

5-1996

# Myth and myth-making in James Branch Cabell's Jurgen : a comedy of justice

Christopher Carson Crenshaw

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/masters-theses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Crenshaw, Christopher Carson, "Myth and myth-making in James Branch Cabell's Jurgen : a comedy of justice" (1996). *Master's Theses*. Paper 609.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu](mailto:scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu).

MYTH AND MYTH-MAKING IN  
JAMES BRANCH CABELL'S  
*JURGEN: A COMEDY OF JUSTICE*

By

CHRISTOPHER CARSON CRENSHAW

B.A., Washington & Lee University, 1993

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

May, 1996

Richmond Virginia

LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND  
VIRGINIA 23173

Christopher Crenshaw is a native of Richmond, Virginia. He graduated *magna cum laude* from Washington & Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, with a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors in English in 1993. His Honors thesis was entitled "*Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris...*": Sacred and Profane Violence in *Moby Dick*."

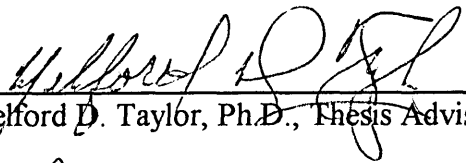
Abstract

Myth and Myth-Making in  
James Branch Cabell's  
*Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice*

A thesis submitted by  
Christopher Carson Crenshaw  
in candidacy for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English,  
University of Richmond, 1996,  
under the direction of  
Welford D. Taylor, Ph.D.

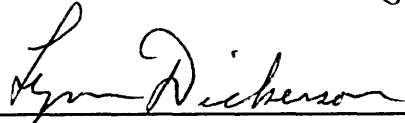
Criticism extant on myth in Cabell's *Jurgen* has focused largely either on the presence of specific mythos in the text, or on the universal application of those myths to the modern world via the cultural-anthropological methods first described in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The common thread in such criticism is that myth is always perceived as an authoritative structure for the transmission of the author's themes. This thesis proposes, however, that the satirical tone and self-conscious allegory of *Jurgen* systematically combine to strip myth of all authority, placing it in a role which conceals, rather than transmits, meaning. Additionally, *Jurgen* reveals an understanding of the myth-making process as inherently deceptive and at odds with the traditional Frazerian understanding.

I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



---

Welford D. Taylor, Ph.D., Thesis Adviser



---

Lynn Dickerson, Ph.D.

The publication in 1890 of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* marked the start of an immense upsurge in attention to myth in arts, literature, and the social sciences. Frazer's study examined systems of myth in contemporary primitive cultures and noted that similar structures existed in European, Greek, and Eastern mythoi to which these primitive cultures could have no possible link. Mythic patterns such as the fisher king and the corn king, as well as certain systems of taboo, which existed across many cultural lines, suggested a universality of human experience as figured in myth that had never been suspected. As *The Golden Bough* became popular, the idea that myth could be a structure unifying mankind began to spread into the arts and literature. Within forty years, the art world was being treated to such works as Stravinsky's symphony, *The Rite of Spring*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, all of which invoked mythic structures taken to be universal to deliver what the artist believed to be universal themes.

In his introduction to *James Branch Cabell: The Dream and the Reality*, Desmond Tarrant calls Cabell's work "virtually a unique addition to the realm of mythology" (vii). This assertion reveals an interesting, though useful, misdiagnosis: what Tarrant calls "myth," is not myth *per se*, but, rather, the attention to myth as a means of communication. By any traditional--which is to say, Frazerian--definition, myth is the creation of stories *by mankind--* and not by a given man--out of a collective imagination for the explanation of the world around him. Tarrant gives just such an explanation of myth.

Man, in the earliest stages of his development, seems to have reacted to life almost entirely through a primitive imagination. He felt or imagined forces at work all round him. By examining primitive peoples an idea can be obtained

of the stages of through which mythical thinking has developed. Initially, man felt that he was part of the world around him and that he was subject equally with the rest of nature to the forces in nature. Gradually, he evolved a society; he developed rituals and magic in an attempt to gain control over these forces for his own benefit. (6)

Tarrant goes on to chronicle briefly the rise and fall of the mythic imagination in man, but never explicitly acknowledges that he is writing of "man" in the sense of *mankind* when he speaks about the creation of myth. Yet, he speaks of Cabell, an individual, as a creator of myth. If the Frazerian definition of myth as collectively created is accepted, it would be more correct to speak of individuals as *users* of myth. At any rate, Tarrant's conflation of these two meanings of *myth* reveals that, in the context of a discussion of myth in literature, the word can mean any of several things: the actual magical stories created by cultures around the world, the individual's exercise of attending to and using these stories, or the literary product of such an exercise. Because our language does not easily discriminate among these meanings, the reader should be aware that, within this paper, the word *myth* may take on any of these meanings.

