpretations to a single issue. It is hoped that by placing these readings in conversation with each other, the book will provide a rich, textured~~,~~ introduction to these topics. To help facilitate this, the Reader provides section introductions that frame the debate and link it to wider ideas or ~~/~~issues that are found both elsewhere in the book and beyond its pages. It is, however, possible to either engage with the readings in isolation~~,~~ or to profitably compare material across sections. To aid in these processes, we have ~~both~~ provided both a brief introductory note to each individual reading and (in this general introduction) an outline of the overall themes, topics and concerns of this Reader.

The first part of the Reader explores the important area of definitions. As such, it flows naturally ~~on~~ from this introduction's attempt to locate mythology, ~~as well as~~ both clearing the way for the subsequent sections and consolidating an understanding of the difference between an academic approach to mythology and popular conceptions. The first chapter in this section contains a sample of Littleton's (now-~~–~~classic) classification of myth, legend~~,~~ and folklore. This chapter is followed by Ben-Amos's essay 'The Idea of Folklore', which calls into question the distinctions made in the previous chapter and provides an important alternative source of definitions for students to engage with. The final chapter~~,~~ of this first section~~,~~ is Malinowski's often-~~–~~parodied definition of myth, which takes the discussion in a radically different direction and raises the important question of the relationship between myth and society. This R~~r~~eading is far richer than textbook summaries would allow and provides a good foundation for the later sections of this R~~r~~eader. The first section therefore begins with classic distinctions~~,~~ and ends with questions that will help students think critically about the readings that follow.

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Comment [Q3]: AU: In the third chapter, only the biography of Malinowski is given; the excerpt is missing. Please provide.

The second part of the Reader groups together theorists who try to locate an origin for myth that, in part, explains the apparent similarity of geographically and temporally distant material. The first section of this part explores theories that either find the origin of the myths' repeating patterns in sacred actions, sacraliz~~s~~ed profane action~~,~~ or some combination of the two. It presents selections from the classic, global theories of myth that are found in the writings of James Frazer, Otto Rank and (in a rather different form) Joseph Campbell. Here the two heroe~~'~~s' journeys unite with the sacrificial priest to initiate the reader into the cultic milieu of universalist thought. Section B~~,~~ of part ~~2~~two~~,~~ moves to explore further the way that myth bridges inner and outer worlds, collective experience and individual psyche, through a focus on the relation between myth and dreams. Jung's contribution on UFOs retains its relevance, despite its age, and this pairs well with Sepie's article, which both demonstrates the truly excellent material that is being currently produced at the cutting edge of mythography and interrogates many of the core conceits of the earlier material. The second part ends with a section that explores theorists who either see history as the seed of myth or see its antithesis. These include~~,~~ Mircea Eliade, Max Müller~~,~~ and Nicholas Allen. The arguments presented here centre around broader issues of truth and falsehood, myth, identity and cultural heritage and are of the utmost relevance to today's students despite the apparent generation gap.

The third part of the book switches the debate to explore structuralist, Neostructuralist and those spatial theories that are largely built upon the former work. It opens with an important and concise demonstration of the structuralist technique by Lévi-Strauss and an example of how it may be adopted to engage with functionalist and Freudian theories by Edmund Leach, before the section is rounded out with a wonderfully concise summary, by Aguirre of Proppian Structuralism. ~~The second s~~Section B of this part complicates the Straussian approach further; Stephen Hugh-Jones develops significantly the concepts of implicit mythology, the relevance of ritual to structuralism and the importance of participant observation for structuralist analysis. Mary Douglas’s essay questions Lévi-Strauss’s approach, while also pointing out some of its more positive aspects. Finally, the work that we have selected by Seth Kunin operates to both integrate the material that surrounds it and clearly outline the scope and process of the Neostructuralist project.

The last section of part ~~3~~ three focuses on the often-overlooked spatial theories of myth, starting with Frances Harwood’s detailed exploration of the spatial elements of myth in the Trobriands, which also serves to return us to Malinowski. The next reading presents Jonathan Miles-Watson’s spatial analysis of Himalayan mythology as a way of demonstrating how Lé~~e~~vi-Strauss’s theory of implicit mythology can be used to build a powerful technique for the analysis of postcolonial, urban~~,~~ societies. The section ends with Miriam Khan’s work on the importance of paying attention to stones for the interpretation of mythology in Papua New Guinea. Collectively, these works develop the nascent spatial elements of the previous contributions and explore the importance of myth for understanding how we make ourselves at home in the world.

