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Mythology in the Middle Ages: Heroic Tales of Monsters, Magic, and Might

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Mythology in the Middle Ages: Heroic Tales of Monsters, Magic, and Might

Description
Myths of gods, legends of battles, and folktales of magic abound in the heroic narratives of the Middle Ages. *Mythology in the Middle Ages: Heroic Tales of Monsters, Magic, and Might* describes how Medieval heroes were developed from a variety of source materials: Early pagan gods become euhemerized through a Christian lens, and an older epic heroic sensibility was exchanged for a Christian typological and figural representation of saints. Most startlingly, the faces of Christian martyrs were refracted through a heroic lens in the battles between Christian standard-bearers and their opponents, who were at times explicitly described in demonic terms.

The book treats readers to a fantastic adventure as author Christopher R. Fee guides them on the trail of some of the greatest heroes of medieval literature. Discussing the meanings of medieval mythology, legend, and folklore through a wide variety of fantastic episodes, themes, and motifs, the journey takes readers across centuries and through the mythic, legendary, and folkloric imaginations of different peoples. Coverage ranges from the Atlantic and Baltic coasts of Europe, south into the Holy Roman Empire, west through the Iberian peninsula, and into North Africa. From there, it is east to Byzantium, Russia, and even the far reaches of Persia. [*From the publisher*]

Keywords
mythology, myth, folklore, Middle Ages, medieval literature

Disciplines
English Language and Literature | European Languages and Societies | Folklore | Linguistic Anthropology | Medieval History | Medieval Studies

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Comments
Attached is the introduction of Christopher Fee's book, *Mythology in the Middle Ages: Heroic Tales of Monsters, Magic, and Might.*

Introduction

I Need a Hero . . . The Hero as Guide in Our Quest
for Medieval Myth, Legend, and Folklore

Mythology in the Middle Ages: Heroic Tales of Monsters, Magic, and Might
will take general readers and researchers alike on a fantastic adventure on
the trail of some of the greatest heroes of medieval literature. Myths of
gods, legends of battles, and folktales of magic abound in the heroic narratives
of the Middle Ages, and we will use such stories as a framework upon
which we may organize discussions of a wide variety of fantastic episodes,
themes, and motifs. Our journey will take us across many centuries and
through the mythic, legendary, and folkloric imaginations of medieval
peoples and empires from the Atlantic and Baltic coasts of Europe; south
into the Holy Roman Empire; west through the Iberian Peninsula; across
the Straits of Gibraltar into North Africa; and thence east to Byzantium,
Russia, and even to the far reaches of Persia where we will travel to the very
border of Afghanistan.

The itinerary for these travels will include popular destinations from
the well-known European traditions to be sure, but the monsters of the
West have their counterparts in the East, and cursed treasure is not limited
to the Valley of the Rhine. Heroes, gods, quests, and monsters emerge
from the depths of time to assert themselves again and again on the human
stage, and their trappings change to conform to the audience of the moment.
This volume will chart such traditions and their relationships from various
corners of the Christendom of the Middle Ages, including some key points
of contact, conflict, and even confluence with the Islamic world.

Defining Medieval Myth,[1] Legend,[2] and Folklore[3]

Such terms as *medieval, myth, legend,* and *folklore* invite us to participate in exercises of exclusion. *Medieval* commonly refers to the Latin West of Europe from the fall of Rome to the rebirth of classical learning designated the *Renaissance.* The words myth, legend, and folktale—in the popular imagination, at least—conjure up images of otherness and falseness. Even today scholars often had best tread warily when discussing the mythologies inherent in, for example, Christian, Islamic, and Judaic religious cultures. In short, putting aside Odin and Lugh and their ilk, one is well advised to define one's terms very carefully indeed before including in a comparative analysis of mythic elements and archetypes, oh, shall we say, the flood of the Old Testament, the apocalyptic visions of the New Testament, or the lives of holy followers of the teachings of Christ, Mohammed, or the prophets of the Abrahamic tradition.

The English word *myth* is descended from the Greek term *mythos,* which may be rendered "speech" or "story." Such "stories" generally stem from traditional, oral roots, and take as their subject matter the great questions faced by all human beings: Who are we? Where do we come from? Why are things the way they are? Why do we do things as we do? In simplest terms, myths are stories that attempt to answer such questions from the perspective of the people who tell them. Myths are generally populated by the great supernatural phenomena that seem to shape the world of men, and these phenomena are often embodied as gods, demons, culture heroes, and the like, the generally superhuman yet often human-like representatives of the vast and otherwise unfathomable elemental forces of the universe around us. Myths often also explain the relationships between these forces and human beings, offer explanations concerning the origins of the rituals humans use to propitiate such gods and other powers, and indeed describe the genesis of the human race itself.

