

Forum Interview

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Interviewed by Stephen Gencarella Olbrys on October 26, 1998

S.O.: Let's start with this very loaded question that we've been asking people for this special issue on myth: What is myth? How do you know one when you see one, from your perspective, in the work that you do?

W.H.: Well, I don't think that you know one when you see one so much as you just declare something to be a myth. In my own classes and writings, I tend to be content with William Bascom's definitions as a kind of working way of using "myth," "legend," and "folktale" as genre terms (Bascom 1984). But there is some difficulty in applying it to some materials, and in particular applying it to classical materials because there's no real easy break between narratives that one might want to label "myth" and materials one might want to label "legend." And so, in a way, using those terms creates problems that weren't there before, problems that the Greeks didn't face because the Greeks didn't have a tripartite system of genre classification of the sort one finds in Bascom and in similar literature. Even though they had a lot of terms for narratives of different sorts, they didn't use them in a way that created fine distinctions. So you find, among the ancient Greeks, the word we have borrowed from them—that is "myth"—being used for all kinds of narratives, including the Aesopic fables. Classical scholars, by and large, tend to follow suit, and don't pay a lot of attention to making genre distinctions. So that does make things very easy on the one hand. On the other hand, I do think you lose some things by not calling attention to patterns of difference in narratives.

S.O.: Then, what distinctions do you draw? What would you consider a "mythic" narrative versus a "legend" in the ancient world?

W.H.: Well, all the narratives that occur earliest in Greek traditional history, let's say, I'll call "myths" in practice. So I'll call cosmogonic narratives "myths," and narratives that tell of struggles among the gods for the rulership of the universe—those we usually call succession myths—I'll call those "myths." And stories of the creation of the first human being, and so on. It starts to get fuzzy when you get to Deluge stories, because humans are really the protagonists of these stories. But we're still pretty early in the history of things and the gods take a pretty active part. They're the kinds of stories in which gods and human beings are each grabbing half of the dramatic interest. So right around there is a point in Greek mythology where you start to move from narratives that most people would call "mythic" to narratives that some people at least would call "hero narratives" or "legends" of other sorts. And it's hard to draw a line.

Another difficulty is that there are Greek stories involving the gods that seem to be set in a much later period of world history. Sometimes it's hard to tell *when* the narrator imagines the narrative to be taking place. For example, you might have a narrative of the assault of a male god on a female goddess, leading to her bearing some kind of offspring. There's really nothing in the narrative that *requires* it to have happened in the very early history of the world, in a kind of "mythic time." And yet all of the characters are gods and all the interest is in gods, so the question might be: what do you do with such a narrative if it doesn't fit neatly into [Bascom's] categories?

There are also other difficulties in using these terms. There's no real evidence that I can see that the Greeks regarded myths as "sacred stories," unless you take "sacred" in a very watered-down sense. Narratives were not held by the same kinds of conventions and rules as, say, "sacred space"—the sanctuary or temple, for instance, of a god or goddess. Myths were simply accounts that tell of the earliest things that we know or think we know about the cosmos. There's no indication that I can see that you had to be a special kind of person to recount these stories. Their telling is not restricted to any special time or place. You could only call them "sacred" in the sense that they have to do with gods, but I don't think that's what people mean when they talk about "sacred stories" any more than that's what they mean when they refer to "sacred space." . . . They're qualitatively different in the Greek case. So if you build in "sacred" as one of your criteria—and that certainly is a very common criterion used in defining "myth"—you'd run into trouble right away with the Greek materials.

S.O.: How do you think the notion of the “sacred” came to be attached to contemporary definitions of myth?

W.H.: I assume that it came from the anthropologists, from their doing fieldwork in societies in which they found that the narratives that most reminded them of the mythic narratives that they were familiar with from their classical educations [laughs] were subject to special rules. But I also wonder if it’s not just the definition that’s just tended to be repeated automatically, without much reflection, especially since most of us students of mythology don’t do fieldwork. We’re not out there confronting this definition with the reality of a given society. I’m sure that most of us get our myths from books.

