

# PREFACE

What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals ...  
W. Shakespeare

What is it about being human? The opening quote is from *Hamlet* (Act II, scene 2), and the depressed Dane did not have a very positive attitude toward people, so he was probably being sarcastic. However, this view of human beings as the crown of creation has a very large following. Some religious traditions hold that the whole of creation exists as a gift from the divine to God's ultimate masterpiece: the human.

What makes us so special? There are several human characteristics that experts cite as indicating human superiority. Our abilities to reason and to communicate are often mentioned, but perhaps we do not come off quite as well as we think. Human beings are the only species of mammal that will knowingly foul our own food and water supply, so perhaps we are not quite as smart as we think we are. Though our communication methods are extraordinarily complex, bees and ants certainly communicate more effectively than we do.

When I think about the wonders of being human, I am most impressed by our sense of humor and our capacity for music. Other animals certainly play and enjoy themselves, but we tell better jokes. And although a nightingale can create a splendid sound, she can't sing Mozart.

Many point to a trait that may be distinctly human (although there's evidence that other species experience it to some extent). That is reflexivity, the capacity to view ourselves as both subject and object, to be self-aware. This is, of course, extraordinary. We are able to ponder our own thoughts and actions, to develop a conscience, and to reflect upon our various roles in life. It comes with a price, however, and that price is also one that the earth must pay unless we reach beyond our self-study to practice more interrelatedness with other species.

Perhaps the wonder of being human is not so much in what we think but in the way that we think. Humans are meaning-giving creatures, and the basic units of our consciousness and our thought processes are symbols. In fact, we cannot think without symbols. They are the basic building blocks of human thought, and symbol making is a primary activity of human life. At the most basic level, then, symbols are what humans utilize

in order to formulate and communicate meaning, and our capacity to use symbols reaches far beyond the basic.

This is not, however, primarily a book about symbols. It is a book about stories—the most powerful and significant stories people have ever told. The key that unlocks these stories, however, is a form of symbol that is uniquely human—the *metaphor*. In fact, rhetorical analysis of human thought and speech suggests that the cognitive structures of human thought are metaphorical. Joseph Campbell, certainly one of the most renowned scholars of myth, recognizes metaphor as the central focus of all myth. In fact, from his perspective, myths are metaphors.

Campbell also emphasizes one particular theme as the earliest and most foundational of mythic stories. From his point of view, the facets of meaning revealed in the motif of the hero's journey serve as the basis for all mythic narratives. In fact, the hero's journey is actually the story of human life. This theme also provides the focal point for this study of symbol, myth, and ritual. Exploration of myth invites us on a hero's journey of our own, from creation through the processes of naming, interacting with the divine, and encountering obstacles, through death, transformation, and rebirth. These aspects of the adventure form the outline of this book.

It would perhaps be helpful to set out here what will not be found in this text. I have not included the complete text of the myths to which I refer, although guidance will be provided to where these stories can be found. I have not included detailed historical or cultural information such as would be appropriate in an anthropological approach. Furthermore, no attempt has been made here to discuss in detail the causes that might lie beneath the formation of these myths (such as attempts to explain natural phenomena, psychological expressions, etc.). This book is about the meanings and themes to be found in the stories themselves.

There are certainly scholars who would object that these stories cannot even be considered separately from their cultural context, and to a certain extent this is true. Whether we know about them or not, all of these stories have origins, cultural contexts and histories. They affected the cultures that told them and were in turn affected by those cultures. A great deal of scholarship exists surrounding all of the themes, cultures, and theories discussed in this text. Therefore, this book can only serve as a diving board into the stories and the ways in which human beings might relate to them. Once one chooses to swim in these waters, there are many currents to explore. Where I can, I will suggest resources for more extensive exploration.

Our vastly expanded access to information and research is both a boon and a barrier to consideration of these myths. Human beings are

both social and astoundingly creative. Myths are both ancient and orally transmitted. Put all this together, and these mythic traditions are extremely fluid. For every version of a god's adventures, there is a variant from some other time and place. Every god and hero that rises up from the past goes by many names, becomes associated with various cultures, and interacts with those cultures in various ways. Whether the traditions related to various deities are identical with, related to, or derived from other traditions is always a matter of some debate.

