

MYTH, LEGEND AND THE INDIVIDUAL

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In modern classical liberal and libertarian thought there has generally been a mistrust, if not outright rejection, of religious ideas. This rejection has extended beyond 'living' religions and back to the corpus of myth, legend and tradition surrounding inactive religions.

This rejection has been based on an obvious reasoning. At the core of libertarianism are the twin concepts of rationality and choice. By contrast the world portrayed in myth and legend is one where events are not explained by the rational. Legends feature a world of higher powers beyond human control. This lack of human control serves to negate individual choice.

The libertarian rejection of "irrational" religious concepts is perhaps best articulated by Ayn Rand, who set religion alongside race and class collectivism in its capacity to deny the individual human spirit.

COLLECTIVIST USES OF MYTHOLOGY

The libertarian rejection of myth has been complemented by the way in which collectivists have sought to use mythic images and concepts.

The German National Socialists used a neo-pagan pseudo-mythology to sanction their totalitarianism. Romantic nineteenth century British socialists compared the coming golden age of socialist utopia to a lost golden age of British myth. In the twentieth century elements of the green movement have sought to give their ideas added weight by linking them to the concept of the earth as "Gaia", the Greek earth goddess.

Such collectivist uses of mythology are, however, essential artificial modern adaptations. By contrast, when mythology is viewed in the context of the primitive societies which created it, its essentially individualistic nature can be observed.

THE PRIMITIVE POLITICAL SOCIETY

Modern anthropology has been dominated by two models of primitive political organisation. These models are outlined in *The Evolution of Political Society* by M. Fried (1967), and *Primitive Social Organisation* by E. Service (1971). Both models provide a simple three stage typology of political societies. Fried describes a movement from "egalitarian" to "ranked" to "stratified". Service describes how society is successively dominated by the tribe or band, then by the "chiefdom", and finally by the state. These categories of the two models are broadly comparable and may be described thus:

Tribe/Egalitarian: In this society divisions are on a 'horizontal' basis of age, sex and the primary kin group unit. In this situation none of the kin groups has attained primacy.

The Ranked/Chiefdom Society: Here a supreme individual exists and other members of the social grouping are ranked according to their relationship with that central person. This situation is essentially unstable with no individual exercising permanent dominance.

The Stratified Society/State: In this society position is now inherited and status is based on a permanent class/caste system.

THE BONDS OF SOCIETY

These models have been criticised for their 'evolutionary' nature. They assume that there will be an inevitable movement from a primitive to a more advanced form of society. This ignores the in-built stabilising mechanisms of primitive society which conspire to preserve the *status quo*.

These stabilising mechanisms are best illustrated by reference to the egalitarian/band society. The egalitarian society has no forces of overt social control. There is no army, no police force, prisons or state institutions. This however represents no libertarian "state of nature". On the contrary, the egalitarian polity is the most heavily governed and anti-individualistic of all societies. The bonds binding society together so firmly are those of magic, superstition, taboo and powerful social obligation.

In such a society, maintained by a complex web of taboos there is no need for government institutions to maintain the law as the breaking of taboo is met by lethal supernatural sanction. Certain New Guinea tribes, for instance, until recent times believed that individuals involved mining stone for tool making who worked harder and gained more than their fellows would suffer from the deadly vengeance of the mine's tutelary spirits.

As well as being pinned down by a web of taboo the individual in the egalitarian society is further restricted by the force of kin group obligation. In the egalitarian society the kin is the primary political/social unit. The kin group acts to support and give identity to the individual. If, however, an individual starts to rise above the tribal norm and assert his individuality, then the kin group acts to pull him back. Increased social obligation dissipates his resources and energies. The individual is forced to carry the dead weight of society on his back.

Such restraints acted to hold an egalitarian society stable in Aboriginal Australia for 25,000 years.

In this context it may be seen that many of the myths and legends of the world are a symbolic chronicle of the battle of the individual to assert himself against taboo and religious restraint. The heroes of ancient myth can be demonstrated to enact a series of individualist dramas.

THE BIRTH AND YOUTH OF THE HERO

Even before he can make choices the hero of myth defies social norms. The hero characteristically has no family and is brought up in obscurity. The boy Arthur is taken away from his parents by Merlin as soon as he is born. The Irish hero Finn, despite being of royal blood, is brought up in rural obscurity in order that he might escape his father's enemies. Similarly Oedipus in Greek legend is brought up with no familial knowledge. In Oedipus' case this lack of awareness of kindred was to have well known and deeply unfortunate consequences.

This lack of a known family means that the hero finds himself without a name or identity. As a consequence, when they acquire a name it arises out of their own individuality and attributes. The Welsh hero Culhwch, for instance, takes his name from being found in a pig sty. The Irish Finn gained his name, which means "white", when his "fair" appearance was exclaimed upon. A similar account is given of how the boy poet Gwion, of Welsh myth, gained the name "Taliesin" meaning "brightness".

The significance of the fact that the hero is cast adrift from his family, and being apparently nameless, would be that while the hero would have no one to protect him and take his side in a quarrel he

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would also have no kindred group to hold back his ambition. All his energies could be concentrated inward on the self and the heights that the hero would strive to scale.

A STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND

It is an element of the hero tale that the hero usually achieves fame far from his native land and his natural social context. Beowulf travels from Geatland to Denmark, in order to win glory cleansing the land of the troll Grendel and his mother. Tristan's adventures take place away from his native Lothian in Cornwall and Ireland. Theseus of Greek myth is removed from Athens to the alien environment of Crete.

The Irish hero, Cuchulain, is an interesting example of this 'outsider' theme. At no point in the cycle of stories concerning this hero is it stated that he comes from outside Ulster, the realm to which he is attached. When, however, a curse renders the men of Ulster unable to defend the province, Cuchulain curiously escapes this universal blight. A clue to this exemption may lie in the fact that Cuchulain's boyhood name was Setanta, which is a name of a tribe apparently based in north-west England. The name Cuchulain, meaning "hound of Culain", was only gained by him after his slaying of a monstrous hound.

The significance of the hero as an outsider is that he is unrestrained and unknowing of the laws of the new land. As such he is a force of disruption and change.

In a primitive society manhood was frequently defined by the ownership of weaponry. Such weapons were frequently given as part of a family inheritance. The hero, however, is not given weaponry but takes it. Arthur claims his kingship by taking the sword from the stone. Sigmund likewise acquires his sword by drawing it from the guardian tree of the Volsunga.

THE CHOICE OF THE HERO

Most hero tales have a critical point of choice where the hero voluntarily singles himself out from the rest of society. From that point on he takes on his special role. He rejects the values of society in favour of his own values.

The youthful Cuchulain hears a druid prophecy that he who takes arms on that particular day will die young, but earn eternal fame. In choosing to be armed on that day, Cuchulain chooses death, but he also comes to live the fullness of his life.

In the Greek myth of Achilles, the critical point comes when Thetis, Achilles' mother, knowing that he will die at Troy, seeks to stop him leaving with the Greek army by disguising him as a woman. Achilles, however, makes a choice which rejects the safety of his mother's plan for heroism and ultimate death before the walls of Troy.

THE ENEMIES OF SOCIETY

Once the hero has made this choice he has irrevocably distanced himself from his fellow men. The hero becomes an ambiguous figure needed by society but at the same time opposed and feared by society.

This is illustrated by the way in which Cuchulain, after defeating the enemies of Ulster, is in such a blind battle rage that he threatens to destroy his own fellow countrymen. Cuchulain's rage is eventually subdued by trickery. But not before his own countrymen have stood in fear of his destructive energies.

By the fifteenth century King Arthur has become a king ruling over his realm as a model of Christian virtue. Earlier strands of tradition, however, show him as a blasphemer breaking taboo and defying tradition. In the British saints' lives he is often in confrontation with the saints as upholders of religious law. Likewise he is also responsible in Welsh legend for the digging up of the pagan talisman, the head of Bran. Here Arthur stands out, like all heroes, as a powerful but unlawful force.

This heroic moral ambiguity can be seen in the traditions which gathered around the Elizabethan sea captain, Francis Drake. In 1588 the Spanish Armada was defeated partly by the naval prowess

of the English commanders such as Drake, but also due to the strong winds which scattered the Spanish fleet. Official English sources saw these winds as divinely sent deliverance. They were known as the 'Protestant wind' and coins struck at the time bore the inscription 'God blew and they were scattered'. West country folk traditions however ascribed their salvation to darker forces. According to legend Drake was in league with the devil and it was the coven of witches he headed which summoned the great wind to turn the Spanish back. Christian morality had not altered the old belief that forces unacceptable to normal society could in the right circumstances be beneficent.

THE TRIALS OF THE HERO

The enemies of the hero are not moral humans but supernatural monsters, products of religion and cult worship. The very invulnerability of the hero to human weapons shows the irrelevance of mortal enemies. The infant Achilles has been bathed in the river Styx to protect him from harm (the waters cover his whole body except, of course, his heel). The young King Arthur is given the scabbard of Excalibur to protect him from harm. The Irish hero Cuchulain goes into battle in a state of battle fury which his human enemies cannot penetrate.

This protection ensures that the struggles of the hero are spiritual and cosmic. His battle is that of the individual to determine the nature of society.

THE FALL OF THE HERO

A common theme of hero tales is that the hero is ultimately forced to break a web of interlinked taboos which bring about his downfall and death. The hero is caught up in the contradictions of his own actions and defeated by the forces which he has spent his life struggling against.

The death of Cuchulain is foreshadowed by his being caught between contradictory taboos. The seed of King Arthur's doom is sown in his incestuous relationship with his half sister. The product of this relationship is Mordred, the man who ultimately slew Arthur. The Greek hero Oedipus is likewise punished for his flouting of divine/societal laws.

From an individualist perspective such endings might be seen to be pessimistic. They would seem to represent the triumph of fate over choice.

But beneath this surface meaning the ambiguity of the hero's story remains.

In the *Volsunga Saga*, when Sigmund lies dead on the field of battle, his widow gathers up the shattered fragments of his sword (the material manifestation of his career) so that it can be reforged and passed on to a new generation.

In the same way, after Arthur's death at Camlann the sword Excalibur is returned to the waters from which Arthur plucked it at the start of his career.

As the individual rebels against the collective *status quo*, society reforms to absorb that change and to achieve a new equilibrium. The individual himself may fail but the world he leaves behind him will never be the same again. The hero of myth and legend is the archetype of the individual who leads the revolt of reason against unreason. His is a struggle which continues to this day.

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