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INTRODUCTION

Among the many theories of myth and many theories of ritual, the myth and ritual theory is distinctive in connecting myths to rituals. The myth and ritual, or myth-ritualist, theory maintains that myths and rituals operate together. The theory claims not that myths and rituals happen to go hand in hand but that they must. In its most uncompromising form, the theory contends that myths and rituals cannot exist without each other. In a milder form, the theory asserts that myths and rituals originally exist together but may subsequently go their separate ways. In its mildest form, the theory maintains that myths and rituals can arise separately but subsequently coalesce.

Original Formulation

In a few introductory pages of his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* the Victorian biblicist and Arabist William Robertson Smith pioneered the myth-ritualist theory.¹ Smith begins by warning against the anachronistic "modern habit . . . to look at religion from the side of belief rather than of practice" (*Lectures*, First Series, 1st edn, p. 17). Smith's approach to ancient religion is behaviorist. Instead of first looking for the "creed" that will provide "the key to ritual and practice" (p. 18), he does the reverse: he first finds the ritual, which will then unlock the creed. Indeed, he cautions against even expecting to find a creed, for "the antique religions had for the most part no creed; they consisted entirely of institutions and practices" (p. 18). Smith grants that ancients, whom he compares with primitives, doubtless performed rituals for some

¹ See William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, First Series, 1st edn (Edinburgh: Black, 1889).

reason: "No doubt men will not habitually follow certain practices without attaching a meaning to them" (p. 18). But he claims that the meaning was secondary and could even fluctuate: "as a rule we find that while the practice was rigorously fixed, the meaning attached to it was extremely vague, and the same rite was explained by different people in different ways, without any question of orthodoxy or heterodoxy arising in consequence" (p. 18).

In classical Greece, for example, "certain things were done at a temple, and people were agreed that it would be impious not to do them. But if you had asked why they were done, you would probably have had several mutually exclusive explanations from different persons, and no one would have thought it a matter of the least religious importance which of these you chose to adopt" (p. 18). Moreover, the explanations given for a ritual did not stir strong feelings. Rather than formal declarations of belief – creeds – the various explanations were stories, or myths, which simply described "the circumstances under which the rite first came to be established, by the command or by the direct example of the god" (p. 18). "The rite, in short, was connected not with a dogma [i.e., creed] but with a myth" (p. 18). "In all the antique religions, mythology takes the place of dogma" (p. 18).

At the same time, ritual was much more important in ancient religion than myth: "this mythology was no essential part of ancient religion, for it had no sacred sanction and no binding force on the worshippers. The myths connected with individual sanctuaries and ceremonies were merely part of the apparatus of the worship; they served to excite the fancy and sustain the interest of the worshipper; but he was often offered a choice of several accounts of the same thing, and provided that he fulfilled the ritual with accuracy, no one cared what he believed about its origin" (p. 19). Consequently, Smith spurns the attention conventionally accorded not only creed but also myth in ancient religion: "mythology ought not to take the prominent place that is too often assigned to it in the scientific study of ancient faiths" (p. 19). Smith goes as far as to declare that "ritual and practical usage were, strictly speaking, the sum total of ancient religions" (p. 21).

According to Smith, "in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth" (p. 19). Myth arose only once the reason for the ritual had somehow been forgotten: "Now by far the largest part of the myths of antique religions are connected with the ritual of particular shrines, or with religious observances of particular tribes and districts. In all such cases it is probable, in most cases it is certain, that the myth is merely the explanation of a religious usage; and ordinarily it is such an explanation as could not have arisen till the original sense of the usage had more or less fallen into oblivion" (p. 19). Myth was superfluous as long as the reason for the ritual remained clear. Only once the reason was lost was myth created to explain and perhaps to justify the ritual, which might nevertheless have continued to be practiced anyway.

Smith's brand of myth-ritualism is tame. Rituals antedate myths and thereby do not initially require myths. Conversely, myths can eventually flourish apart from rituals. But Smith remains the pioneering myth-ritualist because he was the first to propose that the earliest myths arose in connection with rituals. While myth-ritualism requires some indispensable connection between myth and ritual, it does not require a link of equality. For Smith, ritual is conspicuously more important than myth, which he calls "secondary" (e.g., p. 20). He proposes the myth-ritualist theory to explain myth, not ritual. Myth depends on ritual, even if ritual comes to depend on myth. Without ritual there would be no myth, whether or not without myth there would cease to be ritual.

