

MYTH

K. K. Ruthven

THE CRITICAL IDIOM
REISSUED



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Volume 30

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To Simon, Guy and Patrick

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General Editor's Preface

The volumes composing the Critical Idiom deal with a wide variety of key terms in our critical vocabulary. The purpose of the series differs from that served by the standard glossaries of literary terms. Many terms are adequately defined for the needs of students by the brief entries in these glossaries, and such terms do not call for attention in the present series. But there are other terms which cannot be made familiar by means of compact definitions. Students need to grow accustomed to them through simple and straightforward but reasonably full discussions. The purpose of this series is to provide such discussions.

Many critics have borrowed methods and criteria from currently influential bodies of knowledge or belief that have developed without particular reference to literature. In our own century, some of them have drawn on art-history, psychology, or sociology. Others, strong in a comprehensive faith, have looked at literature from a Marxist or a Christian or some other sharply defined point of view. The result has been the importation into literary criticism of terms from the vocabularies of these sciences and creeds. Discussions of such bodies of knowledge and belief in their bearing upon literature and literary criticism form a natural extension of the initial aim of the Critical Idiom.

Because of their diversity of subject-matter, the studies in the series vary considerably in structure. But all the authors have tried to give as full illustrative quotation as possible, to make reference whenever appropriate to more than one literature, and to write in such a way as to guide readers towards the short bibliographies in which they have made suggestions for further reading.

John D. Jump

University of Manchester

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Introduction

What is myth? 'I know very well what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked and try to explain, I am baffled.' So wrote St Augustine in his *Confessions* (xi. 14), grappling engagingly with that elusive category called time, and anticipating the predicament of anybody who is pressed for a brief and comprehensive definition of myth. It is the question itself, we come to realize, which is at fault, for we have no direct experience of myth as such, but only of particular myths: and these, we discover, are obscure in origin, protean in form and ambiguous in meaning. Seemingly immune to rational explication, they nevertheless stimulate rational enquiry, which accounts for the diversity of conflicting explanations, none of which is ever comprehensive enough to explain myth away. Myths partake of that quality ascribed to poetry in Wallace Stevens' meticulously evasive aphorism: they appear to resist the intelligence almost successfully. This is why they attract systematizers who reassure us that the mighty maze is not without a plan, because myth is nothing more than primitive science, or history, or the embodiment of unconscious fantasies, or some other solvent currently in favour. Evidence adduced in support of each claim often convinces one that certain myths must have arisen exactly as the systematizer describes: his skeleton-key undoubtedly fits a certain type of lock. But systematizers are not content to contribute one more mythogony to the existent stock, nor to aspire towards that condition of pluralistic tolerance advocated by Melville and Frances Herskovits (1958, p. 121); on the