S.O.: Besides myth, what other types of oral genres and other forms of folklore were present, and potentially survive, from ancient Greece?

W.H.: I would say that most of the genres that a folklorist would be likely to list, if you were looking for familiar narrative genres, you would also find narratives that look and feel the same from ancient Greek and Roman contexts. There are legends of different sorts: short narratives that tell of a supernatural happening, or longer more “plotsey” stories that feature a hero or a heroine. There are [also] the kinds of stories sometimes called “novellas,” that is, realistic stories either with a romantic, or bawdy, or adventurous element. There are folktales, depending on what you mean by that term; jokes of various sorts, about fools, or in which people say clever things. There are anecdotes . . . in fact, I would say that the anecdote is the most richly attested narrative genre in ancient Greek and Roman literature. The repertory of anecdotes about other people, concerning Plato for instance, . . . is just astonishing, often with multiple texts of the same favorable or mocking anecdote.

And Aristotle was, of course, interested in metaphor. He was fascinated with cognition and saw the ability to create metaphors as a real sign of genius and imagination in a person. And so he and his students were very interested in proverbs. There is mention of books written by members of Aristotle’s school, books that did not survive, on the proverb. But we know that there were ancient collectors of proverbs, the paremiologists, and their collections do survive. The earliest are probably from shortly after Aristotle’s time, say the third century BC.

S.O.: When did you become interested in mythology?

W.H.: I suppose, like a lot of people who became folklorists, I found things like folktales attractive as far back as I can recall. I think after going to college and being introduced to ancient Greek and ancient Roman society, I became interested in Greek religion and Greek mythology, and just read what I could find in the library, which was sometimes very odd. I once found Max Müller's *Chips from a German Workshop* and read that and was very excited, thinking, "Oh this is it! This is what myths are about!" [Laughs.] There wasn't really anybody to talk about these books with and I didn't know what scholarly tradition they belonged to or how other persons had reacted to Max Müller. These were just books on a library shelf. Then I came across a lot of scholars from the [Cambridge] School, Jane Harrison and [F.M.] Cornford, Gilbert Murray, and James Frazer. . . . I read a lot of *The Golden Bough* . . . and was very excited by them, but ultimately, again, there were the same problems.

I think it wasn't until I went to Berkeley and found Joseph Fontenrose in the Classics Department that I encountered my first mythologist, a person who really was willing to identify himself as a mythologist, and who did know all of these traditions. His interests included classical mythology and also Greek religion, and other things that fall into the range of interests of folklore, such as the ancient oracles . . . one of his specialties. Actually, once Alan Dundes founded the folklore program at Berkeley, Fontenrose was one of the persons associated with it. And so I took as much from Fontenrose as I could, working as his T.A. and the like, and eventually went over and knocked on Alan Dundes' door when I saw that there were more things there that I hoped to learn. I took his two-semester seminar on the folktale. That was a wonderful experience. Then I could also sit in on other lectures by folklorists at Berkeley. So . . . I suppose these were things I was interested in in the way that you could be interested in something relative to your age, and then at a certain point, can get expressed by reading scholarly books. Then, in an educational institution, you can eventually grab hold of the appropriate professors.

S.O.: Let's talk about what is probably your best-known work, on the "Odysseus and the Oar" story, in which you demonstrate that the Homeric account is based on an international tale type.¹ How did you hit upon this idea? And how did you work through it to the conclusions you reached about it?

W.H.: Well, the narrative you're referring to is found in Homer's *Odyssey* [11.121-134], but it's told in such an oblique way that almost nobody has recognized it even as being a *story*. . . . [A story] may appear in that work in such an elliptical way, or only in allusion, that it's really impossible, on the basis of the written text alone, to know exactly what you have there. In this case, there's a mysterious passage in the *Odyssey* in which a seer tells Odysseus that when he reaches Ithaca, he must walk inland with an oar and do certain things.² I knew from reading commentators on this passage that there was a very difficult problem with one Greek phrase in the text that people had wrangled with for centuries, because in Homeric Greek, it can be translated in almost opposite ways. When the seer says, "Death will come to you 'X' the sea," "X" can mean either "out of" the sea or "away from" the sea. This is an ambiguity that could only occur in the Homeric dialect; it's no longer ambiguous once you get to later classical Greek.

