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HEROES

HEROES. It is commonly said that whereas in the twentieth century impersonal forces were believed to make history, in the nineteenth century heroic individuals were believed to make history.

THE "GREAT MAN" VIEW OF HISTORY

The epitome of this nineteenth-century outlook was the English writer Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881). His *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841) celebrates eleven disparate figures grouped into six categories:

- the hero as divinity (Odin)
- the hero as prophet (Mahomet [Mohammed] Muḥammad)
- the hero as poet (Dante, Shakespeare)
- the hero as priest (Martin Luther, John Knox)
- the hero as man of letters (Samuel Johnson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Robert Burns)
- the hero as king (Oliver Cromwell, Napoleon).

Carlyle opens his book with a statement that has come to epitomize the "Great Man" view of history: "For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here" (Carlyle, 1897, p. 1). Yet for Carlyle heroes are themselves at the mercy of history. He praises heroes for, above all, their insight into the course of society rather than for the direction they impose on it. Heroes ultimately subordinate themselves to history, the course of which is set by God. Furthermore, the period determines the category of hero needed and even possible. Still, Carlyle is crediting heroes with great accomplishments.

Carlyle's concern with outward accomplishment sharply distinguishes his conception of heroism from that of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) in Part 1 of his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885). The achievement of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, or "overman," is personal, not societal. Rather than praising the *Übermensch* for changing his society, Nietzsche praises the society that produces him.

Carlyle's most vitriolic contemporary critic was the pioneering English sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), for whom the attribution of decisive events to the talents of individuals rather than to the fundamental laws of physical and social evolution is a hopelessly primitive, childish, romantic, and unscientific viewpoint. In Spencer's famous summary phrase in *The Study of Society*, "Before he [the great man] can re-make his society, his society must make him" (Spencer, 1874, p. 35).

Spencer's metaphysical counterpart in the rejection of the influence of great men on history was the

German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). In the introduction to his *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel, unlike Spencer, does praise the hero, but for embodying the World Spirit in its predestined course of development. Whereas Hegel, writing before Carlyle, would have commended Carlyle for emphasizing the hero's "insight," he would have belittled Carlyle for making the hero the cause rather than the manifestation of change.

The twentieth century spawned still stronger skepticism toward the impact of heroes, even in the face of the seemingly all too real impact of dictators like Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and Joseph Stalin (1879–1953). Defenders of heroism nevertheless remain. Best known is American philosopher Sidney Hook (1902–1989), author of *The Hero in History*. Hook argues for a sensible middle ground between crediting heroes with everything, which he assumes Carlyle to be doing, and crediting them with nothing. Unlike Carlyle, for whom heroes can be men of letters as well as of action, Hook is concerned only with heroes of action. He distinguishes between "eventful men," whose actions happen to change history, and "event-making men," whose actions are intended to change history. Eventful men have no special insight, and someone else in their place might have done the same. By contrast, Hook's event-making men, like all of Carlyle's heroes, alone have the insight to make the decisions they do. For example, Hook concedes that no one could have prevented World War I but he also asserts that it was not inevitable that World War I would be fought the way it was. Despite his use of the term "men," Hook includes females in both groups—for example, Catherine II of Russia (1729–1796) as an event-making woman. Because only event-making men and women act on the basis of their talents, only they deserve the epithet "hero."

HEROES AND GODS

For Carlyle, heroes are not merely celebrated but "worshiped." Yet he does not mean literal worship. His heroes are not gods. Of the eleven discussed in *On Heroes*, the sole exception is Odin, who after death was deified by his followers. Carlyle attributes the deification partly to the boundlessness of his followers' reverence but also to the loss of records that would have kept Odin tethered to humanity.

Page 3957

For Carlyle, subsequent heroes have remained mere humans because records have survived. Consequently, the hero as a divinity is gone forever.

Aptly, Carlyle uses the term "mythic" synonymously with "divine": "were there no books, any great man would grow *mythic*" (Carlyle, 1897, pp. 25–26). For even if most heroes are not divine, those heroes whose stories constitute myths are. Hero myths are stories about divine heroes—divine in effect, whether or not formally. To be sure, in the academic study of myth it is conventional to distinguish mere heroes, however glorious, from gods. Folklorists in particular categorize the stories about most heroes as legends rather than myths. Yet contrary to convention, heroism can blur the line between the human and the divine—not by demoting gods to humans but by elevating humans to gods. More precisely, heroism, when recounted in myth, retains the distinction between the human and the divine but singles out the hero for making the leap from the one to the other.