James Branch Cabell was certainly familiar with Frazer's work; he owned both the unabridged third edition of *The Golden Bough*, published in 1917, and the abridged 1922 edition. Both editions remain in Cabell's library, preserved since his death by Virginia Commonwealth University. He was in the vanguard of those artists searching for meaning in what was believed to be among the most basic of principles: myth. Cabell was born to aristocratic parents April 14, 1879, in Richmond, Virginia. The early readings that most

influenced him were in myth and legend: his childhood library contained *Old Greek Stories Simply Told*, *Stories of Old Rome*, *Book of Bible Stories*, and *Stories of the Days of King Arthur* (Davis 24). This last volume, written by Charles Henry Hanson and illustrated by Gustave Doré, was the most prized of his collection. These readings encouraged an imaginative sympathy with myth and legend, a desire to translate life into mythic terms. Even as a child, Cabell would engage in this sort of allegorizing of his world:

One elder--reminiscing--reminded him of Ulysses relating his adventures at the court of King Alcinous. Another elder recalled Aeneas entertaining his audience at Carthage. And sometimes their stance and mood suggested the exiles who sat down and wept by the waters of Babylon. General Lee on his horse Traveller was King Arthur riding back from Avalon. Other Confederate generals were Launcelot or Tristram or Gareth or Galahad. Jefferson Davis became Merlin. The Yankees were the legions of the evil Mordred. Carpetbaggers roved the ruined and enchanted land like ogres. (24)

"Thus," states Davis, "was born Cabell's profound and abiding sense of the role of myth in human history." (24) Davis is correct, but he fails to note that there was also born in Cabell a rudimentary sense of the interchangeability of myths, a sense that would ultimately be reflected in his later works: not merely in their use of myth, but in the ease and frequency of Cabell's shifts between mythic traditions.

*Jurgen* displays Cabell's frequent shifts between mythic traditions quite well, as a catalog of some of the uses of identifiable mythoi will attest. Classical Greek and Roman myth are among those most widely employed in *Jurgen*. Nessus, the centaur whom Jurgen rides to the Garden Between Dawn and Sunrise is extracted from the Greco-Roman myths of Hercules, as is the shirt he gives Jurgen. (The original shirt of Nessus, of course, did not



give Hercules youth; rather it poisoned and killed him.) Dionysos is frequently referred to. The land of Leuke, in which Jurgen meets Queen Helen, is populated by beings from Greco-Roman myth: dryads, nymphs and satyrs, as well as old Silenus and Achilles. The "brown man with queer feet" (Cabell 136) who shows Jurgen the nothingness of existence is clearly the chthonic form of the earth-deity Pan.

Arthurian legend is another major source for *Jurgen*. Cabell uses Merlin and Guenevere as relatively important characters and makes mention of Arthur waiting in London (Camelot) for Guenevere. Caliburn, the sword Jurgen takes from the Troll King Thragnar, is another name for Excalibur. The episode in which Thragnar attempts to deceive Jurgen and Guenevere by using disguises would appear to be a conflation of the tales of Gareth of Orkney and Gawain and the Green Knight, and elements of Gawain's tale also appear in the episode of Jurgen's seduction of the sorceress Yolande.

Cabell makes use of a multitude of less-familiar traditions, as well. The Troll King Thragnar, like all trolls, is a Norse and Germanic figure. Graemagog, as well, is Scandinavian in origin, referring to the Norwegian legend of Gog and Magog. The poet and dandy Horvendile, as well as being an anagram for *horned evil* and thus linked to the Satan of Christianity, is the Norse god Orvandel. (Allen 123). Koshchei, the creator of all, originates in Russian myth, where he was a minor devil. Vampires, of course, originate in Central European legend, though they have been appropriated by cultures around the world. King Smoit is transplanted from Welsh legend; Gogyrvan Gawr, as well, may be constructed from

figures in legendary Wales.