So, by chance, I saw a modern text of this story in the work of James Frazer, when he just happened to cite in a footnote a story about Saint Elias—that is the prophet Elijah—from Greece. He gave a quick little summary of that story. And I just instantly flashed on that story. I knew it was the *same* story as in Homer. And in the same moment I also knew that it solved that philological problem. Because once you saw the logic of the story, the whole point of the sailor's trying to *escape* the sea is so that he would die a non-marine death. . . . If you were to carry it on, leaving out the happy ending, then you knew that the logic of the Odysseus story also had to be about getting *away* from the sea. It's complicated without going into too much detail, but I knew the Greek text and I thought the problems with it were fascinating. I thought it would be fun to try to figure out how you could get at the Homeric intent of that story, and how you could discern what was the intent and what was the reinterpretation, because both interpretations were contending for favor in classical Greece and continued to do so on up into modern times.

I felt that a comparison with this external tradition was *exactly* what you could use. And it was interesting to me to discover that classicists had occasionally come across this story but they never saw any value in it, that is, they always set it aside. . . . What I then had to do was to start gathering texts. I didn't think I could make much of a case on the basis of one text. I didn't know how extensive this tradition was, nor how typical this modern text was—was it an

extremely typical text or was it an odd, deformed account? Was it widespread? Did all the modern texts look like this one about Saint Elias? So I spent some years just gathering texts, and I found that the story was still alive in oral tradition. In fact, some of my uncles who'd been in the navy in the Second World War knew this story. And as I talked about it sometimes, in a coffeehouse or having a beer, I would encounter a person who'd had some dealings with sea, having been in the Merchant Marines or the like, who could give an account of this story. I managed to find, I think, about two dozen texts, either from printed sources—from dissertations, from newspapers, from cartoons—and from persons I just encountered.

I gathered those texts together, and since nobody had really done a study of this story, all I could find out about it was . . . what I could infer was on the basis of those texts. I wrote to see if it might be found in various European folklore archives, but aside from Greece's, they all came back with a zero. So [the Greek material] gave me a comparative base and allowed me to use [it] as my external *comparanda* for discussing the Homeric story. But it also gave me something else, and that was not only a good idea of what was constant and what was variable in the modern tradition to use in examining the Homeric story, but it also gave me a lot of instances of the *transmission* of this story—that is, what prompted the telling of this story. And I found that very interesting because they were pretty consistent themselves. That is, you could see that over and over again a certain conversational topic would come up, and it would act as a kind of trigger to prompt somebody who knew this story to tell it, for one or another effect, sometimes for a comic effect. Sometimes another effect developed depending on which branch of the story the person knew, and they could get a certain kind of reaction. So there were consistencies in the occasions for the story being told, and in the backgrounds of the persons who told it—as far as I could see, almost exclusively adult males who'd either worked on the sea, or were fishermen, or whatever, in Greece, the U.S., and Britain. So you could do a comparative study of contexts as well as of texts of that story. It's a fairly simple story but its distribution is very limited. It's not found all over the world. The oar performs a very describable function having to do with the life of seamen, and it seems too likely to have performed that function in century after century, and that's why it's lasted this long.

S.O.: The question naturally arises: do we know if Homer is the source or if Homer also took it from oral circulation?

