

ANCIENT MYTHS WITH A PERENNIAL QUESTION

DAVNI MITOVI O VJEČNOM PITANJU

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SUMMARY

Even though myths have an imaginative component that frequently clashes with logical thinking, their symbolism often resonates with our collective unconscious. The divine inspiration that propels mythological heroes towards the noblest and highest ideals also carries the risk of taunting the jealousy of the gods. This may culminate in fatal results as has happened to Remus when he overstepped the newly defined boundaries set by his twin Romulus when outlining the future city of Rome. Fortunately, mythological heroes often enjoyed the benefit of having wise advisors. These were generally able to counsel their charges against yielding to the sin of pride so as to avoid triggering the anger of the gods. But when deprived of such advisors - as we are - how are we to place legitimate boundaries to our citadel of growing medical knowledge lest we scoff at limits and pay the penalty exacted from Remus?

Key words: Myths, medical ethics, symbolism

Myths trace their origins to stories of events that really happened, but managed to occur in a time-space framework which, though totally different from our own, was no less real. They represent chronicles of real and commonplace occurrences that ended up cloaked with imagination [1]. Because of the inevitably subjective nature of their imaginative component their language differs from, and frequently clashes with, the language of logical thinking. Nonetheless, and probably because it resonates so well with our collective unconscious [2], the symbolism of myths speaks to us

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with a powerful voice which, not silenced by the passage of centuries, carries messages that surprise us for their uncanny relevance to contemporary, and often totally unprecedented, situations.

While the mythological landscape is crowded with a variety of fabulous creatures bearing both human and animal features, rare are the parallel counterparts walking in our midst. In this respect, the recipients of a porcine cardiac valve come to mind. The animal graft that is keeping them alive differs only in size from the one that has kept alive in our imagination the Sphinx [3], Sirens [4], Centaurs [5], and many other legendary hybrids. Of these, and on account of the terror it inspired, one of the most mesmerizing was probably Chimaera [6].

This fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and the snake-like tail of dragon, reminds us of some inevitable concomitants of transplant surgery. The lion, the king of the animals, embodies power; but under the semblance of protection, the king can often become a despotic ruler and turn into a tyrant [7] - a possible allegory for immunosuppressive therapy, endowed as it is with both life-saving and life-threatening potentials. In the body of the goat (*capra in Latin*) [8] one could see the capriciousness [9] with which serious graft host disease will attack one but not another patient. Traditionally, the dragon has always been the fearsome guardian of hidden treasures and this is the adversary we must at all costs crush in our quest for that prized and yet, so elusive reward. But which recondite treasure is this dragon guarding so jealously? We find the answer in Siegfried myth: immortality [10].

Nonetheless, Chimaera's fate was sealed when, with the help of Athena, Bellerophon rode to his victory on the flying horse Pegasus [11], the winged embodiment of the creative imagination and inspiration that propel heroes towards the noblest and highest ideals. Unfortunately, our hero became victim of his own pride when he dared to ride his flying steed to within reach of Zeus' throne, whereby he was instantly flung back to earth [12]. Lamed by his fall and odious to all Immortals, he became a solitary, aimless wanderer whose heart was consumed with misery [13]. In this legend, Bellerophon exemplifies man's vain attempts at extending his power beyond the ever-existing boundaries established by a higher law. And this even if one flies on the wings of the noblest purposes. It is only at one's own risk that one taunts the jealousy of the gods [14].

Another instance. From time immemorial wolves have been identified with savagery [15]. However, in the language of symbols these animals can

have more than this unidirectional connotation since symbolic expression can acquire positive as well as negative values. Positive is the symbolism that stems from the wolf's ability to see in the darkness of the night, a gift through which the wolf can represent in turn: sunlight, a shiny war hero, or a mythical ancestor. The continuing power of this symbolism has extended to the present. In Turkey, Mustapha Kemal, who had named himself Ataturk, i.e., the Father of the Turks, was surnamed Grey Wolf by his followers. And in so doing, the Turks were simply perpetuating the Asiatic myth that Chinese and Mongol dynasties traced their origin to a Blue Wolf coming from Heaven.¹⁵

Neither celestial nor linked to the sun, was the mythical she-wolf that nursed Romulus and Remus until they waxed strong from feeding on her ferocious milk [16]. The animal that saved them, after they were left to die in the River Tiber, was entirely terrestrial, possibly even chthonian, and therefore intimately linked to the idea of fecundity and fertility.

In the normal course of events, Romulus and Remus should have depended on Rhea Silvia, their natural mother, for sustenance. But Rhea Silvia was a vestal virgin and, therefore, forever precluded from begetting children [17], even children who, like the twins, had been unquestionably fathered by the god Mars; mythology teaching us that multiple births are the natural outcome of the union of a god with a mortal woman.

Years later, Romulus traced on the ground the square outline of the future city of Rome and directed laborers to dig a ditch to mark the boundaries neighbors were to respect. Jealous of the good fortune of his brother, Remus belittled twice the work being done and as to show his disdain for the newly imposed limit, jumped across it, whereby an offended worker raised his spade, struck Remus' head and killed him [18].