The fourth and final part of the reader asks the important question of where myths are going. The first section focuses on myths and popular culture, and helps demonstrate how myth is used, as well as how mythography can be applied, to familiar aspects of the modern world. In this section we explore the relation of mythology (and myth analysis) to Disney princesses (Dundes et al.), s~~S~~cience f~~F~~iction (Suttons) and f~~F~~an f~~F~~iction (Willes). The last section of the reader gives the editors the opportunity to outline their understanding on the future of mythology before concluding with Robert Segal's highly informed exploration of the likely outcome for the future of mythology, which is based upon the theoretical presuppositions of several of the key thinkers that are found in earlier sections of this work. This final section therefore returns us back to the core themes that began (and run throughout) this book –~~;~~ themes that are built upon the tensions that bind together wildly different understandings of mythology's form, function and veracity.

Myth and truth?

The problems surrounding the general interpretation of myth are encapsulated by the way, at a recent Sociology conference, a highly respected (and well-known) academic casually defined myth as any widely held delusional belief. This definition has the merit of being relatively open ~~-~~ended; however, this Western, common~~-~~sense, understanding of mythology runs counter to many academic definitions and is a highly problematic approach to the term. It is, nevertheless, part of a persistent tradition of ethnocentric classificatory systems, which famously found articulation in the writings of Tylor (1871: 286–287) and can still be found in ~~21st ~~twenty-first-century academic explorations of myth (cf Cunliffe 2001: 7). Tylor's approach to myth was a reaction against the trend of his time, which was to view myths as primarily relating events that are intended to be allegorical (Segal 1999: 10). He was therefore keen to argue that for certain people, myths were as real as science was for his audience. He suggested that myth is, in fact, a kind of precursor to science, a sort of imperfect logic, which seeks to explain events that occur in the physical world (Tylor 1871: 286–287). The Tylorian definition of myth, as a faulty form of science, slides easily into the colloquial understanding of myth as falsehood, and both are problematic because of their ethnocentric assumption of a qualitative difference between the interpreter and the interpretation, which in turn creates a category of human (the native and/or the child) whose engagement with the world is somehow lacking.

The understanding that mythology is other people's science is regularly bound up with the suggestion of it as other people's history. By which, it is usually implied that myth is a more limited way of understanding the past than history. It is common to find newspaper articles, shows and conversations that revolve around discovering if a well-known event actually occurred in history, if it is merely myth~~,~~ or some combination of the two. This approach is, in turn, tied to the appealing, if limiting, suggestion that myth may lead us towards true historical discoveries. A good example of this is the now-~~-~~notorious, yet widely digested television shows and publications of Graham Hancock (see, for example, Hancock 2012).

In the academic arena, the relationship between myth and history has tended to be more carefully considered than in the popularist material discussed above, although it is possible to find the crude myth/history division of popular speech in academic publications, with myth and history positioned as two distinct, sometimes opposed, sometimes overlapping categories. We see this in the phenomenological thought of Eliade, who brings the categories of myth and history into his famous ~~a~~ sacred/profane opposition (cf Eliade, Part ~~2~~two, Section B, Chapter 1). For Eliade, myth 'narrates a sacred history, an event that took place in primordial time … [I~~i~~t contains] Supernatural Beings who do not belong to the everyday world … [and] is always an account of creation of one sort or another' (1963: 5–6). Encapsulated in this sentence is Eliade's concept of (and subsequent approach to) myth, which is opposed to more lineal, profane, views of history. This idea of myth as a sacred and participative act of collective remembrance has resonances with Lé~~e~~vi-Strauss' understanding of Amazonian myth’s ability to ameliorate the traumas of history through an emphasis on continuity (Lévi-Strauss and Charbonnier 1969: 33–39). In contrast, Western mythology (read history) celebrates historical rupture as a series of linear steps in a process of cultural evolution (cf Lévi-Strauss, Part ~~3~~three, Section A, Chapter 1 and Hugh-Jones, Part ~~3~~three, Section B, Chapter 2).