The term myth has been defined in many ways and is often used so loosely in common parlance as to render the word nearly meaningless. Indeed, many scholars would limit the category of myth strictly to narratives that evolved around material that was in its origin clearly religious in nature. Stories of divinities or superhuman protagonists descended from the gods are obvious candidates for consideration under this definition, as are the holy texts that explain the genesis of the world, the motive forces controlling the elements, the development of key cultural constructs, or the birth of such sacred rituals as might evolve around the related belief system. Thus, certain core themes common to all human beings reassert themselves

again and again in mythologies across the globe; called "archetypes," these themes are a fundamental aspect of human nature, and thus it is only reasonable that stories differing in detail but similar in focus should emerge in cultures across millennia and around the globe.

In a comparative sense then, myth might be said to refer to particular cultural manifestations of the collective unconscious that explain and/or explore themes of universal significance. Myth thus may be distinguished from legend and folklore in that its primary focus concerns such archetypal universal elements rather than localized themes and details of intense import to a particular community but of less immediate applicability to outsiders. That said, medieval narratives tend to comprise a vibrant blend of the mythic, legendary, and folkloric, and it is not always easy to distinguish among these. Moreover, the medieval world also developed unique mythic structures concerned with how the institutions of men should perform in a Christian context.

Legend refers to narrative traditions transmitted as though factual. Originally oral, these tales generally have some grounding—whether real or perceived—in historical events. Although very often didactic, legends are primarily "tellings" (i.e., "stories") as the various Germanic terms for this type of narrative illustrate; indeed, the cognate Old English term, *secgan*, means "to say." On the other hand, the confusingly similar Latin word *legenda* refers to a "reading," a literary text, and this term is most notably used to refer to literary accounts of the lives of saints. Legend, in a technical sense, is a not dissimilar but entirely discrete genre with clearly oral roots. Such legends often contain supernatural elements and generally are concerned with episodes of particular significance to the community that preserves and transmits them. Legends tell stories that teach the values of a given community, preserve its sense of its own history and its place in the world, and enshrine its cultural heroes.

Legend, like folklore, takes as its subject what we might term "cultural truth." That is, legends pass along to each new generation material of weight and importance to that group. However, legends may be distinguished from folklore in that they purport to be based upon fact. Whereas legends and myths often concern themselves with specific, named, "extraordinary" heroes, folktales tend to have more generic protagonists who have an "everyman" quality that allows an audience to project themselves more readily into the narrative. Legend and folklore can be distinguished from myth in that they are usually more grounded in the specific wisdom and experience of the given community. Although all three types of narrative may be categorized comparatively, mythic archetypes speak more readily to universal concerns, whereas folklore and legend—although often developing

similar or related themes of general significance—tend to be much more context specific. This specificity of local detail, including figures, locations, and actions, adds to the semblance of veracity in many legends.

Folklore refers to cultural "items" common to a particular community; such items may include stories, rituals, dances, songs, or any other aspect of life in that community that is imbued with some measure of shared experience, wisdom, or foundational belief. Moreover, folklore entails the process of the transmission of such shared community knowledge or tradition. Context is thus of paramount concern to the folklorist. Therefore, the great paradox of the study of medieval folklore is that no member of any such community remains to transmit such material. Thus, folklorists, deprived of the opportunity to directly participate in the process, must strive to reconstruct the milieu of the communities that produced the fragmentary folkloric items we may receive in some form from the Middle Ages.

Luckily, grains of knowledge concerning medieval folklore may be gleaned from various sources, including from written records describing folkloric items, from rules or diatribes condemning such items, and from literary allusions recalling folkloric themes or motifs. Moreover, scholars of folklore use a comparative approach, describing and analyzing how folkloric items from various cultures may be categorized under common rubrics. However, these traditions may or may not express aspects of what comparative mythologists might term the universal unconscious; thus, depending on context, folkloric artifacts may or may not be thought to manifest mythic archetypes. In narrative terms, folklore includes oral storytelling traditions that may be specifically attributed to particular pre- or nonliterate cultures or to nonliterate parts of literate cultures. Folktales are generally classified as oral items transmitted in varying forms by storytellers within a traditional community to amuse and to enlighten audiences; however, folktales make no pretence to historical veracity and thus may be distinguished from legends. Folklore generally, and the narrative genre of the folktale in particular, aspires to a form of cultural veracity without the modern, literate sense that historical accuracy is the *sine qua non* of discernable truth.