W.H.: Of course, that is a reasonable question to ask. We could call it the question of priority. The first study that I know of this sort, [Wilhelm] Grimm's lecture on the Polyphemos legend in the mid-nineteenth century (1857), is, as far as I know, the first true comparative study that used a gathering of folk narrative texts in order to throw light on a historical text from antiquity. In this case it was the Cyclops story, the Polyphemos story. [Grimm] managed to gather, I think it was nine or a dozen texts, which really was an extraordinary accomplishment. Think how many books you would have to read! I mean, over here on the seventh floor of our library,³ even with such a wonderful collection, to find a dozen variants of a story on your own . . . it would be quite difficult to get that many. Right away, he anticipated the question of priority. And he gave several reasons why it was easier to assume that Homer's was just one more realization of an international story; it just happened to be the oldest text. So it's a problem that anyone working with ancient texts is going to face over and over again because, most of the time, the text we're working on is the earliest text known. It's less likely to come up in the case of, say, an eighteenth-century French story, or something like that. With "Odysseus and the Oar," I thought there were several excellent reasons why it seemed much more reasonable to assume that Homer was drawing on a story that was traditional in his day, and that that story continued to be transmitted among sea-persons on through to the present day, where you can see it being transmitted by sea-persons to other sea-persons for whom it's a meaningful and useful story. In this case it does not appear to have been taken from Homer and inserted, or re-inserted, into the oral tradition.

Firstly, the story told in the *Odyssey* is so elliptical and abbreviated, and in fact, so hard to perceive as a story, that it's never mentioned in any of the older surveys of folktales or folk narratives in Homer. It's not mentioned by Denys Page in his book on folktales in Homer's *Odyssey* (1973), nor in his earlier book (1955), nor by Ludwig Radermacher in his book on traditional narratives in the *Odyssey* (1916). No one perceived it as a story, so no one perceived it as having analogues in oral tradition. If you don't recognize it as a story, it seems to me extremely unlikely that you would want to borrow it and immediately start telling it to other people. It doesn't invite you to re-use it.

Secondly, it's told in Homer in a way that is full of certain kinds of ambiguities. It's tied up with the way in which Odysseus is going to die. And maybe more to the point, it's not told at the end as a narrative about the past, as it should be told, because the *Odyssey* ends before its action could begin. Homer's device is to have a seer foretell to Odysseus of this further little quest while he is still on his way home to Ithaca from the Trojan War . . . that he will journey inland, away from the sea, until no one recognizes what an oar is anymore. It's a set of instructions, really. So it's not inviting for retelling. Everything suggests that it is far less "borrowable" than is, for instance, the Polyphemos story—but all the evidence suggests that the Polyphemos story wasn't necessarily borrowed from Homer either. [Laughter.]

S.O.: There have been so many changes in the study of mythology over the last quarter-century, with [Walter] Burkert leading the revitalization of the myth-ritual school [see Further Recommended Reading], and people like Fritz Graf following suit. Then there's the survival of structuralism from [Claude] Lévi-Strauss and [Georges] Dumézil in the Paris school in people like [Marcel] Detienne [see Further Recommended Reading] and [Jean-Pierre] Vernant, and the semiotics of the Rome school. What's your opinion of where myth studies are and where they're going? And what do you think are the most interesting ways of interpreting myth today? Lowell Edmunds mentions work in folklore and the iconographic approach as being the most in need of exploration, but I'm curious to know what you think are the most interesting approaches today.

W.H.: Wow, that's a big question. I guess I have to say that part of me always likes to keep close to oral storytelling. When I read Greek scholars who seem to address the texts without remembering what the nature of these narratives is, then I suppose I often feel that they are likely to make observations and draw conclusions that are less persuasive to me because they've lost sight of the original beast. One thing I like about folklorists is that they are likely to keep this in mind as they work with their materials, whereas a person who loses sight might forget, for instance, that Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is not the Oedipus story. It's one realization of that story on a dramatic stage by one person in fifth-century Athens. In fact it's an international story, a tale-type. From that perspective, you can say it's an international story. You can describe its plot, and you could say that its Greek

form was the Oedipus story which developed in a certain direction, and one text of this story—and a very specialized text it is—is the play by Sophocles. But a treatment for the tragic-dramatic stage is not going to be a typical narrative text. It has special concerns for that performance on that occasion. It seems to me that if you lose sight of the fact that you're dealing with a traditional story—or if you don't *care* about that as much—then the kinds of things that interest you and the observations you make are going to be of a certain sort. I find that they are less interesting to me, or interesting to me for different reasons than the ones that generally concern me about stories.

