

Tylor's Solar Sixpence

E. B. Tylor, in contrast to Andrew Lang (Marett: 80, 82) and Herbert Spencer (Tylor 1877: 155), is often seen (Dorson: 187-191) as an avid supporter of the astral and meteorological readings of ancient Indo-European mythology popularized in Great Britain by Friedrich Max Müller (1864: 369-524; 1868: 80-111) and other philologists. In print, especially in the 1860's, Tylor accepted their view that misunderstanding and personification of general attributive names for clouds, planets and stars especially the sun in its course (Tylor 1865 in Marett: 81-83; 1869: 532; 1877: 149-150, 155) had yielded the names and attributes of many Vedic, Greek and Roman deities and heroes. He accorded to their analyses sound principle, largely valid detail and an unassailable basis in ancient knowledge (1868: 226-227). In his own published examination of not solely Indo-European myths and beliefs, Tylor in the 1860's, however, held to no comprehensive theory (Marett: 83); in separate works he resorted to simple solar or more complex euhemerist or sensationalist explanations (Tylor 1861, 1865 in Marett: 81-82, 84-85; 1869: 524).

But by April 1868 Tylor wrote a lengthy private parody of Müller's (and his own) solar mythmaking called "The Mythe of Day". It was composed considerably before the publication of the famous extended travesties of solar theory by R. F. Littledale (1870) and Andrew Lang (1886) (Dorson: 163 n.1; Marett 82 n.4). Its subject, unlike theirs, was taken not from contemporary history - Max Müller or Gladstone - but from childhood. It was a nursery rhyme, obscure yet commonplace as the illustrations for it emphasized.

The Mythe of Day¹

(by E.B. Tylor).

Crushed by the commentators & historians, the relics of the great Solar mythe of our race have found refuge in the nursery, or have gained a more honourable though less honest position as fictitious history. Thus no student, familiar with the mythic deposit in English chronicle, could mistake the sense of the radiant Sun scorching with ardent ray the earth exposed to his beams, which figures in the tale of Alfred burning the cakes left in his charge [s. 2] by the departing but returning night. And thus in the still lingering Sagas of the nursery, History & Mythe are blended in a compound, which no skill save that of the Aryan mythologist can now analyze. The first lines of one such Saga throw an interesting light on the transition period, when the minstrel no longer received from his rapt hearers payment altogether in kind, but when nevertheless a coined currency had only in part come into use, as we read,

"Sing a song of sixpence (& also
A pocket full of Rye".

[s. 3] The mythic song commenced,

"Four & twenty blackbirds baked in a pye".

The simile of the pye representing the underlying earth, & the

overarching heaven or crust is found among the negroes of West Africa, who describe Heaven & Earth as the two calabashes which cannot be opened; ~~or~~ or in the ancient Aryan symbol of the World-Tortoise whose flat under-shell is the earth, whose body is the air, & whose arching carapace is the sky.

Heaven
Air
Earth

We need hardly say, that the four & twenty blackbirds are the twenty four hours, which lie between Heaven & Earth. But the dawn came cutting with its [s. 4] first wedge-like incision that we so often have looked on with delight, as we watched the sunrise after a night spent in the giddy dance, which still keeps up the undying symbolism of Solar worship. The pye was opened, & (a touch most true to nature)

"When the pye was opened
The birds began to sing,
And wasn't that a dainty dish
To set before a king?"

The king, before whom the dish was set, still has it displayed to his burning gaze as he climbs to his meridian, & pours upon the Earth below the golden shower of Dawn, the bright sunshine, which, to show a [s. 5] thought of the regularity -- & accuracy of natural phenomena, he is said to count out in his counting-house.

"The king was in his counting-house,
Counting out his money"-

[A]²

His wife, the imperial Selene, was still in the parlour within the door of night, preparing the moonlight by copious meals of streaming honey (the bread is [s. 6] bee-bread).

"The Queen was in her parlour
Eating bread & honey".

