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DOVER · THRIFT · EDITIONS

Sophocles
OEDIPUS REX

UNABRIDGED

Oedipus Tyrannus

Oidipous tyranennos

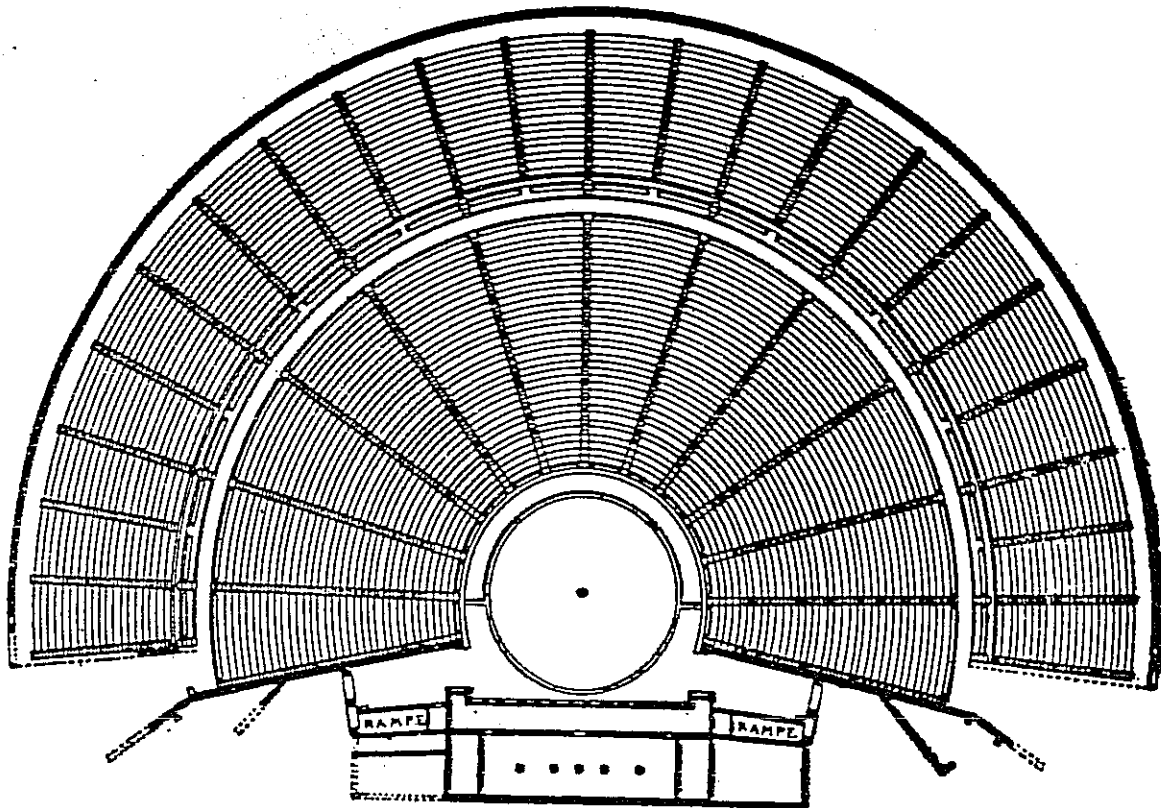
The Greek Theatre

Historians believe that drama was first performed on the stone threshing floors in the countryside of Greece. Eventually historians surmise that this circular "dancing place," or **orchestra**, was moved to the foot of the temple of the god being honored. The temple then served as a background for early theatrical performances. By the fifth century B.C., the design of the Greek theatre was complete with its early connections to the rural stone threshing floors incorporated.

Using the hilly terrain of Greece, the builders of Greek theatre positioned the orchestra, where the chorus danced, at the foot of a semi-circular hillside into which stone benches were built. The audience sat on these benches in the **theatron**, "the seeing place." Extending from the orchestra to each side of the theatron were two broad aisles, the **parados**, a term which also identified the entrance song of the chorus in a tragedy. Perpendicular to the orchestra was the **skene**, a rectangular building with three doors in front, providing a generic backdrop for the action of the play as well as an area into which actors could exit to disappear from the scene and to change costumes, masks, and roles. Toward the end of the century, a small platform in front of the skene appeared to give actors more visibility and to separate them from the chorus in the orchestra below. This platform was called the **proskenion**.