About the French structuralists, I like the fact that they keep an eye on the relationship between story and Greek culture. That seems to me an important contribution that they make. In other respects . . . they make connections or arguments that are not well backed-up empirically. They look good at first glance, but then you dig into the arguments and find that they're not always as strong as they initially appeared to be. But they do very close readings of texts, picturing the cultural features in the text, and they come up with interpretations that are very clever. About Walter Burkert, one always has to marvel at his eclecticism, in drawing so much upon the sciences especially, and anthropology and archeology. He makes very *imaginative connections*. Though it seems to me that the same thing is true: you can sometimes get carried away with a surface connection, but if you pursue it, the connection may not always be as strong as you would like for the interpretation of a particular story. But he does try to get a wider picture of human behavior in which to situate myth. But I can read a study by one of these scholars and feel that they haven't quite yet captured it for me. And, of course, that can be turned around: they might feel that the things I'm thirsting for are not enough for them, or that they need to complement it in other directions. I also like the new emphasis on iconographic studies, though I guess I'm still thinking about them.

You asked what excites me and one is the kind of thing we've been talking about, and that is exploiting typological studies. . . . Folklore hasn't entirely given up interest in typology, and certainly the contemporary legend people haven't, but they have made it a smaller concern. But I feel that the people who deal with historical texts have under-exploited typological studies, partly because they don't know their way around in the folkloric literature. They don't know enough about oral story to see these things from that perspective. They can accept the label "oral story" without thinking much

about it in the same way as, before Milman Parry, people could accept the Homeric epics as being "oral," but what that *meant* never really dawned on them. It remained for Parry and Lord to show . . . what the implications of an oral epic tradition really are. Just labeling it doesn't really capture it.

Another aspect of mythology that is not emphasized in current scholarship, it seems to me, and that I really find interesting, is appreciating the stories as artistic creations in themselves, that they are like a song or a painting . . . they have parts that interact and have an effect. It seems to me that often persons talk about everything other than this artistic aspect of the stories, how they work as stories. I think [Axel] Olrik, with his "epic laws" (1992) was on the right track in asking, "what is the vocabulary?" or "what are the structures that oral narratives use?" It seems that the Historical-Geographical people are mostly interested in charting the history of stories, and many people have been interested in interpreting them as metaphors—reflections of this or that—rituals, or natural phenomena. Initiation rituals have made a big comeback these days. But the stories themselves seem to be left behind in all this. It's as though a modern scholar were to refer to a particular Greek myth or legend and see some analogies between the plot of that story, or motifs in that story, and things that are typical of known initiation rituals in societies studied by ethnographers, and make the connection that this Greek story is basically the story of an initiation ritual, and just stop there.

Well, what I want to know is, what . . . does that mean? How are we supposed to picture what you mean by this? Do you mean that, along the lines of the earlier myth-ritualists, that this narrative was somehow the verbal counterpart of some actions that took place, and that it's become divorced from those actions and survived as a story by itself? In that case, the question should be, *why* has it managed to survive as a story by itself? Why don't we look at that question? Or, if it's not that, is it borrowing imagery from a once-familiar institution in a society—say, initiation rituals—such as church weddings are a familiar institution in our own society? In that case, I would say that observation is no more interesting than to say that a person could tell a story that borrows imagery from a wedding. That's good to know, but I couldn't say that that can stand as the final interpretation of a *story*. It just tells me that you can have stories about weddings or about anything else. It's not hard to find statements of this kind in current structural and ritual scholarship, and I don't find it very satisfying.

