

Myth and Literary History: Two Germanic Examples

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The Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lecture for 2003

Under the care of its founder, John Miles Foley, the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition, together with its journal *Oral Tradition*, has become the preeminent institution in its field in America; and as the field itself widens, the Center's importance in the study of the humanities can only grow. The annual Lord and Parry Lecture Series is one aspect of that widening outreach, and I feel very honored to be able to follow distinguished and provocative humanists in the series and to follow, though more distantly, Lord and Parry themselves. The topic agreed on for my contribution was the slippery subject of myth, my current preoccupation, not only because of some detailed research projects in hand, but more urgently as a new undergraduate seminar on the general topic looms on my immediate horizon. There's nothing like that kind of undergraduate teaching to force one to return to basic ideas. Bless them, undergraduates won't let a body hide behind philology! I realize that myth fits only problematically into the format of the Lord and Parry lectures and into the mandate of the journal *Oral Tradition*; in fact as far as my skimming eye could discover, no article in *Oral Tradition's* eighteen luminous years has confessed in its title to a principle concern with myth—admittedly this impression was not the product of meticulous research.

In any case, the Center and the journal usually deal concretely (even if also theoretically) with the form, content, and performance of oral literature or else with its cultural matrix, especially in oralities and literacies. These topics been among *my* main interests too ever since my understanding of literature was destabilized and refashioned by my teacher Albert Lord about 1963. Less famously, however, Lord had a keen interest in myth as well. In 1968-69, the year I worked for him as head teaching fellow in the General Education course known as Hum 9, we tried, between sit-ins or microphone take-overs by the SDS and tear-gas attacks by the authorities, to teach some formalist approaches to myth, such as that of Lord Raglan's famous hero pattern. That's when it became clear to me that Mr. Lord (to use the form of

address current at Harvard at that time) was a crypto-ritualist like Vladimir Propp, whom we also endeavored to interpret that year to restless student hordes who quite unreasonably could not understand why American lives should be sacrificed in an imperial adventure. (Thank goodness there's nothing like that going on today: the times, they have a-changed.)

The myth-ritual approach perhaps appealed to Mr. Lord, as it still does to me, because it ties myth, which constantly threatens to grade off into formlessness, to a ritual that can be apprehended and described in formalist and performative terms. Insofar as a myth can be the words spoken at a ritual, Jane Harrison's "things said over things done," the concept is doubly opened to structural or formal approaches, first by being a definite, particular utterance and second by being grounded in actions that presumably find echoes in the utterance. The myth-ritual school, which we still find full of vigor in the exciting scholarship of Walter Burkert (e.g., 1966, 1983, 1987, and 1996) and, somewhat attenuated, in some of my own recent work (1999, forthcoming a), brings the study of myth into the same perceptual orbit we move in as students of oral literature. Meanwhile, the concept of myth itself as generally and more widely understood simply *will not* be pinioned either to a certain utterance or to certain actions, with the result that students of particular myths have to jettison a huge semantic penumbra around the word "myth" in order to arrive at their formal clarities. In my own field of competence, early Germanic mythology, the ritual connection is more often than not purely hypothetical and often impossible even to imagine. More generally the myth-ritual approach could be criticized in a metaphor: the concrete form offered by ritual is a would-be anchor for a cloud.

Myth as cloud perhaps suggests the difficulties for an earth-bound analyst; but in order to avoid the trap of formalism, normally my favorite trap, while still integrating myth into the field of vision implied by my hosts, especially by the journal, I want to try to investigate where, if anywhere, myth fits into literary history. To a small extent this is a wish to dialogue with an elegant article by Walter Haug, "Mythos und Literatur" (1989). Haug, however, writes out of a confident structuralist essentialism, whereas to me a couple of decades later both categories are constructed products of their use. A related difference of approach is that Haug, starting from a comparison made by Dumézil, takes his exemplary stories as given, tidy wholes while my detailed engagement with Germanic myths, all of which show a cultural gap between recording and effective life as myth, makes it difficult for me to move beyond the discovery phase. Thus Haug can contrast myth and *literature* while for me it is *literary history* as part of the construction of both categories that forms the subject. In this very broad

sense, I take literary history to be the overall goal of a journal like *Oral Tradition*. But to avoid another trap associated with myth, the lapse into abstraction or pure wool-gathering, I would like to offer two myth-complexes as models to think with. The first of these, the Masterbuilder tale, is a very old interest of mine, recently renewed when I wrote an encyclopedia article that managed also to bring some new material to bear (Harris 1976 and 2003).