In claiming that myth is an explanation of ritual, Smith is denying that myth is an explanation of the world – the standard conception of myth, espoused classically by Edward Tylor.² For Tylor, myth is an account of events in the physical world. Myth is more important than ritual, which is the *application*, not the *subject*, of myth. Myth constitutes creed, which is merely expressed in the form of a story. For Tylor, myth serves the same function as science. Indeed, myth is the ancient and primitive counterpart to modern science. For both Smith and Tylor, science has neither myths nor rituals.

Development of the Theory

In the several editions of *The Golden Bough* the classicist and anthropologist James Frazer developed the myth-ritualist theory far beyond that of his close friend Smith.³ While Frazer is best known for his tripartite division of all culture into the stages of magic, religion, and science, the bulk of his tome is devoted to an intermediate stage between religion and science – a stage of magic and religion combined. In this in between stage is to be found myth-ritualism; for only here do myths and rituals work together. In the stage of sheer magic there are rituals – the routines involved in carrying out the directions – but no myths, for there are no gods. In the stage of religion there are both myths and rituals, but they are barely connected. Myths describe the character and behavior of gods. Rituals seek to curry divine favor. Rituals may presuppose myths, which would suggest what activities would most please the gods, but they are otherwise independent of myths.

² See E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1st edn (London: Murray, 1871), vol. I, chs 8–10. On Tylor see my "Tylor's Theory of Myth as Primitive Science," in *The Sum of Our Choices: Essays in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 70–84.

³ See J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1st edn, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1890); 2nd edn, 3 vols (London: Macmillan, 1900); 3rd edn, 12 vols (London: Macmillan, 1911–15); abridged edn (London: Macmillan, 1922).

By contrast, in the following stage of magic and religion combined, myths and rituals work together. Frazer, rarely consistent, in effect presents two distinct versions of myth-ritualism. In the first version myth describes the life of the god of vegetation, and ritual enacts the myth, or at least that portion of the myth describing the death and rebirth of the god. The ritual operates on the basis of the Law of Similarity, according to which the imitation of an action causes it to happen. The ritual does not manipulate vegetation directly. Rather, it manipulates the god of vegetation. But as the king goes, so goes vegetation. The assumption that vegetation is under the control of a god is the legacy of religion. The assumption that vegetation can be controlled, even if only through the king, is the legacy of magic. The combination of myth and ritual is the combination of religion and magic: "Thus the old magical theory of the seasons was displaced, or rather supplemented, by a religious theory. For although men now attributed the annual cycle of change primarily to corresponding changes in their deities, they still thought that by performing certain magical rites they could aid the god who was the principle of life, in his struggle with the opposing principle of death. They imagined that they could recruit his failing energies and even raise him from the dead" (*Golden Bough*, abridged edn, p. 377). In the ritual a human being plays the role of the god and acts out what he magically causes the god to do. While the actor may be the king, Frazer does not strongly tie this version of myth-ritualism to kingship.

In Frazer's second version of myth-ritualism the king is central. In the first version the king, even when the actor in the ritual, merely plays the part of the god of vegetation. In the second version the king is himself divine, by which Frazer means that the god resides in him. Just as the health of vegetation depends on the health of its god, so now the health of the god depends on the health of the king: as the king goes, so goes the god of vegetation and so, in turn, goes vegetation itself. To ensure a steady supply of food, the community kills its king while he is still in his prime and thereby safely transfers the soul of the god to his successor: "For [primitives] believe . . . that the king's life or spirit is so sympathetically bound up with the prosperity of the whole country, that if he fell ill or grew senile the cattle would sicken and cease to multiply, the crops would rot in the fields, and men would perish of widespread disease. Hence, in their opinion, the only way of averting these calamities is to put the king to death while he is still hale and hearty, in order that the divine spirit which he has inherited from his predecessors may be transmitted in turn by him to his successor while it is still in full vigour and has not yet been impaired by the weakness of disease and old age" (pp. 312-13).