Usually, the gap between the human and the divine is insurmountable, especially in Western religions. The most egregious sin in the West is the attempt by humans to become gods, epitomized by the vain efforts of Adam and Eve and of the builders of the Tower of Babel. The hiatus between the human and the divine applies as fully to polytheistic religions as to monotheistic ones. For ancient Greeks, those who dared to seek divinity were killed for their hubris. Those who directly challenged

the gods were often consigned to eternal punishment in Tartarus.

Still, the West permits exceptions. In the ancient world the grandest exception was Herakles (Hercules), who, while born to Zeus, was still mortal. Herakles nevertheless accomplished superhuman feats of strength, outmaneuvered death in his last three great feats, and was rewarded with immortality by Zeus for his industry. Yet to some ancient writers such as Herodotos (c. 484–between 430 and 420 BCE) Herakles' very stature meant that he had been born a god. Greeks did establish cults to worship human heroes, but only after their deaths, when heroes had transcended ordinary constraints (see Farnell, 1921). The grandest exception to the division in the West between humanity and divinity is, of course, Jesus. Yet even his capacity to be at once fully human and fully divine is taken to be a paradox, and a paradox difficult to maintain in practice. Throughout its history, Christianity has often veered between making Jesus merely an ideal human being, as in the Victorian period, and making him a sheer god, as in ancient Gnosticism.

Rather than trying to dissolve the gap between the human and the divine, hero myths transform humans into virtual gods by conferring on them divine qualities. The qualities can range from physical attributes—strength, size, looks—to intangible ones such as intelligence, drive, and integrity. One measure of the humanity of Carlyle's heroes is the limit of their power: to the extent that they cannot alter history, they are merely human. The difference between humans and gods may be of kind: often, gods can fly, can change shape, and live forever. Or the difference may be of degree: typically, gods are bigger, stronger, sexier, and smarter than humans. But so great is the difference of degree that it still puts divinity beyond the reach of most. While anyone can aspire to become a Hollywood star, the few who make it are not coincidentally called "gods" and, as "stars," reside in a heaven far above us. Carlyle himself acknowledges the divine aura of his human heroes and even deems hero worship the source of all religion, including Christianity.

MODERN HEROES

Some heroes, or kinds of heroes, fit only certain periods. For example, it is hard to imagine an aristocratic hero like medieval Spain's Don Juan surviving into the twentieth century. Other heroes do survive, either because their appeal continues or because they are protean enough to adapt to the times. Herakles, the greatest of ancient heroes, was by no means confined to the crude image of him as Rambo-like—the title character in a series of Hollywood films from the 1980s who appeared to be all brawn and no brains—but on the contrary has been depicted as the embodiment of wisdom, the exemplar of virtue, a tragic hero, a glutton, and even a romantic lover (see Galinsky, 1972).

In the twentieth century, as in prior centuries, not only were traditional heroes transformed, but new heroes and new kinds of heroes emerged. If distinctively nineteenth-century heroes were the romantic hero (Lord Byron's Childe Harold) and the bourgeois hero (Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary), distinctively twentieth-century heroes include the ordinary person as hero (Arthur Miller's Willy Loman), the comic hero (Philip Roth's Alexander Portnoy), the schlemiel as hero (Isaac Bashevis Singer's Gimpel the Fool), and the absurd hero (Samuel Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon). Far from divine, the contemporary hero is hopelessly human—mortal, powerless, amoral. The present-day hero is often lowly even within the human community—more the outsider than the insider, more the loser than the winner, more the villain than the savior. The contemporary hero is not a once-great figure who has fallen but a figure who never rises. Sisyphus, not Oedipus, let alone Herakles, epitomizes contemporary heroism. Yet Sisyphus is still to be commended for never giving up. Persistence replaces success, survival replaces achievement. Today's hero, for example, is heroic in persisting without success. Because contemporary heroes scarcely reach the stature of

gods, their stories scarcely constitute myths.

Yet it would surely be extreme to argue that traditional heroism has died out. Present-day heroes in sports, entertainment, business, and politics are admired for their success, not for their mere persistence, and the acclaim conferred on them often reaches the same divine plateau as in times past. They are "idolized" and "worshiped." At most, the notion of heroism as persistence has arisen alongside the traditional notion of heroism as success.

