



Southwestern Oklahoma State University
SWOSU Digital Commons

Faculty Articles & Research

University Libraries

10-18-2021

The Flight of the Wild Gander by Joseph Campbell

Phillip Fitzsimmons

Southwestern Oklahoma State University, phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/libraries_articles



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fitzsimmons, Phillip, "*The Flight of the Wild Gander* by Joseph Campbell" (2021). *Faculty Articles & Research*. 47.

https://dc.swosu.edu/libraries_articles/47

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Articles & Research by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

- Swank, Kris. "The Child's Voyage and the *Immram* Tradition in Lewis, Tolkien, and Pullman." *Mythlore* vol. 38, no. 1 (#135), Fall/Winter 2019, pp. 75-98.
- . "The Irish Otherworld Voyage of Roverandom." *Tolkien Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2015, pp. 31-57.
- . "The Poetry of Geoffrey Bache Smith with Special Note of Tolkienian Contexts." *Journal of Tolkien Research* vol. 12, iss. 2, 2021. <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol12/iss2/2>.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien. Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- Vaninskaya, Anna. "Tolkien: A Man of his Time?" *Tolkien and Modernity*, vol. 1, edited by Frank Weinreich and Thomas Honegger, Walking Tree, 2006, pp. 1-30.
- Ward, Michael. *Planet Narnia: The Seven Heavens in the Imagination of C.S. Lewis*. Oxford University, 2010.
- Wood, Ralph C., editor. *Tolkien Among the Moderns*. Notre Dame, 2015.



THE FLIGHT OF THE WILD GANDER: EXPLORATIONS IN THE MYTHOLOGICAL DIMENSION—SELECTED ESSAYS, 1944-1968 (The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell). Joseph Campbell. New World Library. 2018. 237p. 9781608685318. \$18.95.

The Flight of the Wild Gander: Explorations in the Mythological Dimension—Selected Essays, 1944-1968 is a 2018 addition to The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series. This volume of essays begins with a history of the Grimm brothers and fairy tales, moves on to the author's ideas on the role of society to the development of mythologies, and ends with the secularization of the sacred. This book would go nicely with his *The Mythic Dimension: Selected Essays 1959-1987*, a 2017 reissue of the volume, also for The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series. Both books develop similar themes about mythology using psychology and anthropology as a joint lens for his analysis. A word of warning to readers is that the scientific information from the psychological and anthropological literature of his time is necessarily dated because the essays were written between 1944 and 1968. This must be taken into account when evaluating Campbell's argument. Another word of warning is he is highly critical of contemporary Western religion, especially of Christianity.

In his Introduction Campbell states that "I have set forth my basic thesis—that myths are a function of nature as well as of culture, and as necessary to the balanced maturation of the human psyche as is nourishment to the body" (xi). His thesis is never far away in any of the essays in the volume. For instance, the first chapter *The Fairy Tale* provides a history of the work and significance of the Grimm brother's in collecting and publishing fairy tales. Campbell describes the scientific approach of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in accurately collecting the

stories as raw data and publishing them without embellishment. Campbell claims that the stories originate spontaneously from a people's psyche, from long ago, and that the folk traditions of storytelling have authentic structural elements, images, and turns of phrase that are stable and passed from generation to generation through oral instruction and repetition. He argues that fairy tales are fundamentally different in content from those of made-up stories. Campbell writes, "Earlier collectors had felt free to manipulate folk materials; the Grimms were concerned to let the speech of the people break directly into print" (2). Campbell writes that "against odds" the Grimms's project of capturing the words of the people continued in 1806 amid a war torn country. He quotes Wilhelm, "Undoubtedly the world situation and the necessity to draw into the peacefulness of scholarship contributed to the reawakening of the long forgotten literature; but not only did we seek something of consolation in the past, our hope, naturally, was that this course of ours should contribute somewhat to the return of a better day" (3). Campbell later explains that "The Grimm brothers regarded European folklore as the detritus of Old Germanic belief: the myths of ancient time had disintegrated, first into heroic legend and romance, last into these charming treasures of the nursery" (11). The quotations above indicate the social significance the Grimm brothers placed upon capturing the language and therefore the spirit of the Germanic peoples. Their intention, or project, as Campbell describes it fits with his claim in the chapter that fairy tales are natural outgrowths of the psychology of a people and that each culture has its own unique tradition of stories, images, and ways of expressing themselves that develops throughout their history. He also claims that maintaining an active connection with those stories contributes to the mental health of a people and to individuals within the group. The chapter does a number of other things not discussed here. One is to distinguish and define the difference between legends, tales, and myths. He asserts that of the three story-forms, that unaltered fairy tales have the most power. The chapter continues on to provide a summary update of the development, significance, and conclusions of fairy tale scholarship, internationally, from the time of the Grimms to Campbell's present time of 1944. A good resource provided at the end of the book is an appendix titled *Tale Numbers and Names to Grimm's Fairy Tales* that provides a complete list of the Grimm fairy tales.