The king is killed either at the end of a fixed term or at the first sign of infirmity. Certainly the sudden death of a king can never be precluded, but the killing of the king before his likely passing guarantees as nearly as possible the continuous health of the god and so of vegetation. The aim is to fend off

winter. The withering of vegetation during the winter of even a year-long reign is ascribed to the weakening of the king.

This second version of myth-ritualism has proved the more influential by far, but it in fact provides only a tenuous link between myth and ritual and in turn between religion and magic. Instead of enacting the myth of the god of vegetation, the ritual simply changes the residence of the god. The king dies not in imitation of the death of the god but as a sacrifice to preserve the health of the god. What part myth plays here, it is not easy to see. Instead of reviving the god by magical imitation, the ritual revives the god by a transplant. It would therefore be better to restrict the term myth-ritualism to Frazer's first version of the theory.

In Frazer's true myth-ritualist scenario, myth arises prior to ritual rather than, as for Smith, after it. The myth that gets enacted in the combined stage emerges in the stage of religion and therefore antedates the ritual to which it is applied. In the combined stage, myth, as for Smith, explains the point of ritual, but not only once the meaning of ritual has been forgotten. Rather, myth *gives* ritual its meaning. In the combined stage, ritual would not be undertaken without myth: one would not ritualistically enact the death and rebirth of the god of vegetation without the myth of the death and rebirth of that god.

Myth for Frazer, as for Tylor, serves to explain the world, but for Frazer explanation is only a means to an end: controlling the world. Myth for Frazer, no less than for Tylor, is the ancient and primitive counterpart to modern science, but for Frazer it is the counterpart to applied science and not primarily, as for Tylor, to scientific theory.

For all Frazer's extension of the myth-ritualist theory beyond Smith, he gradually became an ever more vociferous Tylolean and even a critic of the very ritualists inspired by him.⁴ In turn, he came to be condemned by some myth-ritualists for exactly his Tylolean stance. Far purer exemplars of the myth-ritualist theory than he are Jane Harrison and S. H. Hooke, the leaders of the initial main groups of myth-ritualists: classicists and scholars of the ancient Near East.⁵ Their positions are close and constitute the strongest form of myth-ritualism. Fittingly, they disagree most sharply over the status of Frazer: where Harrison lauds him as her mentor, Hooke lambastes him as the arch-Tylolean.

⁴ See J. G. Frazer, Introduction to Apollodorus, *The Library*, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; New York: Putnam, 1921), vol. I, esp. xxvii–xxviii.

⁵ See Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis*, 1st edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1912); *Epigomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1921); S. H. Hooke, "The Myth and Ritual Pattern of the Ancient East," in *Myth and Ritual*, ed. Hooke (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), ch. 1; Introduction to *The Labyrinth*, ed. Hooke (London: SPCK, 1935), v–x; *The Origins of Early Semitic Ritual*, Schweich Lectures 1935 (London: Oxford University Press, 1938); "Myth, Ritual and History" and "Myth and Ritual Reconsidered," in Hooke, *The Siege Perilous* (London: SCM, 1956), chs 3 and 12; "Myth and Ritual: Past and Present," in *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*, ed. Hooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), ch. 1.

Harrison and Hooke begin by pitting their theory against the intellectualist one of Tylor and others. Referring to the peoples of the ancient Near East, especially those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, Hooke says that they "were not occupied with general questions concerning the world but with certain practical and pressing problems of daily life. There were the main problems of securing the means of subsistence, to keep the sun and moon doing their duty, to ensure the regular flooding of the Nile In order to meet these needs the early inhabitants of Egypt and Mesopotamia developed a set of customary actions directed towards a definite end" ("The Myth and Ritual Pattern of the Ancient East," pp. 2-3). Those actions were rituals. What Hooke says of the ancient Near East, Harrison says of ancient Greece.

In explaining how rituals served to control the otherwise uncontrollable forces of nature, Hooke and Harrison follow Frazer. Ritual works on the basis of the Law of Similarity. The ritual acts out the death and rebirth of the god of vegetation, who, as for Frazer, is the chief god of the pantheon. While the god is dead, the land is infertile; when he is revived, so is the land. The ritual is performed at the end of winter – better, at the point when one wants winter to end. A human being plays the part of the god.

