

## Folklore into Theory: Freud and Lévi-Strauss on Incest and Marriage

ABSTRACT: This article suggests that two major modern theories on incest and its prohibition, successively proposed by Freud and by Lévi-Strauss, are essentially transformations on a folklore leitmotiv tottering with age. The discussion examines Freud's weaving of traditional themes into psychoanalytic theory, and then engages Lévi-Strauss' meta-Freudian elaboration. This inquiry leads to asking whether penetration into the products of the mind by the mind necessarily involves reenacting fundamental patterns of thought. This question raises the issue of the status of theorization in academic realms, such as folklore and mythology, where discipline and object fuse into a single denomination.

### A Christmas Fairy Tale

From the start, the shade of folklore looms large upon Freud's thinking. In April 1896, when the young scholar proposed to his colleagues in Vienna that the etiology of hysteria could be traced to early sexual traumas caused by the sexual aggressions of adults towards children, the chair of the meeting commented that it sounded "like a scientific fairy tale" (Masson 1992; cf. Gay 1995:96–97). Although Freud appears to have been upset by the event, only a couple of months before he himself had called his new theory of sexual intercourse in childhood "a Christmas fairy tale" (Gay 1995:89–111). This recurrence is significant because Freud was soon to transform his "fairy tale" into the building block of psychoanalysis in accordance with a folkloric theme. In the next year Freud realized that, as he put it, "there are no indications

of reality in the unconscious" (Masson 1985:264); he then decided that neurotic symptoms are not "related to actual events but rather to wishful fantasies," and thus stumbled, as he later put it, "for the first time upon the Oedipus complex" (1993b:218).

In this conceptual passage from the old seduction hypothesis to the new theory, the Oedipal frame basically upgrades the original "fairy tale" by reinterpreting alleged acts as fantasies (Freud 1993b:217–18; cf. Freud 1989a:414, Masson 1992:107–19). This upgrading is in turn part of a wider transformation in Freud's thinking that later involved a return to alleged acts, such as the bold transition from describing "the wish to kill one's father" in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to "describing the actual killing" in *Totem and Taboo*. This move was a big step according to Freud and one of projective imagination in the eyes of faithful disciples (Jones 1963:281), the sort of "iridescent fantasy . . . between historical thinking and psychological thinking" (Kroeber 1965:54) that Lévi-Strauss did not hesitate to call a myth (1967:563). Construed in between the original "fairy tale" and the latter "myth," the complex that appropriately bears the name of its legendary model appears therefore as a variation in folklore.

In fact, the procedure of drawing on folklore to schematize psychological data extends beyond the Oedipus theme. Still at the core of psychoanalytic theory, one finds none other than "the theory that Plato put into the mouth of Aristophanes" in the *Symposium*, concerning the original twin-ness of humans and their striving to regain oneness through sexual mingling. It is the only hypothesis concerning the origin of sexuality that, despite being avowedly "a myth rather than a scientific explanation," fulfills "the one condition" that Freud deemed necessary in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle": the tracing "of the origin of an instinct to *a need to restore an earlier state of things*" (Freud 1993a:331). Because Freud's criterion—the urge to restore an earlier state of things—is essentially mythical, only a mythic explanation fulfills it. Remarkably, he expresses precisely this when he writes that "the theory of the instincts is . . . our mythology." Freud accordingly states that "instincts are mythical entities" (1991a:127) and names the sexual instinct, with its thrust to restore Aristophanes' original oneness, after Eros, the Greek god responsible for the famous union of Uranus and the Earth in a close clasp that threatened to reinstate undifferentiated chaos (cf. Brisson 1997:77).

The unity of all this mythological imagery is clear if one recalls

that Freud lumps both the emasculation of Uranus by Kronos and the rebellion of Zeus against Kronos together under the heading of the prototypical Oedipal situation. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he mentions the “unpleasing picture” “brought to us by mythology and legend from primeval ages” of “the father’s despotic power” and of “the son, as his destined successor . . . in the position of the enemy . . . impatient . . . to become ruler himself through his father’s death” (1991c:357–58; cf. Rank 1991, ch. 9). In *Totem and Taboo* Freud explores this idea through primordial images, as is the wont of myths. As Freud tells his story, “One day the brothers . . . killed and devoured their father. . . . The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of each one of the company of brothers: and in the act of devouring him they accomplished their identification with him, and each of them acquired a portion of his strength” (1990:203).