The Masterbuilder Tale

The story of the building of Asgard (*Ásgarðr*), the stronghold of the Norse gods, is told in chapter 42 of Snorri Sturluson's handbook of myths, *Gylfaginning*, the first part of his *Prose Edda*.¹ It is only in the interest of time that I refrain from quoting and summarize instead. One of the first events in the history of the *Æsir*, the Norse gods, was the arrival of an unknown workman who offered to construct a fortress that would be secure against the giants. The builder demanded as his price the goddess Freyja and also the sun and moon. The gods in counsel agreed, but set a deadline of the first day of summer for the finished construction and stipulated that the builder receive help from no man—a stipulation modified to allow help from the builder's stallion Svaðilfari. Mighty oaths were sworn. The stallion hauled huge stones by night, and the work proceeded rapidly. As the deadline approached it became clear what a mistake the gods had made; they blamed the decision on Loki and forced him to find a way to cheat the builder. That night a strange mare appeared on the scene and seduced the stallion away from his work and, chasing the stallion, the builder as well. The next day the builder saw that he would now fail to meet the deadline and flew into a rage, revealing himself as a giant. The gods now broke their oaths and summoned Thor, who raised his hammer and paid the builder his wages with death. Later Loki gave birth to a foal that became Odin's famous steed, Sleipnir.

Suspense, deception, Terminator-like action, extreme sexuality—this story has it all. No wonder every reader of the *Edda* remembers it. The passage brings together many strands of Snorri's version of Old Norse mythology, but its centerpiece is a narrative that obviously renders a multiform of a widely attested type of *legend*. The number and variations of this tale complex make an historical-geographic understanding no simple

¹ Faulkes 1988:34-36, 1987:35-36.

task even though excellent folklorists have studied it.² It is possible to generalize, however, that the core narrative tells how a supernatural being enters into a contract with a building-sponsor to complete a construction task within a short time in return for a ruinously precious reward; when the work is almost finished, the supernatural is cheated of his reward. The limited time for the task is in effect a deadline, and the bargain releases the contractor from the necessity to pay if the building is incomplete at the deadline. The payment demanded varies enormously, but characteristically it includes a human life or soul or simply possession of a human being. The motifs employed for cheating the builder and for the conclusion of the tale vary widely. Frequently the cock is made to crow, signaling too early the end of the (last) night of construction, or the devil or giant is delayed in some other way. Usually the work itself is left unfinished in some (relatively small) way; sometimes the last load of stones is still to be seen on the hillside. Finally, the frustrated builder frequently leaves the scene in a fit of anger (especially the devil, a manikin, or a fairy), sometimes trying to destroy the building as he goes; when the builder is a giant, he will frequently be a casualty of the story.

A distinctive form of this folktale developed in Scandinavia, in which the deadline is modified by a naming motif, probably borrowed from the wondertale Type 500 (Rumpelstilzchen). In the narrative fusion, the original building deadline survives but is ignored, and further pressure is put upon the human building-sponsor who usually discovers the name accidentally, for example hearing it sung in a lullaby. The giant, addressed by name at the last minute, frequently falls to his death. In retaining the giant as builder, Scandinavia seems to represent an older layer of the tale complex, but the dead-naming motif is clearly a relatively modern innovation.