So, I'd like to see people pay more attention to stories *as stories*, and how they work. Say, in the spirit of [Vladimir] Propp, and in the spirit of Olrik, and in the spirit of some literary critics who look at story construction and the effects of narrative elements, the aesthetics of stories. Perhaps, as we were discussing earlier, you take the same handful of narrative ideas, and, for instance, watch what happens to them in northern Europe and then in southern Europe—that's what I find fascinating. What is the narrative potential of these ideas? What happens when you develop them in different ways? I think Greg Schrempp made a really nice observation in his book, *Magical Arrows*, about the pleasures of comparativism. I thought he captured something that I myself feel, which is that there's an inherent kind of logical and aesthetic pleasure in seeing different potentialities realized in some of the same relative ideas. Also, this information can be illuminating in the sense that it can help you to understand better a particular text or manifestation that interests you. That helps us to keep in mind that we're talking about oral stories. I'm struck again and again by the brilliance of the narrators who thought of taking an element—that in most texts of a story just sits there, almost latently—and decides to foreground it and you see the story take new twists and turns that you never could have imagined. Once you make one change, it causes a few others, and I find that a really enjoyable thing to experience.

S.O.: You are in a unique position in that you are conversational in both classics and folklore in ways that Frazer, or [Gilbert] Murray, or [H.J.] Rose once were, a way that is no longer familiar to us. Do you ever get the sense of what you do as a revival of comparative mythology? How do you locate yourself in those terms?

W.H.: I guess I don't think of it as "comparative mythology," though I think it's an apt enough term, . . . because [the term is] used so much to refer to comparative Indo-European mythologies. But there's no reason to think that there can't be comparative Semitic mythologies and others. It even depends on what you mean by "mythology," and there are big differences among scholars on that. Though I'm very fond of those traditions, I suppose I see myself more in the tradition of the folklorists and the early classicists who joined the folkloric enterprise in their own generations. Theirs was a tradition you can

really trace from the mid-nineteenth century on up through the 1920s, when it seems to fall apart. You have these guys like the Grimms, who really were philologists, pioneering folklorists who combined these two interests. They really knew the historical texts very well. They were engaging in field collecting and the excitement of trying to understand these phenomena, what the distribution of folktales was. Almost everything was a question mark in their day. Most educated people in the West had a classical education of some sort, but professional classicists certainly leapt into this pretty early. Their names don't loom large for folklorists, but for persons acquainted with scholarly traditions, you can see that they made important contributions, were very learned, and knew the discussions in folklore and classics very well—[someone] like Ludwig Friedlander among the German scholars, for example. But this work seemed to kind of peter out on both sides during the '20s.

The last classical scholars who were really acquainted with folk narrative scholarship wrote their works in the '20s, and the same is true for the last folklorists who seemed on intimate terms with the classical texts. It seems to correspond, in classics, with a disenchantment with the social sciences, which had their brief heyday in classical studies with the Cambridge school in particular. Perhaps those scholars retired without finding successors. Perhaps people reacted against the excesses of that school or needed a breather of some sort, in the same way that mythologists did in light of the excesses of Max Müller's approach to myth. In the case of persons who were working mostly with folktales, the folklorists, they continued working, although with declining energy as they lost some of their enthusiasm for the paradigms they were working in, but who had no alternatives. People would always rather have something than nothing, so they'll stay within a paradigm that [they] don't like if no other is available. Or [they] change fields.

So in my view, classicists stopped using these materials before having gone through the same stages as the folklorists had. The folklorists taught themselves certain things about the nature of oral narrative that were not obvious, that you had to learn by reading a lot of collections, by going out and collecting yourself, by seeing how narrators and audiences worked. They learned basic things, like, there are *stories*, and there are *motifs*, and that these are not the same thing, and that there's no single correct text of a story. The most obvious kinds of things to folklorists are not obvious to people in other fields. The classicists lost their ability to use the folklore

materials, and folklore became more and more a place that you could not visit casually. You had to invest a certain amount of energy in it to know your way around, . . . because there are not many places where you can learn to do the work of folklore, and not many books that can show you how to do it on your own. People who are interested often don't know what to do, unless they've had the privilege of getting some folkloric training. Classicists didn't take advantage of those nice comparative studies that the folklorists had done, the indices that folklorists had made for instance, which are of tremendous use to anybody working with historical materials.⁴ I felt that these [works] could often be used to good advantage to identify stories that were not obviously stories, and to help solve problems in a classical text for which there was simply no other avenue of approach.