THEORIES OF HERO MYTHS

The distinctiveness among theories of hero myths is that they profess to know the nature of all hero myths. Like theories of myth generally, theories

Page 3958

of hero myths claim to answer the main questions about the myths: what is their origin, what is their function, and what is their subject matter?

The study of hero myths goes back at least to 1871, when, in *Primitive Culture*, the pioneering English anthropologist E. B. Tylor argued that many of them follow a uniform plot, or pattern: the hero is exposed at birth, is saved by other humans or animals, and grows up to become a national hero (vol. I, 1871, pp. 254–255). In 1928 the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, in *Morphology of the Folktale*, sought to demonstrate that Russian fairy tales follow a common biographical plot, in which the hero goes off on a successful adventure and upon his return marries and gains the throne. Propp's pattern skirts both the birth and the death of the hero.

Of attempts not merely to delineate patterns but also to determine the origin, function, and subject matter of hero myths, the most important have been by the Viennese psychoanalyst Otto Rank (1884–1939), the American mythographer Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), and the English folklorist Lord Raglan (1885–1964). Rank later broke irreparably with Sigmund Freud (1956–1939), but when he wrote *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1909), he was a Freudian apostle. While Campbell was never a full-fledged Jungian, he wrote *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) as a kindred soul of C. G. Jung (1875–1961). Raglan wrote *The Hero* (1936) as a theoretical ally of J. G. Frazer.

Otto Rank

For Rank, following Freud, heroism deals with what Jungians call the first half of life. The first half—birth, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood—involves the establishment of oneself as an independent person in the external world. The attainment of independence expresses itself concretely in the securing of a job and a mate. The securing of either requires both separation from one's parents and mastery of one's instincts. Freudian problems involve a lingering attachment to either parents or instincts. To depend on one's parents for the satisfaction of instincts or to satisfy instincts in antisocial ways is to be stuck, or fixated, at a childish level of psychological development.

Rank's pattern, which he applies to thirty hero myths, is limited to the first half of life. It goes from the hero's birth to his attainment of a "career":

The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is

preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by an humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honors (Rank, 2004, p. 61).

Literally, or consciously, the hero, who is always male, is a historical or legendary figure like Oedipus of Greek mythology. The hero is heroic because he rises from obscurity to the throne. Literally, he is an innocent victim of either his parents or, ultimately, fate. While his parents have yearned for a child and abandon him only to save the father, they nevertheless do abandon him. The hero's revenge, if the parricide is even committed knowingly, is, then, understandable: who would not consider killing one's would-be killer?

Symbolically, or unconsciously, the hero is heroic not because he dares to win a throne but because he dares to kill his father. The killing is definitely intentional, and the cause is not revenge but sexual frustration. The father has refused to surrender his wife—the real object of the son's efforts. Too horrendous to face, the true meaning of the hero myth becomes shielded by the concocted story. Rather than the culprit, the hero becomes an innocent victim or at worst a justified avenger. What the hero seeks is masked as power, not displayed as incest. Most of all, who the hero is becomes some third party, a historical or legendary figure, rather than either the creator of the myth or anyone stirred by it. Identifying himself with the literal hero, the myth maker or reader vicariously revels in the hero's triumph, which in fact is his own. He is the real hero of the myth.

Literally, the myth culminates in the hero's attainment of a throne. Symbolically, the hero gains a mate as well. One might then conclude that the myth fittingly expresses the Freudian goal of the first half of life. In actuality, it expresses the opposite. The wish it fulfills is not for detachment from one's parents and from one's antisocial instincts but, on the contrary, for the most intense possible relationship to one's parents and the most antisocial of urges: parricide and incest, even rape. Taking one's father's job and one's mother's hand does not quite spell independence of them.

The myth maker or reader is an adult, but the wish vented by the myth is that of a child of three to five. The fantasy is the fulfillment of the Oedipal wish to kill one's father in order to gain access to one's mother. The myth fulfills a wish never outgrown by the adult who either invents or uses it. That adult is psychologically an eternal child. Having never developed an ego strong enough to master his instincts, he is neurotic. Since no mere child can overpower his father, the myth maker imagines being old enough to do so. In short, the myth expresses not the Freudian goal of the first half of life but the fixated childhood goal that keeps one from accomplishing it.

