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Review of Joseph Fontenrose, *The Ritual of Myth*

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Review of Joseph Fontenrose, *The Ritual of Myth*

**Abstract**
The ritual theory of myth inspired some of the highest literary achievements of the twentieth century, such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, but at the same time it also created one of the most attractive fallacies to his humanistic scholarship: the origin of myth in ritual and ritual only. This theory influenced anthropology and archaeology, biblical scholarship and literary criticism. Folklore resisted its lure, yet was occasionally vulnerable to its devastating effects. A few years ago the ritual theory of myth appeared to be all but dead, but recently, like divine kingship itself, this idea has shown signs of resurrection.

**Disciplines**
Cultural History | Folklore | Near and Middle Eastern Studies
pass is a moot point, but Hill's revelation of the details and origins of Trinidadian
culture as exhibited in carnival is a distinct contribution to the study of West Indian
folklore.

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The Ritual Theory of Myth. By Joseph Fontenrose. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Lon-
appendix, bibliography, indexes. No price given)

The ritual theory of myth inspired some of the highest literary achievements of the
twentieth century, such as T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land, but at the same time it also
created one of the most attractive fallacies to hit humanistic scholarship: the origin of
myth in ritual and ritual only. This theory influenced anthropology and archaeology,
biblical scholarship and literary criticism. Folklore resisted its lure, yet was occasionally
vulnerable to its devastating effects. A few years ago the ritual theory of myth appeared
to be all but dead, but recently, like divine kingship itself, this idea has shown signs
of resurrection. Notable are two books of readings and literary criticism, respectively,
John B. Vickery and J'nan M. Sellery, eds., The Scapegoat: Ritual and Literature
(Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1972) and John B. Vickery, The Literary Impact of

Hence Fontenrose's monograph, which was first published in 1966, deserves a care-
ful second reading, for he exposes the frailty of evidence, the inconsistencies in logic,
and the sheer errors in translation and interpretation that marred the ritual theory of
myth from its origin in Frazer's The Golden Bough to its full growth in academic and
popular writings. Fontenrose's criticism focuses on the works of two of the main cult-
worshipers of the ritual theory: the historian of religion, Lord Raglan (Fitzroy Richard
Somerset), and the literary critic, Stanley Edgar Hyman. While Raglan considers all
myths to be derived from a single ritual, the sacrifice of the divine king, Hyman takes
a broader view and regards the ritual act in general as engendering myth. Fontenrose
examines the documentary basis for these two theories and finds nothing of the kind.
Ethnographic descriptions do not support the contention that "primitive peoples" ritualistically sacrifice their ailing kings at periodic intervals. Even in the ancient Near
East and Egypt there has not been clear evidence for the ritual sacrifice of the king,
in spite of the search for it by archaeologists and biblical scholars who interpreted the
cultures of the area in the light of the ritual theory of myth. Hyman, whose theory
has greater latitude, does not fare any better under the scrutiny of Fontenrose. In this
instance, the question of evidence is not as crucial; suffice it to point to such verbal
activities as storytelling, proverb speaking, and some forms of singing that do not have
necessary action correlatives. Also, as Fontenrose points out, experience, dreams, and
fantasy can be creative factors in the formation of tales, legends, and myths.

Raglan and Hyman draw upon the ideas and interpretations of classical sources by
James Frazer and Jane Harrison. As a student of classical literature, Fontenrose ex-
amines the basic texts upon which the ritual theory of myth rests and finds hardly any
support for it at all. His cautious reading of the Greek and Latin sources demonstrates
that it was Frazer himself who created the myth of the King of the Wood. Out of
flimsy references and incomplete information, Frazer wove the story of the sleepless king of the wood, a runaway slave who was the priest of Diana Nemorensis at her great sanctuary beside Lake Nemi, and who guarded himself, day and night, from a successor who would challenge him only after he could pluck a bough from a tree.

Fontenrose’s interpretation of the same meager and vague sources is devoid of mystery. He cautiously proposes that they allude to “a gladiatorial combat between incumbent priest and a challenger” (p. 44). He also points out the local nature of this particular festival event. Similarly the textual foundation of Jane Harrison’s theory is missing. She views myth, in Hyman’s words, as “a spoken correlative that evolves organically out of the acted rite” (p. 26). However, the hymn that serves to demonstrate her thesis lacks the dancing and the dramatic enactment of the story that she read into it.

Certainly, the errors in translation and interpretation of classical texts to which Fontenrose points are not that unique. The history of classical archaeology in Greece, Italy, the Near East, and Egypt abounds with similar examples. In Frazer and “The Golden Bough” (London, 1970), R. Angus Downie, James Frazer’s secretary, tells about an incident in which he himself learned about an error Frazer made.

In his Ovid he translated sexta luna as “sixth month” and equated it with June. Ward Fowler pointed out that this was a Latin idiom for the sixth day of the month. Frazer immediately wrote out his resignation as a Fellow of Trinity and took it to Henry Montagu Butler, then Master of Trinity. The Master listened to the explanation, handed him back his resignation, and advised him, “Pecca fortioer.”

The errors of translation that Fontenrose uncovers had a more serious result. They stirred up the imagination of poets and scholars alike, and set a chain reaction of mistakes, misunderstandings, and confusions which have not completely been untangled to this day. Hopefully The Ritual Theory of Myth will keep us, and others, from compounding the errors of the past.

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Teaching (about) Folklore


This introduction to the study of folklore and folklife contains an inspiring and spirited mixture of essays, theoretical contributions, practical instructions, and pure encyclopedia articles. It is a very well put together book, written by eighteen researchers who have something to say. One can see here that it is competent educators who have come forward and are narrating. Most of the contributions were presumably first given as lectures.

1 Frazer and “The Golden Bough” (London, 1970), 22. R. Agnus Downie notes that she learned about this incident from Lady Frazer, and writes: “She was no Latin scholar, but knew Italian, hence the strange form fortioer. I wonder whether in fact the Master quoted part of Martin Luther’s exhortations to Melanthon: Esto pecator et pecca fortioer, sed fortius fide et gaude in Christo. (Be a sinner and sin heartily, but have faith and rejoice in the Lord more heartily.)”