Significantly, this formulation is the mythic mode of the theory of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex. We find the demythologized version famously expressed in the statement that the “infantile ego . . . borrowed strength . . . from the father, and this loan was an extraordinarily momentous act. The super-ego retains the character of the father” (1989b:30). It follows that the seminal idea (formulated in “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex”) that “the authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there . . . forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father” (1991b:319), is a modern variant of an age-old folkloric theme. To be precise, it is the universal dragon-slayer theme in which “to kill the monster means to incorporate it into oneself, to take its place. The hero becomes the new monster, clothed in the skin of the old” (Calasso 1994:342). This insight follows a long exegetic tradition (which psychoanalysis did not invent), represented as much by Ananda Coomaraswamy’s remark that “the Dragon-slayer [was] born to supplant the Father and take possession of the kingdom” (1943:6) as by Vladimir Propp’s note that “he who was born from the dragon will kill the dragon” (1983:363; cf. 290–91).

These are, in short, the grounds on which I propose that Freud used both the Oedipus theme and Plato’s “hypothesis” to construe his complete Oedipus complex—“which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children” (1989b:28). He therefore built the touchstone of psychoanalysis according to age-old folkloric themes (cf. Merkur 1993:345–47).

## Androgyny, Incest, and Marriage

Such folkloric themes take primordial androgyny—of which incest is the toned-down enactment in the social realm—as the prototype for marriage, something clear in Plato’s story that the original humans were cut in two, so that all love expresses the drive to return to original unity (*Symposium* 189b–193a). But whereas Plato addresses in his story the origin of *all* sexuality, including male and female homosexuality, Freud only takes the heterosexual case into account, emphasizing the mythic theme of primordial androgyny

Consider the link between androgyny and marriage in myth. Genesis 2, for instance, states that God formed man (*adam*) from the dust, and then fashioned the female (*ishshah*) out of one rib of the male (*ish*). The implication, of course, is that Adam included both male and female—in other words, primordial man was androgynous before the sexual principles were separated (2:7, 21–22). The homologous account of Genesis 1 states “God created man in his image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (1:27). Genesis 5, in its “record of Adam’s line,” lifts any lingering uncertainty: “When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God; male and female He created them. And when they were created, He blessed them and called them Man” (5:1–2).<sup>1</sup>

Remarkably, after Adam was split into its constitutive sexual principles, the male proclaims that the female is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23)—and the biblical writer comments, “Hence a man . . . clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh” (2:24). In other words, as in Plato, sexual union is all about reenacting primordial androgyny—the point taken up by Freud. Plato explicates, “our innate love . . . is always trying to reintegrate our former nature, to make two into one” (*Symposium* 191d), and Freud stresses that “after the division had been made, ‘the two parts of man, each desiring the other half, came together, and threw their arms around one another eager to grow into one’” (1991d:331). Moreover, Freud himself points out the same pattern in a Vedic story of creation he links to “the Platonic myth” (131n1). In the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka-upanishad* (1.4.1–5), Person (*Purusha*), all alone in the beginning of creation, “wished for a second. He was so large [*sic*] as man and wife together. He then made this his Self to fall in two (*pat*), and thence arose husband (*pati*) and wife (*patnī*).” Then they embraced repeatedly—and, by and by, creation unfolded (2.85).<sup>2</sup>

Note that all three stories depict devolution from idyllic oneness to present-day division. In all cases, the sexual drive minimizes ontological division after the model of mingling with one's own flesh and blood. And such mingling, of course, is what incest is about. If we define incest as the supposed return of body substance upon itself through sexual contact, it is clear that sex between halves of the primordial person is incestuous. For good reason, the Vedic woman, after she has been extracted from the Purusha and submitted to his embrace, broods "How can he embrace me, after having produced me from himself?"