Unlike Frazer, Hooke and Harrison postulate no distinct, prior stages of magic and religion and begin instead with the equivalent of Frazer's stage of magic and religion combined. For them, myth-ritualism is likely the earliest stage of religion. For Hooke and Harrison, no less than for Frazer, myth-ritualism is the ancient and primitive counterpart to modern science. For them, as for Frazer, modern science replaces not only myth-ritualism but myth and ritual *per se*.

As a myth-ritualist, Hooke, who scorns Frazer as a Tyloorean, is ironically even closer to Frazer than Harrison, who applauds him. For Hooke stresses the role of the king, which Harrison downplays. Sometimes for Hooke, as sometimes for Frazer, the king is only the human representative of the god of vegetation. The king imitates the death and rebirth (as well as the victory, marriage, and inauguration) of the god and thereby automatically causes the god and in turn vegetation to do the same. Other times for Hooke, as other times for Frazer, the king is himself divine, in which case the ritual is the actual killing and replacement of him. Yet Hooke still places the ritual at the end – the would-be end – of winter rather than, as for Frazer, at the end of a king's prescribed reign or at the onset of weakness. Hooke thus faces the same inconsistencies as Frazer over the status of the king.

Venturing beyond both Frazer and Hooke, Harrison, inspired by thinkers ranging from Henri Bergson to Emile Durkheim, adds to the ritual of the renewal of vegetation the ritual of initiation into society. Indeed, she argues that the original ritual, while still performed annually, was exclusively initiatory. There was no myth. God was only the projection of the euphoria produced by the ritual – a straight application of Durkheim. Subsequently, god

became a god of vegetation, the myth of the death and rebirth of that god arose, and the ritual of initiation became an agricultural ritual as well. Just as the initiates symbolically died and were reborn as full-fledged members of society, so the god of vegetation and in turn crops literally died and were reborn. Eventually, the initiatory side of the combined ritual faded, and only the Frazerian ritual of vegetation remained.

Harrison and Hooke alike deny vigorously that myth is an explanation of even ritual, much less of the world. "The myth," states Harrison, "is not an attempted explanation of either facts or rites" (*Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, p. 32). In denying that myth is an explanation of ritual, she and Hooke really mean no more than Frazer the myth-ritualist: that myth flourishes alongside ritual to provide its script rather than, as for Smith, arising only after the meaning of ritual has been forgotten. Myth can still, then, be regarded as an explanation of ritual, but of *living* ritual. Myth is recited as the ritual is enacted, just as for Frazer. Myth is therefore like the sound in a film or the narration of a pantomime. Says Hooke: "In general the spoken part of a ritual consists of a description of what is being done . . . This is the sense in which the term 'myth' is used in our discussion" ("The Myth and Ritual Pattern of the Ancient East," p. 3). Says Harrison: "The primary meaning of myth . . . is the spoken correlative of the acted rite, the thing done . . ." (*Themis*, 1st edn, p. 328).

Where for Smith myth arises later than ritual, and where for Frazer ritual arises later than the myth used with it, for Harrison and Hooke myth and ritual arise simultaneously. "It has been much disputed," notes Harrison, "whether the myth arises out of the rite or the rite out of the myth . . . As a matter of fact the two operations arose together and are practically inseparable" (*Epilegomena*, p. 27). Elsewhere, however, Harrison places ritual prior to myth.

Harrison and Hooke carry myth-ritualism further than Frazer in conferring on myth the same magical power contained in the ritual. Where for Frazer the power of myth is merely dramatic, for Harrison and Hooke it is outright magical. "The spoken word," says Hooke, "had the efficacy of an act . . ." ("The Myth and Ritual Pattern of the Ancient East," p. 3). "A myth," says Harrison, "becomes practically a story of magical intent and potency" (*Themis*, p. 330). We have here word magic – and perhaps a glint of the notion of "speech acts."

