

Neither potion nor plaything, but a *provocation*: teenagers' engagement with myth

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As a storyteller working with young people in various therapeutic and educational settings, I am conducting practice-based research into storytelling *for, with and by* adolescents. My workshops may include games, creative writing activities, drama, art and other activities, but they primarily take their energy from a myth or folktale told to the young people by me. This has much in common with the work of any applied arts work – there is usually a stimulus material – but in my case the chosen story is not just a starting-point but an ‘other room’ in which we spend most of the duration of the workshop. The story-world is the landscape for exploration, transformation and indeed realisation. The outcome is often some sort of ‘retelling’ of the myth or story by the young people, but there is much behind this term ‘retelling’.

A similar methodology is articulated by more illustrious applied storytellers such as Alida Gersie (1990, 1997) and Jack Zipes (1995); indeed in this talk I am going to encourage you to see it as a ‘pedagogy’. I apologise in advance that, to some extent, I will use the terms ‘myth’, ‘folktale’ and ‘story’ interchangeably, as my source material is eclectic and I suggest that the insights I have gained from using it with young people apply across genre boundaries. My aim in this paper is to lead you to the perspective I have gained on myth from using it with adolescents.

Given the centrality of this text, this myth, to the pedagogy of a storyteller like myself, it is evidently vital for me to come to an understanding of its nature and status. If I find it to be powerful, where does its power lie? How much freedom should we allow ourselves to play within it, and how should we play? Starting with Gersie and Zipes, two eloquent, perceptive and passionate advocates of the use of myth and folktale with young people, is helpful in laying out two alternative ways of interacting with it.

On the one hand, we can view myth as, in some sense, wise. Alida Gersie, a dramatherapist with decades of experience of storytelling and storymaking in therapeutic and educational groups, has devised what she calls ‘structures’ for guiding groups through particular myths and folktales (Gersie and King 1990). She urges practitioners to respect the integrity of the myth as she gives it to them, and to trust that her structure will allow individual group members to find personally significant meaning in it. Of course, she is very far from thinking that the myth contains a single truth: rather, in any group there will be fruitful dissent and negotiation, and the purpose is ultimately for participants to be able to gain narrative mastery over their own identities. However, there is a sense of truths to be delicately revealed.

A slightly less nuanced version of this view can be found in the avowedly neo-Jungian work of Clarissa Pinkola Estes (*Women Who Run with the Wolves*, 1996), and Robert Bly (*Iron John*, 1990), dealing respectively with what myth has to teach us about femininity and masculinity. Pinkola Estes’ book aims to rediscover the ‘wild woman archetype’ with the help of a series of myths and folktales; Bly’s uses ‘Iron John’ as a guide text through the phases of life of a man. In both there is the sense of a path laid out for the reader to follow, which will lead to greater wisdom or enlightenment. What these works have in common with Gersie’s more complex understanding is the sense that ‘the right

story' has a healing or teaching potential of its own; can be a kind of potion. Indeed, many storytellers consciously or unconsciously adopt this position when they avow that they 'allow the story to speak for itself'; I have often said this sort of thing myself.

This stance is roundly critiqued by Jack Zipes (1995), who emphasises instead the historically situated nature of myth and folktale (he works mainly with fairy-tales). These stories, he reminds us, are written in certain ways in certain times and places, either to reinforce the ideologies of dominant groups, or to resist them. Thus any 'mystical overtones' or 'cult-like' status ascribed to either myth or myth-teller should be rejected. The storyteller's role should rather be that of the cultural or political provocateur, using this material to set up discourses against each other and stimulate listeners' critical and creative faculties. In his projects with young people, he aims to hand over to them the means of narrative representation of society; he advocates free, playful experimentation with mythic elements and archetypes so as to knock down stereotypes and oppressive deceptions.

While Zipes' understanding too is far subtler than I have time to do justice to in this paper, we have here two ways of understanding what myth can facilitate in applied settings: an earnest guided exploration of personal meaning, or politically liberating, subversive communal play with cultural signs. We can raise the myth up, or we can knock it down.