Still, equation of marriage with recovery of primordial oneness is remarkably recurrent. Note that the biblical declaration that woman and man are of the same substance and must therefore cling together so as to "become one flesh" has been pivotal for Christian thought. Matthew has Jesus banning divorce (with due allusion to Genesis) on the grounds that a man and his wife "are but one body. So then, what God has united man must not divide" (19:6). One logical step ahead, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, Basil the Great, maintains that since husband and wife are but one flesh, the wife's kin become "akin to the husband" through the wife, and vice-versa—so that, for instance, to consort with the wife's sister amounts to mingling with one's own sister, and to consort with the husband's brother is like sleeping with one's own brother (Basil 1895:443, letter 160.4; cf. Héritier 1999:84–85). In the same vein, Cervantes explains in chapter 33 of his *Don Quijote* that since marriage makes husband and wife one flesh, on the model of the primordial consubstantiality of Adam and Eve, any stain on the woman's flesh also appears on the husband's. Cervantes concludes that the cuckolded husband "participates in his wife's dishonor because he and she are one and the same thing" (1998:240).

It follows that the one-flesh paradigm of Western marriage is symbolically incestuous insofar as it assimilates sexually active couples to the consubstantial parts of the androgynous ancestor. Basil's example, in which a man's liaison with his wife's sister amounts to an incestuous affair with his own sister, shows that in-laws are being assimilated to kin because the husband and the wife themselves have become like twins, or, more exactly, like the split parts of androgynous Adam. In the same vein, Cervantes' theory of contagious dishonor implies that legitimate marriage concerns one's own flesh acting upon itself in sexual autarky, referring again to androgynous unity.

Likewise, but quite independently, Freud's acceptance of Plato's model of the origin of sexuality implies taking primordial androgyny—and its sociological transcription, incest—as the paradigm of all marriages. Let us see how Freud expresses the pervasive idea of androgynous unity in the terms of a primordial conjunction of a mother and her child.

In the case of a son, this primordial situation is the basic model of marriage. Freud writes in his essay on “femininity” that a woman acquires “her attractiveness to a man, whose Oedipus attachment to his mother it kindles into passion,” in her identification with her mother.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, as our author notes, it often happens when the husband marries his mother's replacement “that it is only [the husband's] son who obtains what he himself aspired to” (1991a:168). In other words, while the husband yearns to obtain his rejuvenated mother in marriage, the wife, identifying with her mother, is aiming for a son. More exactly, she slips from father to husband and, “in accordance with an ancient symbolic equivalence,” from wish for a penis to wish for a son (1991a:162; cf. Freud 1991b:277–78, 321, 340)—and it is only through the son that she can expect “the satisfaction of all that has been left over in her of her masculinity complex.” In a way her situation is hopeless insofar as the son will later settle for a younger wife that replaces the mother. But even here the fundamental mother/son conjunction persists since, as Freud puts it, “even a marriage is not made secure until the wife has succeeded in making her husband her child as well and in acting as a mother to him” (1991a:168). In other words a happy marriage is, for the man, the weakened reconstitution of the blissful original condition of oneness with mother. In this sense, the psychoanalytical speculation that every sexual act is a regression into the womb (p. 120) is a true variation on Aristophanes' tale—applauded by Freud—that explains the love drive as an attempt to regain blissful oneness.

But original oneness may also be the union of a mother and her daughter. As Freud has it, the husband is ultimately the heir, even beyond the father, to the “*phallic* mother” (1991a:160; cf. 167) that the daughter loved during her own “masculine phase” (152)—before, that is, as Freud puts it in “The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex,” the realization of being “castrated” started penis envy and thus a lifelong sliding “along the line of a symbolic equation . . . from the penis to a