It also seems to me that they are an advantage in that many stories from classical mythology are a big question mark. . . . What do you do with the legend of Theseus, for example? Here's an Athenian legend of it's hero, Theseus. Well, what people have said about it is just off the tops of their heads, just a lot of speculation. And while their speculations can be very imaginative and very intelligent, they're not necessarily well grounded in anything. They're just clever ideas. Or they may even be right, but there's no way to show it. But looking at the plot, I can immediately recognize the Theseus legend as based on an international story. I can then look at the texts of that story and see what parts of the Theseus story are a Greek realization, and to what extent the Greeks played with or distorted that story in interesting ways. That seems to me to allow for observations to be made with greater confidence than one can have in pure speculation. I don't believe that this is the *only* thing that a person should do, but the fact is that if you look at the scholarship on something like the Theseus story, you won't find observations like these being made, which, in my view, ought to be acknowledged in every study. Once you can say what the most *basic* things about the Theseus legend are, then you can take off from there. But you won't find it. Or you'll find it acknowledged in a footnote in such a way that you realize that the author has no idea of its implications. He doesn't understand what the fact that it is related to another folktale really means. So there's a lot to do there. We can use the tools that the folklorists have provided. We can often find the motif or tale-type, compare it with the ancient texts, and illuminate the ancient texts in certain ways that are extremely helpful to further our understanding of them.

S.O.: I can't let you go before asking about your two most recent books, *Phlegon of Tralles' Book of Marvels* and the *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*.⁵ In those works, you look at subliterate genres that were very popular as forms of entertainment in the ancient world but that, generally speaking, are not considered by classicists. So I guess my question is why are you stirring up trouble [laughter] by looking at these texts that have been ignored for so long? Why poke around where no one has gone before?

W.H.: Well, they haven't been ignored entirely or I never would have known about them. They'd still be lying unpublished in some European library. Fortunately, in each case, somebody has been interested enough to publish a Greek or Latin text, and a few people have written on a few of these works, but the truth is that we have very little on them. My friend Pépe Sobrer over in Spanish and Portuguese tells me that two articles appear on Cervantes every day. That's about the rate per year on these materials. So they're definitely out of the mainstream and you have to dig to discover them. People in my own field of classics often ask me, "How did you find these things?" Well, you have to have an interest in these things in the first place, then when you get a hint, you follow it up and that leads to other things. You never let a hint go that you don't pursue. You never know what's around the corner.

Historically, there is an elitist bias in classics, in the same way as you have the opposite bias in folklore. I often think that the fantasy of the classicist is sipping a nice coffee at a sidewalk café in Rome [laughter], you know, that being served by a waitress is somehow fitting and comforting, while the folklorists are in the kitchen wondering how the bread is baked. . . . The tendency toward the elitist bias is that you tend to emphasize the authors and institutions that have been most influential in an intellectual or aesthetic way, and in many ways, that's been the traditional rationale for the study of classics. Where have our main cultural influences in the West come from? We're interested in the roots of Western civilization, and so we look at where the major literary genres come from and the heavyweight philosophers and the formation of institutions—democracy and the like. So we look at ancient societies very selectively. But if you have a more social science impulse, then you might be interested in the ancient societies more holistically, in just how

they worked as ancient societies. It might be somewhat analogous to the shifting paradigm in folklore. Rather than just saying, we're interested in narrators only because the stories they tell are like the texts retold in the fairytale books we grew up with, we're now interested in their communities, and their lives, and the occasions on which they transmitted these stories. It does seem to me to make the more canonical stuff more interesting if it's seen against the background of non-canonical literature. You can sometimes get the feeling that an ancient Greek couldn't write a bad play, . . . or that a philosopher couldn't have a ridiculous thought! You forget that we're studying the cream that's been very much selected . . . Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles, you know, these people wrote hundreds of dramas and we have about thirty. They probably wrote some really terrible plays. [Laughter.]