The court of Queen Anaitis features figures from Babylonian myth, including Baal-Peor and Derceto (Derketo), and its sensuous character is clearly Indian, with references to "linghams" and "yonis" drawn from erotic works such as the *Kama Sutra* (Jurgen 168). Nor is Cabell averse to employing the odd element from traditional European fairy tales, as in "The Orthodox Rescue of Guenevere," (66) when Jurgen awakens the sleeping beauty with a kiss. Cabell also borrows freely from Judeo-Christian myth, placing Heaven and Hell alongside these heathen figures in a single, polyglot structure. And it should be understood that this catalog is certainly incomplete--Cabell's scholarly abilities, so well established at the College of William & Mary, enable him to dabble in and transform mythic traditions less well known than even the most obscure of those listed above.

That Cabell uses this sort of patchwork approach to myth has often been simply taken for granted by such critics as Joe Lee Davis and other biographers, who do little more than state that Cabell was interested in myth and discuss the relationship of certain of his characters to mythic figures. When it has been discussed at all, Cabell's use of multiple mythic approaches has commonly been interpreted as reflective of a Frazerian understanding of myth. Such an understanding presumes that myth is a universal trait somehow ingrained in mankind, and, because of this fact, mythologies are in a sense *interchangeable*, as if when one has seen one fertility god dismembered in a given culture's mythos, one can understand all such myths, even substitute them one for another. The presence of mythic structures which cut across cultural boundaries suggests that the meanings contained in myths are commonly applicable

to all mankind (or at least, to much of it).

There is, of course, significant weight to this theory, but I am not interested in debating the merits of different approaches to myth. I *am* interested, however, in demonstrating that Cabell's understanding of myth as it is revealed in *Jurgen* is something unique among his contemporaries, indeed, among mythists for half a century to come. I believe that Cabell's mythic structure in *Jurgen* represents a turning away from this Frazerian-universalistic understanding of myth. This deviation may be only partial, because the impulse to use myth in literature certainly must stem from a belief in its applicability to modern life. But it is significant nonetheless, because we will see that Cabell robs myth of its authority and its universality at every turn.

As I have pointed out, Cabell does not merely draw from a wide variety of mythoi; he also alters and combines them. By placing Guenevere in a Norse setting, or placing mythic figures in Hell (without privileging Christian figures over those mythic figures, as Dante or Milton might have done), Cabell is creating something new, something patently *artificial*, something sewn from scraps of world myth and still showing the seams. Not only is Cabell creating a structure for *Jurgen* by drawing from and altering existing mythoi, he is constructing an entirely *new* mythos (or using one he had already constructed). Cabell is constantly present as a mediary to the mythic traditions he employs because he makes them his own. Cabell, then, cannot be called a mythist in the Frazerian sense, because he does not permit his reader to experience myth directly, nor does he simply reinterpret or retell myths

to show their relevance to his world.

If the tangibly *artificial* nature of *Jurgen's* mythos forces the reader to step back from myth and experience it as something other than a natural, human phenomenon, so too does the book's literary idiom. *Jurgen* is written in two simultaneous modes: allegory and satire. Allegory and satire are among the most manifestly artificial modes of literature. Both rely on conventions established between writer and reader as to what the conditions of reading are: in allegory, the literal level is taken to have a higher meaning, while in satire, the literal level is understood to be ironic, in some sense, false. In both cases, what the reader sees on the page is precisely *not* what he retrieves from the book, as long as he understands the conventions. This goes beyond the symbolic concerns of novels or stories; a novel can be read literally, while the intended meaning of allegory or satire will be lost completely if read literally. The two literary rubrics under which *Jurgen* operates both conspire to keep the reader at arm's length.