baby” (1991b:321). Thus, in contrast to the man’s rather static idyll with the mother even through marriage, the woman’s basic dissatisfaction leads her on to a dynamic role. In the case of males, fear of castration is deemed to simply cause boys to renounce their mother and thereby to accept a mother substitute. Differently, in the case of women, the supposed reality of castration results in the penis envy that leads each to first taking the father as love-object (pp. 337, 340) and then to posing as younger mother to another man in order to get herself a son—first a husband-son, then a son as ideal husband—thus, so to speak, a symbolic penis. Hence, in famously stating that “anatomy is destiny” (p. 320), Freud assigns to women the role of rejuvenating the motherly pole of the constant mother/son idyllic pattern because every woman fatefully seeks to become the mother in this pattern. In short, the destined dissatisfaction of each Freudian woman craving her lost penis imposes the dynamism of time on the otherwise timeless ideal model of union between mother and son, “the most perfect . . . of all relationships” (1991a:168).

Let me provide an ethnographic example of the fundamental symbolic theme Freud is unwittingly expressing. Anthropologist Sally Falk Moore found the recurrent notion that “marriage is a substitute for incest” in a survey of the “incestuous creation myths” of forty-two peoples (1964:1312–13). Rightly, Moore considers the well-documented case of the Dogon of Mali, for whom marriage is explicitly “a reenactment of mythical incest,” exemplary of these myths (pp. 1313–14). I shall therefore take up this example in order to explore the wider conception at stake. According to Dogon cosmogony, in the original creation all reproduction was to take place between androgynous twins. However, one son, having rebelled against God the Father and committed incest with the mother, lost his feminine dimension—his female twin and soul—which he has pursued incessantly since that time. This rebellion had staggering effects, for it brought an end to the ideal creation of androgynous twins, which was irremediably replaced by the situation of one-sexed beings that can only reunite in marriage—in other words, by the rather sad lot of today’s humankind. However, people still yearn for the perfect creation even while enduring their hopeless lot—that is, they attempt to regain the original androgyny even while setting out to marry. Thus every individual Dogon man is assimilated to the rebellious son, Yurugu, in supposedly maintaining

a strong attachment to the mother on the one hand and in seeking to reunite with his sister on the other—the ideal marriage being, in theory, that between a brother and a sister.

This situation entails that a male child will be symbolically assimilated to his mother's brother, who is her ideal husband. Hence he will regard his uncle's wife as substitute for his own mother and will take "liberties (including sexual relations)" with her (Griaule and Dieterlen 1999:92). In so doing he is seeking for a wife, just as Yurugu had been "seeking his female soul," and the maternal uncle is bound to give him his own daughter if not his wife. This situation means, of course, as Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen note, that "there is a correspondence here between the maternal uncle's daughter, his wife, and his sister, who is the mother of the nephew" (p. 93). A knowledgeable informant spells out the underlying idea to Griaule by saying that in every human coupling the woman is the incestuous mother uniting with her son (Griaule 1966:132). More precisely, every man seeks through marriage—after the model of the rebellious son—both his female soul and "the return to the mother," that is, "to the placental tissue from which he was prematurely torn" (de Heusch 1981:120). Both strivings are the same insofar as every marriage acts out the recovery of the original, androgynous oneness that translates in sociological terms as incest.

Note that the destined dissatisfaction of the Freudian woman craving for her lost penis imposes the dynamism of time on the otherwise timeless ideal model of union between mother and son, just like the frustration of Yurugu perpetually yearning for his lost female soul creates the dynamics of sexual reproduction from the timeless matrix of androgynous union. While this homology may seem surprising, it indicates where to start looking for shared symbolism in Dogon lore and Freud's theory. To the Dogon, the femininity that Yurugu irretrievably lost translates in physical terms as circumcision (Griaule and Dieterlen 1965:245). Indeed, the penis foreskin supposedly contains the feminine soul of a male, and the clitoris contains the male soul of a female. Such souls, being the last remnants of original androgyny, must be cut out by means of the symmetric practices of male circumcision and female excision in order to promote the sexual reproduction of human beings (Griaule 1966:20–21). Freud, too, acknowledges that "in every normal male or female individual, traces are found of the apparatus of the opposite sex," and he considers the clitoris "analogous to



the male organ” (1991b:52, 374). In his thinking, therefore, each girl’s fall under the sway of a “castration complex” (p. 376), which leads her from male to female sexuality (1991a:152, 1991b:374–75), corresponds to the Dogon practice of actually removing the organ of maleness in order to promote female sexuality. Similarly, Freud attributes the overcoming of the Oedipus complex on the way to mature sexuality to the fear of castration in boys, which he explicitly relates to “the primeval custom of circumcision” (1993b:424–25n1, 1991a:119).