Sources of Medieval Myth, Legend, and Folklore

Annals and Chronicles[4]

Chronicles are quasi-historical sources that purport to record actual events over time and in chronological order. Such records also are often referred

to as *annals* because events within them were generally organized according to year. Many chronicles were updated with some semblance of regularity and thus provide a glimpse into a growing medieval sense of the nature of history as well as preserving those events and accounts thereof that the chroniclers considered worthy of posterity. In point of fact, such records are as often repositories of fancy as they are sources of what we would recognize as "history," a fact that makes them valuable resources in the study of medieval myth, legend, and folklore, even if their historical veracity is not unimpeachable. For example, the *Annales Cambriae*, or "Welsh Annals," are valuable sources of early British myth and legend, just as the Kievan *Primary Chronicle* provides rich context for the Russian epic of Prince Igor.

Epics[5]

An *epic* recounts the exploits of a great hero or heroic band on a sweeping scale and in a grandiose style. Generally set in a misty, gilded past with strong heroic overtones, the epic takes as its protagonist a hero of superhuman proportions who is often the scion of the gods. The epic hero generally undergoes a significant journey upon which he fights monumental battles and achieves a fantastic quest. Sometimes manifesting overtly supernatural qualities or powers, such an epic figure is often a savior of sorts and may manifest traits of the culture hero. "Traditional" or "primary" epics are founded directly upon earlier oral models and materials and use similar techniques. The *Iliad* is an example of such an epic from the classical world, whereas *Beowulf,* which articulates a dimly remembered world of Germanic myth, legend, and folklore in the poetic idiom of Anglo-Saxon England, is a fine example of a traditional epic from the medieval world. "Secondary" or "literary" epics evoke and recast traditional themes in more sophisticated narrative terms. The *Aeneid*, which draws upon the tradition of the *Iliad*, is an example of such a secondary epic from the classical world.

Romances[6]

Originally so called because examples thereof were composed in vernacular Romance languages rather than in Latin, this widespread literary form emerged in the twelfth century or so and remained vastly popular throughout the Middle Ages. *Romances* have several points of contact with the mythic, legendary, and folkloric that make them obvious sources of material for a study of these narrative genres. First and foremost,

the centrality and the treatment of the hero in most Romances provides an obvious area of resonance. The hero is the central protagonist of the Romance as a genre, and indeed, many a Romance is primarily known by the eponymous name of its leading character. In addition, such figures very often undertake adventures, quests, and battles that offer clear resemblance with those we would associate with the hero of myth and legend.

The Romance is also known, of course, for its use of the theme of courtly love, its emphasis on chivalry, and the hero's pursuit of the affection of his ladylove, often resulting in marriage. Such a focus helps to throw into stark relief the contrast between the genre of the Romance and that of the epic, which generally eschews any such concern that might detract from its central theme of the hero's martial prowess. Such "romantic" narrative patterns, although less immediately concerned with archetypal aspects of the hero, are nonetheless in fact very often embroidered with mythic, legendary, and folkloric threads, and thus the Romance regularly implicitly manifests such materials even when explicitly concerned with matters seemingly far removed from what we might on the surface consider myth or legend. In addition, Romances generally purport to recount true stories and often make references to authoritative sources, whether actual or invented. Thus the genre of the Romance has some important points of confluence with that of the legend. Likewise, the inclusion of the magical and the marvelous illustrate the resonance between these types of narratives.

Arthurian Romance[7]

It would be remiss to fail to note that many different Romances in many different languages deal with the figures, events, and adventures associated with the Knights of King Arthur; we often refer to such works under the rubric of the **Arthurian Romance**. The Arthurian landscape is vast, is populated with manifold heroes, and is rich with heroic archetypes and episodes; however, these fields have been tilled and re-tilled by many hands, and thus this volume does not include a survey of that material. The reader interested in delving deeply into the legends, myths, and folklore of Arthurian will have no difficulty in finding ample resources to guide such a search.

The Lives of the Saints[8]

Hagiography, or the narrative lives of saints, provided one of the staple literary traditions of the Middle Ages. Indeed, the fact that compilations

of the lives of saints—most notably the 13th-century *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine—were amongst the most popular and widely disseminated works in medieval Europe illustrates the centrality of these traditions to the literature of the time. Although in the early Church cults tended to develop around the figures of those martyred for their faith, after Christianity became dominant throughout the Roman Empire, various types of holy protagonists began to assert themselves. Religious leaders, hermits, and sanctified virgins proved popular, as did figures associated with the conversion of pagans. In addition, sometimes Christianized pagan gods and heroes slipped into the canon.

Moreover, saints' lives are often closely tied to rituals utilized in the veneration of particular sacred figures—a relationship that underscores how crucial hagiography can be to the study of medieval folklore. More important to the study of medieval myth and legend is the standard structure of the saint's life, which is itself a typological redaction of the life of Christ with discernable resonance with various mythic archetypes of gods and heroes. Stories of saints often include elements such as unusual parentage or origin; miraculous childhood feats; preaching, healing, and related miracles; persecution and martyrdom; and posthumous wonders generally associated with the relics of the saint or the saint's place of demise or rest. The widespread appeal and persistence of hagiography is most important to this study because of the fact that secular legends—notably those of heroes of the stature of Roland, the Cid, and Prince Igor—often replicate the typological pattern of the saint's life in their narrative structure.