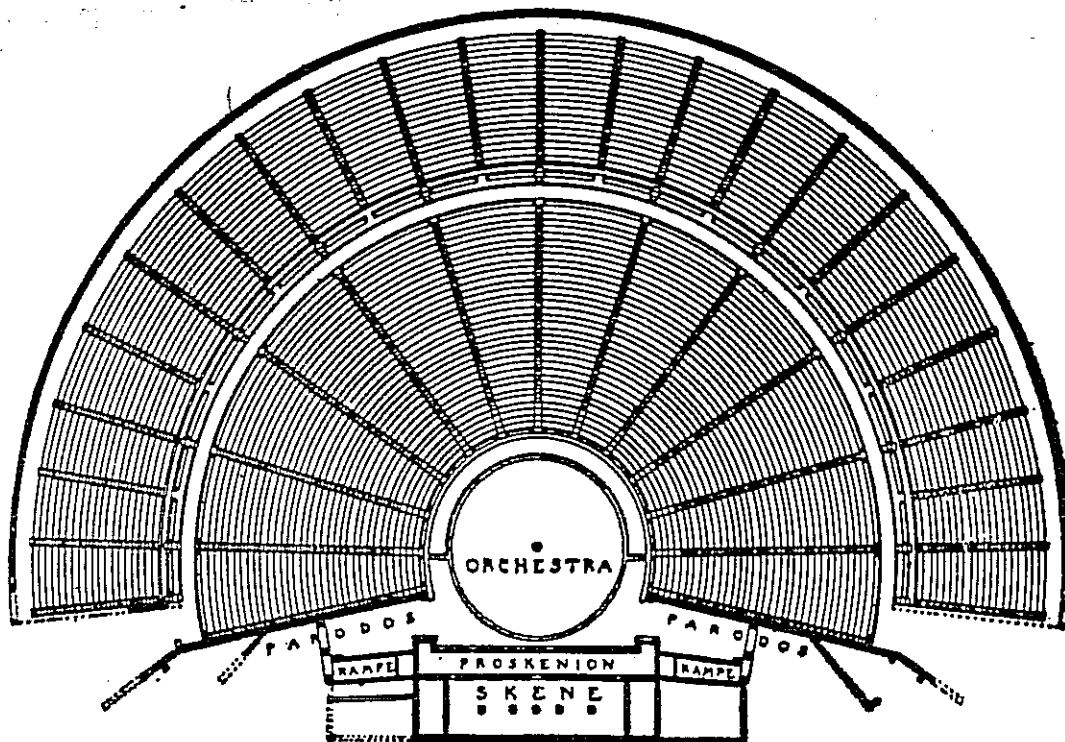
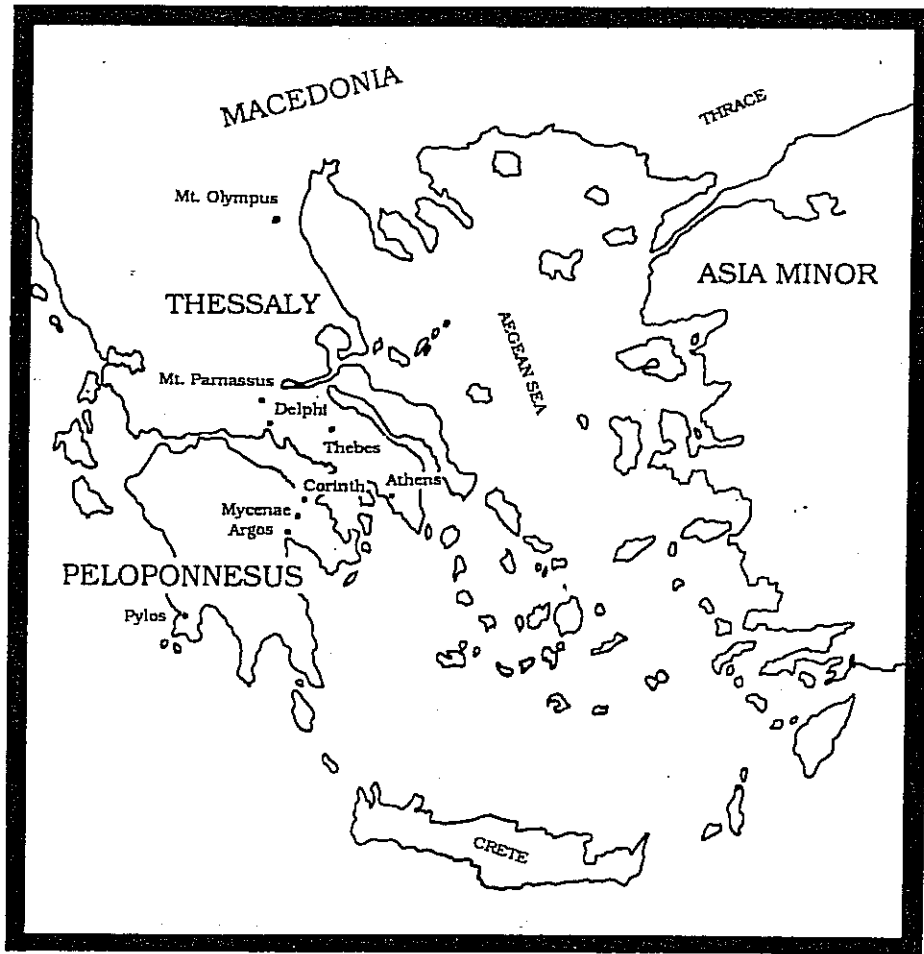
The performances began at dawn and lasted the entire day. The light of the sun illuminated performers and audience alike, uniting them uniquely into the drama.

Directions: Label the drawing below. Identify the theatron, the orchestra, the parados, the skene, and the proskenion.



¹ Kenneth MacGowan and William Melnitz, *Golden Ages of the Theater* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959), 13.

for word definitions



The Greek Actor

Participating in Greek drama was considered to be a citizen's civic duty. Citizens were expected to volunteer to perform in the chorus. Experienced performers, especially citizens trained in oratory, elevated to the status of actor. The Greek actor, who might also be a governmental official or influential businessman, was highly regarded in Greek society. So revered, the actor was often exempted from military duty.

In this male-dominated society, women were not allowed to act. They were often excluded from the audience, or when allowed to attend, were relegated to the upper rows of seats.

The actor portraying the god, king, or legendary hero needed to appear larger than life. As a symbol, he reflected a grander status than mere mortals, like those appearing in the chorus. He needed to be seen by the audience who were at a great distance from the stage. Therefore, the actor donned a costume which added size and distinction to his role.

The actor wore a long, flowing robe, dyed in symbolic colors, called a **chiton**, with a great deal of padding underneath to give a broader than natural appearance. To add height, high, platformed shoes called **cothurni** were worn.