In his brief work on Cabell as a fantasist, *From Satire to Subversion: The Fantasies of James Branch Cabell*, James Riemer makes a similar point: "Cabell's satirical, ironic manner is said [by his critics] to damage the sense of wonder which, in the Tolkien tradition, is perceived as necessary to the secondary world of high fantasy" (xvii). If we first understand that fantasy critics (Riemer notes several, including Brian Attebery and Mark Allen) assume a hierarchical relation between "high" fantasy and "lesser" fantasy, we can easily see that according to these critics, to damage the "sense of wonder" of fantasy is to lessen its value. Riemer blasts such critics' assumptions that all fantasy has similar aims and aspires to the

status of "high" fantasy. "To assess Cabell as falling short of the aims of high fantasy," he writes, "is to misunderstand the way in which his fantasies operate: it is primarily through his departures from that tradition and its conventions that Cabell is able to develop many of his central themes" (xviii). This is precisely the way in which Cabell functions as a mythic writer: by departing from convention and by short-circuiting the sense of wonder that so often accompanies myth, he distances us from his subject material and forces us to examine not only the text but our own expectations of how such a text should function. By refusing to allow myth to settle naturally into his text, Cabell makes us question exactly how "natural" myth really is to mankind.

I have established several grounds for the claim that the reader of *Jurgen* is constantly made aware of the book's artifice. I have also advanced the claim that this artifice interferes with the (essentially) direct experience of myth offered by most mythic writers. It is particularly in *Jurgen's* satire that the relationship between these two claims becomes clear. *Jurgen* is not simply satire on one hand and myth-making on the other; these two crafts are interwoven in the book, each functioning through the other. Myth is both a vehicle for satire in *Jurgen*, an idiom for talking about the world as Cabell sees it, and a target of satire. A few examples will help make this clear.

*Jurgen's* sojourn (under the assumed title of the Duke of Logreus) in Glathion, the realm of King Gogyrvan Gawr and Guenevere, his daughter, is a satirical examination of the failings of *domnei*, or woman worship, as a philosophy of love. Later, I will provide a fuller

reading of this section in conjunction with two other philosophies, but the episode will be helpful in explaining the conjunction of myth and satire. Guenevere, despite her eventual love affair with Launcelot, is mythically figured as a perfect object of love: chaste, pious, and dutiful. Jorgen's love of Guenevere operates in this context--*domnei*--which assumes love of woman to be an earthly manifestation of divine love of God. Guenevere is, in Glathion as well as in Camelot, perceived as an object of such love. However, despite the fact that she is promised to Arthur, she and Jorgen engage in an affair with the tacit acceptance of her father. Guenevere, it is found, can act as she will, but she must always be perceived in the light of *domnei*. It is for this reason that Gogyrvan Gawr encourages Jorgen to indulge his affections for Guenevere; Gogyrvan urges Jorgen, however, to "lie like a gentleman" (90). That is to say, Jorgen and Guenevere may give in to their passions, but their love must remain hidden from all others, and must end when Arthur's agents arrive to take her to Camelot to be married.

"... I regard ... my daughter with considerable affection: and it would be salutary for you to remember that circumstance, Messire de Logreus, if ever you are tempted to be candid."

Jorgen was horrified. "But with the princess, sir, it is unthinkable that I should not deal fairly.... Although of course, I would, in simple justice to her, not ever consider volunteering any information likely to cause pain."

"Again I perceive," said Gogyrvan, "that you understand me. Yet I did not speak of my daughter only, but of everybody."

"How then, sir, would you have me deal with everybody?"

"Why, I can but repeat my words," says Gogyrvan, very patiently: "I would have you lie like a gentleman." (*Jorgen* 92)

The dual implications of the word, *lie*, should be clear: it is to be taken both in the sexual sense and in the sense of untruth. To "lie like a gentleman" is to lie with someone, then lie

about it. The moral issue, for Gogyrvan, is not conduct, it is appearance. It is informative to note that Gogyrvan figures this lying as protection, not only for Guenevere, but for "everybody." Spectators must be protected from the actions of Guenevere; she must remain to them a vision of God's presence on the earth. Clearly, this episode is a satirical indictment of false morality, a morality that ignores the hidden sin while excoriating the visible. Yet in using Guenevere to satirize invalid moral behavior, Cabell is implicitly demythologizing Guenevere herself. Although he employs her in a mythic context, Cabell is stripping Guenevere of her mythic character.

Additional support for my thesis of the devaluation of myth may be found in Jurgen's sojourn into Hell. When Jurgen enters Hell, he finds demons torturing "damned" souls with fires. The sufferers, of course, are insisting on their punishments, and rather overworking the poor demons. They are surprised to learn that Jurgen has no wish to be punished for his sins. When they find that Jurgen is not in Hell to insist on punishment, the demons are not a little surprised.

And then the mob of devils made a great to-do over Jurgen.