Medieval Heroines and Feminine Warrior Saints?

Although some male heroes of the Middle Ages certainly derive ultimately from all-but-forgotten gods and demi-gods, many others obviously cleave to the ancient archetypes of the hero, a figure that—although clearly more than a man—is manifestly less than a god. On the other hand, medieval heroines are often described in quite different terms, and the representation of female power can be more varied and less straightforward. Indeed, multitudes of medieval heroic narratives are driven by the adventures of "superman" protagonists, during the course of which potent and mysterious female figures obstruct or abet the hero through feminine wonders, wiles, and witchcraft. The most obvious medieval examples of heroines who exhibit what we might perceive as more masculine heroic characteristics may be found in collections of saints' lives.

The heroines in such narratives take many forms; some of them—notably well-known examples including Saint Juliana—are militaristic soldiers for the faith, the characters of whom resonate with those of the holy warriors of medieval epics. Such holy women generally are virgins who very often die protecting their chastity. However, in many other kinds of texts, perceived feminine powers associated with sexuality and fertility seem clearly derived from ancient archetypes of the goddess that are cast in medieval texts into forms ripe with sorcery, danger, and seduction. Medieval manifestations of the feminine heroic, divine, and demonic are fascinating and well worth study in their own right. Because the present volume relies on heroic epic episodes for its source materials, powerful female figures appear from time to time in various appropriate contexts but are not examined in detail upon their own impressive terms. The reader interested in pursuing an in-depth study of this field should turn to a volume dedicated to the subject such as that currently under preparation by the author.

Heroes of Medieval Myth, Legend, and Folklore[10]

The realm of medieval myth, legend, and folklore is in large measure the province of the hero. We will note and discuss several examples of archetypal figures, elements, places, objects, and creatures, to be sure, especially in the northern and western reaches represented by the Scandinavian and Celtic traditions, but again and again we will return to the adventures and archetypes of the hero, aspects of the hero's journey, and various medieval manifestations of categories concerning the hero.

Medieval heroes were developed from a variety of source materials— some mythic, others legendary or folkloric. Early pagan gods become euhemerized through a Christian lens, and in the great dragon-slayer epic the *Saga of the Volsungs*, for example, we will catch clear glimpses into the ancient pagan Germanic mythology of old. In other cases, an older epic heroic sensibility is exchanged for a Christian typological and figural representation of saints, and such Christian spiritual heroes may be recast as types of Christ; conversely, depictions of Christ and his saints may at times betray the influence of an older heroic influence.

In works such as the *Song of Roland* and the Spanish tale of El Cid, we will examine medieval concepts concerning the nature of divine will and justice and how the mandates and judgments of God might be rendered discernibly in the world of men. God sometimes participates directly in anointing temporal rulers in medieval works, and at times communicates directly with his chosen earthly representatives through the medium of

dream visions, which are at times imparted by celestial messengers. More-over, in epic heroes such as the Cid, Roland, and Prince Igor, the faces of Christian martyrs are refracted through a heroic lens in the battles between these Christian standard-bearers and their opponents, who are at times explicitly demonic in nature. We will examine such heroes in terms of specific, detailed illustrative episodes drawn from the source texts, and we will note the trajectory of a given hero's archetypal journey where appropriate and helpful.

The archetypal approach—although far from perfect—does have some real advantages in any attempt to develop a comparative analysis of the functions of heroes in medieval texts. For example, a hero's conception and birth often are notable, as are his childhood deeds. Battles with the monstrous are common, of course, but so are quests for treasures and powers of value to the hero and his people. The quest trope sometimes is rendered into the archetype of the hero's journey to the Underworld, a voyage into a literal or metaphorical otherworld—sometimes depicted as a term of exile or in Purgatory—from which the hero emerges with new powers, riches, or knowledge that he generally may use or share to the benefit of his people. Rites, rituals, and the symbolism of initiation are often key elements of such heroic narratives, which sometimes culminate with the hero's death and even forms of apotheosis.

Mythologies across the globe and spanning the millennia have concerned themselves with heroes, but it is perhaps a notable characteristic of the largely monotheistic medieval West that many adventures, attributes, and characteristics we might otherwise expect to be associated with gods seem relegated to the hero. At times this is a self-conscious redaction of ancient mythologies by medieval apologists, but at other times it seems clear that the many possible manifestations of the hero of medieval mythology simply allowed for the fullest possible expression of particular traditions, hopes, aspirations, and fears within a monotheistic context.