Though the actor gained in size, he lost mobility, which led to a more declamatory style of acting which required the actor to move little and to face his audience for delivery of his speeches. Because of distance from the audience and limited mobility, actors developed stock, broad, sweeping gestures and general movements which signified particular emotions, such as lowering the head to indicate grief, or beating the breast and rending their clothes to indicate mourning, or stretching out arms in prayer.

Actors carried **properties** (props) to indicate roles. A herald might wear a wreath, a traveler a broad-brimmed hat. Kings customarily carried scepters and warriors carried spears. The elderly carried sticks serving as canes.

The most distinctive feature of the actor's costume was the mask. Paradoxically, the mask both limited and broadened the audience's understanding of the role portrayed. The mask helped to identify the specific character, yet generalized the features enough to indicate a virtual **Everyman**, helping the audience to glean that personal message the Greeks intended to impart in their drama.

The Mask

Born of man's use of the mask in religious ritual to inspire awe in the congregation by appearing more than mortal and to hide his face from the gods as he impersonated them, the theatre adopted the mask as one of its more significant conventions. To complete the larger-than-life picture, the actor wore a large **mask** which served both as a megaphone with its large aperture for the mouth, and as a symbol to distinguish the role. It identified age, sex, mood, and rank. Fully hooded, it rested on the shoulders of the actor. Usually the mask was constructed of bark, cork, leather, or linen. The most beautiful were tragic; the grotesque and bizarre depicting creatures like frogs and birds were reserved for comedy. The flexibility of changing masks allowed actors to change roles easily. A mask was called a **persona**.

Tragic Mask



Comic Mask



Masks



2

¹ Phyllis Hartnoll, *The Concise History of Theater* (New York: 1969, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.) 19.

² George R. Kernoodle, *Invitation to the Theatre*, (New York: 1967, Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.) 163.

The first theater was on the slopes of the Acropolis. People sat in the open air on benches, which surrounded the stage on three sides. Because it was a religious ceremony, the performance was dignified and serious. People expected to be awakened to truth, and to experience a discussion on life's most serious issues.

IV. Stage Conventions of the Greek Theater

1. Use of dramatic irony - Since the audience was familiar with the plots, taken from well-known myths, the audience always has more information about the action than the characters on stage.
2. The plays, were acted in the daytime, without lights or curtains, and had few sets.
3. Actors were all male. They wore masks, wigs, and high boots, which all added to the formality.
4. The plays were written in poetic verse rather than prose.
5. To increase dramatic intensity, the plays observed three unities:
unity of time — all the action of the play took place within 24 hours; dialogue provided background information.
unity of place — action was limited to one setting; one unchanged scene was used.
unity of subject — the focus was on the main character. There were no sub-plots.
6. Messengers were used to tell the audience about what happened offstage. Because of the religious intent and dignified style, no violence was shown on stage. The messenger ran on stage and spoke to the audience of any deaths or killings.
7. An essential element of Greek drama involved the use of a chorus: a. 15 to 20 men represented the citizens b. they were always on stage and they frequently sang and danced c. they always had a leader who carried on a dialogue with the main characters or with the chorus.

The function of the chorus was to: - set the tone - give background information - recall events of the past - interpret and summarizes events - ask questions - at times, give opinions - give advice, if asked - stay objective in the sense that it didn't disagree with the leading character - act like a jury of elders or wise men who listened to the evidence in the play and reached a moralistic conclusion at the end.

Aristotle's definition of Tragedy:

Ch. VI. 2

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

The "purgation of pity and fear" is Aristotle's description of the special kind of pleasure we get from tragedy.

The question why tragedy, with its images of conflict, terror, and suffering, should give us pleasure and satisfaction is often asked.

Aristotle says tragedy is a form of poetry and, like all poetry, it came into being to gratify certain of the deeper instincts of human nature. It exists, as Aristotle pointed out, to provide its own particular kind of aesthetic pleasure.

Pity and fear required of us, the audience, are expressed chiefly during the course of our self-identification with the hero of a tragedy. As we attend the tragedy, we must be Lear, Electra, or Hamlet. The kind of hero with whom alone we can identify ourselves is one extreme in neither virtue nor vice, a man essentially good whose misfortunes are brought about "by some error or frailty"--Marmartia as the Greek has it- the "tragic flaw".

Aristotle's conception of a tragic hero may be summed up in the following:

1. He must pass from happiness to misery (not the reverse)
2. He must not be perfectly virtuous and just, but of a good character.
3. His downfall must not result from vice or baseness.
4. His downfall must come about because of a flaw of character ("tragic flaw")
5. He must belong to a distinguished family, so that the fall will be all the greater.

As one author puts it: The hero of a tragedy must be, to a considerable extent, the author of his own doom; he must fall because of some basic moral weakness. The hero of a tragedy, in other words, never falls only because of circumstances, Fate, or Destiny, but chiefly through some species of personal, ethical blindness. We cannot identify ourselves with a man or woman who suffers catastrophe only through some accident. When a man suffers an accident, the cause is outside his control; and we cannot put ourselves in his place.

The tragic hero is a man whom we admire, often love, but who at a crucial moment has the illusion that he can manipulate a course of events just because he chooses to view them a certain way.

Be sure to keep this paper especially as you study

Mythological and Archetypal Approaches

1. DEFINITIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

In *The Masks of God*, Joseph Campbell recounts a curious phenomenon of animal behavior: Newly hatched chickens, bits of eggshells still clinging to their tails, will dart for cover when a hawk flies overhead; yet they remain unaffected by other birds. Furthermore, a wooden model of a hawk, drawn forward along a wire above their coop, will send them scurrying (if the model is pulled backward, however, there is no response). "Whence," Campbell asks, "this abrupt seizure by an image to which there is no counterpart in the chicken's world? Living gulls and ducks, herons and pigeons, leave it cold, but *the work of art strikes some very deep chord!*" (31; our italics).