Snorri's myth, written about 1223, is considerably older than any of the folktales. Dates are of course of little significance for such oral materials, but Snorri's tale clearly represents a stage before the naming motif overspread Scandinavia, probably in the late middle ages. In most features Snorri's myth agrees with the folktales, often strikingly so, but scholars concur that Snorri made a number of adaptations in order to account for other myth fragments or sources; most obviously he adapted the end of the narrative to fit his major source, the eddic poem *Völuspá*, stanzas 25-26, which he quotes to conclude the chapter. The overriding problem posed by the folktale analogues boils down to the status of chapter 42 as myth. Snorri knew at least one oral version of the tale, but was the tale as he knew it from

² References in Harris 1976 and 2003, but among older studies Boberg 1955 deserves special notice.

oral tradition in the thirteenth century a “myth” or a “legend”? If it was a genuine myth, how are we to understand that the same narrative is spread all over Europe as a legend? How did the heathen sacred narrative manage to persist orally in Christian Iceland over two hundred years after the conversion; why is there no other certain trace of the myth in all the numerous remnants of Norse mythology; and why, in that mythology, is there no other case of a myth that so closely coincides with a complete secular folktale? In 1933 Jan de Vries summarized this gap in our understanding (76): “As to the transition between myth and folk-tale, we grope in the dark.”

De Vries’s study is most important for definitively decoupling Snorri’s story from its apparent moorings in *Völuspá*. Snorri is obviously trying to explain these cryptic stanzas by his chapter 42, and “explanation” for a creative mythologist like Snorri took narrative, not critical, form: instead of trying tentatively to tease out the implications of verses that were as dark for him as for us, he brought to bear an external narrative that to some extent already fit the circumstances of the pagan poem and could be adapted at will. When I entered the fray in 1976, I fully accepted de Vries’s argument for the independence of *Völuspá* 25-26 and tried to settle the genre question and the literary-historical question of Snorri’s methods and motivation through the introduction of a new analogue, a local legend in historicized saga form attached to some remarkable construction works in southwest Iceland, principally the path across the lava-field Berserkjahraun on Snæfellsnes peninsula, as told in the early thirteenth-century *Heiðarvíga saga* and in the slightly later *Eyrbyggja saga*.³

Later I was made aware of a more modern variant of this legend,⁴ which, because the affinity has not been noticed in print, I will pause briefly to introduce. The tale is attached to a lava-field south of Reykjavík on the south side of the Reykjanes peninsula near Grindavík and appears in the folklore collection of Jón Árnason (1954-58, IV:133-34; my translation):

Ögmundur hét maður. Hann var berserkur, illur viðskiptis og flakkaði um land og gjörði mörgum mönnum óskunda. Hann kom að Krýsuvík og bað dóttur bónda. Bóndi þorði ekki að neita og lofaði honum dóttur sinni ef hann legði veg yfir hraunið. Hann gekk að því og fór til, byrjaði að

³ Full references in Harris 1976; supplementary references in 2003.

⁴ Personal communication from Dr. Gerard Breen (9/19/97). My thanks to Dr. Breen for this and further helpful communications about the Masterbuilder tale over the years.

vestan, en bóndi stóð við hraunbrúnina að austan. Ögmundur hamaðist og hjó rösklega veginn yfir hraunið, en þegar hann kom austur yfir og var búinn dasaðist hann. Þá hjó bóndi hann banahögg og dysjaði hann þar. Grjóthrúga er þar við götuna sem kallað er leið Ögmundar, en stendur á kletti. Vegurinn gegnum hraunið er djúpur og mjór og víða brotinn eða höggvinn gegnum stór björg (hraunstykki), en víða þrepóttur í botninn. . . . Síðan hefir hraunið heitið Ögmundarhraun.

There was a man named Ögmundur; he was a berserk, difficult to deal with, and roamed around the countryside doing injury to many a man. He came to Krísuvík and demanded the farmer's daughter. The farmer did not dare to say no and promised him his daughter if he would construct a trail over the lava-field. He agreed and went there, beginning on the west side, but the farmer took a position at the edge of the lava on the east side. Ögmundur went into a berserk rage and rapidly hewed out a path over the lava-field; but when he arrived on the east side and was finished, he was exhausted. Then the farmer struck him a death-blow and buried him there. There is heap of stones standing on a crag there beside the path, which is called "Ögmundur's Way." The path through the lava-field is deep and narrow and in many places broken or hacked through great boulders (i.e., of lava), but in many other places on a terraced base. . . . Afterward the lava-field bore Ögmundur's name.

