

From the Guest Editor

What is it about myth? Back in the days when Richard Dorson and others were busy codifying what counts as folklore and what doesn't, the study of myth was relegated to the anthropologists, the classicists, the religionists, and others whose research and conclusions did not (and could not) depend upon the efforts of fieldworkers among living traditional-narrative bearers. (Native America's societies, the only ones in the Western Hemisphere felt by Dorson to have myths at all, represented anomalies within this view.) This exclusionary strategy was, in large part, dictated by an understanding of myth as something like: a narrative genre encompassing the sacred stories of prerational, preliterate, prescientific, and/or preindustrial peoples, concerned with events believed to have taken place in the remote past, in some way allied with performances of religious rituals, and interpretable only within the contexts of their production, in turn accomplishable only by close reliance upon surviving (decoded) documentary evidence.

But politely interrogate any sampling of scholars who work with myth in today's postmodern academic environment and it becomes immediately obvious that among the problematic terms in such a characterization are "narrative," "genre," "sacred," all of the pre-you-and-me terms, "events," "belief," "remote," "performance," "ritual," "interpretation," "context," "production," "document," "coding," and "evidence." Even taking the definition wars of the past century or so into consideration, whose arguments centered largely on descriptions of folklore's long-acknowledged genres of legend, saga, epic, ballad, and folktale, it must be admitted that such a state of semantic disarray and/or ambiguity is truly extraordinary.

This theme issue of *Folklore Forum* in no way seeks to resolve the debate over the proper meaning of the word "myth." Rather, in aid of that debate, it seeks to display the variety inherent in our understanding of myth as we near the end of the twentieth century. In preparation for this issue, I cast a wide, interdisciplinary net to solicit thoughtful writing about myth as a term in current scholarship. From among the many fine essays I received for this issue, I selected the three articles presented here, which together suggest a representative cross-section of the ways in which we currently employ many of the concepts associated with myth.

The first article, contributed by Jody Malcolm, a rogue scholar currently working in Florida, is a beautifully realized exploration of western Europe's oldest story—the Irish epic known as the *Táin Bo Cuáilgne*, with its marvelous characters Cuchulain, Maeve, and Fergus—appropriated by Irish

filmmaker Neil Jordan in his attempt to reveal our often fatal susceptibility to accepting the unchanging truths of an old story within a changing modern political context. I was as intrigued as the next moviegoer by *The Crying Game's* treatment of colonialism, race, and sexuality, as well as with its Aesopic fable about human nature, but it never occurred to me that the film was a revisioning of the *Tain*. In Malcolm's article, film becomes our new documentation for the existence of a living myth, one still very much at the heart of contemporary Irish attitudes toward things like freedom and incarceration, fidelity to norms and personal integrity, gender and its roles, violence and its roles, and storytelling altogether.

The second article, contributed by scholar-poet Stephen S. Curry of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, is a nuanced feminist-psychoanalytic examination of adolescent literature that seeks to allow, explore, and ultimately validate the stuff of myth as central to successful female maturation within patriarchy. Drawing from the deep well of ideas left to us by Sigmund Freud, C. G. Jung, Melanie Klein, and Julia Kristeva, among others, Curry's writing articulates those shapes, colors, feelings, smells, intuitions, and other experienced initiations into human being as they are enacted in literary structures that privilege the preoedipal (maternal) over the oedipal (paternal), relatedness over hierarchy, and depth over surface expression.

In the final article, Robert Glenn Howard of the University of Oregon at Eugene takes an ancient myth online and in good ethnographic style observes it—in this case from the vantage of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical theory—as its adherents wend their ways through biological science, religious faith, and electronic communications technology toward an imminent and specifically-perceived future for the planet Earth. In so doing, Howard challenges many of our assumptions about orality, narrativity, performance, belief, documents, and myth as a genre concerned with purported events in the remote past. We're not talking about your mother's myth (or father's, for that matter) anymore.

My warmest thanks to all three writers for their skill, perseverance, and good humor in the face of editorial onslaughts of all kinds.

For the new "Perspectives" section of *Folklore Forum*, I asked scholars known to me from a variety of fields to contribute brief essays responding to the question, "What is myth?" Ten generous souls took the question to heart and produced the texts here included. In considering their widely differing criteria and resultant definitions—ranging from the didactic to the impressionistic, from the authoritative to the popular, from the academic to the therapeutic, and from the oral to the iconographic—it is my hope that current and future teachers and students of myth will benefit from seeing so many contemporary approaches to

the same topic within a single volume. My heartfelt thanks to these admired friends, teachers, and authors for their contributions.

Another new section of the journal, "The Forum Interview," debuts with Stephen Olbrys's conversation with Indiana University's own double-threat in classics and folklore, William F. Hansen. Thoroughly articulate in the matters and methods of both classical studies and folkloristics, and having carefully taught multitudes over his 28-year tenure at IU, he, along with Gregory Schrempp (see Perspectives), recently masterminded the creation of a new interdisciplinary graduate program in Mythology Studies at IU, to my knowledge the only one of its kind in the U.S. Thanks to Professor Hansen, not only for sharing some portion of his vast knowledge with us over the years, but for submitting to Olbrys's relentless questioning with his usual good grace and several very tasty recipes, which, unfortunately, are not included here.

This issue's "Collectanea" section is favored by the work of Tom Mould, who has allowed us to publish a few of the Choctaw myths he has collected and plans to include in his forthcoming book on the same subject. His contextual introductions to the myths recounted here serve as excellent guides to anyone seeking to appropriately represent living mythic narratives in textual form. Many thanks.

"Open Forum," *Folklore Forum's* vehicle for folkloristic debate, is given to a conversation continuing from previous issues on the subject of periodic crises within the history of folkloristics, featuring a contribution from William G. Doty, author of *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals* (see "Further Recommended Readings"), now in preparation for its second edition, and one from my esteemed colleague John Laudun.

We return to the theme of myth in "Book Reviews." My thanks to all of the reviewers, and especially to Lynn Gelfand for her delightful description of a highly complex website devoted to the world's mythologies. "Further Recommended Readings" is offered as a guide for those who, like most of us when it comes to myth, don't know where to begin. It is my hope that this section will benefit both students and teachers in locating a few of the starting lines.

I wish to express my most sincere thanks to John Roleke and Stephen Gencarella Olbrys for roping me into agreeing to guest-edit this theme issue, and to Roleke and Camille Bacon-Smith for teaching me something about working with writers. It's been an extraordinary experience that I wouldn't trade for anything. I also wish to thank Matt Bradley, Kurt Hartwig, Lisa Akey, Andy Kolovos, Amy Goldenberg, and the other members of this year's *Folklore Forum* staff whose work nursed the issue into tangibility.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to mention an interdisciplinary conference on myth which will be held at IU in Bloomington in May 1999. The proceedings will begin with a panel celebrating Indiana University Press's 1958 publication of *Myth: A Symposium* (see Further Recommended Readings) and will move on to papers by invited scholars on Myth and Ethnography, Myth and Historical Texts, Myth in the Modern World, and Myth and Art, leaving plenty of time for lively conversation. A wonderful time is guaranteed for all.

I believe that the myth conference in May 1999, the graduate program in Mythology Studies, and this theme issue of *Folklore Forum*, taken together, bode extremely well for the continued flourishing of myth scholarship at Indiana University in the months and years ahead. With so many fine hearts and minds working together, we can indeed expect to have something of lasting value to offer the generations to come.

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