

# Forum

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## Hierogamy versus Wedlock

To the Editor:

Although I applaud Evelyn Hinz (in "Hierogamy versus Wedlock: Types of Marriage Plots and Their Relationship to Genres of Prose Fiction," *PMLA*, 91, 1976, 900–12) for eschewing formalist approaches to genre (p. 901) and for exploring the romance "from a wide-ranging interdisciplinary perspective rather than from a purely literary angle" (p. 912), her exclusive attention to marriage plots leads her to some highly dubious generalizations about the nature of mythic literature.

First, while she intends to use the archaic "treatment of marriage" in what she calls "mythic narratives" only as "an index" "to a [nonnovelistic] philosophical orientation, one . . . aligned with the 'spirit' of the romance" (p. 901), by the middle of her essay she sees hierogamy as the *primary* index of such an orientation (p. 905). And by the end we are told, quite unreservedly, that "the prototype . . . for mythic narrative is not of an eschatological or quest variety, but rather the union or marriage of Zeus and Semele" (p. 912). But, if hierogamy is the prototype for mythopoetic narratives, we must, I suppose, deny the appellation "mythic" to such phenomena as Ahab's quest in *Moby-Dick* and the visionary eschatology of the Book of Revelation. I, for one, would prefer to deny the universality of the hierogamous prototype.

If this is to exaggerate what is only a function of the admittedly limited range of Hinz's "introductory . . . essay" (p. 901), restricted as it is to *marriage* plots in *prose* fiction, I can still legitimately object to her too narrow definition of the nature of mythic epistemology. She argues that an artist is mythic only to the extent that he resembles Mircea Eliade's "archaic man," that is, to the extent that he seeks to abrogate historical time by the ritual "repetition of primordial paradigms . . . enacted *in illo tempore*" (p. 905). Such parochialism has the unfortunate consequence of eliminating from the category "mythic narrative" *all* literature informed with the Judeo-Christian myth (for Yahweh is preeminently a god of history); and this is precisely what Hinz has in mind. She embraces this extreme not only because of the observed contrariety between

the archaic doctrine of eternal return and the Christian notion of eschatology, but also because, for her, "the sacred [in mythic narrative] has nothing to do with morality or spirituality" (p. 906), and is therefore essentially anti-Christian. Finally, Hinz's mythic artist is essentially this-worldly, anxious "to liberate the mythic potential of the phenomenal world," which occasions, we are told, "his persistent quarrel with Christianity" (p. 912). But the consequences of this position are dubious: suddenly Genesis is no longer a mythic narrative; neither is *Paradise Lost*; nor, for that matter, is the Christian *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (though this last *might* be saved on the questionable grounds that the Mariner's "union" with the nightmare Life-in-Death is a hierogamy contrasted with the "profane" marriage from which he draws the Wedding Guest). One wonders about the usefulness of a definition of "mythic narrative" that excludes works such as these: what, then, are we to *call* them?

More philosophically, what makes a narrative mythic is neither its assertion of the doctrine of eternal return nor its consequent attempt ritually to rescue man from history; not its opposition to profane *time* (Blake once wrote that "Eternity is in love with the productions of time") but rather its opposition to the profane *world*, a world bound to an exclusively rationalist-empiricist orientation. Although Hinz hints at this (p. 908), her equating a profane orientation with "the whole *Logos* complex" (italics mine) again reveals an anti-Christian bias: for the *whole Logos* complex includes, for example, the creation account in Genesis and the incarnational prologue to the Gospel of St. John.

Hinz inadvertently comes closer to a catholic view of mythic narrative when she speaks of "that which is imbued with the divine, . . . that which is transmitted in sacred history or myth"; and her description of "the sacred" is entirely apropos: "it consists of the sense of the sublime, the numinous, the awe-full, which Rudolph Otto in *The Idea of the Holy* describes as the *mysterium tremendum*" (pp. 905–06). But ironically the *mysterium tremendum* has no essential connection with the notion of eternal return: Rudolph Otto's orientation is almost exclusively Judeo-Christian. The advantage of his approach is that he explores myth not so much in

terms of paradigms or archetypes as in terms of that which is saturated with the sacred. In this respect he resembles Walter Otto, whom Hinz mentions (p. 912), without, however, attending sufficiently to his remarkable mythic point of view. For Walter Otto, cultus (including, of course, ritual mimesis) is a “mighty creation called into life by the divine afflatus of a god who reveals himself,” while myth likewise bears witness to “this same encounter with the Sublime.” Both cultus and myth are, for Otto, “great languages with which mankind speaks to the Almighty, . . . for no other reason than that it must.”