Joseph Campbell

Whereas for Freud and Rank heroism is limited to the first half of life, for Jung it involves the second half—adulthood—even more. For Freud and Rank, heroism involves relations with parents and instincts. For Jung, heroism in even the first half involves in addition relations with the unconscious. Heroism here means separation

not only from parents and antisocial instincts but even more from the unconscious: every child's managing to forge consciousness is for Jung a supremely heroic feat.

The goal of the uniquely Jungian second half of life is likewise consciousness, but now consciousness of the Jungian unconscious rather than, as in the first half, of the external world. One must return to the unconscious, from which one has invariably become severed, but the ultimate aim is to return in turn to the external world. The ideal is a balance between consciousness of the external world and consciousness of the unconscious. The aim of the second half of life is to supplement, not abandon, the achievements of the first half.

Just as classical Freudian problems involve the failure to establish oneself in the outer world in the form of working and loving, so the distinctively Jungian problems involve the failure to reestablish oneself in the inner world in relation to the unconscious. Freudian problems stem from excessive attachment to the world of childhood; Jungian problems are the result of excessive attachment to the world one enters upon breaking free of childhood: the external world.

Just as Rank confines heroism to the first half of life, so Campbell restricts it to the second half. Rank's scheme begins with the hero's birth; Campbell's, with his adventure. Where Rank's scheme ends, Campbell's begins: with the adult hero ensconced at home. Rank's hero must be young enough for his father and in some cases even his grandfather still to be reigning. Campbell does not specify the age of his hero, but the hero must be no younger than the age at which Rank's hero myth therefore ends: young adulthood. While some of Campbell's own examples are of child heroes, they violate his scheme, according to which heroes must be willing to leave behind all that they have accomplished at home, and violate even more his Jungian meaning, according to which heroes must be fully developed egos ready to encounter the unconscious from which they have largely become separated. Campbell's heroes should, then, be adults.

Rank's hero must be the son of royal or at least distinguished parents. The hero of the egalitarian Campbell need not be, though often is. Whereas Rank's heroes must be male, Campbell's can be female as well, though Campbell inconsistently describes the hero's initiation from an exclusively male point of view. Finally, Campbell's scheme dictates human heroes, even though many of his examples are of divine heroes. Rank's pattern, by contrast, readily allows for divine as well as human heroes.

Whereas Rank's hero returns to his birthplace, Campbell's marches forth to a strange new world, which the hero has never visited or even known existed. This extraordinary world is the world of the gods, and the hero must hail from the human world precisely to be able to experience the distinctiveness of the divine one. The hero enjoys physical relations with the goddess and marries her—the reason the hero must here be male. He clashes with the male god and defeats him—the reason the hero must here be male. Yet with both gods he becomes mystically one and thereby becomes divine himself.

Whereas Rank's hero returns home to encounter his father and mother, Campbell's hero leaves home to encounter a male and a female god, who are neither his parents nor necessarily even a couple. Yet the two heroes' encounters are seemingly akin. But in fact they are not. Because the

goddess is not the hero's mother, sex with her does not constitute incest. And the conflict with the male god is resolved.

When Campbell writes that myths "reveal the benign self-giving aspect of the *archetypal* father," he is using the term in its Jungian sense (Campbell, 1972, pp. 139–140). For Freudians, gods symbolize parents. For Jungians, parents symbolize gods, who in turn symbolize father and mother archetypes, which are components of the hero's personality. A male hero's relationship to these gods symbolizes not, as for Freud and Rank, a son's relationship to other persons (his parents) but the relationship of one side of a male's personality (his ego) to another side (his unconscious). The father and the mother are but two of the archetypes of which the Jungian, or collective, unconscious is composed. Archetypes are unconscious not because they have been repressed but because they have never been conscious. For Jung and Campbell, myth originates and functions not, as for Freud and Rank, to satisfy neurotic urges that cannot be manifested openly but to express normal sides of the personality that have just not had a chance at realization.

By identifying himself with the hero of a myth, Rank's myth maker or reader vicariously lives out in his mind an adventure that, if ever directly fulfilled, would be acted out on his parents themselves. While also identifying himself—or herself—with the hero of a myth, Campbell's myth maker or reader vicariously lives out in the mind an adventure that even when directly fulfilled would still be taking place in the mind. For parts of the mind are what the myth maker or reader is really encountering.