I believe that overtones of this myth can be discerned in some clinical situations centering on would-be mothers. It is not difficult to draw a parallel with the god-like attributes that can be easily projected by a grateful patient to the practitioner who, through the magic of fertility drugs, induces a single or even a multiple pregnancy in a previously barren woman. Nor can one ignore the resemblance that the she-wolf bears to a surrogate mother. Much like the she-wolf, the surrogate mother embodies the terrestrial idea of fertility, with all what this prized characteristic implies. On the negative side, e.g., when the surrogate mother is unwilling to honor the commitment of relinquishing the child she bore, one witnesses developments which, given their dark and threatening nature, are truly of

chthonian type. It is underground that the forces of germination and those of death are so powerfully linked. And, in our example, birth of the child will spell death to the bonding inevitably developing in the surrogate mother — in the event the child is surrendered — or death for any expectation of bonding in the would-be mother — should the child not be relinquished to her.

We witness now also the medical miracle of successful gestation even in women beyond their menopause. The professionals who have been able to achieve this biological *tour de force*, are deservedly among the undisputed heroes of our medical subculture. But, unlike legendary heroes, the contemporary ones have worked their superhuman feats and have created a new citadel of knowledge toiling all by themselves and without the benefit of the wise feedback their Greek counterparts derived from a tutelary figure.

Thanks to their wise advisors, the Greek heroes were frequently, though unfortunately not always, dissuaded from yielding to the sin of pride, the scenario embodying their ultimate fall. Bellerophon was guided by Athena; Icarus had his own father Daedalus as an advisor; even Aesculapius, the god of healing, had Chiron, the wise centaur, as his mentor. However the ultimate effectiveness of these guardians' protection depended on the willingness of their charges to listen and, hopefully, avoid the jealousy of the gods.

This had not been the case for Bellerophon, nor proved to be the case for Icarus whose father, Daedalus, was the prototype of the inventor. Among other clamorous inventions, Daedalus had also been able to fashion with amazing ingenuity wings that were cleverly designed and perfectly functional. They were marvelously fitted together with wax. Daedalus fastened them on himself as well as on Icarus and, to the astonishment of all, they were both able to fly away from the labyrinthine jail where they had been imprisoned [19]. But the sons who are bequeathed paternal inventions and eagerly adopt them for their manifest and immediate benefits, in a short time end up realizing that each new discovery comes with its full complement of overt liabilities and hidden frailties.

The knowledgeable Daedalus had wisely admonished his son against flying too close to the sun, lest its jealousy would be aroused. But, inebriated by his immediate success, Icarus chose to ignore the paternal warning, while soaring higher and higher and paying no heed to his father's

anguished commands. Predictably, the angry sun melted the wax and Icarus fell to his doom.

Not much different was the fate of Aesculapius who, under the tutelage of Chiron, became so proficient in the healing arts that he saved the life of many who were desperately ill. This led to the rumor that he had even brought back to life some who had died. He was promptly charged as acting beyond his province and, as soon as the news of this intolerable presumption reached the topmost peak of Mount Olympus, the affronted Zeus, who was enthroned there as the lord of the sky, slew him with a thunderbolt [20].

The city founded by Romulus has lasted a long time and, over the centuries, its presence has continued to be felt. Similarly, the medical technology that has taken root in our culture and the biological developments that are permeating our life are part of a reality that is not likely to disappear overnight. Moreover, if unsolved or at least contained, the problems they generate and the questions they raise will continue to be with us for quite some time.

In creating this new citadel of medical knowledge, shall we be following the example of Romulus and define its legitimate boundaries or, since at the start boundaries are never of forbidding height, shall we scoff at them, trespass, and then pay the penalty exacted from Remus? In other words, the basic question that has to be addressed is: How long can human beings be successful without falling victims to their own pride or, in mythological terms, without incurring the jealousy and anger of the gods?

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SAŽETAK

Premda se oslanjaju na maštu koja se opire logičkome razmišljanju, mitovi često svojim simbolizmom odražavaju našu kolektivnu podsvijest. Božansko nadahnuće koje nosi mitske junake k ispunjenju najplemenitijih i najuzvišenijih ideala, nosi sa sobom i rizik da će izazvati zavist bogova i skončati kobno, kao što je skončao Rem kad je prešao granicu koju je postavio njegov brat blizanac Romul radeći nacrt budućega grada Rima. Srećom, mitski su se junaci često mogli okoristiti savjetima mudraca. Oni bi im rekli kako da se odupru vlastitoj oholosti i time spriječe bijes bogova.

Međutim, kako da bez takvih savjetnika mi obični ljudi izradimo nacrt svoje tvrdave rastućega znanja o medicini, osim da s podsmijehom odbacimo postavljene granice i platimo kaznu kakvu je platio Rem?

Ključne riječi: mitovi, medicinska etika, simbolizam