"For it is exceedingly good to have at least one unpretentious and undictatorial human being in Hell. Nobody as a rule drops in on us save inordinately proud and conscientious ghosts, whose self-conceit is intolerable, and whose demands are outrageous."

"How can that be?"

"Why, we have to punish them. Of course they are not properly punished until they are convinced that what is happening to them is just an adequate. And you have no notion what elaborate tortures they insist their exceeding wickedness has merited, as though that which they did or left undone could possibly matter to anybody. And to contrive these torments quite tires us out."

"But wherefore is this place called the Hell of my forefathers?"

"Because your forefathers builded it in dreams," they told him, "out of the pride which led them to believe that what they did was of sufficient importance to merit punishment." (252-53)

Cabell is, of course, lampooning the human guilt and conceit that Nietzsche diagnosed in religious man, as well as the society which fosters it (*On the Genealogy of Morals* 57-97). What is for Cabell a satire of religiousness and the human affection for guilt, however, is also a satire of Hell as a myth. Cabell understands this myth as something explicitly *constructed* by man, and his irony about myth is also irony about the construction of myth. Not only does this passage strip authority from man's religious pretensions, it also strips authority from the mythos that supports those pretensions.

The most explicit example of the intersection of Cabell's mythic categories with his satiric form is in the figure of Anaitis, ruler of the island of Cogaigne. Soon after his arrival in Cogaigne, Jurgen discovers the voluptuous Anaitis not only to be a queen but also "a nature myth connected with the moon" (159). Anaitis and her "relatives" are unique among the figures of *Jurgen* in that they are actually mythic figures in *Jurgen's* own context, rather than just in the context of the reader's knowledge. Other mythic figures, such as Guenevere, or places, such as Hell, are stripped of their authority as mythic figures with respects to the reader, who is given the contradictions of their status in the text as opposed to their status as myths. Jurgen, as well, perceives that they do not live up to their mythic status, but that they remain figures to be dealt with on their own terms, even if they do not meet their mythic standards.



In the court of Anaitis, however, Jurgen interacts with myths *as myths*, and they are stripped of their authority even as characters.

"Well, and was there ever such a treasury as the library of Cocaigne? All the diversions that you nature myths have practised I find recorded there: and to read of your ingenious devices delights and maddens me....Besides, the library is the only spot I have to myself in the palace, what with your fellow nature myths making the most of life all over the place."

"It is necessary, Jurgen, for one in my position to entertain more or less. And certainly I cannot close the doors against my own relatives.

"Such ruffraff, though my darling! Such odds and ends! I cannot congratulate you upon your kindred, for I do not get on with all these patchwork combinations, that are one-third man and the other two-thirds a vulgar fraction of bull or hawk or goat or serpent or ape or jackal or what not. Priapos is the only male myth who comes here in anything like the semblance of a complete human being: and I would infinitely rather he stayed away, because even I who am Jurgen cannot but be envious of him." (166-67)

The residents of Cocaigne are not people, but myths. By attending to these nature myths as myths, Cabell is actually further undermining his allegorical structure. They literally are what they represent (mythic figures of little substance); the expected move from the literal level of meaning to the allegorical level cannot occur, so the reader is further distanced from the text. Jurgen assigns the myths their insignificance, portraying them as eminently ridiculous (as he says, they seem only to be indulged in "making the most of life all over the place" (166)) and stripping them of all possible authority as either myths *or* characters.

Reality in *Jurgen*, it would seem, lies in the imperfect element carried by mythic figures, as opposed to the myths themselves. In the case of Guenevere, her value lies in the inconsistency she shows to her mythic character; the Hell of *Jurgen* is obviously not a character, but it exists as something created by men who feel they require punishment, rather

than by a vengeful God. It is in this discrepancy between mythic expectations and actual experience that the lessons offered by the figures (as elements of satire) are based. Anaïtis and the other figures populating Cogaïne (Aesred, Priapos, and the Ephesian Diana, among many others) are myths themselves, and are consistent to themselves; thus, they have little value for *Jurgen*. This is the central tenet of the understanding of myth displayed in *Jurgen*: myth is not valuable in itself, or for anything it reveals about the transcendence of mankind; rather, its value lies only in the hidden things it can reveal about man: his dishonesty, his conceit, his pettiness.

After Jurgen spends two months in Cogaïne as Anaïtis' consort, she begins to fear that Jurgen's time with her will be short.