Scholars deal with all this contrasting and sometimes conflicting information in various ways. They may debate about which versions are more original or authentic. They may discuss the original interpretations or functions of these myths or how they fit into the practices of various cults. They may also choose a particular version of a myth to analyze or to illustrate a particular perspective.

This text recognizes that there are always variants in ancient traditions, and where these differences provide additional insight, I have attempted to include at least some reference to them. However, in no way do I claim that every (or any) story I discuss here is the original or only version. I take the function of the mythic in human life very seriously, and the assumption that the themes and meanings found in ancient traditions are powerful truths still valid and beneficial in contemporary culture is perhaps the most basic presupposition I have made here. With this perspective in mind, the accuracy of a particular version of each myth is not as significant as the meanings we can derive from it.

The works of Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell have certainly influenced my own study of myth, and no discussion of this topic could possibly be complete without them. However, this text is not an attempt to build upon prior theoretical positions. More specifically, I am not convinced that any specific type of myth, whether cosmogony or hero's journey, serves as a "monomyth"—an original prototype from which all other forms of myth derive. Though this text is loosely structured around the theme of a hero's journey, my own view of this motif differs in many ways from that of Joseph Campbell. Rather than basing this exploration on any prior work, I find this motif to be a helpful and provocative approach to exploring some of the myriad paths that lead us into mythic realms.

The impetus behind this text is perhaps best revealed by its title. Though the origin of many of these tales predates recorded history, the motifs they consider, the secrets they reveal, are as alive now as they have been throughout human history. Perhaps no culture or language is ever truly "dead." If the past were only the past, there would likely be no point in poking about in it. Myths offer us so much more than a look backward,

and this text seeks not so much to study what these stories were but to consider how they live on in us and where they might lead us.

Even in the early stages of scholarship in the field, some extremely important anthropological and analytical work on myths, symbols and rituals was done by women (Mead, von Franz, and others). The best-known scholars, however, are male. Though scholars like Frazer, Freund, Doty, Long, Eliade, and Campbell have contributed massively to scholarship in this area, their focus, not surprisingly, has influenced developments in the field in favor of male figures and patriarchal interpretations. Joseph Campbell, for example, has been strongly critiqued for the obvious sexist perspective in some of his work. Because of its popularity, based in part on the Bill Moyers interviews, this bias is especially troubling. Though critique of this bias is beyond the scope of this book, I have intentionally focused some of my discussion on myths involving female deities and heroes and on alternative perspectives challenging some of the better-known traditional views.

Study of myth does not seem to me to have as much impact on contemporary academic work as it has in the past. Although this area of study typically has a place in the curricula of anthropology and literature programs, the impact of the mythic is not as much of a consideration in contemporary life and scholarship. If I believed that these narratives are merely curious and arcane artifacts from the distant past, this sidelining of the mythic would make sense. However, it is my belief that mythic narratives and the rituals that bring them to life are part of what it is to be human, and that our intellectual and psychological lives are starved without some exercising of the mythic imagination.

While some scholars in religious studies may consider studies of myth and ritual to be somewhat peripheral, their impact on contemporary culture is undisputed. The academy may focus elsewhere, but many writers, playwrights, film directors, and creators of video and computer games have a better understanding of what engages the human imagination. One need only consider the impact of a few narratives to realize how deeply we are drawn to the mythic: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, and *Harry Potter*, not to mention all manner of monsters, continue to draw us into their magical world, hungry to see ourselves again reflected in these mythic mirrors. Those who would remove the mythic power from spirituality may react suspiciously to the symbolic images in these tales, but lines still form around the block to see films with mythic content.

With this perspective in mind, I have included in my discussion some consideration of the connections we in contemporary culture may experience when reflecting upon these narratives. These observations are, of

course, somewhat skewed by my own personality and experiences, but it is my hope that others will find observations here to which they can relate. Though I have included some consideration of ways in which ancient cultures interacted with these mythic traditions, I have not focused as much on past cultures and their interpretations of these themes.

As mentioned above, the structure of this book is based very loosely on the mythic cycle itself. After a general discussion of the terms and concepts involved in the study of symbols, myths, and rituals, the following chapters track the stages of the cycle from creation to rebirth and return. In the final chapter, I have included a discussion of some of the ways ancient myths function in contemporary culture. At the end of each chapter, I have included study questions, discussion questions, and information about where complete versions of the myths mentioned in each chapter may be found.