Though a close relationship to the version located on Snæfellsnes (where there are two berserk builders) and by extension to that story's European roots is obvious, it would be difficult and unnecessary to apply this much later (attested) tale to the assessment of Snorri's myth.

The sagas' tale of the berserk builders is, I argued in 1976, a second early Icelandic outlier of the Masterbuilder complex. The story would almost certainly have been known to Snorri and can be considered *the* form of the Masterbuilder legend known to him—a contention supported by Snorri's biography and even by some verbal similarities between the sagas' versions and Snorri's. The latter parts of my article sought a *motive* for Snorri's adaptation of this local legend as his written myth and found it in the intricate euhemeristic thought of twelfth- to thirteenth-century learning.

The one time I presented an oral paper based on this research—it was about 1974—at least one audience member seemed disposed to punch me out. We don't lightly give up the honorific title "myth" for a story as good as this one. But my paper was just a few years ahead of a substantial wave of work on Snorri's relation to learned sources, and in retrospect I seem to be in good company with Germanic mythologists going back at least to Eugen Mogk in the '20's and forward to the contemporary Margaret Clunies Ross. For the recent encyclopedia article I reviewed all the literature I could

find on the Masterbuilder tale after 1976; and there seems to have been only one attempt explicitly to reestablish the pre-de Vries traditional view (Dronke 1979; cf. Harris 2003). Though my argument may sound radical at first hearing, *and*—in this summary form, dogmatic—for which excuse me—I believe we can take it as sufficiently established among scholars to serve as our first example.

Lamicho the Barker

Our second example, which I've only *begun* working on, is one of the few Langobardic myths to have survived. Preserved in Paulus Diaconus's *Historia Langobardorum*, broken off at the author's death in 799, it tells a foundation story linked to one of the prehistoric royal dynasties, set sometime during a vague period of some hundreds of years before the Langobards entered history when they settled in Pannonia about 546 or more definitively with their invasion of Italy in 568 (Paulus 1978:61-63; Paul 1974:26-30). Here is our story: Agelmund, son of Agio ("edge," i.e. sword) and grandson of the real dynasty founder, the seeress Gambara, was the first Langobard to hold the title of king. In his time a certain prostitute had given birth to seven boys at once and disposed of them in a fishpond. King Agelmund happened to ride by and stopped to watch the infants struggling; for unstated reasons he "turned them hither and thither with [his] spear" (like "turning" salad?), and one caught hold of the spear with his hand (Paul 1974:26). Now the king was moved and pronounced that this one would be a great man; he had the baby saved, nursed, and brought up as his foster son. The foundling was given a name variously spelled in the many manuscripts, but probably best regarded as Lamicho. Paulus reports that he was so named from *lama*, supposedly Langobardic for fishpond—an etymology now universally rejected. Lamicho grows into a warrior and succeeds his foster father as king. Before his own death two adventures are told of Lamicho. In the first he acts as heroic representative of the tribe in defeating the Amazon champion in an aquatic fight, insuring the Langobards the right to cross a river into some vaguely eastern territory. There, after a peaceful sojourn, they fall victim to a surprise night attack by a people the manuscripts call variously the Bulgares or Vulgares. In that attack king Agelmund is killed and his only daughter is abducted. The Langobards now choose Lamicho as their king and begin a war of reprisal. In the first battle of that war the Langobards flee back to their camp but are rallied and led to victory by the heroic rhetoric of Lamicho and by his battle leadership.