Great historical personages and events are quite literally the material from which legend is wrought. In simplest terms, this argument asserts—given sufficient time and cultural weight—that legendary figures may begin to assume mythic proportions. We see this process developed to various degrees in such figures as Prince Igor, Roland, and El Cid, all of whom—although clearly legendary in their genesis—begin to project some aspects of the mythic archetypes of the hero as time passes and their narratives begin to become woven into a tapestry of burgeoning cultural identity.

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Moreover, examining the development of several roughly contemporaneous heroes across a wide variety of cultures—some of which were often in conflict—allows an astute reader to note how the development of medieval heroes speaks to the resonance of common themes in various traditions, a commonality that provides a striking counterpoint to the dissonance between and among various peoples and belief systems. Sinbad the Sailor, to cite but one example, drapes the peregrinations of an Indo-European questing hero in the clothes of the Arab.world, and he and his Turkish cousin Basat defeat the self-same man-eating monster known to their common Greek ancestor Odysseus as the Cyclops Polyphemus. In fact, the respective mythologies of the Byzantines and the Turks teach us as much about mythic confluence as the military struggles between these empires tell us about cultural dissonance.

Indeed, although the travails of Western Christendom are familiar through the epic heroes of Spain and France, less known is Basil Digenis Akritis, who hails from the border wars of Byzantium and whose enemies have their own epic heroes in the warriors mentored and valorized by the shaman and bard Dede Korkut. Further to the east, the ancient mythology of Persia is of particular import to those interested in the medieval manifestations of ancient Indo-European mythology, and the *Shahname* of medieval Persia is an epic cycle that beggars most Western counterparts in comparison. Placing heroes from this wide range of traditions shoulder to shoulder will give us the opportunity to examine what is common across a range of medieval mythic, legendary, and folkloric traditions and what seems unique in a particular instance.

Heroic narratives thus provide ideal vehicles for examinations of the foundational relationships between myth and culture, between medieval and modern, and between belief system and everyday actions. To that end, *Mythology in the Middle Ages: Heroic Tales of Monsters, Magic, and Might* will bring medieval literatures and cultures to life through the adventures of their great heroes for another generation of readers, but more than that, it promises to do so in a way that will challenge readers to think about the significance of the conflict and confluence of mythic cultures, medieval or modern.

Rubrics of Concord and Discord: Comparing Medieval Heroes

Medieval scribes divided texts into sections designated by headings written in "red" ink from which we get the Latinate term *rubric*. Our journey through the world of the medieval hero is divided into three main parts,

which are organized under the rubrics "Champions of the Pagan Frontier," "Warriors for the Christian Faith," and "Heroes of the Islamic World." These divisions are designed to help us to note the similarities and differences among various medieval mythologies most heavily influenced by pagan traditions, Christian practices, and Islamic beliefs, respectively.

We begin our exploration of the landscape of medieval mythology in northwestern Europe, with traditions that clearly have grown from ancient pagan roots, and with heroes who battle monsters and magic as we are most comfortable defining these. Such supernatural "others" are of tremendous proportions and potency and represent classic bogeymen of childhood imagination, including a fire-breathing dragon, a vengeful sorceress, and a gargantuan evil tyrant. In addition, the "champions of the pagan frontier" who battle such nemeses are themselves drawn from the ranks of superhuman heroes with clear links to the otherworldly: The Norse Sigurd is advised by Odin, king of the gods; the Irish Cuchulainn is healed by his father, the great god Lugh; and the Welsh Culhwch undertakes a truly Herculean set of tasks with the aid of his royal kinsman, King Arthur, who leads a band of heroes who seem little less than thinly veiled gods of yore.

From the pagan frontier, we travel to the heart of Christendom, where we meet heroes who are ostensibly overt "warriors for the Christian faith," stalwart soldiers of the Cross who battle adversaries who are often overtly satanic in nature, charting a notable progression from heroes who are Christian in name to those who genuinely seem to seek holy war with the minions of Hell. We begin with the Byzantine Basil, who is in some ways remarkably like Sigurd or Culhwch for a *Miles Christi*, or a "Soldier of Christ." The Orthodox scion of a Christian mother and a Syrian emir who converts to the faith of his bride, Basil *Digenis Akritis*, the "Twin-Blood Border-Lord," in fact battles a dragon of his own and spends much more time slaying lions and subduing brigands than fighting for his faith. The Russian Igor, whose people willingly took up the mantle of Orthodoxy from the Byzantines, battles heathen steppe raiders described in demonic terms but does so in a context rife with images from and references to ancient Slavic mythology. The Carolingian Roland fights an enemy clearly wrought into a demonic other and is himself recast into a type of Christ through his willing self-sacrifice. Roland's kinsmen and the Iberian Cid also evoke Divine Judgment through trial-by-combat sequences that clearly encapsulate and reflect ways in which a medieval mythology of holy war was enshrined in Christian practices.