Application of the Theory to the Ancient World

With Harrison and Hooke the development of the theory of myth-ritualism peaked. The next stage was the application of the theory. The initial application was still to the ancient world. Most famously, the classicists Gilbert Murray, F. M. Cornford, and A. B. Cook applied Harrison's theory to such ancient

Greek phenomena as tragedy, comedy, the Olympic games, science, and philosophy.⁶ These seemingly secular, even anti-religious phenomena were interpreted as latent expressions of the myth of the death and rebirth of the god of vegetation.

Among biblicists, Ivan Engnell, Aubrey Johnson, and Sigmund Mowinckel accepted Hooke's formulation of the myth-ritualist theory but differed over the extent to which ancient Israel in particular adhered to the myth-ritualist pattern.⁷ Engnell saw an even stronger adherence than Hooke; Johnson and especially Mowinckel, a weaker one. Hooke was never the mentor of the biblicists, the way Harrison was for the classicists, but he was still the key figure among them. He was their myth-ritualist stalwart.

Application of the Theory Worldwide

More broadly, the anthropologist A. M. Hocart and the historian of religion E. O. James applied the myth-ritualist theory to cultures around the world.⁸ Hocart uses a simplified version of myth-ritualism – the lowest common denominator of Frazer, Hooke, and Harrison. James' more complicated version combines Frazer's two versions of myth-ritualism. The extension of myth-ritualism by Hocart and James, while worldwide, was less radical than that of Harrison's followers because the application was to manifestly religious phenomena – that is, to overt myths and rituals.

⁶ See Gilbert Murray, "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy," in Harrison, *Themis*, 341–63; *Euripides and His Age*, 1st edn (New York: Holt; London: Williams and Norgate, 1913), 60–8; *Aeschylus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940); F. M. Cornford, "The Origin of the Olympic Games," in Harrison, *Themis*, ch. 7; *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (London: Arnold, 1914); "A Ritual Basis for Hesiod's *Theogony*" (1941), in Cornford, *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950), 95–116; *Principium Sapientiae*, ed. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), 191–256; A. B. Cook, *Zeus*, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914–40).

⁷ See Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, 1st edn (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1943); *A Rigid Scrutiny*, ed. and tr. John T. Willis (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969) (retitled *Critical Essays on the Old Testament* [London: SPCK, 1970]); Aubrey R. Johnson, "The Role of the King in the Jerusalem Cults," in *The Labyrinth*, ed. Hooke, 73–111; "Hebrew Conceptions of Kingship," in *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*, ed. Hooke, 204–35; *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel*, 1st edn (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1955); Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, tr. D. R. Ap-Thomas, 2 vols (New York: Abingdon, 1962 [1951]); *He That Cometh*, tr. G. W. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954 [1951]), ch. 3.

⁸ See A. M. Hocart, *The Life-giving Myth and Other Essays*, ed. Lord Raglan (London: Methuen, 1952), chs 1, 4, 5; *Kingship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927); *The Progress of Man* (London: Methuen, 1933), chs 13, 19; E. O. James, *Christian Myth and Ritual* (London: Murray, 1933); *Comparative Religion*, 1st edn (London: Methuen, 1938), ch. 4; *The Beginnings of Religion* (London: Hutchinson, 1948), ch. 7; "Myth and Ritual," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 17 (1949), 79–120; *Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), esp. ch. 9.

Invoking Frazer, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski applied his own, qualified version of the theory to the myths of native peoples worldwide.⁹ Malinowski argues that myth gives rituals a hoary origin and thereby sanctions them, but he argues that myth sanctions many other cultural phenomena as well. Society depends on myth to encourage obedience to rules and customs of all kinds, not merely to rituals. The historian of religion Mircea Eliade applied a similar form of the theory to the myths of all cultures.¹⁰ Myth for him, too, sanctions phenomena of all kinds, not merely rituals, by giving them a primeval origin. Yet Eliade goes beyond Malinowski in stressing the importance of the ritualistic enactment of myth in the fulfillment of the the ultimate function of myth: carrying one back to the time of the myth and thereby bringing one close to the gods.