The root of the difference is not only political; it is about how much integrity we ascribe to a certain version of a myth, or indeed whether myth is some 'special category' of human text. This is the view Mikhail Bakhtin seems to express in his 1941 essay, 'Epic and Novel' (Morris 1994). Bakhtin's thoughts on 'the epic' appear to me to be at odds with the rest of his thinking. Whereas he understands all utterances to be part of a dialogic exchange proceeding throughout human history, he sees the world of the epic as being part of an 'absolute past', in which 'there is no place...for any openness, indecision, indeterminacy.' (Morris 1994, p.182) . This world is 'inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual personal point of view or explanation.' (p.183)

As for the individual hero in an epic, he is equally exempt from debate: 'His view of himself coincides completely with others' views of him – the view of his society (his community), the epic singer and the audience also coincide...' (p.183) In saying this, Bakhtin specifically denies the transposition process which any storyteller recognises as one of the keystones of their art. For example, Tom Maguire (2014) describes my own experience when he depicts the storytelling event as a triangle - the storyteller, the story-listeners and the story itself - with the retelling occurring in the 'space between' these.

My lived experience of this is that I exercise only a certain degree of control over the form a myth takes in each retelling. In their attending, my listeners communicate their emotions, their assent or dissent, their perplexity, their interest in following a certain thread, and to keep their attention I cannot but follow. I recently told one of my favourite stories, The Twelve Wild Swans, to a group of young people in an adolescent psychiatric unit. This is a story I know in many forms – drawn from sources ranging from African myth to European fairytale. A young girl's brothers are transformed into swans, and only she can save them by sewing them suits of nettles, keeping silence for seven long years while she does so. Even when she is taken as a bride by a prince, and then narrowly escapes death for witchcraft by her mother-in-law the queen, she remains silent and dedicated to her work to the last. To me, the story centres on the endurance and steadfastness of a young woman, who is interested not in pleasing men but in accomplishing what she feels to be her mission

in life. Knowing the group fairly well, I felt this was useful territory for them to explore. Perhaps, on another day, had the young people been in a different frame of mind, it would have been. And yet on this particular morning, as I was telling the story, I was horrified to feel it take shape as a tale of original sin, isolation, and hopelessness. The girl seemed like a victim powerless to resist the iron will of her society – just as some of the young people in the room undoubtedly felt about their own lives. The context had retold the myth, in a place of darkness from which I could not readily pull it out, and I had allowed it to happen. In my role as storyteller and teacher, I had failed them.

Retreating from the pain of this moment, it is clear enough why these kind of things happen. They arise from inherent properties both of the human imagination and of myth. Our imaginations, as Lev Vygotsky (1967) wrote, work by combining elements gleaned from the raw material of our life experience. The more experience we have, the more creative we become. This life experience can be added to by the stories we read or hear – we constitute these in our minds as a form of vicarious experience, once more using elements and images from our actual experience to do so. It follows that stories told to us need not be very detailed for us to enter deeply into them – indeed too much detail may be a hindrance. Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller' (1936) writes that one of the great strengths of myth and folktale is its very lack of 'psychological shading'. I think of this as its 'sparseness'. In telling 'The Twelve Wild Swans' to the group, I did not, for example, explain why the girl chose to save her brothers, or how she felt when she managed it. Nor did I give much physical description of places or characters. Gestures and sensory experiences stand in for both of these – the girl's fingers and feet were stung raw by the nettles - as they are enough to place the audience in the story themselves. And it is this that invites interpretative work from the listener, to fill in the gaps and stitch the story into her own experience.

More recently, Jacques Ranciere (2008) has questioned our whole understanding of how listening and spectating works: what an audience member takes from a performance of, say, a play may have much more to do with his or her own interests and knowledge, than what the playwright or director intended.

If this is the case with theatre, how much more the case with my informal, improvised retelling of a myth to a roomful of teenagers, where they have influence not only over their own understandings, but over the unrehearsed words of the story itself. The story's sparseness leaves huge spaces for interpretation between the anchor points of plot. The result is that the 'other room' of the myth being told becomes a place of dialogue, encounter and negotiation between my life experience and theirs. The retelling of the myth is actually a transposition to what Bakhtin calls the 'chronotope' – the 'here and now' of the context. I refer here to both the context of the storytelling event – the room full of young psychiatric inpatients and me – and the wider social, cultural, political context which each of us present brings into it.