In short, Freud expresses through imaginary castration the same passage into mature female sexuality, on the one hand, and into male sexuality, on the other, that the Dogon—along with many other peoples relying on symbolic thinking—promote through ritual excision and circumcision. Therefore, the conspicuously symbolic role of imaginary castration in Freud’s tale of sexual maturation is his own symbolic equivalent to initiatory ritual—where, as Maurice Bloch (1992:8–23, 65–69) pertinently shows, to be emasculated, and thus feminized, generally amounts to being equated to prey before acceding to the full male status of the hunter. In the Freudian version, this is only valid for the male—for whom overcoming the Oedipus complex amounts to slaying the dragon—whereas the female cannot but ceaselessly follow the mirage of the penis as she rejuvenates each man’s mother in seeking a new son who will in turn symbolically kill the father. Overall, just as a man incorporates the father, a woman reincarnates the mother, so to speak. Therefore, I take this author’s much decried “belief in the influence of lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity,” as Freud himself puts it (1991a:167), as crucial to his thinking insofar as it fulfils here the mythic function of accounting for the passage from timeless unity to dynamic coupling. Overall it is, I think, this deep logic of the mythic model transposed in the *Oedipus* theme that has a grip on Freud as he affirms in *The Ego and the Id* that bisexuality (to be understood, as we saw, in the Platonic sense), not sexual rivalry, could be the ultimate cause of all ambivalence in the Oedipal pattern (1989b:29).

## The Receding Frame

The point I am making, alas, is not entirely my own; it actually follows illustrious footsteps. In a groundbreaking article, Lévi-Strauss hinted that Freud’s Oedipal scheme transposes a mythic theme of passage from ophidian(earthborn men usually displayed telltale vestiges of

their primal snake/dragon nature) unity into sexual procreation. More exactly, Lévi-Strauss asserted that Freud's problem concerning the Oedipus theme—that of understanding “how *one* can be born from *two*: how is it that we do not have only one procreator, but a mother plus a father?”—is a variant on the Greek mythic theme of autochthony, represented by ophidian creatures, versus sexual reproduction. Hence, the anthropologist famously concluded that “not only Sophocles, but Freud himself, should be included among the recorded versions of the Oedipus myth” (1955:435).

Lévi-Strauss' point is, more generally, that within the realm of mythology each successive form, or model, appears as content from the point of view of another form that aims to explain it. In other words, each new interpretation of a myth may be expected to count as a variant from the point of view of the next interpretation (1971:561). The author's own formulation of the paradox of the receding frame, whose ever-widening circles, as Wendy Doniger points out, indicate infinity (O'Flaherty 1984:203; cf. Hofstadter 1980:15). Here we start having a definite pattern, for, as Lévi-Strauss himself acknowledges, his own interpretations should also count as mythic variants (1971:561).

Granted, Lévi-Strauss affirms that his work can be taken as “*the* myth of mythology” (1964:20, emphasis mine) in the sense, I reckon, that structural analysis is the one form of myth that escapes the receding frame. Indeed, to Lévi-Strauss, structural analysis is the last avatar of myth because it brings the underlying structure to consciousness—because, in other words, it brings the form and content of myth together so as to disable any further “incarnations” of its structure (1971:561). But the very logic of the receding frame entails that, just as from Lévi-Strauss' perspective Freud's science appears as a variant of myth, so from a fresh outside perspective Lévi-Strauss' own *Mythologiques* must appear as a mythological object.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that Lévi-Strauss lays a claim to dispossessing myth of its generative capacity by bringing its structure to consciousness, just as Freud proposed to neutralize the generative power of repressed libido by “transforming what is unconscious into what is conscious” (1989a:347, 1991d:288).<sup>4</sup> The very fact that Lévi-Strauss' plea of freedom from the receding frame is cast in a Freudian mold suggests that it in fact prolongs his predecessor's construction (cf. Badcock 1981 and Doniger 1989). That Lévi-Strauss should have ascribed

Freud's greatness partly to the "gift" of thinking "the way myths do" (1988:190) therefore suggests where one could start searching for the fascinating quality of the great anthropologist's own thinking.