Application of the Theory to Literature

The most notable application of the myth-ritualist theory outside of religion has been to *secular* literature. Harrison herself boldly derived all art, not just literature, from ritual. She speculates that eventually people ceased believing that the imitation of an action caused that action to occur. Yet rather than abandoning ritual, they now practiced it as an end in itself. Ritual for its own sake became art, her clearest example of which is drama. More modestly than she, Murray and Cornford rooted specifically Greek epic, tragedy, and comedy in myth-ritualism. Murray then extended the theory to Shakespeare.¹¹

Other standard-bearers of the theory – derived from Frazer, Harrison, or Hooke – have included Jessie Weston on the Grail legend, E. M. Butler on the Faust legend, C. L. Barber on Shakespearean comedy, Herbert Weisinger on Shakespearean tragedy and on tragedy per se, Francis Fergusson on tragedy, Lord Raglan on hero myths and on literature as a whole, C. M. Bowra on primitive song, and Stanley Edgar Hyman and Northrop Frye on literature

⁹ See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Norton, 1926) (reprinted in his *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* [Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1948], 72–124); “Magic, Science and Religion,” in *Science, Religion and Reality*, ed. Joseph Needham (London: Sheldon Press; New York: Macmillan, 1925), esp. 76–8 (reprinted in *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, 1–71).

¹⁰ See Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1959 [1957]), ch. 2; *Myth and Reality*, tr. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, tr. Rosemary Sheed (London: Sheed and Ward, 1958 [1949]), esp. ch. 15.

¹¹ See Jane Ellen Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual* (New York: Holt; London: Williams and Norgate, 1913); in addition to the references in note 6 above, see Gilbert Murray, “Hamlet and Orestes: A Study in Traditional Types,” Annual Shakespeare Lecture, 1914, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 6 (1913–14) (London: Oxford University Press, 1914), 389–412.

generally.¹² As literary critics, these myth-ritualists have understandably been concerned less with myth itself than with the mythic origin of literature. Works of literature are interpreted as the outgrowth of myths once tied to rituals. For those literary critics indebted to Frazer, as the majority are, literature harks back to myths that were originally the scripts of the key primitive ritual of regularly killing and replacing the king in order to ensure crops for the community. "The king must die" becomes the familiar summary line.

For literary myth-ritualists, myth becomes literature when it is severed from ritual. Myth tied to ritual is religious literature; myth cut off from ritual is secular literature, or mere literature. When tied to ritual, myth can serve any of the active functions ascribed to it by the myth-ritualists. Myth bereft of ritual is demoted to mere commentary. To paraphrase Marx and Engels, myth linked to ritual can change the world, where myth severed from ritual can only interpret it.

Independently of Frazer and others, René Girard has proposed his own linkage of myth, ritual, and literature.¹³ For him, literature is the legacy of myth, which recounts, albeit in distorted form, the ritual sacrifice of an innocent victim. The central connection for him between myth and the killing of a figure celebrated as a savior is reminiscent of the myth-ritualism of Frazer. While Girard seeks to show how literature reflects myth, he goes beyond

¹² See Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920); E. M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (New York: Macmillan, 1948); C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959); Herbert Weisinger, *Tragedy and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1953); "The Myth and Ritual Approach to Shakespearean Tragedy," *Centennial Review* 1 (1957), 142-66; "An Examination of the Myth and Ritual Approach to Shakespeare," in *Myth and Mythmaking*, ed. Henry A. Murray (New York: Braziller, 1960), 132-40; *The Agony and the Triumph* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1964); Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949); *Dante's Drama of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953); "'Myth' and the Literary Scruple," *Sewanee Review* 64 (1956), 171-85; Lord Raglan, "The Hero of Tradition," *Folk-Lore* 45 (1934), 212-31; *The Hero* (London: Methuen, 1936); "Myth and Ritual," *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955), 454-61; C. M. Bowra, *Primitive Song* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962); Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Myth, Ritual, and Nonsense," *Kenyon Review* 11 (1949), 455-75; "The Ritual View of Myth and the Mythic," *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955), 462-72; Northrop Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," *Kenyon Review* 13 (1951), 92-110; *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 131-239; "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement," *Daedalus* 90 (1961), 587-605; "Literature and Myth," in *Relations of Literary Study*, ed. James Thorpe (New York: Modern Language Association, 1967), 27-55.