Lord Raglan

As a Frazerian, Lord Raglan focuses on the relationship between myth and ritual. Myth provides the script for the ritual, which is the killing and replacement of the king, in whom the soul of the god of vegetation resides and whose soul is thereby transferred to his successor. The soul is then transferred to the body of the next king. The incumbent is killed either at the first sign of weakness or at the end of a fixed term so short as to minimize the chance of illness or death in office. The king is killed to preserve or restore the state of health of the god and thereby of vegetation: as the king goes, so goes the god, and so goes vegetation.

Venturing beyond Frazer, Raglan equates the king with the hero. Raglan turns Frazer's theory of myth in general into a theory of hero myths in particular. Moreover, Raglan introduces his own detailed hero pattern, which he applies to twenty-one hero myths. That pattern extends all the way from the hero's conception to his death. In contrast to Rank's and Campbell's patterns, it therefore covers both halves of life:

Page 3960

1. The hero's mother is a royal virgin;
2. His father is a king, and
3. Often a near relative of his mother, but
4. The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and
5. He is also reputed to be the son of a god.
6. At birth an attempt is made, usually by his father or his maternal grandfather, to kill him, but
7. He is spirited away, and
8. Reared by foster-parents in a far country.

9. We are told nothing of his childhood, but
10. On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.
11. After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
12. He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
13. Becomes king.
14. For a time he reigns uneventfully, and
15. Prescribes laws, but
16. Later he loses favor with the gods and/or his subjects, and
17. Is driven from the throne and city, after which
18. He meets with a mysterious death,
19. Often at the top of a hill.
20. His children, if any, do not succeed him.
21. His body is not buried, but nevertheless
22. He has one or more holy sepulchres (Raglan, 1990, p. 138).

Clearly, parts one to thirteen correspond roughly to Rank's entire scheme, though Raglan himself never read Rank. The victory that gives the hero the throne is not, however, Oedipal, for the vanquished is not necessarily his father. Parts fourteen to twenty-two do not correspond at all to Campbell's scheme. The hero's exile is loosely akin to the hero's journey, but for Raglan there is no return. For Rank, the heart of the hero pattern is gaining kingship—or other title. For Raglan, the heart is losing kingship. Wherever Campbell's heroes are kings, the heart is their journey while king.

Campbell's hero can be any adult. Raglan's hero must be not only a male but also a king. Campbell's hero must—or should—be human. Raglan's hero can be either divine or human.

For Rank, heroes are heroic because they dare to serve themselves. For both Campbell and Raglan, heroes are heroic because they willingly or unwillingly serve their communities. Heroes serve their communities by their sacrificial deaths. Myths describe the lives—and deaths—of ideal kings. For Campbell, heroes in myth serve their communities by their return home with knowledge of the divine world. Without Raglan's hero, the community would die; without Campbell's, it would remain benighted.

René Girard

In *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) and many subsequent works, the contemporary French literary critic René Girard (1923–) offers an ironic twist to the theory of Raglan. Whereas Raglan's hero is heroic because he is willing to die for the sake of the community, Girard's hero is killed or exiled by the community for having caused the present ills of the community. Indeed, the "hero" is initially considered a criminal who deserves to die. Only subsequently is the villain turned into a hero, who, as for Raglan, dies selflessly on behalf of the community. The transformation of Oedipus from reviled exile in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* to revered benefactor in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* evinces the transformation of outcast into saint. Even though Girard, and also Raglan, are vehemently anti-Freudian, both use Oedipus as their fullest example.

The change from criminal to hero is for Girard only the second half of the process. Originally, violence erupts in the community. The cause is the inclination, innate in human nature, to imitate others and thereby to desire the same objects as those of the imitated. Imitation leads to rivalry, which leads to violence. Desperate to end the violence, the community selects an innocent member to blame for the

turmoil and usually kills the victim. The scapegoat can range from the most helpless member of society to the most elevated, including the king or queen. Whereas for Raglan myth directs or inspires the killing of the hero, for Girard myth is created after the killing to hide it. The myth first turns the scapegoat into a criminal who deserved to die but then turns the criminal into a hero, who has died willingly for the good of the community. The scapegoat can even become a criminal and a hero simultaneously. For the figure blamed for the turmoil is also credited with ending it, albeit by death or exile. But the criminal can also become even more of a hero thereafter.

SEE ALSO

Myth, overview article .

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Page 3961

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