The Moslem neighbors so often cast in the role of devilish enemies in European epics had heroes of their own, of course, and on the final leg of our journey we will chart points of contact, conflict, and confluence between heroes of the Islamic world and their Christian counterparts. Drawn from an ancient and vast literary tradition that marries Indo-European mythology with an Islamic sensibility, the cycle of stories concerning the Persian hero Rostam offers a glimpse into a mythic context that is paradoxically starkly alien from and distantly related to that of Christian Europe. Indeed, the central episode of Rostam's life involves the hero's slaying of his own son, Sohrab, in a tragic case of ambiguous mistaken identity clearly reminiscent of that involving the Irish Cuchulainn and his son.

Meanwhile, in the heroes of the Turkish epic cycle we will find a free-wheeling *carpe diem* spirit with only the slightest nod to Islam. To be sure, the Oghuz Turks were the enemies of Constantinople, which is referred to in these tales as *Rum*, or "Rome." We might therefore expect to see them in conflict with such Christian holy warriors as the Byzantine Basil, and we might well be tempted to identify them with the Kumans, fellow horse-warriors of the wide-open plains of Eurasia who bedeviled the Russian Igor. Although battles with Christian enemies do occur, the most striking elements of this collection include echoes of classical mythology and pre-cursors to Mediterranean and Turkish folklore. Moreover, one might posit that the Turkish heroic cycle offers a steppe-raider, horse-culture vision of a pagan warrior ethos not dissimilar from that of the Irish and Norse traditions, which cloak their own ancient substance beneath a thin veneer of Christianity. Finally, the large collection of tales offering insight into Arabian mythology and its heroes reflects many influences, from classical travel epics to Egyptian grave-robbing folklore. However, the consistent hallmark of the Arabian hero often seems to be his humble origin, a recurring theme that brings us at the end of our journey back to a discussion of the functions of the hero, his development, and his adventures, all of which speak to his abiding popularity and help us to bring together the disparate fragments that form the mosaic through which we may discern the patterns of medieval mythology.

Following in the Footsteps of Heroes: The Structure of Our Quest

We begin our discussion of "Champions of the Pagan Frontier," in the icy North: After a brief overview of the role of the Vikings in medieval Scandinavia, Chapter One describes the recurring appearance of drag-ons in medieval literature and the role of the dragon-slayer as hero.

The Norse myth of Otter's Ransom provides an introduction into the Scandinavian hero Sigurd, who is then compared with his Middle High German doppelganger Siegfried and his Anglo-Saxon cousin Beowulf, who are also dragon-slayers. We follow in the wake of Viking longships to Ireland in Chapter Two, which grounds an overview of medieval Irish literature upon a foundational understanding of ancient Celtic practices and beliefs. After a discussion of the *Tain*, the great epic of the Irish tradition, this chapter follows the development of Cuchulainn through a series of heroic archetypes. Chapter Three takes us across the Irish Sea to Wales in the southwest of the Isle of Britain and then discusses the *Mabinogion*, the great epic cycle of medieval Welsh mythology. After an overview of the elements of Welsh myth suggested by *Culhwch and Olwen*, this chapter follows the heroic Culhwch in his quest for the hand of the fair daughter of the larger-than-life king who finally yields his head to this giant-slayer hero.

Our acquaintance with "Warriors for the Christian Faith," begins on the eastern edge of the Byzantine Empire: Chapter Four opens with a discussion of the theme of "holy war" and that of the "border hero." After an introduction to Byzantium, this chapter examines the unique origin of the hero Basil, the function of coming-of-age hunting episodes and related bride-snatching sequences, and subsequently follows Basil through his battles with brigands, beasts, and amazons. Of particular note is a description of Basil's defeat of a serpent-demon that has resonance with dragon-slaying episodes. The chapter concludes with an examination of how Basil is wrought into a Christ-like symbol, representative of a lost "Golden Age." Chapter Five follows Orthodox missionaries north from Constantinople to Kiev, which converts and proclaims itself the "Third Rome." After a discussion of the Rus, their Viking roots, and their relationship with the Byzantine Empire, this chapter discusses the Kumans and the Tatars, invaders from the steppes cast by Russian authors as satanic soldiers of darkness. The chapter looks in particular at the epic *Lay of Igor's Campaign*, focusing most on Igor's capture by the demonic Kumans, his escape and flight from captivity, his subsequent apotheosis, and the clearly pagan elements of this ostensibly Christian account of holy war.