The infant-exposure story, our main interest, has a distant analogue elsewhere in Langobard pseudo-history unknown to the Carolingian historian. Recall that in the Anglo-Saxon tradition represented by *Widsith* “Sceaf ruled the Langobards”; recall too that the mysterious arrival of Scyld Scefing in *Beowulf* is elsewhere attributed to his father the “Sheaf.” Scyld and Sceaf together constitute a fascinating subject that has recently been thoroughly canvassed by Bruce Alexander (2002), who greatly “expands the analogues” (so his subtitle) but only to texts that explicitly name Scyld or Sceaf. Touching Lamicho, however, the most important scholarship belongs to a line of Viennese scholars and to a brilliant, but mind-glazing, paper by Kemp Malone.⁵ This is unfortunately not the moment for a close or critical account, but I draw together the most important strands. A pervasive symbolism around the totem of the dog haunts Langobardic prehistory. Malone convincingly etymologizes Lamicho as “little barker” and makes a strong argument that his Anglo-Saxon name appears in *Widsith* as Hungar, i.e. Hundgar, “dog-spear”; in earlier mythic episodes in Paulus the Langobards terrorize their neighbors by spreading the word that they had dog-headed warriors, like the bear- and wolf-warriors well known in Old Norse; Paulus’s “prostitute” (*meretrix*) has been explained by Much (followed by Höfler and others) as going back to a word for bitch; cf. Lat. *lupa*, “she-wolf” and “prostitute.” The Langobards’ original ethnic name, Winnili, has been connected with “savage dogs” by Much, who most importantly demonstrated that the Hundings of eddic legend are our Winnili-Langobards. This means that the Hunding-Wulfing feud preserved in Norse sources looms as a background to Langobardic story, and Malone draws the ultimate consequences of the background by explaining the whole story of Lamicho as the Hunding *version* of that feud. Malone had an astounding gift for combinations, but I feel that the hound-symbolism of the Langobards, as Höfler called it, is something we can hold on to. To some extent this was sensed already by Jacob Grimm (1970:395 and 482, passages present already in the first edition of 1848) who compared the story of Lamicho to the German legends of the origins of a noble family, the Welfs/Welfen (better known in English through the Italian form as Guelphs). The legend has the same multiple birth with unnatural connotations, but the man who happens along to rescue the eleven babes (the twelfth having been kept by the mother) is their father or at least the husband of their mother. (Similarly the sources are split over whether Agelmund is the father or foster father of Lamicho.) The rescued babes of the German legend received the

⁵ Much 1919, 1924, 1925; Malone 1959a, 1959b; Höfler 1940, 1962; cf. Markey 1983.

name “whelps,” and the dog-sympathy descended with the family over centuries.

So much for the intra-Germanic connections and scholarship. Parallel but as yet unconnected runs an Indo-European branch of scholarship in a current article by Calvert Watkins (forthcoming) that I will now mutilate by summarizing. The oldest myth of the set he compares, Hittite from about 1600 BCE, is the story of the Queen of Kaniš, who produced thirty boys in one birth. Ashamed, she disposed of the boys in a river, but unlike Lamicho’s “cruel” mother, she provided them with a floating vessel, thoughtfully caulked with excrement.⁶ The waifs were rescued at the coast and brought up by the gods. Later the Queen littered again with thirty girls; these she chose to bring up in the central Anatolian city of Neša. Now grown up, the young men journey up country, chance to hear of the girls, and realize that the purpose of their journey is to seek out their mother. The Queen did not recognize her sons and so gave their sisters to them as wives. Only the youngest lad warns against the sin . . . and there the text breaks off. Watkins compares two other very early texts, one Greek, one Rig-Vedic; both have unnatural multiple births but otherwise present only a part of the total pattern of the Hittite text. Watkins also thickens the brew by introducing for each myth evidence of a related ritual, the Indic ritual being the famous *aśvamedha* or Horse Sacrifice. I think there may be a Langobardic analogue to the ritual as well, but for this occasion we will keep to the high ground by observing only the pervasive affinities between the tales told by Paulus and the Hittite text. They could be listed as: (1) unnatural multiple birth (2) with animal affinities; (3) disposal of the litter by water; (4) rescue by a person or persons with noble credentials (i.e., not shepherds, a water-drawer, or the like); (5) nourishment and rearing (briefly mentioned); and finally (6) *culling* of the one future leader out of the mass. Culling is obviously what happens in the Lamicho story (and in the Welf legend); in the Hittite the one young husband who resisted incest is likely to have become the hero, just as in Watkins’ Greek parallel, where forty-nine of the fifty daughters of Danaos murder their sinfully endogamous husbands, but one is spared; he becomes king.