[B]²

But dawn arose before her master, tis therefore called the maid (an allusion to which survives in her red hands, or "rosy fingers" "~~ροδοεικταυλας~~"), & she spread across the sky the Clouds, which are the radiant clothes to be poisoned by the baleful evening, & to become [s. 7] the fatal, clinging, burning robe of the Deianeira of the sunset.

[C]²

At last the day's work is done; the clouds are spread & dried on the "lines" of solar rays; the money is counted; the honey eaten; the four & twenty blackbirds think on the whole they have had enough of day & song, & that it is time to roost. Rest & joy to them, but death to the Day, [s. 8] the hanger of the Celestial garments on the Sky-line. The Magpie of Night raises her devouring beak above the horizon, & the foremost projection, the nose of Day, is snipped off.

[D]²

Into the horrors of the full absorption of day into the hungry ravenous night, the tender-hearted mythologist forbears to enter.

1

This eight-page manuscript of "The Mythe of Day" is in the writing of Tylor's wife Anna on stationery embossed with the heading "Crux Praesidium et Decus" [Cross, Protection and Honour]. It was perhaps never published, although a synopsis appeared in Primitive Culture (1871: I, 287-288) with an altered interpretation of the last verse. The blackbird was now the sunrise at the end of dawn rather than the magpie of night at the end of day. I have reproduced the manuscript with the kind permission of A.L. and F.M. Tylor. I have used "&" to represent Tylor's "†"; my additions of accents, numbers of sides and alphabetical references to illustrations are given in brackets.

2

Edward or Anna Tylor made comical line-drawings for "The Mythe of Day" which cannot suitably be reproduced here in full. [A] shows a figure with a sunny head on a man's body sitting in a chair and dispensing spiral coin-rays. [B] has a well-dressed woman with a crescent moon for a face holding in one hand a piece of bread and indicating with the other a beehive on a table. [C] depicts a maid in starched dress, apron and cap hanging cloudlike clothes on a clothes-line. The sunny-headed figure, with his hands in his pockets and puffing on a large, redolent cigar, shambles up the stairs toward her. In [D] a blackbird flies by and bites her nose, as she raises her arms in fright.

3

Deianeira: the wife of Herakles who gave him a burning robe poisoned with a centaur's blood.

* * *

Subsequently Tylor did criticize in print the extravagance (1871: I, 287-288; 1877: 155) and ignorance of the historical bases for myths (1879:388) of some solar theorists, but not of the "more cautious and conservative" Müller (1876:236). Tylor, himself long cautiously trying to dislodge study of the origins of mythology from the hands of the philologists (ibid.; Marett: 80) and the rasher of the social scientists, now stressed the diverse, overlapping sources for myth among different peoples and in different periods. He no longer accepted solar imagery alone as a deity's justification; it might perhaps supply the motive for certain of the god's actions (Marett: 83, 93). With his usual spirit of compromise, Tylor allowed that intricate solar imagery and verbal misunderstanding might be central to the "pure", that is subjective (Marett:84) and theistic (Tylor 1880:14) myths surrounding the lofty Indo-European gods. But not all people and thoughts were Indo-European and Indo-European ones were not necessarily early or primitive. Tylor tried subtly to stress the more earthly, objective origins of myth among early and primitive peoples. Not names (cf. Müller 1864:447-448), but perceptions of things underlay language and myth, Tylor thought (Marett: 92); not incomprehensible supernatural deities, the last stage in the personification of nature, but more naturalistic, "animatistic" (Marett: 91 and n.5) representations of reality were primary to primitive religion (Marett: 84-86, 96-97; Tylor 1871: I, 271). The "visible, palpable, active, individual objects" (1866: 81) that it incorporated might include the sun, but did not pale into insignificance beside this luminary. In any case, primitive theories about the sun and other material objects ought not to be despised; they were the "rude science" of their day as well as the mythology of the future (1866: 72-73; 1869: 524; 1877: 149-150; Marett: 93,96).

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