Chapter Six takes us through the narrow passes of the Pyrenees, the mountain range that divides France from Spain and traces how the story of an ambush of the rearguard of Charlemagne's army was wrought into the great epic of the Holy Roman Empire. After examining how the legend of Roland developed from the historical Battle of Roncevaux, this chapter explores how the theme of holy war is explicitly developed in the

Chanson de Roland, resulting in demonic enemies, a Christ-like hero in Roland, and a Judas-figure named Ganelon. This chapter concludes with a description of a trial-by-combat sequence intended, like the concept of holy war itself, to invite the active participation of the Divine. Chapter Seven returns us to the Iberian Peninsula, where the legend of an epic hero known as the Cid developed in the cultural hothouse of medieval Spain, where the Moorish conquest led to a vibrant mix of Christian, Islamic, and Jewish cultures unique in medieval Europe. This chapter begins with a discussion of the Moors, the significance of the Islamic conquest in the Spanish imagination, and the resulting dream of reconquest that fueled notions of holy war. This chapter then describes how the historical personage of Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar became recast as the legendary figure of the Cid and then follows this figure through several archetypal sequences, culminating in an episode of Divine Judgment that recalls that in the *Chanson de Roland*.

We first meet "Heroes of the Islamic World" on the border between Iran and Afghanistan, where ancient pagan gods are clad in Moslem garb of the Middle Ages. Chapter Eight begins with a description of how ancient Persia, more properly known as Iran, a storehouse of Indo-European mythology, provided the legacy that resulted in the medieval *Shahname*, the Iranian "Book of Kings." Having established the pedigree of the epic hero Rostam, which reaches back into the bloodlines of the gods of yore, this chapter follows the progression of that hero through several key stages, culminating in the fatal duel between this figure and his son Sohrab. Chapter Nine takes us to Anatolia or "Asia Minor," known to us today as Turkey. After introducing us to the Oghuz Turks and explaining from where they came, this chapter details how these nomadic raiders helped to change the face of the Eastern Mediterranean, cast down the Byzantines, and establish a new empire. This chapter then describes the great epic cycle of medieval Turkey and notes how this compilation provides the barest Islamic leavening for a rich mixture of classical mythology, Turkic folklore, and legendary elements. Chapter Ten invites us south into the Arabian Peninsula, where we learn about the birth of Islam and the development of the "frame tale" technique that will produce the *Thousand and One Nights*. Our travels then conclude with the close examination of three "everyman" heroes of medieval Arabian mythology—a study that helps to clarify how disparate elements of popular folklore were combined with heroic archetypes and even classical literature to produce an exciting and engaging mix. Indeed, the composite nature of these Arabian heroes and of the narrative techniques used to present them will help us to

conclude our study by hearkening back to the image of the mosaic of the medieval hero.

Finding Common Ground: Recurring Patterns of Medieval Heroism

Coming-of-age archetypes are commonplace in medieval heroic tales, as evidenced by the stories of the Irish Cuchulainn, the Turkish Boghach, and the Arabic Aladdin, whereas the journey to the Underworld theme asserts itself metaphorically in such stories as that of the Russian Igor and the Iberian Cid, as well as literally in those of the Arabic Judar and the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf. At times such commonalities are the result of the transmission of tales across cultures in particular areas; for example, the popularity of the wrestling match with Death and the cave of the Cyclops themes in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East are testaments to the abiding popularity of classical mythology throughout that region. In other instances the evidence suggests that common Indo-European ancestors gave birth to disparate but related medieval offspring in, for instance, homes as far afield as Iran and Ireland. Some texts seem to have developed along similar thematic lines, a circumstance particularly evident in the Russian and Carolingian epics, both of which quite clearly develop themes of holy war concerned with a crusading hero doing battle with a demonic enemy. Sometimes mythic archetypes and folkloric motifs assert themselves in varied texts from across a range of cultures, lending to certain of these medieval tales a timeless appeal that links them to stories and traditions from around the globe. The world of the medieval epic is in any case the world of the hero, and the visages of this hero emerge from the juxtaposition of vibrant fragments of mythology, folklore, and legend. Such heroes speak to us in a language of adventure and wonder of the fears, burdens, and challenges we all encounter, and their glorious victories and valiant defeats still offer readers today words of hope and encouragement as we embark upon our own adventures.

Notes

1. As Northrup Frye has famously noted, myths are concerned with topics of universal import rather than mere entertainment value. However, Carl Lindahl has asserted that comparative analysis of religious elements invites a certain contentiousness and thus advises a careful definition of terms rather than the exclusion of comparisons with current religions of practice. However strictly one defines the term, there are certainly as many ways to read and interpret myths

as there are definitions for the genre; of particular note in any study concerned with comparing various mythic aspects from disparate traditions are what might be termed the anthropological and psychological schools of thought. Perhaps the most well-known figure associated with the anthropological assessment of mythology is Claude Levi-Strauss, whose theory of structuralism posits that one may learn a great deal about a culture by studying its myths. The foundational beliefs inculcated in such narratives have much to teach us about the values and morals of a given society. On the other hand, Carl Jung is a key figure in the psychological analysis of myths. Rather as dreams seemed to Freud to offer a window into the unconscious of the individual, Jung saw myths more or less as the eloquent and evocative "dreams" of a culture. Jung was particularly interested in how archetypes manifested the individual's journey toward maturity, which makes it a useful approach in the study of the development of the hero across traditions. For detailed discussions of the nature and definition of "myth," see especially Baldick 143–144; Cotterell 1–6; Leeming *Voyage of the Hero* 3–8; Leeming *Oxford Companion to World Mythology* xi–xiii, 79–80; Lindahl 283–285; Puhvel 1–20; Thury and Devinney 3–22; and Trapp 605–606.