Campbell's hinted analogy, though only roughly approximate, will serve nonetheless as an instructive introduction to the mythological approach to literature. For it is with the relationship of literary art to "some very deep chord" in human nature that mythological criticism deals. The myth critic is concerned to seek out those mysterious elements that inform certain literary works and that elicit, with almost uncanny force, dramatic and universal human reactions. The myth critic wishes to discover how certain works of literature, usually those that have become, or promise to become, "classics," image a kind of reality to which readers give perennial response—while other works, seemingly as well constructed,

and even some forms of reality, leave them cold. Speaking figuratively, the myth critic studies in depth the "wooden hawks" of great literature: the so-called archetypes or archetypal patterns that the writer has drawn forward along the tensed structural wires of his or her masterpiece and that vibrate in such a way that a sympathetic resonance is set off deep within the reader.

An obviously close connection exists between mythological criticism and the psychological approach discussed in chapter 4; both are concerned with the motives that underlie human behavior. Between the two approaches are differences of degree and of affinities. Psychology tends to be experimental and diagnostic; it is closely related to biological science. Mythology tends to be speculative and philosophical; its affinities are with religion, anthropology and cultural history. Such generalizations, of course, risk oversimplification; for instance, a great psychologist like Sigmund Freud ranged far beyond experimental and clinical study into the realms of myth, and his distinguished sometime protégé, Carl Gustav Jung, became one of the foremost mythologists of our time. Even so, the two approaches are distinct, and mythology is wider in its scope than psychology. For example, what psychoanalysis attempts to disclose about the individual personality, the study of myths reveals about the mind and character of a people. And just as dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of the individual, so myths are the symbolic projections of a people's hopes, values, fears, and aspirations.

According to the common misconception and misuse of the term, myths are merely primitive fictions, illusions, or opinions based upon false reasoning. Actually, mythology encompasses more than grade school stories about the Greek and Roman deities or clever fables invented for the amusement of children (or the harassment of students in college literature courses). It may be true that myths do not meet our current standards of factual reality, but then neither does any great literature. Instead, they both reflect a more profound reality. As Mark Schorer says in *William Blake: The Politics of Vision*, "Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular

opinions and attitudes depend" (29). According to Alan W. Watts, "Myth is to be defined as a complex of stories—some no doubt fact, and some fantasy—which, for various reasons, human beings regard as demonstrations of the inner meaning of the universe and of human life" (7).

Myths are by nature collective and communal; they bind a tribe or a nation together in common psychological and spiritual activities. In *The Language of Poetry*, edited by Allen Tate, Philip Wheelwright explains, "Myth is the expression of a profound sense of togetherness of feeling and of action and of wholeness of living" (11). Moreover, like Melville's famous white whale (itself an archetypal image), myth is ubiquitous in time as well as place. It is a dynamic factor everywhere in human society; it transcends time, uniting the past (traditional modes of belief) with the present (current values) and reaching toward the future (spiritual and cultural aspirations).

II. SOME EXAMPLES OF ARCHETYPES

Having established the significance of myth, we need to examine its relationship to archetypes and archetypal patterns. Although every people has its own distinctive mythology that may be reflected in legend, folklore, and ideology—although, in other words, myths take their specific shapes from the cultural environments in which they grow—myth is, in the general sense, universal. Furthermore, similar motifs or themes may be found among many different mythologies, and certain images that recur in the myths of peoples widely separated in time and place tend to have a common meaning or, more accurately, tend to elicit comparable psychological responses and to serve similar cultural functions. Such motifs and images are called *archetypes*. Stated simply, archetypes are universal symbols. As Philip Wheelwright explains in *Metaphor and Reality*, such symbols are

those which carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion, if not all, of mankind. It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, up-down, the axis of a wheel, and others, recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and

time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and causal connection among them. (111)

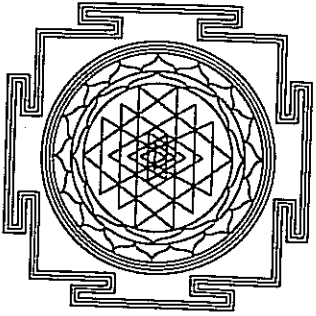
Examples of these archetypes and the symbolic meanings with which they tend to be widely associated follow (it should be noted that these meanings may vary significantly from one context to another):

A. Images

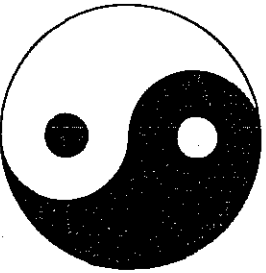
1. Water: the mystery of creation; birth-death-resurrection; purification and redemption; fertility and growth. According to Jung, water is also the commonest symbol for the unconscious.
 - a. The sea: the mother of all life; spiritual mystery and infinity; death and rebirth; timelessness and eternity; the unconscious.
 - b. Rivers: death and rebirth (baptism); the flowing of time into eternity; transitional phases of the life cycle; incarnations of deities.
2. Sun (fire and sky are closely related): creative energy; law in nature; consciousness (thinking, enlightenment, wisdom, spiritual vision); father principle (moon and earth tend to be associated with female or mother principle); passage of time and life.
 - a. Rising sun: birth; creation; enlightenment.
 - b. Setting sun: death.
3. Colors
 - a. Red: blood, sacrifice, violent passion; disorder.
 - b. Green: growth; sensation; hope; fertility; in negative context may be associated with death and decay.
 - c. Blue: usually highly positive, associated with truth, religious feeling, security, spiritual purity (the color of the Great Mother or Holy Mother).
 - d. Black (darkness): chaos, mystery; the unknown; death; primal wisdom; the unconscious; evil; melancholy.
 - e. White: highly multivalent, signifying, in its positive aspects, light, purity, innocence, and timelessness; in its negative aspects, death, terror, the supernatural, and the

blinding truth of an inscrutable cosmic mystery (see, for instance, Herman Melville's chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick*).

