

Legend-Tripping at Bunnyman Bridge: Greek Mythology and American Urban Legends

Many American “urban” legends have the sheen of being extremely local (*legends from one town are virtually unknown in the next town over*) and quasi-historical (*happened to a friend of a friend*), but a close, comparative look reveals that these tales often are built on ancient mythological archetypes and ritualistic concepts, especially with regard to anxieties concerning unbounded and liminal spaces. In this paper I will draw connections between ancient and contemporary legends with an eye to 1) how many legends attach themselves to transitional, “in-between” places—bridges, rivers, crossroads, and cemeteries 2) how many legends feature “liminal”, composite monsters which are neither fully human nor fully animal and 3) how many legends call for an enacted drama of sorts or rather a reenactment of the central myth (“legend-tripping”) as part of rites of passage which usher individuals across a liminal point in his or her life—adolescence, marriage, death—echoing ancient rituals concerned with similar transitions.

Liminal Spaces and Liminal Creatures

Ancient Greek mythic and cultic narratives are peppered with language concerning the “uncanny” liminal spaces—the crossroads and the threshold are the unbounded points which attract the dangerous, unbounded spirit or creature. Thus, such places both lure those who wish to test and manipulate those powers and call for apotropaic protections from those who wish to flee them. In this section I examine the American legends of the murderous Bunnyman of Bunnyman Bridge (Clifton, VA), the Goatman of Old Alton Bridge (Denton, TX), and the Pope Lick Monster (Pope Lick, VA). Each case involves a hybrid, half-human, “liminal” creature who is said to terrorize those who dare to transgress its transitional and isolated domain (bridge, river, trestle). An exploration of the details of these legends shows that they are direct

descendants of or companions to ancient (and universal) associations between the uncanny and the unbounded.

Legend-Tripping and Adolescent Rites of Passage

Urban legends such as these often provide the pretext for adolescent dares in which teenagers test their own bravery by visiting the location associated with the tale (usually at around midnight) and acting out some sort drama connected with the story (the “legend-trip”), such as with the famous “Bloody Mary in the Mirror” narrative. As such, in the section I argue that these “rituals”, in a way, perform the same kind of function as ancient mystery or public rites (such as initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries or the donning of the *toga virilis* for young Roman men) did in antiquity. The legend-trip, of course, on one level functions simply as an intense, fleeting thrill for the individuals involved, but socially and mythically speaking, it also offers a way for the adolescent to “act mythically”, to “face death” in a relatively safe space, and to advance psychically across that liminal time in life when one is between childhood and maturity.

Bibliography

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