Concerning *Oedipus*, Lévi-Strauss allows that his own interpretation takes "the Freudian use" of the theme into account (1955:435). Indeed, for Lévi-Strauss the myth

replaces the original problem: born from one or born from two? Born from different or born from same? By a correlation of this type, the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. Although experience contradicts theory, social life verifies the cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence cosmology is true. (p. 434)

Note that Lévi-Strauss replaces the problem as posed by the Greeks and rephrased by Freud with a correlation in which both the "overrating" and the "underrating" of blood relations are ascribed to "social life." Since such overrating and underrating of blood relations refer to love between heterosexual kin and to strife between homosexual kin, of which Oedipus's double act of incest with mother and of parricide is, of course, the paradigm (cf. Willner 1982:85), Lévi-Strauss is—after Freud—describing social life in terms of incest.

This similarity is by no means casual. Earlier on, in his book on kinship, Lévi-Strauss had expressed his agreement with Freud regarding humankind's basic striving for incest. Indeed, his last words in this book stress the universal yearning for a world where one could enjoy one's own womenfolk (1967:20, 569–70).

Granted, on the surface of things the gist of Lévi-Strauss' argument is quite innocuous. Incest prohibition, he writes, is one indispensable condition for social life, for it engenders reciprocity between human groups. Prescriptive organization of such exchanges in so-called elementary structures of kinship involves marriage between cross-cousins, i.e., the offspring of a brother and a sister (as opposed to the offspring of same-sex siblings). Lévi-Strauss distinguishes three varieties of cross-cousin marriages, and argues that each correlates to one different form of elementary exchange. Marriage between a man and his *bilateral* female cross-cousin prevails where two human groups, A and B, directly exchange marriage partners in every generation so that reciprocity is immediate—in formulaic terms,  $A \leftrightarrow B$ . Frequent marriages with *matrilateral* female cross-cousins indicate that three or more kin groups indirectly exchange marriage partners in a cyclic

chain pattern, so that all groups involved must intervene before the reciprocity loop closes—again in formulaic terms,  $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C (\rightarrow A)$ . Finally, marriage with the *patrilateral* female cross-cousin is not so much a systematic practice as an ad hoc strategy. It registers when, for example, a man from group A gives out a sister to a man in group B on condition that in the future the sister's daughter be married to his own son, which promotes localized reciprocity between groups A and B across two generations—in formulaic terms,  $A \rightleftharpoons B$  (see Lévi-Strauss 1967:505–17 and 1983:88–89).

In short, Lévi-Strauss argues that incest prohibition—as enacted through prescriptive rules of cross-cousin marriage—generates three systems of reciprocity that read as logical transformations of one another. In this perspective, prohibition of incest is a must for marriage systems to unfold. But there is an underlying, altogether more complex, argument in this book. Lévi-Strauss asserts that matrilateral marriage is “the most lucid and fecund among the simple forms of reciprocity . . . a great sociological adventure,” whereas patrilateral marriage mocks reciprocity. In point of fact, he states that the latter form of marriage exchange represents the “irresistible temptation of a ‘social incest,’ even more perilous for the group than biological incest” (1967:520, 523). But Lévi-Strauss then affirms that matrilateral and patrilateral cross-cousin marriages constitute an “indissoluble couple of oppositions” and therefore “cannot be conceived one without the other, at least unconsciously” (pp. 520–21). And, one step ahead, he states that those societies bold enough to institute the matrilateral formula “have remained obsessed by the patrilateral formula” (p. 520), the “latent intervention” and “underlying presence” of which brought them an element of security which none dared get rid of completely (p. 522).

