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## Myths Old and New: The Bedtime Stories of Humankind

### ABSTRACT

One may think that myth has become obsolete, that its study no longer has a place in contemporary society, yet myth and ritual are repositories of ancient knowledge and they carry universal patterns of behavior and thought across the ages and geographic boundaries. Whereas history and archeology can offer but a blurry image of old psychology, myths can facilitate a clearer glimpse into the minds of people who lived hundreds or thousands of years ago. There was a time when life was inconceivable without religion. Nowadays this is no longer so. Still our daily lives continue to be shaped by long forgotten rituals and practices, some of which are so deeply rooted in our psyche that we do not even remember their relationship with the sacred anymore. Due to scientific discoveries, we tend to view myths with the superiority the microwave user feels towards the cave man, trying to light a bundle of dry grass with a flint. Also, because myth and religion are not necessary in order to supply a moral code for life in society, we tend to overlook their intrinsic value and their imperceptible, albeit omnipresent influence on the way we act, think and regard the world around us. In this paper I intend to discuss two modern phenomena: the re-telling and the re-invention of myths.

### KEYWORDS

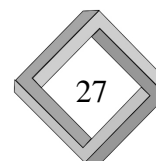
Myth; Imagination; Illusion; Storytelling.

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### Re-telling myths with a modern flavour: the rejection of immortality

During one of my mythology classes, I made an experiment with my students: we watched a recent movie (which they unanimously considered of poor artistic quality) and tried to discuss the mythological themes developed there. It was interesting to note that most of them had no problems identifying the traditional themes, but were less quick in pointing out the new ones. Another difficulty arose when they had to make connections between the movie subjects and classical myths, which led me to a further, in-depth analysis of the subject. The movie in question was *Clash of the Titans*, an American movie produced in 2010 by director Louis Leterrier, which is more or less a remake of the 1981 work of director Desmond Davis, starring the legendary Laurence Olivier. The first impression is that we are dealing with a re-telling of an ancient Greek myth: Hades, god of the Underworld, threatens an entire island with destruction (in an attempt to dethrone Zeus and gain absolute power over both realms) and it is up to the hero Perseus to save the world. Perseus starts on his quest to find a way to defeat Hades and his sea monster, a quest which ends according to a seemingly pre-historic recipe for success: hero kills



monster and marries girl, and they live happily ever after. Or not. To be more precise, they live happily together until they grow old and die. If many elements of the movie are obviously based on Greek themes (the general god characters, the winged horse Pegasus, Medusa, the three fortune-telling crones, Charon and the crossing into the Underworld), the underlying motif is entirely modern. While the ancient and medieval worlds were abundant with quests and searches for the elixir of immortality and eternal youth, our modern society does not seem so keen on this idea. Ancient Greek heroes received, at the end of a life full of extraordinary deeds, the right to join the gods on the Elysian Islands, and they sometimes turned into gods themselves, as in the case of Hercules (turned into a god by his father Zeus), or Achilles (who was worshipped as a god in many territories around or close to the Black Sea).

However, the Perseus from year 2010 states his refusal of immortality in no unclear terms, first when Zeus offers him a magical weapon: “I can do this as a man”, then in a direct confrontation with Zeus: “I’d rather die like a man than live forever as a god.” Despite the millennia that have passed since the first heroic sagas were created, the movement from a longing and arduous search for immortality to its blunt refusal seems a step that is wider than expected. In the same *Clash of the Titans*, Io appears as a young beautiful woman who has been punished by gods with eternal youth. She tells her story mournfully, explaining how she had to watch all her loved ones die around her, and how the gods’ curse sentenced her to an eternity of solitude and sadness. In the end, she dies to save Perseus, but, as a reward for Perseus saving Olympus, Zeus brings her back to life and allows the couple to live a happy mortal life together. Beyond the irony of the gift (immortality is not desirable, but resurrecting

the dead to suit one’s purpose and convenience is completely acceptable), the situation repeats the pattern first explored by another movie: *Highlander*, produced in 1986 by director Russel Mulcahy and starring Christopher Lambert. In a quest which seems to be the exact opposite of Gilgamesh’s adventure, a group of immortals who can only be killed by beheading, fight for the ultimate prize: mortality. Like Perseus, individuals endowed with extraordinary powers, who do not age nor are affected by disease, fight fiercely for the right to grow old and die like anybody else around them. Connor MacLeod (the Highlander) tells one sad story to explain his purpose in life: his first wife grew old and eventually died in his still young and strong arms.