To the extent that Otto’s point of view is tenable, it is not correct for Hinz to assert, as a generalization, that “Mimesis had for primitive man and has for the mythic writer a sacred and a practical function: it is the means whereby what happened *in illo tempore* can be made to happen again” (p. 908). For example, Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan” is mythic, but not because it recounts a hierogamy (although it does), not because it abrogates historical time (it doesn’t), but because it exhibits Rudolph Otto’s *mysterium tremendum* and was “called into life by the divine afflatus” of Zeus.

In conclusion, I might observe that Hinz unintentionally comes closest to a Christian orientation near the end of her essay. Although her discussion of the regenerative effect of the *hieros gamos* in *Landlocked* (and elsewhere) is unconvincing (because it commits the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy), and although her notion of ritual cosmic regeneration is essentially pagan, the kind of moral-metaphysical flow of which she speaks strikingly resembles the interconnectedness of the human and physical cosmoses in the Christian myth. Witness the cosmic degeneration that occurs in *Paradise Lost* when Eve eats the forbidden Fruit:

Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat  
Sighing through all her works gives signs of woe,  
That all was lost. (IX. 782–84)

What Hinz says of mythic hierogamy is equally true (*mutatis mutandis*) of the above lines: they are “experienced subjectively, but [they are] also an experience that brings cosmic consciousness, a consciousness of the way things *are* when viewed from a cosmic perspective” (p. 911).

What makes a narrative mythic is precisely that it views things religiously from a cosmic perspective. Had Hinz been willing to admit the possibility of there being more than *one* such perspective, her extraordinary essay would have been definitive rather than merely seminal.

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To the Editor:

A theory does not stand or fall on a single example, and Evelyn J. Hinz’s argument for a reconsideration of the generic labels, novel and romance, contains many fine observations, but there seem to me to be serious difficulties with its overall argument as well as with its handling of one of its illustrative cases.

Although the romance may well be generically distinguished from the novel, marriage is not a sufficiently defining criterion so that its appearance in romance should cause a redrawing of boundaries. Indeed, from Chrétien’s *Erec* through Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale and Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, marriage has informed both the *conte* and the *con-jointure* of romance, to use Vinaver’s terms (*The Rise of Romance*). On the other hand, objects that are indisputably novels, for example, the prose fiction of Dickens, have often next to nothing to do with marriage. In *Great Expectations* there is no marriage at all (and if one calls out here: “But that is the point, for what we have is the solitary quest hero of romance,” then I suggest that we abandon the enterprise and use less vexed terms such as prose fiction or narrative). And, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, to take a perhaps more typical example, there is indeed a marriage plot, but that is so peripheral, so external to what happens inside the novel, so little felt, either structurally or symbolically, that its protagonists do not share many more than thirty pages in the book’s thousand.

But what I should like to take issue with more explicitly is Hinz’s reading of Forster’s *The Longest Journey*, for it perpetuates a fairly common misinterpretation and suggests certain of the difficulties of the overall thesis. Hinz argues that “the novel ends with Agnes and Stephen happily married” (p. 903). But Mr. Pembroke’s haughty reply, “my sister leads a busy life,” to Stephen’s suggestion that “Mrs. Keynes” write an introduction to Rickie’s posthumous collection is our only clue that Agnes has married again. “Happily” is a conjecture that nothing we know of Agnes supports. That this last irony should become evidence for a reading “where love or nature conquers all for the good of society and the continuation of the human race” (p. 903) seems to me terrifically lopsided. Even Stephen’s marriage, which at least we cannot accidentally overlook, is presented in purely symbolic terms. He is married to no novelistic character, for his wife is clearly none other than the Demeter of Cnidos, whose picture hung in his room: “she faced the sunrise; and when the moon rose its light alone fell on her, and trembled, like light upon the sea” (*LJ*, p. 138). Neither Stephen’s nor Agnes’ marriage has