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An alternative approach has been taken by a number of comparative m~~M~~ythographers (Muller 1897~~,~~; Dumézil 1988~~,~~; MacCana 1997~~,~~; et al.), who have viewed recorded mythology as source material in the quest to recover a forgotten history. In the famous Indo-European approach, extant mythology from across India and Europe is employed as a gateway to understanding, or (re)constructing, the now-~~–~~lost culture of a postulated ancient race (known as the Aryans). The existence of a single proto Indo-European culture is far from certain and based primarily on linguistic similarities that spread throughout India and Europe, which can be taken as a purely linguistic relationship (cf Allen, Part ~~2~~two, Section C, Chapter 3)~~,~~ but can also be viewed as the result of a historical relationship. From here, it is but a small step to the suggestion that just as traces of Aryan language survive in modern languages, ~~then~~ so too traces of their mythology survive~~s~~ in modern myth and ritual (cf Muller, Part ~~2~~two, Section C, Chapter 1). Scanning through mythology, across huge expanses of space and time, these mythographers were able to find affinities in the material (sometimes with the benefit of considerable reinterpretation of the source material). However, there are significant problems with this fundamental model, foremost of which is, that with a data pool so large and a little ingenuity, it is possible to find any pattern desired if you look hard enough. More worryingly, the preoccupation with reconstructing a system of a hypothetical lost people, at times, blinds these analysts to a subtle understanding of the mythology's host culture. While in its later incarnations, the comparative approach is made into a strength, in the vast majority of Indo-European analyses, it is a clear weakness.

For all its ingenuity, Frazer's understanding of myth (cf Frazer, Part ~~2~~two, Section A, Chapter 1), as a form of ritual explanation, is liable to the same ‘~~‘~~cherry-~~-~~picking’ allegations as Muller. Indeed, Frazer's attempt to solve the mystery of the murder of the priest at Lake Nemi~~,~~ prompts him to ~~him~~ range freely through space and time, in an effort to reconstruct a lost central pattern of purportedly (almost) universal significance. Similarly, Campbell's suggestion that myth speaks to a universal pattern of loss, gain and return~~,~~ rests on a reductionist technique (cf Campbell, Part ~~2~~two, Section A, Chapter 3). For Campbell, myth is a metaphorical/poetical insight into the penultimate truth (Campbell ~~&~~ and Moyers 2011). This is an extreme version of the classical psychiatric approach to mythology that sees it as a reflection of inner processes (cf Jung, Part ~~2~~two, Section B, Chapter 1 and Dundes, Part two~~2~~, Section B, Chapter 2). This argument is based upon the belief that myth is a form of psychological therapy, which allows for the public outworking of universal, personal, psychological problems. This notion is encapsulated by Jung in the *Psychology of Child Archetype*, where he writes that ‘myths are original revelations of the preconscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings, and anything but allegories of physical processes’ (2002: 87). Jung here implies that both Tylor's and Frazer's analyses techniques have made the mistake of taking the content of myth far too literally and have entirely missed the ability of myth to be a symbolic expression of the preconscious.

This definition of myth is seemingly more open ~~-~~ended than Tylor's definition, for, in this understanding, myth relates to a broader range of material (not simply nature), without the need for a violent reconstruction, such as that which Frazer and Muller impose~~s~~ on the material. As Kunin (2003~~2~~: 15)~~,~~ has pointed out, if the psychological approaches were content to suggest that myth is an outward expression of psychological issues, the model would be at least plausible; however, in stating that there is a common content of those unconscious~~,~~ or preconscious issues, the approaches fall into the same trap of universalism that Frazer does. Indeed, we would want to push this concern even further than Kunin does to suggest that the Cartesian notion of inward and outward worlds, which lies behind the psychological model, is not only ethnocentric~~, it is~~ but also inaccurate (see, for example, Ingold 2000: 157–172).

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Myth and society

According to Malinowski, m~~M~~yth is tied more concretely back to the social societies that it is drawn from ~~by Malinowski~~ (Part ~~1~~one, Section A, Chapter 3). Malinowski shares Eliade’s notion that myth ‘is a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality, told in satisfaction of deep religious wants, [and] moral cravings’ (2003: 117). However, Malinowski then goes on to suggest that myth also fulfils several other roles, which become increasingly less familiar to Eliade’s definition. Malinowski ultimately ends with a statement that is more reminiscent of Tylor’s position: myth acts to enhance and codify ‘social submissions, assertions, [and] even practical requirements’ (2003~~ibid~~)~~’~~. Thus Malinowski’s definition of myth is quite open ended and allows myth a wide range of social functions. Crucially, myth for Malinowski is generally seen as performing a social function, and he therefore believes that myth is best viewed in its context.