Campbell continues to develop his thesis throughout the rest of the essays in the collection. In *Bios and Mythos* he begins with a discussion of the role of society in the formation of the symbols within mythologies and poetry. He moves on to the argument that psychology explains the role of biology in the development of mythology. He claims that many of the images of mythology exists as a consequence of the birth of our human bodies. Using the language of Freudian psychology he points to childhood as an extended development

outside of the womb, which is unusual among most species, as being described in images of rebirth in mythological stories. Campbell believes mythology is both a component of the development of our psyches and a description of our common experience of leaving the womb while we are still developing and helpless. In his words, "Society, as a fostering organ, is thus a kind of exterior 'second womb,' wherein the postnatal states of man's long gestation—much longer than that of any other placental—are supported and defended" (35-36). His point is that society is shaping us at the same time it is protecting us and contributing to our development. Campbell also argues that our experience of gestational development through both society and biology are represented repeatedly in images of birth throughout all mythologies.

In *Primitive Man as Metaphysician* Campbell uses William James's characterization of all people being one of two psychological types, the "tough-minded and tender-minded" (44). These types affect each person's interpretation of mythology. In brief, the tough-minded interprets the stories of mythology in a scientifically analytical way and is looking for literal truth. Campbell characterized most anthropologists as being of this type. The tender-minded type interprets the stories intuitively. Campbell characterized Native American Shamans and practitioners of Asian religions as being of this type. His point is that a tough-minded reading of ancient religious texts is going to result in a mismatch between the scientific understandings of the world described in the texts and our current understanding of nature. Campbell provides several examples of beliefs in Western religions that 20th century adherents find difficult to continue to believe while using a tough-minded interpretation of the ancient texts of their various sacred scriptures.

On the other hand, Campbell also recounts Native American and Asian stories to illustrate the continuing relevance of the tender-minded interpretation, of these stories and ancient sacred scriptures, to the practitioners of their religious traditions. Campbell writes, "For myself, I believe that we owe both the imagery and the poetical insights of myth to the genius of the tender-minded; to the tough-minded only their reduction to religion" (55). Throughout the book Campbell repeatedly returns to the story of Black Elk, the Oglala Sioux Shaman. Campbell tells the story of Black Elk's progress from discovering his calling and training to be a Shaman, becoming keeper of the Sacred Pipe, and teaching the Perennial Philosophy to the world, in order to preserve something of his people. Black Elk's story is interwoven into Campbell's wide exploration of the tender-minded approach to interpreting sacred texts. In his discussion Campbell draws from the stories of many cultures, from all over the world, as he extends his initial thesis, stated at the beginning of the book and in this review. Once extended, the thesis can be summarized as follows: The tender-minded approach to sacred texts, poetry, and mythology keeps them relevant to

our times and is a way for us to remain engaged with the sacred in a way that, in Campbell's words, is "necessary to the balanced maturation of the human psyche as is nourishment to the body" (xi).

I recommend *The Flight of the Wild Gander* to anyone who wants to explore a secular and tender-minded approach to engaging with multicultural mythologies and sacred texts, from around the world. Joseph Campbell was an excellent writer who did extensive research on mythologies, sacred texts, and religions. He was also well-read in the psychoanalytical and anthropological literature of his time, which he used in his analyses of mythologies throughout the book. Campbell was able to weave his ideas about these topics and from these disciplines into chapters that were scholarly, thought provoking, and provides a pleasure to the reader akin to experiencing the performance of an exceptional story-teller. This book is appropriate for all public and University libraries. I also recommend it to the libraries of private religious institutions provided they understand that Joseph Campbell's work is a challenge to traditional religion as practiced in the United States. More than anything, I recommend the book to individual readers who are looking for a solid piece of writing about mythology that is inclusive, thought provoking, and a good read.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons



GOD AND THE GOTHIC: RELIGION, ROMANCE, AND REALITY IN THE ENGLISH LITERARY TRADITION. By Alison Milbank. Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0198824466. Hardcover. x + 354pp. \$99.00.

ALISON MILBANK IS KNOWN TO TOLKIEN SCHOLARS for her fine book *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real* (2007), which was her third scholarly monograph. Her first, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (1992), was a reworking of her 1988 doctoral thesis at the University of Lancaster. This was followed in 1998 by *Dante and the Victorians* (1998). As per Milbank herself, she was the John Rylands Research Fellow at the University of Manchester, and has taught at Cambridge, the University of Virginia, and, since 2004, at the University of Nottingham. She is also Priest Vicar and Canon Theologian at Southwell Minster.

God and the Gothic not only revisits a few of the authors (Charlotte Brontë and J. Sheridan Le Fanu) covered in her thesis and first book, but, as Milbank notes "this book has been many years in gestation" (vii). This is self-evidently true, for such a wide-ranging study is not likely to be accomplished in less than a decade or two.