Indeed, this overlaying of the myth from the 'absolute past' onto the chronotope of the telling always throws up conflicts of values, areas of cognitive dissonance, which inflect both the teller's retelling and the listeners' response. If the 'gaps' in a sparsely told myth *invite* interpretation by listeners, these anachronisms *provoke* or *demand* it. I recently told part of the saga of Egil the Viking to a class of low-ability 12-year-old boys, some of whom have behavioural difficulties. Egil is an overgrown, furious young man of almost superhuman strength, whose only saving grace is his ability as a poet. He is rejected even by the heroic Norse society and has to go raiding throughout the

Viking world. When king Eric Bloodaxe offends him, he slays Eric's servants and young son in revenge. The boys had, by this stage in the story, come to identify with Egil and his struggles to control himself, and perhaps because of their empathy, this moment of brutality horrified them. There was no continuing with the story, as they wanted to get to the bottom of this. What could possibly have justified this behaviour? There ensued a lengthy and passionate debate about Egil's cold upbringing and how it might have affected him, whether he was responsible for his own actions, whether revenge is ever justified, and what Viking society should have done with a boy like him.

This was not a level of discussion which this class usually indulges in, and I think it demonstrates well the pull of Alida Gersie's view that 'the right story' can indeed do powerful work.

However, I suggest that there are two forces operating at once, and I as the teller of the myth am working in a space of creative tension between them. On the one hand, the myth is full of valuable distilled human experience. One image I hold is that a myth, with all its diversity and strangeness, 'raises the floor' in the room, so that all present are operating in a space of greater, more complex understanding. New elements of experience are introduced, they are experienced vicariously, and they are linked into chains of causality which give listeners another way of understanding human behaviour. The young people were, if you like, more intelligent within the myth of Egil than they were able to be in the abstract outside it. In this sense, the myth *is* a wise teacher worthy of respect, if not a potion.

On the other hand, the myth is a thing that comes into being differently in the moment of each telling. It was not the answers the myth provided, but the questions it posed, that ultimately generated these insights from the young people. And these arose from the very interaction between the inexplicable, monumental epic from Bakhtin's 'absolute past' and the retelling context of the young boys, me and the classroom. I would call here on Bakhtin's own concept of 'heteroglossia' – far from being a monologic utterance, the communal retelling and exploration of a myth provokes negotiation between many social languages, and shows the boundaries of each. It may be that we make much more free with myth than people used to in Bakhtin's time, influenced as we are by the novel – another point we owe to Bakhtin (Morris 1994). We are no longer interested in the perfect hero whose motives are beyond question, we are interested in his inner conflicts; like Zipes, we want to subvert them, rewrite them and play with them.

Where does this leave my storytelling pedagogy in the difficult moments that arise in the space between these understandings? I am still exploring this space. My first example, of the young people in the psychiatric ward and the shocking turn my favourite story took, illustrates what it can be like. It certainly indicates that to 'let the story speak for itself' is glib and even irresponsible, at least when working with vulnerable young people. The filling of gaps, the attempts to resolve cognitive dissonances, are a dialogic process that happen, as I have said, in an 'other room', the storyworld. This process allows young people to feel heard, and to create their own shared and individual meanings. However, it also risks them leading me into dark territory. There is a responsibility I need to take on myself, to accompany them on their explorations of a story, but to remain a caring and responsible adult guide able to take them to the hopeful places it contains.

Working with adolescents has thus taught me that the value of myth is its hybrid nature: it is neither a preplanned route nor empty territory, but a provocative map inviting exploration and subsequent redrawing. In some way I cannot yet fully articulate, I want neither to raise it up, nor to strike it

down. Rather I want to give it the dignity owing to it, while making it fully available for rewriting. I suggest that myth is uniquely placed to lay down a challenge to young people: to make sense of the inexplicable realities of social life, and respond to them creatively.

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