For in becoming the consort of a nature myth connected with the Moon Jurgen had of course exposed himself to the danger of being converted into a solar legend by the Philologists, and in that event would be compelled to leave Cogaïne with the Equinox, to enter into autumnal exploits elsewhere.  
(180)

Anaïtis' fear is that Jurgen will be forced to leave because of his obligations as a newly created myth. Jurgen, though, already has an eye toward leaving Cogaïne, where he is not quite happy. His motive for visiting the Master Philologist is to prevent the loss of his humanity, his abstraction into myth, and the co-option of his free will. Myth is, for Cabell, something *less* than human: not something ideal, or to be lived up to, at all.

Many critics (Davis and Tarrant included), as I have pointed out, have claimed that Cabell is using myth in such a way as to provide a structure for the delivering of some universal theme or another, but my point is that the construction of a mythic frame and,

indeed, of a new mythos, combined with the intersection of myth and satire, tends to subvert any possible universality. Cabell subverts every myth he touches in *Jurgen*. Heaven is based on Jurgen's grandmother's notion of what Heaven should be, and Jurgen meets himself there, existing as his Grandmother's idealized vision of himself. Hell just gives "sinners" what they demand, rather than truly punishing them for their sins. In Leuke, a realm equivalent to ancient Greece, Jurgen finds mythic figures bound solely by conventions--as if by the conventions of their very myths. And the Creator is simply trying his best to give people what he thinks they want, and often failing miserably in his understanding. We are never allowed to take any myth seriously. In *Cocaigne*, we even find Jurgen explicitly ridiculing myths:

But to get back to the congenial task of criticizing your kindred, your cousin Apis [a bull-god of the Ancient Egyptians], for example may be a very good sort of fellow: but, say what you will, it is ill-advised of him to be going about in public with a bull's head. It makes him needlessly conspicuous, if not actually ridiculous: and it puts me out when I try to talk to him. (167)

Authors that have employed myth heavily--both before and since Cabell--tend to take it quite seriously, so that we have Matthew Arnold using myth to discuss aesthetics and the changing character of man in *Empedocles on Etna*, and D.H. Lawrence using it to meditate on human nature and thought. Such writers always use myth as an authority, something to lend weight and context to their arguments, and understand it to be truth in symbolic form. Cabell, on the other hand, consistently *strips* myth of all authority, casts it as something which can *obscure* truth, and forces his reader to constantly revise his understanding of what myth is and does.

In *Straws and Prayer-Books*, Cabell acknowledges the recurring power of myth to

captivate the minds of artists, yet points out the difficulty in explaining why.

For these great myths have ... some common and not readily definable power which resistlessly makes captive the dreams of men of all conditions and faiths and degrees of intelligence. I can remember puzzling a long while over what conceivable feature these so divergent stories could be said to have in common; since some shared trait must be, I reasoned, the explanation of their virtually uniform allure. And these myths baffled me. Their might seemed not wholly explainable.

I could not see that these old stories had anything whatever in common; and even if in the ageless fables some shared feature were discovered, that would hardly explain the unvarying strange sequel. It would not explain the emergence from the "story" of a figure which, the story done with, and all its incidents put behind, continued to live on in other stories, and continued through generation after generation to have quite fresh adventures. (107-8)

Why, Cabell asks, should myths live on, continually recreated in the works of such disparate writers as Euripides, Goethe, Charles Kingsley, Flaubert, and Hawthorne? Cabell is certainly unable to find any single link even among all the myths concerning a given figure, such as Andromeda or the Wandering Jew, other than the figures themselves. The Frazerian viewpoint, as I have stated, suggests that myths are shared and reborn across cultural boundaries because they speak of the human condition, the things which unite even modern Americans with aboriginal Africans. Cabell rejects this idea, as the above selection reveals. Whether or not this rejection is well-founded is immaterial for our purposes; it matters only that Cabell perceives no common theme. If anything at all explains the constant recurrence of myth in literature, it is the fact that its significance can never entirely be nailed down, as Cabell goes on to assert.