¹³ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory (London: Athlone Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977 [1972]); "To double business bound" (London: Athlone Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); *The Scapegoat*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (London: Athlone Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986 [1982]); *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trs. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Athlone Press; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987 [1978]); *Job, the Victim of his People*, tr. Yvonne Freccero (London: Athlone Press; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987 [1985]).

other literary myth-ritualists in proposing his own theory of myth and ritual. The function of myth is to cover up the memory of the dastardly killing and thereby preserve the stability of society. Girard roots sacrifice not, like Frazer, in hunger, but in aggression.

Revisions of the Theory

Working on their own, the biblicist Theodor Gaster and the anthropologist Adolf Jensen independently proposed versions of myth-ritualism which make myth more important than ritual.¹⁴ Whether or not their contention that their fellow myth-ritualists downplay myth is correct, they offer a new twist to the relationship between myth and ritual.

The anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn went much further.¹⁵ He tempered the myth-ritualist dogma that myths and rituals are inseparable. He argued that, operating separately or together, myth and ritual serve a psychological function: that of alleviating anxiety. Myth provides prescribed ways of understanding; ritual, prescribed ways of behaving. When, for Kluckhohn, myths and rituals do operate together, they operate in the same general manner as for Harrison and Hooke: the myth explains what the ritual enacts.

While allowing, like Kluckhohn, for the independence of myth and ritual, the classicist Walter Burkert maintains that when the two do come together, they reinforce each other.¹⁶ Myth links rote human behavior to the behavior of gods. Ritual links a mere story to prescribed behavior of the most dutiful kind. Like Girard, Burkert roots myth in sacrifice and roots sacrifice in aggression, but he does not limit sacrifice to human sacrifice, and he roots sacrifice itself in hunting – the original expression of aggression. Moreover, myth for Burkert functions not to hide the fact of sacrifice but to preserve it and its role in enabling human beings to cope with the guilt and anxiety they feel over their own aggression and mortality. Finally, Burkert connects myths not only to

¹⁴ See Theodor H. Gaster, "Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East: A Review Article," *Review of Religion* 9 (1945), 267–81; *Thespis*, 1st edn (New York: Schuman, 1950); "Myth and Story," *Numen* 1 (1954), 184–212; *The New Golden Bough* (New York: Criterion, 1959), 462–4; Adolf E. Jensen, *Myth and Cult among Primitive Peoples*, trs. Marianna Tax Choldin and Wolfgang Weissleder (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

¹⁵ See Clyde Kluckhohn, "Myths and Rituals: A General Theory," *Harvard Theological Review* 35 (1942), 45–79; Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho*, rev. edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 229–40.

¹⁶ See Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), esp. 56–8, 99–101; *Homo Necans*, tr. Peter Bing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983 [1972]), esp. 29–34; *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 73–8; *Creation of the Sacred* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), ch. 3.

rituals of sacrifice but also, like Harrison, to rituals of initiation. Myths here serve the same socializing function as rituals.

By far the most radical and influential contemporary variety of myth-ritualism has been structuralism, pioneered by the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss.¹⁷ While Lévi-Strauss focuses overwhelmingly on myth, he does consider ritual as well. According to Lévi-Strauss, all human beings think in the form of classifications and project them onto the world. Humans think specifically in the form of pairs of appositions, which Lévi-Strauss calls "binary oppositions." Not only myths but all other human activities as well display humanity's pairing impulse.

Myth is distinctive in not only expressing oppositions, which are equivalent to contradictions, but also resolving them: "the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction" ("The Structural Study of Myth," p. 443). Myth resolves a contradiction dialectically, by providing either a mediating middle term or an analogous, but more easily resolved, contradiction.

Not only do whole myths have the same dialectical relationship to one another that the parts of each have internally, but so do myths and rituals. Rather than mirroring each other, as for other myth-ritualists, myth and ritual oppose each other. Lévi-Strauss thus presents a new, structuralist slant to the relationship between myth and ritual. As he says in contrasting his brand of myth-ritualism to prior ones, "The current [i.e., nonstructuralist] theory, according to which a [chronological] term-to-term correspondence exists between two orders (whether the rite acts out the myth, or the myth explicates the rite), is reducible to the particular case of a more general [structuralist] relation. The study of individual cases makes myths and rites appear as different transformations of identical elements" (*Structural Anthropology*, II, pp. 65–6).