2. Scholars such as Axel Olrik, Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, and Jan Vansina worked to help define how legend functions in the context of other oral traditions and how it relates to what we think of as "history." For detailed discussions of the nature and definition of "legend," see especially Baldick 121; Leeming *Oxford Companion to World Mythology* vii; Lindahl 240–243; Puhvel 2–4, 15–16, 21–22, 117–118; and Thury and Devinney 3–15.

3. Major figures associated with the development of folkloric categories include Vladimir Propp and Stith Thompson. For detailed discussions of the nature and definition of "folklore," see especially Baldick 85; Cotterell 2; Leeming *Voyage of the Hero* 4; Leeming *Oxford Companion to World Mythology* xii; Lindahl 138–148; Puhvel 18–19; and Thury and Devinney 517–537.

4. For detailed discussions of the nature and definition of an "annal" or "chronicle," see especially Baldick 36; Leeming *Oxford Companion to World Mythology* 45–46, 359; Lindahl 12–13, 31; and Puhvel 2, 125, 140, 189–190, 223–225.

5. For detailed discussions of the nature and definition of "epic," see especially Baldick 70–71; Leeming *Voyage of the Hero* 152–154; Lindahl xix; Puhvel 2, 70–71, 140; and Trapp 600.

6. For detailed discussions of the nature and definition of "Romance," see especially Baldick 191–192; Lindahl 119–120, 346–350; and Trapp 610–611.

7. The body of reference literature in this field is nothing short of overwhelming; however, the neophyte and expert alike would be well served by beginning a journey into the world of Arthur with the following two recent reference guides, each of which provides an excellent and up-to-date bibliography: Norris J. Lacy, Geoffrey Ashe, and Debra N. Mancoff offer a superb overview

of the terrain in *The Arthurian Handbook*. Garland reference library of the humanities, Vol. 1920. New York: Garland Publishers, 1997. Alan Lupack provides an excellent and in-depth starting point with *The Oxford Guide to Arthurian Literature and Legend*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2005.

8. For detailed discussions of the nature and definition of hagiography, see especially Baldick 95; Cotterell 137–138; and Lindahl 354–357.

9. Those interested in a gaining grounding in feminist approaches to mythology might be well advised to begin with Carolyne Larrington's *The Woman's Companion to Mythology*. London: Pandora, 1997. A fundamental understanding of the narrative function of the feminine heroic in hagiography may be gleaned from Karen A. Winstead's *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997. Three particularly fine examples of sanctified warrior heroines from the Anglo-Saxon tradition are the subject of Marie Nelson's *Judith, Juliana, and Elene: Three Fighting Saints*. American University studies, Vol. 135. New York: P. Lang, 1991. Gender roles in medieval Europe are explored thoroughly in Katharina M. Wilson and Nadia Margolis's *Women in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004.

10. Developed from Carl Jung's psychological assessment of mythology, what is commonly referred to as the monomyth of the hero—a mythic template of archetypes concerned with key transformative episodes that regularly recurs across widespread and diverse traditions—is best known to a popular audience through Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's work, although often enthusiastically embraced by nonspecialists, has been more severely criticized in recent years by scholars in the field. That significant caveat noted, it is only fair to acknowledge that—Campbell's work aside—such transformative episodes often do in fact provide landmarks in the geography of medieval heroic narratives. Although we must not elide "legend" and "myth" too readily, scholars of world mythology such as Arthur Cotterell suggest that the legendary may be transmuted into the mythological over time through the crucible of the potent, sometimes fervent belief systems that develop around some heroic narratives. In such cases, we do not have to look very hard to find archetypal structures asserting themselves within this material. Cotterell cites the Trojan War in this regard, noting how over oceans of time and space events from the legendary past become a structure around which mythic material might be organized. For example, the figure of Odysseus developed into an archetypal hero with clearly mythic qualities. For detailed discussions of the nature and definition of the hero, see especially Baldick 98; Cotterell 1–6; Leeming *Voyage of the Hero* 3–8; Leeming *Oxford Companion to World Mythology* xi–xiii, 79–80; Lindahl 283–285; Puhvel 1–20; and Thury and Devinney 135–142, 365–371.

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