

Readers of classical literature and history often find that the stories they meet there remind them of other stories from other societies. The tale about Romulus and Remus being set adrift in the Tiber may suggest the tale of Moses being committed to the Nile. The attempted seduction of Hippolytus has its resemblances to the episode of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. The myth of Oedipus contains echoes of events associated with many other mythical figures. One may wonder whether such likenesses are no more than coincidence.

This question attracted the attention of an English nobleman many years ago, and he has suggested an answer. Fitzroy Richard Somerset, 4th Baron Raglan, was himself an interesting figure. Born in 1885, he was educated at Eton, joined the Grenadier Guards at twenty, and went on to hold responsible positions in Hong Kong, the Sudan, and Palestine and Trans-jordan. Later he was Lord Lieutenant of Monmouth and President of the Royal Anthropological Institute. His book The Hero was first published in 1936, and then re-issued in paperback by Vintage Books in 1956. A central part of its thesis is that the tales about mythical figures have a common origin in an ancient form of religious kingship and its attendant ritual.

Lord Raglan has reviewed stories of mythical heroes from many cultures, and finds a recurrent pattern. Some of the heroes are classical, while others come from the Hebrew tradition, from Java, the upper Nile, Scandinavia and elsewhere. In these various traditions there are some twenty-two points that appear again and again in the careers of mythical heroes, and while no feature is attached to every hero, many do fit the pattern in almost every one.

Can you identify the hero about whom the following tale is told? His mother was a princess, and the circumstances of his conception unusual. He was wounded by his mother and left his country. His childhood is virtually unknown, but on reaching manhood he journeys to a kingdom where he kills the king and becomes king in his place. He marries his mother and has a family, but eventually is recognized by his wife-mother. He is overcome with grief and dies, but his sons do not succeed him, and there is no mention of his burial. Some features of this hero's life have been omitted, but none that are essential. The hero is from a world far different from that of Oedipus, and his story is given by Sir Stamford Raffles in his History of Java.

The common features identified by Lord Raglan are as follows:

- 1) The hero's mother is a royal virgin;
- 2) His father is a king, and
- 3) Often a near relative of his mother, but
- 4) The circumstances of his conception are unusual, and
- 5) He is also reputed to be the son of a god.
- 6) At birth an attempt is made, usually by his father or his maternal grandfather, to kill him, but
- 7) He is spirited away, and
- 8) Reared by foster-parents in a far country.
- 9) We are told nothing of his childhood, but
- 10) On reaching manhood he returns or goes to his future kingdom.

- 11) After a victory over the king and/or a giant, dragon, or wild beast,
- 12) He marries a princess, often the daughter of his predecessor, and
- 13) Becomes king.
- 14) For a time he reigns uneventfully, and
- 15) Prescribes laws, but
- 16) Later he loses favour with the gods and/or his subjects, and
- 17) Is driven from the throne and city, after which
- 18) He meets with a mysterious death,
- 19) Often at the top of a hill.
- 20) His children, if any, do not succeed him.
- 21) His body is not buried, but nevertheless
- 22) He has one or more holy sepulchres.

A number of classical figures rate high in their correspondence with the typical hero. Oedipus rates 21, Theseus 20, Romulus and Perseus check in with 18, and Dionysus gets 19. In British legend we find King Arthur with 19, and Robin Hood with 13. By contrast with figures from myth, Lord Raglan maintains, no truly historical personage scores well: the top is Alexander the Great, who became almost a myth in his own lifetime, and who rates at best 6 or 7.

There are, of course, a number of figures from the classical world who score high on the Raglan scale: some are mentioned in The Hero, others are not. It might be a challenge to see how many figures you can identify who score ten or more, and a book prize is offered to the person who submits the longest list of such figures.