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Malinowski’s imperative to contextualiz~~s~~e myth stands in contrast to the global comparative theories discussed above. For Malinowski, like Tylor, believes that myth is something which cannot be stripped away from its context and is best ~~understand~~

understood by careful observation of how it is used. Furthermore, he discounts the notion of historical reconstruction of a myth’s use, let alone its content. In particular Malinowski develops his argument with regard to a Trobriand origin myth, which he claims must ~~neither~~ be interpreted neither as faulty history nor as symbolic expressions of deep psychological needs. Instead, Malinowski argues that ‘the personage and beings that we find in them [that is to say myths] are what they appear to be on the surface, and not symbols of hidden realities’ (2003: 184).

Malinowski’s highlighting of the need for cultural contextualiz~~s~~ation of myth and the use of myth is vital if we are to understand what myths mean to anyone other than ourselves. However, in limiting myth to a surface-~~-~~level interpretation, Malinowski seems to be swinging too far in the opposite direction. Indeed, it is hard to understand why Malinowski’s analysis precludes the existence of a more fundamental level of meaning. Malinowski, however, is useful for shifting the debate from what myth might be and towards a discussion of what myth might do; in so doing, he opens the possibility of myth operating at more fundamental levels, whil e~~st~~ remaining tied to the social contexts in which it arose.

In Mary Douglas’s highly influential analysis of taboo in the Hebrew Bible (2003), she demonstrates powerfully both the categoriz~~s~~ing tendencies of humans and the way that myth reflects those structuring systems. It follows therefore that myth can be a gateway to an appreciation of these underlying categoriz~~s~~ing systems and as such the key to helping us understand how various societies carve up the world. This idea comes through strongly in the work of Lévi-Strauss (Part ~~3~~three, Section A, Chapter 1), which was to completely revolutioniz~~s~~e the field of mythography. Lévi-Strauss’s technique operates on the assumption that myth raises problems, or contradictions, that are inherent in the world and works towards their resolution. Myth, however, ~~neither~~ raises these problems neither in a literal way (as the functionalists claim~~,~~) nor in a socially unmoored way (as psychoanalysts would have), but through a series of (often-~~-~~dialectical) relations (Lévi-Strauss 1955). Myth, for Lévi-Strauss, is therefore something that must ~~both~~ be interpreted both symbolically and contextually.

It is important to stress that for Lévi-Strauss elements in one mythic system that seem to resemble another are no more necessarily related than words in different languages that seem to resemble each other (ibid). Therefore, the Indo-Europeanists were right to build on a linguistic analogy;~~,~~ however, they erred in not applying to myth the linguistic principle that what matters is the similarity in relation between words, not the words themselves (cf De Saussure 2011). Similarly, it is the relations between elements of myth (called mythemes) that reveal the underlying classificatory systems of the culture and unlock the keys to understanding both cultural systems and (at a more profound level) the human condition (Lévi-Strauss 1955).

L~~e~~évi-Straus's work on mythology is extensive and developed over a protracted period. It is therefore not surprising that his thought shifts over time and collectively contains some ambiguity. One key area of ambiguity relates to the issue of whether myth shapes structure~~,~~ or is shaped by it. This issue~~s~~ is highlighted in the neostructuralist period by scholars, such as Derrida, ~~that~~ who argue against an authoritative reading of the structure of a myth and instead posit a process of deconstruction that undermines the hegemonic structures and leaves open the possibility of replacing them through alternative readings, or mythic constructions (Derrida 1993). This idea is echoed in feminist mythopoetic readings of myth (see Dundes et al Part ~~4~~four, Section A, Chapter 2) that highlight (often using psychiatric symbol analysis) the underlying patriarchal structures of received myths and seek to replace them with narratives that contain disruptive, equaliz~~s~~ing structures (Fiorenza 2015).

At a certain point this process becomes true mythopoiesis – moving beyond myth analysis into myth creation. In truth, many of the theories of myth that have been outlined above can be seen as forms of myth creation:~~,~~ Muller is labelled a Solar Myth, by Littledale (1906: 279), and Eliade, in his memoirs, confesses that his analysis stems from the 'pleasure of inventing, of dreaming, of thinking at all, relieved of the strictures of systematic thought' (Rennie 1996: 3). From this perspective myth creation is tied to the creative act, including that of academic analysis, and as such an ongoing and unavoidable part of life today, as several of the chapters in the later stages of the book suggest. It is hoped that this book will help to inform that process by placing into debate with each other the contrasting and lively attempts to grapple with the issue of myth and, in so doing, add to the continuing development of our understanding of this at once widely known and yet seldom understood category of human expression.

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