But the Hittite baby-boat cries out for comparison with the many more familiar exposed infant tales, including those of Sargon (about 1300 BCE), Moses (first millenium BCE), Cyrus (fifth century BCE), and, in the

⁶ Otten (the most complete translated source) gives *Kot* (“dung”) (1973:7); Hoffner (1990:62) translates “dung”; but a personal communication from Dr. Patrick Taylor, based on the Chicago Hittite Dictionary, casts doubt on this interpretation of the word at issue.

Mahabharata, Karna (perhaps 400 BCE). Many scholars have studied this constellation of tales, but the best known are probably those who have made their results easiest for general readers by providing a single explanation, that is, Otto Rank (1959) and Lord Raglan (1936), with respectively their psychological and ritual “keys to all mythology.” The best study I have found, however, is a fine dissertation on the Sargon birth legend by Brian Lewis (1980), who, among other things, gives careful summaries of no fewer than 72 stories that are at least arguably related to the tale of Sargon, including both the Hittite myth I have summarized and another a bit closer to the Sargon-Moses form, and even Paulus’s Lamicho tale. Lewis studies the material according to strict geographical-historical principles; as a result we have a comprehensive and responsible set of charts and analyses in terms of archetype and subtypes—a result that is nevertheless a little disappointing for the student of myth greedy for a global vision. Lewis’ collection does make it possible to compare the multiple-birth group—which he does not comment on as such—with the rest and with Watkins’ rather different reconstructive exercise.

We learn quickly, then, that these two—the Queen of Kaniš and Lamicho—are the *only* multiple-birth legends synopsized by Lewis; but we can certainly add German legends of the Welf type.⁷ Watkins’ one-line Vedic text may imply incest as the origin of its birth of twenty, but we can’t say much more than that. And for the present I want to ignore the question of whether *twins*, such as Romulus and Remus, constitute a multiple birth. To finish off this summary treatment of Lamicho, however—remember it’s only an *example* in our larger discussion, a myth to think with—let me draw together my provisional opinions about the Langobardic tale.

When the tribe lived in the old Bardengau on the lower Elbe and, as the Hundings in East Holtstein, in contact with Inguaeonic folk groups and the sea, it shared with them the fertility myth of the sea-borne foundling Sceaf. As they moved east and south their contacts with the Swebian tribal network increased; Woden worship and the myth depicting his role in their new name, Langobards, may have accrued from the central or south German neighbors. The prototype of the Lamicho-Welf story displaced the old fertility god in the more warlike time and place. The Queen of Kaniš supplies a clue to this prototype, but the broader tale type as interpreted by Lewis carries with it a frequent trait of animal sympathy. For example, many of Lewis’ tales involve nurturing by animals; and in the second Hittite example the mother *is* an animal. In any case, the resulting myth was

⁷ Grimm and Grimm 1981; see espec. numbers 393, 411, 521, 540, 549, 577, 584, and the valuable notes by the translator/editor Donald Ward.

thoroughly embedded in the old hound symbolism of the tribe, a symbolism that survived into late medieval folklore attached to certain noble families of central and southern Germany and in Lombardy in the family of Cangrande di Verona, the *canis magnus* (Höfler 1940). And it peeps through in Paulus' Latin, as we have seen. A speculation on why this foundling foundational myth was adopted (apparently at the price of the loss of the Scaef myth) might link it with the institution of kingship. Before Agelmund, the Langobards, like other early Germanic tribes, were ruled by numerous leaders, called *duces* in the Latin sources. The institution of the single *rex* was due to the pressures of war (and foreign influence) during the migration period, but the king was chosen by the assembly from among the most able *duces*. A myth in which the king is *culled* from among less virtuous brethren might suit such an ideology very well.