Most of this popular literature seems to arise when an ancient society really makes some shifts that make it seem familiar to us nowadays. . . . Say, for the Greeks, there was a shift from small, cohesive *poles*—self-ruled towns—in which your community was relatively stable and [in which] there was a lot of continuity to a situation in which you'd been conquered by external nations, [after] which you no longer saw your rulers, . . . political freedom was really diminished, . . . [and] the barriers between nations were broken down so that East and West were really blending a lot more. The internationalism and relativism, and the feeling of not having much power over your own fate, and much less predictability and cohesion in your immediate community [are] features that I think mark the feelings of many people in our own time. There was also increased book production and increased literacy, and more variety in the literature that's produced so it can cater to special tastes.

In classical Greece, I think you had a literature that was pitched, maybe, in the middle and everybody drew on it. . . . But by the time you get to the A.D.s, you're getting literature that I think is more like today's TV channels. Everybody gets their own kind of literature. There's literature in philosophy that's really tough, you know, for the top brains; there's literature for people who want to know a little but don't want to get really into it; then there's sidewalk philosophy for people who just want to have an idea of what is being talked about. So in fiction and in every other way, you have something for everyone.

The literary historians have not been so interested in these lower levels of literature. The fact is that many of these books remained popular for centuries and were translated into dozens of languages. They really became international books, continued on, and became much more important in the Middle Ages than they were in the total literary world of the classical period. And some of them—just like stories that never stop being told—some of them just kept generating versions of themselves. I mean, you can find them in a bookstore today. They're just an underground book tradition that's very much like an invisible story tradition. So some of the same things that attract a folklorist to wanting to understand cultural features can be similar to what's attractive about the subliterate stuff for a classicist.

S.O.: Bill, thank you so much for giving me all this time. I think people will be excited by many of the things you've said.

W.H.: Oh, my goodness. You're entirely welcome.

I would like to thank Professor Hansen for his time and willingness to conduct this interview. Due to space limitations, the interview is not published in its entirety. The reader is encouraged to visit the Folklore Forum website at <http://php.indiana.edu/~folkpub/> for the complete interview, which includes a brief discussion on Near Eastern and Scandinavian mythology, and the study of folklore by classical scholars of the early twentieth century.

Notes

¹ See "Odysseus and the Oar," in *Approaches to Greek Myth*, ed. Lowell Edmunds, pp. 241-72. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990; "Odysseus' Last Journey," *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 24 (1977): 27-48; and "The Story of the Sailor Who Went Inland," in *Folklore Today: A Festschrift for Richard M. Dorson*, eds. Linda Dégh, Henry Glassie, and Felix Oinas, pp. 221-30. Bloomington, In.: Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies, Indiana University, 1976.

² The seer Tiresias instructs Odysseus to take an oar and travel inland until he comes upon people who mistake it for a chaff-wrecker; that is, people who are so far from the sea and so unacquainted with signs of the sea that they mistake an oar for an inland (in this case agricultural) instrument. The seer further instructs Odysseus to plant the oar in the earth when he encounters these people, and there sacrifice to Poseidon, the god of the seas, who has been Odysseus' adversary. In modern accounts of the story, St. Elias (a patron of sailors) or another man well acquainted with the sea retires from his maritime duties, takes an oar upon his shoulders, and walks inland until people mistake the instrument for something else. Thereupon the sailor settles down for retirement, far away from the turmoil of life on the sea.

³ The Folklore Collection at Indiana University.

⁴ See Antti Aarne, 1964, *The Types of Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*. 2d edition, translated and enlarged by Stith Thompson. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, FF Communications No. 184; and Stith Thompson, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1962. *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books and Local Legends*, 6 vols. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

⁵ See Adrienne Mayor's review in this volume.

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