And this one sometimes guesses to be--perhaps--the pith of ... myths' durability, that the felt symbolism admits of no final interpreting. Each generation finds for Andromeda a different monster and another rescuer;

continuously romance and irony endeavor to contrive new riddles for the Sphinx; whereas the Wandering Jew ... has had put to his account, at various times, the embodying of such disparate pests as thunderstorms and gypsies and Asiatic cholera. (105)

The attraction of myth, according to Cabell, is certainly not due to any single thing which a myth can reveal about mankind; in fact, the only universal truth its recurrence in literature reveals is that man is extremely fond of myth. If, as Cabell states, the symbolism of myth "admits of no final interpreting," it is not possible that myth itself can reveal truth about mankind. It is for this reason that Jurgen ridicules the myths in Cogaingne: myth has no value in itself, it carries no universal truth. Cabell's use of myth in *Jurgen* is therefore subversive. By holding myth up to itself in the form of his characters, Cabell reveals the inadequacies of both myth and man. Myth is, in *Jurgen*, not an ideal, but a sort of dark mirror, useful chiefly for revealing imperfections.

Myth, as I have stated, is seen by Cabell to be something explicitly created by man, rather than spontaneously arising, in the Frazerian sense, from man's collective unconscious. Moreover, the creation of myths is not natural to man, as we can see in the passage regarding Jurgen's potential transformation into a solar myth. Quite the opposite: myth, in *Jurgen*, is the creation and arbitration of the Master Philologist--a scholar, the most civilized (or least natural) of men, one whose world is bound solely by words and ideas, rather than by experience, as is the case with Jurgen. For Cabell, myths rise from the ability and desire of men--and not the *natural* men to whom Frazer ascribes the creation of myth-- to obscure truth with symbolic forms. Cabell is quite adamant that myth, at least as it is discussed by

scholars and recycled by writers, is in no way primitive or natural. Quite the opposite: myth is an eminently civilized endeavor.

It is here, in his understanding of the myth-making process, as well as in his subverting of myth, that Cabell is so ahead of his time. In a literary world bound by Sir James Frazer and his eventual disciple-reviser, Joseph Campbell, not to mention Jung and Freud, it was more than fifty years after the publication of *Jurgen* that Rene Girard put forth the first scholarly work, *Violence et le Sacre* (1972), which I know to have questioned the premise that myths arise from some universal human faculty for dreaming the truth. There has not been enough made of this fact. Cabell himself points out in *Let Me Lie* that he recognized that the Old South was a product of a myth-making process (157-58). But, assigning this recognition and the oddity of Cabell's satiric use of myth to Cabell's urbanity, critics seem entirely to have missed what I find to be the most interesting aspect of his work.

Cabell's understanding of the process of myth-making was probably born in his youth, as he listened to his elders' stories of the Old South and the War Between the States. If the South was England, and Confederate officers were Arthurian knights, then Richmond was the Old South's Camelot. Members of Cabell's family who had been alive during the Civil War were important people in the capital of the Confederacy; the myth of the Old South concerned them closely, if not implicitly. They had a vested interest in creating and maintaining a system of myths which would justify their participation in a losing war, as well as palliating that loss. As Cabell grew older, he began to notice that the public rhetoric of his family concerning the Old South was quite different from the talk in which they engaged one another day to day.

You noticed that your elders did not speak in the same way when they were just talking to one another in your father's drugstore, or in your mother's dining-room at Sunday night supper....

Your elders, in brief, were not mad with the armies and the leaders of the armies that had invaded and seized upon the fair kingdom which really and truly belonged to General Robert E. Lee. They just kind of made fun of them....

But that did not last for more than a little while. Pretty soon they would go back to talking, almost as if they were sitting in church instead of right here in your grandfather's back parlor, about what a fine place all the South used to be, and Virginia in particular. (*Let Me Lie* 148, 157-58)

Edgar MacDonald notes in his biography of Cabell that, even as a boy, Cabell had begun to realize the discrepancy between his elders' stories and the fact of modern Richmond.

It was confusing, the way in which your elders talked about things which no great while before you were born had happened in Richmond. -- Because you lived in Richmond: and Richmond was not like Camelot. Richmond was a modern city, with sidewalks and plumbing and gas lights and horse cars. (*Let Me Lie* 146-47)

The South no more equates with its myth than modern London does with Camelot. What was obvious to Cabell, however, did not seem to be recognized by those around him. When his elders lapsed from reverence of the South, it was quickly restored, and the discrepancy between the irreverence and worship was no more acknowledged out loud than was the discrepancy between mythic and modern Richmond. Cabell clearly recognized that myth is not something that springs from primitive man's need to explain the world around him; nor does it arise from common archetypes embedded in men's minds. It sometimes arises, for Cabell, from the need to mask the sins and disappointments of existence in beauty and grandeur. Myth is, for Cabell, fundamentally dishonest.