In other words, certain societies have dared set sail on the “sociological adventure” of generalized exchange insofar as they retained an essentially incestuous form of marriage exchange masquerading as reciprocity. This interpretation amounts to saying that retention of incest is a must for matrimonial reciprocity to unfold. Lévi-Strauss can conceive of “very poor” social organizations working on the basis of patrilateral marriage without “ever dreaming the adventure of matrilateral marriage,” but he cannot admit of generalized exchange having let go of so-called “social incest” (1967:521–23). In an alternative formulation he states that cross-cousin marriage is generically “the elementary formula of marriage by exchange” (p. 151) and that

patrilateral marriage “is an even simpler structure of reciprocity” (p. 500). Of course, a structure of reciprocity that is simpler than the elementary structure of reciprocity cannot but pertain to both incest and marriage; in other words, it must connote the idea of marriage as incest. As a consequence, Lévi-Strauss’ complex theory conceives the structural transition from incest to marriage using incest as a model of marriage. Whence we return to the author’s definition of Theban “social life,” which supposes reciprocity based on alliance, in terms of both the overrating and the underrating of blood relations that spell out Oedipus’ incest.

But, one may ask, what is this puzzling patrilateral marriage that poses incest at the nexus of social life? As we saw, Lévi-Strauss describes it in terms of a man who surrenders his sister in marriage but then seeks to obtain her daughter back for his own son (1967:516–17). Here is, then, the crux of the matter. Despite the incest prohibition, this marriage realizes an incestuous attitude insofar as it allows the selfsame substance of a brother and sister to mingle in legitimate marriage, in the following generation, through the respective son and daughter. Note that this amounts to saying a man representing the father marries a bride that rejuvenates the mother. Such image, of course, meets Freud’s model of marriage as an echo of incest connoting primordial unity, for which dragons consistently stand. Therefore, Lévi-Strauss’ portraying of Theban “social life” in terms of both the overrating and the underrating of blood relations brings to mind that the dragon-slayer founder of Thebes set out, as Calasso stresses, “to find his sister Europe and won the young Harmony,” whom he married under the aegis of the Dragon before both actually turned into snakes (1994:386–90).

## Folklore into Theory

When Lévi-Strauss pictures incest as the model of marriage—even though social life requires the prohibition of incest—he is taking up, after Freud, a universal leitmotiv of folklore. The thinking of both authors suggests that it is anything but casual that they should have used mythological models to think over the workings of the human mind. Just as Freud justifies his interest in mental patients on the grounds that “they have turned away from external reality, but for that very reason they know more about internal, psychical reality and can therefore reveal a number of things . . . that would otherwise be inaccessible to

us” (1991a:90), so Lévi-Strauss justifies his interest in myths on the grounds that here “the mind [*l’esprit*], facing itself and escaping the obligation of composing with objects, is in a way reduced to imitating itself as an object” (1964:18). Thus granting the possibility of the mind reflecting itself—in Freud’s terms, of the ego taking itself as an object (1991a:89)—one must ask whether such a reflection is not bound to follow the unconscious laws of the very mind taken as an object, which is, according to Lévi-Strauss, precisely what “myths” do.

Of course, just as Freud’s conception of the unconscious necessarily applies to Freud’s (as well as Lévi-Strauss’) thinking, so Lévi-Strauss’ representation of the receding frame applies of necessity to his own (and Freud’s) reflection. In this perspective, the problem of the receding frame amounts to that of the permanence of mythic schemes throughout the constructions of different thinkers. Lévi-Strauss mentions the “very dangerous game” one plays in mythology of “placing one’s own intellectual mechanisms in the service of the traditional scheme, allowing it to live and to operate that same mysterious alchemy that afforded it solidity and endurance throughout continents and millenaries” (1954:134). His avowed understanding of mythology, both as data and discipline, as a reflection of the human mind upon itself—along with Freud’s moving description of his own theory of instincts as “mythology” (1991a:27; cf. Merkur 1993:357–58)—suggests that both men were in some measure aware of transposing age-old schemes into the modern *Weltanschauung*. Such awareness is, I think, part and parcel of their greatness.