The theme is again emphasized in the 2011 box office hit, *Pirates of the Caribbean—On Stranger Tides*. Various parties (pirates, officers of the Queen of England and dignified Spanish aristocrats) engage on a race towards the fountain of youth, yet when they find it, it is only one character – the single character depicted as irrevocably evil – who tries to take advantage of its powers. On the other hand, Captain Teague (a wise pirate captain who appears to possess the ultimate knowledge of pirate laws and lore) states that “it doesn’t matter how long you live, but how you live”, an idea repeated by his son, Captain Jack Sparrow, at the end of the movie:

Gibbs: I don’t get it, Jack. You had the chalices, the tear, the water - you could have lived forever!

Jack Sparrow: Who’s to say I won’t live forever? But, you know what? It’s a pirate’s life for me, savvy?

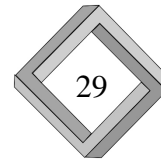
Just like the Highlander or the modern Perseus, Jack Sparrow (who is, undoubtedly,



one of the most popular heroes of our times) rejects immortality in favour of life full of human benefits. If we see movies as the modern version of not so long extinct storytellers, and cinemas as an extended fireplace, where grown up children gather to listen to “bedtime stories”, the unavoidable question is what caused this significant shift in human psychology? How has immortality become all of a sudden so undesirable? Why do we still crave stories featuring heroes with all kinds of superpowers if in reality all we want is a mortal human life? During my classroom experiment, I asked my students the same question: What is wrong with being immortal? It is the human nature to always want more, so immortality would quench this thirst. We could dedicate an entire lifespan to a single pursuit, knowing that there would be enough time for the next one, and the next, and so on. Of course, if we consider the logistic aspects (natural resources, inhabitable places), things become complicated, yet that has never stopped humankind from dreaming. Why, then, would we suddenly decide to stop dreaming about neverending youth and life without death?

My students’ answers repeated Io’s and MacLeod’s opinions: immortality condemns you to watch the loved ones die around you. The idea is noble on an abstract level, but if we analyze it carefully, the discrepancies are obvious: even during our normal, mortal life, we are still doomed to watch family and friends disappear. Moreover, with exceptions dictated by fatal diseases and accidents, it is our human biology that says our parents, grandparents and older friends should die before we do. Combine this fact with the statistically high probability that our lifelong partner will die before we do, and we find ourselves facing long years of solitude, without the solace of youth, health and the infinite possibilities that come with

immortality. I stated in the beginning that, due to the existence of clearly defined law codes and social rules, myths and stories are no longer necessary to support the order of our life in society. I would like to make a distinction now: myths are no longer necessary as an official instrument, but they continue to shape our view of the world and to offer us life models. In my opinion, the refusal of immortality emphasized in recent productions does not actually express a shift in human psychology. While mankind has indeed altered its way of thinking across the centuries, some patterns – like the search and longing for immortality, the more or less acknowledged belief and need to believe in a higher, supernatural power, the more or less conscious separation of the sacred and the profane, to mention just a few – remain unchanged. Nowadays we have not forsaken the search for eternal youth and life, it has simply acquired a different form: that of modern medicine, genetic research and plastic surgery. Despite the declared (and idealistic) rejection of anything that does not pertain to our ordinary world, in which our bodies are affected by wrinkles and disease, where they fail to come close to our beauty standards, modern society is engaged in a race against time and biology. And this is where myths (re-told, re-evaluated, re-modeled to suit contemporary issues) are used again, their power to affect large groups of people remembered and re-activated. Perseus, Disney’s Hercules, the Highlander and Jack Sparrow tell us that immortality is not good—and whom should we listen to if not the heroes who fill the screen with their larger than life adventures? Nevertheless, is it wisdom or sour grapes? I would say neither. In a society where food and health care have become easily and widely accessible, myths act as *memento mori*: we must not forget that, in spite of our state-of-the-art hospitals, where broken limbs and



organs are taken apart and put together again, in spite of our I-Pods, I-Pads and other gadgets, death is still just around the corner.