As influential as the myth-ritualist theory has been among not only theorists of myth or ritual but also specialists in the myths and rituals of individual cultures, most theorists of myth and most theorists of ritual have rejected the theory in any of its forms.¹⁸ They maintain that myths and rituals exist largely independently of each other. Most theorists of myth continue to focus on myth

¹⁷ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955), 428–44 (reprinted in his *Structural Anthropology*, tr. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf [New York: Basic Books, 1963 (1958)], ch. 11); "Structure and Dialectics," in his *Structural Anthropology*, ch. 12; "Comparative Religions of Nonliterate Peoples," in his *Structural Anthropology II*, tr. Monique Layton (New York: Basic Books, 1976 [1973]), ch. 5.

¹⁸ To cite a single example of the influence of the theory on specialists: "Modern research stresses the connection between *myth and ritual*: The myths are stories explaining the rites enacted in the *sacred dramas* of the great festivals. Above all the *creation drama* of the *New Year Festival* has been of great importance in the whole Ancient Near East, and through the medium of Canaan it has also gained a firm footing in Israel" (Aage Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 5th edn [Copenhagen: Gad, 1959], vol. I, 242). John Rogerson pointed out this example to me.

alone, and most theorists of ritual continue to focus on ritual alone. Even those theorists of myth or of ritual who accept some linkage between myth and ritual usually limit the tie to a fraction of myths and rituals.¹⁹

Whatever the actual nexus between myths and rituals turns out to be, the myth-ritualist theory remains valuable. It suggests aspects of myth that might otherwise get overlooked – notably, the relationship between belief and practice, between narrative and action. The theory also suggests parallels between myth and other cultural phenomena like science and literature that might otherwise get missed.²⁰

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¹⁹ Criticisms of the myth-ritualist theory abound. In addition to Frazer's criticism cited in note 4 above, see esp. William Ridgeway, *The Dramas and Dramatic Dances of Non-European Races* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1915), 41–64; Norman H. Snaith, *The Jewish New Year Festival* (London: SPCK, 1947); Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); *The Problem of Similarity in Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, Frazer Lecture 1950 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951); Haskell M. Block, "Cultural Anthropology and Contemporary Literary Criticism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11 (1952), 46–54; Wallace W. Douglas, "The Meanings of 'Myth' in Modern Criticism," *Modern Philology* 50 (1953), 232–42; Stith Thompson, "Myths and Folktales," *Journal of American Folklore* 68 (1955), 482–8; William Bascom, "The Myth-Ritual Theory," *Journal of American Folklore* 70 (1957), 103–14; S. G. F. Brandon, "The Myth and Ritual Position Critically Examined," in *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship*, ed. Hooke, 261–91; H. J. Rose, "The Evidence for Divine Kings in Greece," in *The Sacral Kingship/La Regalità Sacra*, VIIIth International Congress for the History of Religions (Leiden: Brill, 1959), 371–8; Joseph Fontenrose, *Python* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), ch. 15; *The Ritual Theory of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Francis Lee Utley, "Folklore, Myth, and Ritual," in *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 83–109; A. N. Marlow, "Myth and Ritual in Early Greece," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 43 (1961), 373–402; G. S. Kirk, *Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 12–31; *The Nature of Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), ch. 10; Hans H. Penner, "Myth and Ritual: A Wasteland or a Forest of Symbols?" *History and Theory*, Beiheft 8 (1968), 46–57.

²⁰ The fullest presentations of the myth-ritualist theory are to be found in Richard F. Hardin, "Ritual" in *Recent Criticism: The Elusive Sense of Community*, *PMLA* 98 (1983), 846–62; H. S. Versnel, "What's Sauce for the Goose Is Sauce for the Gander: Myth and Ritual, Old and New," in *Approaches to Greek Myth*, ed. Lowell Edmunds (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), ch. 1 (revised version in Versnel, *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* [Leiden: Brill, 1993], ch. 1); Robert Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1991).