Admitting that one perpetuates mythological schemes goes against the grain of the academic ethos. Bruce Lincoln—one of the most thoughtful contemporary writers on myth—acknowledges that myth scholars are particularly prone to producing mythic narratives. He also tells readers about his personal struggle to extricate himself from mythology (1999:xii, 209). Provocatively, Lincoln defines myth as “ideology in narrative form” and adds that scholarship is “myth with footnotes” (pp. 207, 209). This entails posing the problem of “whether scholarship genuinely differs from myth,” which he answers with “[w]hen neither the data nor the criticism of one’s colleagues inhibits desire-driven invention, the situation is ripe for scholarship as myth” (pp. xii, 215). Otherwise put, the mythic dimension of academic work becomes apparent when scholarly checks and balances are weak; and, conversely, it takes enhancing the “footnote” dimension of scholar-

ship—standing for “hard work, integrity, and collegial accountability” (p. 209)—to keep ideological manipulation in check.

The notion that weakened checks and balances propitiate scholarship as myth is interesting, and it faintly echoes Lévi-Strauss’ point that mythological thinking is the default mode of the mind left to itself. Nevertheless, Lincoln takes a very different tack. Whereas Lévi-Strauss and Freud experiment with turning the human mind back on itself, Lincoln deals with the “instrumentality of myth” (p. 159). His gaze pinpoints the self-serving strategies of individual narrators adapting stories to their own interests and exposes discrimination and inequality in mythological texts, both ancient and modern.

Even so, Lincoln is no freer from the receding frame than any of his predecessors. He indulges in thinking that a critical gaze dispossesses mythology of ideology (by denouncing its discriminatory assumptions to public awareness), just as Lévi-Strauss flirts with the idea that structural interpretation strips mythic schemes of dynamism (by exposing their structure to consciousness). But even as Lévi-Strauss dubs *Mythologiques* the myth of mythology, so Lincoln candidly exposes the ideological motivation—he calls it a “Marxist inclination” (p. 146)—fueling his own effort to denounce the ideological drive of his predecessors. In this light, Lincoln’s ideological struggle to extricate himself from the ideological framework of mythology appears as yet another version of the receding frame.

But to each his own. Lincoln, with graceful erudition, scrutinizes both ancient materials and more recent interpretations in light of a contemporary ideal of political correctness, while warning us against idealizing mythology. On a different tack, Freud and Lévi-Strauss to a degree have transmuted age-old themes of folklore—such as the Dragon Slayer, which Vladimir Propp recognized as the paradigm of all fairy tales (Propp 1983 and 1996; cf. Silva 2002)—into influential theories of our time.

For folklorists, there is food for thought in the possibility that the enduring influence of Freud and Lévi-Strauss in contemporary thinking owes something to their creative transposition of immemorial folklore patterns into modern *Weltanschauung*. Moreover, the examined suffusion of mythic schemes in the work of scholars bent on examining the unconscious workings of the mind suggests the mind-boggling power of unconscious processes in even the most strenuously self-conscious of scholarly pursuits. Last but not least, in

light of Gregory Bateson's not trivial remark that "people all think in terms of stories" (1979:13), evidence of continuity between traditional themes and modern theories suggests one reason why folklore still matters—provided folklorists take notice and rise up to the task of studying pattern in human stories, ancient and modern.

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## Notes

1. All Old Testament quotations are from Jewish Publication Society 1988. New Testament quotations are from the *Jerusalem Bible* (Jones 1968).

2. All Plato quotations are from Plato 1963. Passages from *Brihadāranyaka-upanishad* are from Max Müller's translation (also used by Freud) of *The Upanishads* ([1879–1884] 1962).

3. Incidentally, to say that a man will marry his mother through a wife identifying with her own mother conflates both mothers, a subtle way of putting marriage under the sign of original unity.

4. Note that an empty structural grid takes the place of Freud's repressed libido in Lévi-Strauss' version of the id (see Lévi-Strauss 1974, chap. 10).

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