4. Circle (sphere): wholeness, unity.
 - a. Mandala (a geometric figure based upon the squaring of a circle around a unifying center; see the accompanying illustration of the classic Shri-Yantra mandala): the desire for spiritual unity and psychic integration. Note that in its classic Asian forms the mandala juxtaposes the triangle, the square, and the circle with their numerical equivalents of three, four, and seven.



- b. Egg (oval): the mystery of life and the forces of generation.
- c. Yang-yin: a Chinese symbol (below) representing the union of the opposite forces of the yang (masculine principle, light, activity, the conscious mind) and the yin (female principle, darkness, passivity, the unconscious).



- d. Ouroboros: the ancient symbol of the snake biting its own tail, signifying the eternal cycle of life, primordial unconsciousness, the unity of opposing forces (cf. yang-yin).
5. Serpent (snake, worm): symbol of energy and pure force (cf. libidō); evil, corruption, sensuality; destruction; mystery; wisdom; the unconscious.
6. Numbers:
 - a. Three: light; spiritual awareness and unity (cf. the Holy Trinity); the male principle.
 - b. Four: associated with the circle, life cycle, four seasons; female principle, earth, nature; four elements (earth, air, fire, water)
 - c. Seven: the most potent of all symbolic numbers—signifying the union of *three* and *four*, the completion of a cycle, perfect order.
7. The archetypal woman (Great Mother—the mysteries of life, death, transformation):
 - a. The Good Mother (positive aspects of the Earth Mother): associated with the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance (for example, Demeter, Ceres).
 - b. The Terrible Mother (including the negative aspects of the Earth Mother): the witch, sorceress, siren, whore, femme fatale—associated with sensuality, fear, danger, darkness, dismemberment, emasculation, death; the unconscious in its terrifying aspects.
 - c. The Soul Mate: the Sophia figure, Holy Mother, the princess or "beautiful lady"—incarnation of inspiration and spiritual fulfillment (cf. the Jungian anima).
8. The Wise Old Man (savior, redeemer, guru): personification of the spiritual principle, representing "knowledge, reflection, insight, wisdom, cleverness, and intuition on the one hand, and on the other, moral qualities such as goodwill and readiness to help, which make his 'spiritual' character sufficiently plain. . . . Apart from his cleverness, wisdom, and insight, the old man . . . is also notable for his moral qualities; what is more, he even tests the moral qualities of others and makes gifts dependent on

this test. . . . The old man always appears when the hero is in a hopeless and desperate situation from which only profound reflection or a lucky idea . . . can extricate him. But since, for internal and external reasons, the hero cannot accomplish this himself, the knowledge needed to compensate the deficiency comes in the form of a personified thought, i.e., in the shape of this sagacious and helpful old man" (Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* 217ff.).

9. The Trickster (joker, jester, clown, fool, fraud, prankster, picaro [rogue], poltergeist, confidence man ["con man"], medicine man [shaman], magician [sleight-of-hand artist], "Spirit Mercurius" [shape-shifter], *smith dei* ["the ape of God"], witch: The trickster appears to be the opposite of the wise old man because of his close affinity with the shadow archetype (for "shadow," see III. B.1 below); however, we should mention that he has a positive side and may even serve a healing function through his transformative influence. Jung remarks that "He is a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man, and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being. . . ." (*Archetypes* 263). Jane Wheelwright's definition is particularly instructive: "Image of the archetype of mischievousness, unexpectedness, disorder, amorality, the trickster is an archetypal shadow figure that represents a primordial, dawning consciousness. Compensating for rigid or overly righteous collective attitudes, it functions collectively as a cathartic safety valve for pent-up social pressures, a reminder of humankind's primitive origins and the fallibility of its institutions" (286). Jeanne Rosier Smith points out that myths, "as they appear in literature, can be read as part of an effort for human and cultural survival. The trickster's role as survivor and transformer, creating order from chaos, accounts for the figure's universal appeal and its centrality to the mythology and folklore of so many cultures" (3). While the trickster archetype has appeared in cultures throughout the world from time immemorial, he (or, in some cases, she) is particularly notable in African American and American In-

dian cultures (see our discussion of *Huckleberry Finn* in chapter 7).

10. Garden: paradise; innocence; unspoiled beauty (especially feminine); fertility.

11. Tree: "In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes life of the cosmos: its consistance, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality" (Ciriot 328; cf. the depiction of the cross of redemption as the tree of life in Christian iconography).

12. Desert: spiritual aridity; death; nihilism, hopelessness.

These examples are by no means exhaustive, but represent some of the more common archetypal images that the reader is likely to encounter in literature. The images we have listed do not necessarily function as archetypes every time they appear in a literary work. The discreet critic interprets them as such only if the total context of the work logically supports an archetypal reading.

B. Archetypal Motifs or Patterns

1. Creation: perhaps the most fundamental of all archetypal motifs—virtually every mythology is built on some account of how the cosmos, nature, and humankind were brought into existence by some supernatural Being or beings.