Myth and Literary History

So much for our two examples. Considered in relation to literary history and to myth as a category, these two stories might appear to be symmetrical opposites. The building of Asgard is presented as a myth in the sense of a story about gods, but is revealed as literature based on legend. Ibsen worked a similar transformation on the folktale in his play *The Masterbuilder* (*Byggmester Solness*), and Wagner transformed Snorri's myth in ways that uncannily recapitulate in reverse Snorri's own revision of the legend. The story may have trickled down Northrop Frye's literary *scala* to the ironic level *if* we are justified in reading an episode of Lars Gustafsson's *A Tiler's Afternoon* as deflating the mythic flatulence of Ibsen: when far below the vicar calls his name, the aged worker—a masterbuilder figure for our less than heroic age—does *not* fall from the steeple he is repairing; later he confides that he is never afraid even if so high he can hear the angels fart. These modern instances, though less than perfect parallels, are not so far from the conscious manipulation of tradition we seem to find in Snorri. In any case, the loss of the Asgard story as real myth is plainly a gain for literary history since we get a glimpse into Snorri's methods and motives.

To judge only by the analogues in the Grimms' *Deutsche Sagen* (1981), the Lamicho story was simply the earliest appearance of a family-origin legend that we find several times in German folklore, presented with urbane skepticism by Paulus. Yet the respected Karl Helm (1953:78-81) and other students of Germanic religion regarded it as a myth if restored to its proper pre-Christian milieu; and Karl Hauck (1955) mounts a powerful argument for considering it and other early Germanic tribal histories and

genealogies as part of the *religious* apparatus of the tribal state. If this is true, and I think it is, Lamicho's story is an example of a real myth turned into an historical legend by a writer. What's a modern student to believe?

The stories we've been following are not generically fixed by essential qualities but have their qualities assigned to them by context, custom, and desire. A startling example of this phenomenon is Margaret Mills' report (1982) on a women's cult in modern Iran where a version of the story we know as the folktale Cinderella had literally become a sacred text. This would not disturb G. S. Kirk (1984), who defines myth as *any traditional story*, including legends and wondertales; I regard this definition as so *open* as to obliterate important, if not transcendent, distinctions, but it is also too *narrow* in limiting the idea too strictly to story. And here we return to the problem with formalism. Consider William Bascom's "Forms of Folklore" (1984), one of the most useful essays for a teacher. As an initial move Bascom sets up an analytic ideal, a sort of hypothesis, in which myth, legend, and folktale are three "genres" distinguished by non-formal criteria such as belief, time of action, and attitude toward the story (sacred or secular). The gist of the essay is a tour of native cultures to compare their segmentation of the world of oral literature with this Western model. But Bascom begins unacceptably by characterizing all three as *prose* narratives. This is a confusion of what French structuralists call *discours*, discourse or vehicle, with *histoire* or story. But the question at stake is not about the vehicle—a ballet, a cartoon, a Little Golden Book—but a question about the kind of story. A formal approach would not necessarily make that mistake, but I'm still not satisfied that myth is best understood merely as a category of story.

We expect more of something we honor with the name "myth" than can be delivered by a definition that begins and ends with "story." The history of the word—how Plato used it, how Aristotle used it—is irrelevant to this exercise. Think instead in the here and now of all the non-narrative, even non-verbal senses of the word. I used to be secretly annoyed with a beloved colleague who taught a course called "The Myth of America"—admittedly the annoyance was not unrelated to its popularity. But that usage is legitimate; even myth as lie, that is, someone else's belief, is a legitimate contemporary use. The word legitimately takes in ideology, worldview, reputation, or such an eschatological complex as Ragnarök, and this range of usage, with more or less religious tinge, constitutes the unusual power we associate with the word. We need an understanding that stretches to include all this as well as narrative. We need, to use an obvious distinction memorably captured by Rogerson (1984 [1978-79]), an understanding of the relationship of "myth" to "myths." I propose to

understand “myths” as the narrative way that “myth” is usually communicated, especially in pre-modern cultural settings, and I believe this is not far from the relationship of syntagmatic to paradigmatic in Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism: the binaries making up the analysis are an attempt to understand myth on the basis of its expression in myths.

Finally, literary history: it must be obvious by now why literary history, or even the para-literary history we need for non-written literature,⁸ has difficulty accommodating “myth.” To deal only in “myths,” sacred stories, their form, intertextuality, and diachronic development, would be to treat the material as literature and not fully as itself. To deal with “myth” would deny formalism and the basis of literary history itself.

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⁸ The notion of “para-literary history” is discussed in Harris forthcoming b.

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