### **Re-inventing the myths: fantasy literature**

Like anything that has ever stirred human interest, fantasy literature has its fans, detractors and hardcore aficionados. Of interest for the present topic is the fact that in recent years, fantasy as a genre has managed to surpass science-fiction in popularity, which seems to indicate that people have started acknowledging (sometimes without truly realizing it) the relationship between myth and our psyche. Fantasy literature, no matter how brilliant and creative the author, is nothing but mythology rewritten and its success indicates that man has started longing for “the age of gods”. Two authors have been particularly successful: J.K. Rowling and Stephanie Meyer, and one cannot help but wonder what turned almost one billion people into Harry Potter fans. Or what caused the “Twilight” frenzy. The answer is simple and I do not claim credit for it: all the female readers put themselves into Bella’s shoes and live vicariously a charmed life in which the ordinary girl attracts the attention of the best-looking guy in high school. If that guy happens to be immortal, rich, possessing the knowledge of several lives and (it goes without saying) superhuman powers, and if he happens to have never been in love before, the recipe for ever-after happiness is perfect. The same is applicable to Harry Potter: every child who has read the book dreams of being Harry Potter, or at least one of his friends, to live in a castle, surrounded by magic and magical objects which turn everyday life into something better than all the Disneyland of the world put together.

Where is the myth in that? Well, the recipe for success is not new: all storytellers of old spoke about scullery maids who were in fact princesses and who ended up marrying Prince Charming, and about sons whose families did not appreciate them to their true valor until they decided (or were forced by circumstances) to go on a quest and become heroes. Despite the fact that myths are generally associated with gods, they are not necessarily so, although fairy tales and myths alike will always include some kind of presence from the other world and hint at least at an interference between realms. Myths are, to use Mircea Eliade’s definition, “sacred history”, they represent not only religious, but also social prototypes, and the *Twilight Saga* or the *Harry Potter* books seem to indicate that the 21<sup>st</sup> century people are not so different from the people who gathered to listen about Achilles’ or Cuchulainn’s exploits.

A modern creation which bears comparison to the great classical sagas is George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Fire and Ice*, a cycle designed to contain eight books, out of which the fifth one was published in July this year. *A Song of Fire and Ice* has been praised for the fact that the characters are no longer depicted in black or white, but in different shades of gray, and no character, no matter its status within the general plot, is “safe”. One example is Rob Stark, a boy forced by circumstances to take his father’s place sooner than expected, who tries to avenge his father’s murder. Rob raises an army and wins every fight, only to be murdered himself during a wedding he attends. What Martin’s fans forget or ignore is the fact that Achilles was also killed, and not in a direct fight, but through a lucky hit with the arrow, while Hercules’ cause of death was also cunning, his wife being the innocent instrument. George R.R. Martin



does not create new myths, but he does re-write them. The rich mythological lore of the world represents his readily available source, from which characters such as Daenerys, mother of dragons, Tyrion the Dwarf, Aegon the King, Jon Snow the Skinchanger or the Others (Martin's version of vampires, cold creatures which can only be destroyed by fire or obsidian and who create a kind of zombies out of the people they kill) are born. We could say that Martin follows the road opened by Tolkien, with the difference that his depictions of fights and murders are bloodier and more realistic. Yet that is not an entirely new literary device either; the Celtic sagas sometimes offer similar displays of violence and bloody scenes. For example, in one episode, Daenerys must eat the raw, still pulsing heart of a horse to insure the health and well-being of her unborn son. In the Irish *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, the following scene appears:

Then she [Morrigan] told the Dagda that the Fomoiré would land at Mag Ceidne, and that he should summon the *aes dana* of Ireland to meet her at the Ford of the Unshin, and she would go into Scetne to destroy Indech mac De Domnann, the king of the Fomoiré, and *would take from him the blood of his heart and the kidneys of his valor. Later she gave two handfuls of that blood to the hosts* that were waiting at the Ford of the Unshin. Its name became "The Ford of Destruction" because of that destruction of the king.

I have not given the example above with the intention of proving Martin's lack of originality; on the contrary, from a literary point of view, I quite admire his re-interpretation of themes and motifs, while as a mythographer I can only rejoice the fact

that the old stories do not sleep forgotten. I would like, however, to emphasize the fact that the coherence of patterns and themes which can be observed in stories old and new seems to support the theory according to which humankind developed at some point in history a "religious" gene, just as it has developed a language gene. No language in this world, as Joseph Greenberg proved, is entirely unrelated to any other language, be it old or new, dead or still spoken. Similarly, no great story that has managed to affect large numbers of people and to survive the test of time is entirely original, because the human mind was programmed to recognize, and consequently be attracted to, a limited number of themes and subjects. Just like children who, before bedtime, insist on hearing the same story again and again, the humankind wants to hear the same stories, retold with variations which, across the centuries, seem almost completely insignificant. We need to hear, again and again, that Prince Charming eventually finds Cinderella, that inside our small and insignificant selves lie hidden extraordinary powers and magical abilities, that even heroes can die (although it is preferable that they turn into gods after death) and that in every paradise there is some sin and blood. And that, though the quest for immortality is futile, there is still some hope left in this world.