2. Immortality: another fundamental archetype, generally taking one of two basic narrative forms:

a. Escape from time: "return to paradise," the state of perfect, timeless bliss enjoyed by man and woman before their tragic Fall into corruption and mortality.

b. Mystical submergence into cyclical time: the theme of endless death and regeneration—human beings achieve a kind of immortality by submitting to the vast, mysterious rhythm of Nature's eternal cycle, particularly the cycle of the seasons.

3. Hero archetypes (archetypes of transformation and redemption):

- a. The quest: the hero (savior, deliverer) undertakes some long journey during which he or she must perform impossible tasks, battle with monsters, solve unanswerable riddles, and overcome insurmountable obstacles in order to save the kingdom.
- b. Initiation: the hero undergoes a series of excruciating ordeals in passing from ignorance and immaturity to social and spiritual adulthood, that is, in achieving maturity and becoming a full-fledged member of his or her social group. The initiation most commonly consists of three distinct phases: (1) separation, (2) transformation, and (3) return. Like the quest, this is a variation of the death-and-rebirth archetype.
- c. The sacrificial scapegoat: the hero, with whom the welfare of the tribe or nation is identified, must die to atone for the people's sins and restore the land to fruitfulness.

C. Archetypes as Genres

Finally, in addition to appearing as images and motifs, archetypes may be found in even more complex combinations as genres or types of literature that conform with the major phases of the seasonal cycle. Northrop Frye, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, indicates the correspondent genres for the four seasons as follows:

1. The myths of spring: comedy
2. The myths of summer: romance
3. The myths of fall: tragedy
4. The myths of winter: irony

With brilliant audacity Frye identifies myth with literature, asserting that myth is a "structural organizing principle of literary form" (341) and that an archetype is essentially an "element of one's literary experience" (365). And in *The Sibbortri Structure* he claims that "mythology as a whole provides a

kind of diagram or blueprint of what literature as a whole is all about, an imaginative survey of the human situation from the beginning to the end, from the height to the depth, of what is imaginatively conceivable" (102).

III. MYTH CRITICISM IN PRACTICE

Frye's contribution leads us directly into the mythological approach to literary analysis. As our discussion of mythology has shown, the task of the myth critic is a special one. Unlike the traditional critic, who relies heavily on history and the biography of the writer, the myth critic is interested more in prehistory and the biographies of the gods. Unlike the formalistic critic, who concentrates on the shape and symmetry of the work itself, the myth critic probes for the inner spirit which gives that form its vitality and its enduring appeal. And, unlike the Freudian critic, who is prone to look on the artifact as the product of some sexual neurosis, the myth critic sees the work historically, as the manifestation of vitalizing, integrative forces arising from the depths of humankind's collective psyche.

Despite the special importance of the myth critic's contribution, this approach is, for several reasons, poorly understood. In the first place, only during the twentieth century did the proper interpretive tools become available through the development of such disciplines as anthropology, psychology, and cultural history. Second, many scholars and teachers of literature have remained skeptical of myth criticism because of its tendencies toward the cultic and the occult. Finally, there has been a discouraging confusion over concepts and definitions among the myth initiates themselves, which has caused many would-be myth critics to turn their energies to more clearly defined approaches such as the traditional or formalistic. In carefully picking our way through this maze, we can discover at least three separate though not necessarily exclusive disciplines, each of which has figured prominently in the development of myth criticism. In the following pages we examine these in roughly chronological order, noting how each may be applied to critical analysis.

A. Anthropology and Its Uses

The rapid advancement of modern anthropology since the end of the nineteenth century has been the most important single influence on the growth of myth criticism. Shortly after the turn of the century this influence was revealed in a series of important studies published by the Cambridge Hellenists, a group of British scholars who applied recent anthropological discoveries to the understanding of Greek classics in terms of mythic and ritualistic origins. Noteworthy contributions by members of this group include *Anthropology and the Classics*, a symposium edited by R. R. Marett; Jane Harrison's *Themis*; Gilbert Murray's *Euripides and His Age*; and F. M. Cornford's *Origin of Aëtic Comedy*. But by far the most significant member of the British school was Sir James G. Frazer, whose monumental *The Golden Bough* has exerted an enormous influence on twentieth-century literature, not merely on the critics but also on such creative writers as James Joyce, Thomas Mann, and T. S. Eliot. Frazer's work, a comparative study of the primitive origins of religion in magic, ritual, and myth, was first published in two volumes in 1890, later expanded to twelve volumes, and then published in a one-volume abridged edition in 1922. Frazer's main contribution was to demonstrate the "essential similarity of man's chief wants everywhere and at all times," particularly as these wants were reflected throughout ancient mythologies. He explains, for example, in the abridged edition, that

[U]nder the names of Osiris, Tammuuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same. (325)

The central motif with which Frazer deals is the archetype of crucifixion and resurrection, specifically the myths describing the "killing of the divine king." Among many primitive peoples it was believed that the ruler was a divine or semidivine being whose life was identified with the life cycle in nature and in human existence. Because of this identification, the

safety of the people and even of the world was felt to depend upon the life of the god-king. A vigorous, healthy ruler would ensure natural and human productivity; on the other hand, a sick or maimed king would bring blight and disease to the land and its people. Frazer points out that if

the course of nature is dependent on the man-god's life, what catastrophes may not be expected from the gradual enfeeblement of his powers and their final extinction in death? There is only one way of averting these dangers. The man-god must be killed as soon as he shows symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail, and his soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before it has been seriously impaired by threatened decay. (265)

Among some peoples the kings were put to death at regular intervals to ensure the welfare of the tribe; later, however, substitute figures were killed in place of the kings themselves, or the sacrifices became purely symbolic rather than literal.

Corollary to the rite of sacrifice was the scapegoat archetype. This motif centered in the belief that, by transferring the corruptions of the tribe to a sacred animal or person, then by killing (and in some instances eating) this scapegoat, the tribe could achieve the cleansing and atonement thought necessary for natural and spiritual rebirth. Pointing out that food and children are the primary needs for human survival, Frazer emphasizes that the rites of blood sacrifice and purification were considered by ancient peoples as a magical guarantee of rejuvenation, an assurance of life, both vegetable and human. If such customs strike us as incredibly primitive, we need only to recognize their vestiges in our own civilized world—for example, the irrational satisfaction that some people gain by the persecution of such minority groups as blacks and Jews as scapegoats, or the more wholesome feelings of renewal derived from our New Year's festivities and resolutions, the homely tradition of spring-cleaning, our celebration of Easter and even the Eucharist. Modern writers themselves have employed the scapegoat motif with striking relevance—for example, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."

The insights of Frazer and the Cambridge Hellenists have

been extremely helpful in myth criticism, especially in the mythological approach to drama. Many scholars theorize that tragedy originated from the primitive rites we have described. The tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus, for example, were written to be played during the festival of Dionysos, annual vegetation ceremonies during which the ancient Greeks celebrated the deaths of the winter-kings and the rebirths of the gods of spring and renewed life.

Sophocles's *Oedipus* is an excellent example of the fusion of myth and literature. Sophocles produced a great play, but the plot of *Oedipus* was not his invention. It was a well-known mythic narrative long before he immortalized it as tragic drama. Both the myth and the play contain a number of familiar archetypes, as a brief summary of the plot indicates. The king and queen of ancient Thebes, Laius and Jocasta, are told in a prophecy that their newborn son, after he has grown up, will murder his father and marry his mother. To prevent this catastrophe, the king orders one of his men to pierce the infant's heels and abandon him to die in the wilderness. But the child is saved by a shepherd and taken to Corinth, where he is reared as the son of King Polybus and Queen Merope, who lead the boy to believe that they are his real parents. After reaching maturity and hearing of a prophecy that he is destined to commit patricide and incest, Oedipus flees from Corinth to Thebes. On his journey he meets an old man and his servants, quarrels with them and kills them. Before entering Thebes he encounters the Sphinx (who holds the city under a spell), solves her riddle, and frees the city; his reward is the hand of the widowed Queen Jocasta. He then rules a prosperous Thebes for many years, fathering four children by Jocasta. At last, however, a blight falls upon his kingdom because Laius's slayer has gone unpunished. Oedipus starts an intensive investigation to find the culprit—only to discover ultimately that he himself is the guilty one, that the old man whom he had killed on his journey to Thebes was Laius, his real father. Overwhelmed by this revelation, Oedipus blinds himself with brooches taken from his dead mother-wife, who has hanged herself, and goes into exile. Following his sacrificial punishment, Thebes is restored to health and abundance. Even in this bare summary we may discern at least two ar-

chetypal motifs: (1) In the quest motif, Oedipus, as the hero, undertakes a journey during which he encounters the Sphinx, a supernatural monster with the body of a lion and the head of a woman; by answering her riddle, he delivers the kingdom and marries the queen. (2) In the king-as-sacrificial-scapegoat motif, the welfare of the state, both human and natural (Thebes is stricken by both plague and drought), is bound up with the personal fate of the ruler; only after Oedipus has offered himself up as a scapegoat is the land redeemed.

Considering that Sophocles wrote his tragedy expressly for a ritual occasion, we are hardly surprised that *Oedipus* reflects certain facets of the fertility myths described by Frazer. More remarkable, and more instructive for the student interested in myth criticism, is the revelation of similar facets in the great tragedy written by Shakespeare two thousand years later.

1. The Sacrificial Hero: Hamlet

One of the first modern scholars to point out these similarities was Gilbert Murray. In his "Hamlet and Orestes," delivered as a lecture in 1914 and subsequently published in *The Classical Tradition in Poetry*, Murray indicated a number of parallels between the mythic elements of Shakespeare's play and those in *Oedipus* and in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus. The heroes of all three works derive from the *Golden Bough* kings: they are all haunted, sacrificial figures. Furthermore, as with the Greek tragedies, the story of Hamlet was not the playwright's invention but was drawn from legend. As literary historians tell us, the old Scandinavian story of Amlethus or Amlet, Prince of Jutland, was recorded as early as the twelfth century by Saxo Grammaticus in his *History of the Danes*. Murray cites an even earlier passing reference to the prototypical Hamlet in a Scandinavian poem composed in about A.D. 980. Giorgio de Santilana and Hertha von Dechend in *Hamlet's Mill* have traced this archetypal character back through the legendary Icelandic Amloði to Oriental mythology. It is therefore evident that the core of Shakespeare's play is mythic. In Murray's words,

The things that thrill and amaze us in *Hamlet* . . . are not any historical particulars about mediæval Elsinore . . . but things belonging to the old stories and the old magic rites, which

stirred and thrilled our forefathers five and six thousand years ago; set them dancing all night on the hills, tearing beasts and men in pieces, and giving up their own bodies to a ghastly death, in hope thereby to keep the green world from dying and to be the saviours of their own people. (236)

By the time Sophocles and Aeschylus were producing their tragedies for Athenian audiences, such sacrifices were no longer performed literally but were acted out symbolically on stage, yet their mythic significance was the same. Indeed, their significance was very similar in the case of Shakespeare's audiences. The Elizabethans were a myth-minded and symbol-receptive people. There was no need for Shakespeare to interpret for his audience: they *felt* the mythic content of his plays. And though myth may smolder only feebly in the present-day audience, we still respond, despite our intellectual sophistication, to the archetypes in *Hamlet*.

Such critics as Murray and Francis Fergusson have provided clues to many of Hamlet's archetypal mysteries. In *The Idea of Theater*, Fergusson discloses point by point how the scenes in Shakespeare's play follow the same ritual pattern as those in Greek tragedy, specifically in *Oedipus*; he indicates that

in both plays a royal sufferer is associated with pollution, in its very sources, of an entire social order. Both plays open with an invocation for the well-being of the endangered body politic. In both, the destiny of the individual and of society are closely intertwined; and in both the suffering of the royal victim seems to be necessary before purification and renewal can be achieved. (118)

To appreciate how closely the moral norms in Shakespeare's play are related to those of ancient vegetation myths, we need only to note how often images of disease and corruption are used to symbolize the evil that has blighted Hamlet's Denmark. The following statement from Philip Wheelwright's *The Burning Fountain*, explaining the organic source of good and evil, is directly relevant to the moral vision in *Hamlet*, particularly to the implications of Claudius's crime and its disastrous consequences. From the natural or organic standpoint,

Good is life, vitality, propagation, health; evil is death, impotence, disease. Of these several terms *health* and *disease* are the most important and comprehensive. Death is but an interim evil; it occurs periodically, but there is the assurance of new life ever springing up to take its place. The normal cycle of life and death is a healthy cycle, and the purpose of the major seasonal festivals (for example, the Festival of Dionysos) was at least as much to celebrate joyfully the turning wheel of great creative Nature as to achieve magical effects. Disease and blight, however, interrupt the cycle; they are the real destroyers; and health is the good most highly to be prized. (197)

Wheelwright continues by pointing out that because murder (not to be confused with ritual sacrifice) does violence to both the natural cycle of life and the social organism, the murderer is symbolically diseased. Furthermore, when the victim is a member of the murderer's own family, an even more compact organism than the tribe or the political state, the disease is especially virulent.

We should mention one other myth that relates closely to the meaning of *Hamlet*, the myth of divine appointment. This was the belief, strongly fostered by such Tudor monarchs as Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I, that not only had the Tudors been divinely appointed to bring order and happiness out of civil strife but also any attempt to break this divine ordinance (for example, by insurrection or assassination) would result in social, political, and natural chaos. We see this Tudor myth reflected in several of Shakespeare's plays (for example, in *Richard III*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*) where interference with the order of divine succession or appointment results in both political and natural chaos, and where a deformed, corrupt, or weak monarch epitomizes a diseased political state. This national myth is, quite obviously, central in *Hamlet*.

The relevance of myth to *Hamlet* should now be apparent. The play's thematic heart is the ancient, archetypal mystery of the life cycle itself. Its pulse is the same tragic rhythm that moved Sophocles's audience at the festival of Dionysos and moves us today through forces that transcend our conscious processes. Through the insights provided us by anthropological scholars, however, we may perceive the essential arche-

typical pattern of Shakespeare's tragedy. Hamlet's Denmark is a diseased and rotten state because Claudius's "foul and most unnatural murder" of his king-brother has subverted the divinely ordained laws of nature and of kingly succession. The disruption is intensified by the blood kinship between victim and murderer. Claudius, whom the ghost identifies as "The Serpent," bears the primal blood curse of Cain. And because the state is identified with its ruler, Denmark shares and suffers also from his blood guilt. Its natural cycle interrupted, the nation is threatened by chaos: civil strife within and war without. As Hamlet exclaims, "The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!"

Hamlet's role in the drama is that of the prince-hero who, to deliver his nation from the blight that has fallen upon it, must not only avenge his father's murder but also offer himself up as a royal scapegoat. As a member of the royal family, Hamlet is infected with the regicidal virus even though he is personally innocent. We might say, using another metaphor from pathology, that Claudius's murderous cancer has metastasized so that the royal court and even the nation itself is threatened with fatal deterioration. Hamlet's task is to seek out the source of this malady and to eliminate it. Only after a thorough purgation can Denmark be restored to a state of wholesome balance. Hamlet's reluctance to accept the role of cathartic agent is a principal reason for his procrastination in killing Claudius, an act that may well involve his self-destruction. He is a reluctant but dutiful scapegoat, and he realizes ultimately that there can be no substitute victim in this sacrificial rite—hence his decision to accept Laertes's challenge to a dueling match that he suspects has been fixed by Claudius. The bloody climax of the tragedy is therefore not merely spectacular melodrama but an essential element in the archetypal pattern of sacrifice-atonement-catharsis. Not only must all those die who have been infected by the evil contagion (Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—even Ophelia and Laertes), but the prince-hero himself must suffer "crucifixion" before Denmark can be purged and reborn under the healthy new regime of Fortinbras.

Enhancing the motif of the sacrificial scapegoat is Hamlet's long and difficult spiritual journey—his initiation, as it were—

from innocent, carefree youth (he has been a university student) through a series of painful ordeals to sadder, but wiser, maturity. His is a long night's journey of the soul, and Shakespeare employs archetypal imagery to convey this thematic motif: *Hamlet* is an autumnal, nighttime play dominated by images of darkness and blood, and the hero appropriately wears black, the archetypal color of melancholy. The superficial object of his dark quest is to solve the riddle of his father's death. On a deeper level, his quest leads him down the labyrinthine ways of the human mystery, the mystery of human life and destiny. (Observe how consistently his soliloquies turn toward the puzzles of life and of self.) As with the riddle of the Sphinx, the enigmatic answer is "man," the clue to which is given in Polonius's glib admonition, "To thine own self be true." In this sense, then, Hamlet's quest is the quest undertaken by all of us who would gain that rare and elusive philosopher's stone, self-knowledge.