If we return here to *Straws and Prayer-Books*, this matter may become still more clear. In discussing the as-yet unapprehended truth about mythic figures, Cabell brings up the case of Pan. Cabell notes that Pan figures in no myth of marked interest except that of Psyche. Yet, he points out, Pan is among the favorite figures of authors (Matthew Arnold, Edmund Spenser, and D.H. Lawrence come readily to mind as having used Pan extensively in one work or another). Despite Pan's scarcity in myth, guesses about his nature "filled libraries" (110). Noting that Pan never gathered with the Olympic gods, Cabell claims that Pan is "the divine outcast" (110). Not only does he not associate with the Olympians--Pan, in his only appearance in a major myth (that of Psyche), sides against them. Cabell suggests that this might be the very reason for his popularity.

That perhaps was why Pan had become for romanticists the Master. That might be why, when Olympos crumbled, he had set between those ungainly horns the pentagram; had caused this hairy brown body to burgeon with scales and feathers; had given to the most virile of the gods the breasts of a woman; and had kindled in his honor the moons of Chesed and Geburah. The goat god had thus, alone of the Olympians, endured. He endured as Baphomet, as Azazel, as Janicot, as Eblis; as the Master of the Gnostics, the Master of the Sabbath, the Master of the Two Moons. (111)

As the rebelling God, Pan appears in the myths of countless other cultures. He is Satan, Baphomet, and so on. Cabell characterizes Pan as the god who had "looked upon the divine handiwork, and seen that it was not good; or, at any rate, not good enough" (113). Upon looking back at the mythic figures who are constantly reborn in literature, Cabell asserts that "each one of them was a rebel who had gained famousness by warring in one way or another against Heaven" (113). Understandably, to Cabell's mind, this would make them irresistible



to the creative writer. Myth, he claims, exists to glorify the rebel--it is based on impiety. Whether or not this conclusion is valid is of no concern to us; it matters only that what Cabell saw shrouded in the grand trappings of myth was impiety, and that he implies a characterization of myth as dishonest.

The character of Jurgen is also significant with regards to myth as impiety and rebellion, as well as to the dishonesty of myth. Edgar MacDonald wrote an article titled "Cabell's Hero: Cosmic Rebel" which obviously examines several of Cabell's heroes (including Jurgen) as rebels. Though it does not precisely deal with myth, MacDonald's article is useful at least to demonstrate that Jurgen may be considered a rebel. Consider the nature of Jurgen's quest: he is seeking his wife, taken away from him by Koshchei, the creator of all, who assumed Jurgen wished to be rid of her. In other words, Jurgen is attempting to rectify the Creator's mistake. As he visits each successive land, Jurgen rejects the demands they make upon him, and, in fact, at one point, even replaces God on the throne of Heaven. Clearly, Jurgen is a rebel among rebels, and a case might be made that *Jurgen* is an exercise in myth-making about the ultimate rebel. Yet, interestingly, he also rebels against myth itself. Particularly in Cogaingne and in the presence of the Master Philologist, Jurgen punctures and rejects myth (as well as rejecting mythic status for himself). Though he is, himself, a master liar, Jurgen is never satisfied with half-truth from the world around him and insists on ripping open the veils of appearance to reach what is real. It is for this reason that Jurgen ultimately rejects the three ideal women and returns to Dame Lisa--she represents an honest reality.

Clearly, Cabell's most immediate concern with myth-making regards the Old South. And, given his attention to myth as rebellion, Cabell's concern with the Confederacy seems doubly important. The myths of the Confederacy helped form his childhood, and affected him, more or less, throughout his life in Richmond. The critique of myth-making that exists in *Jurgen* can be read as a critique of the South mythologizing itself. *Jurgen* critiques Southern myth-making by exploring three philosophies and understandings of women and love that are to varying degrees associated with the Old South: the chivalric, the gallant, and the poetic.

Within the medieval chivalric view, life is seen as essentially a religious struggle, in which the goal is to prove oneself worthy for another life. God, in the chivalric view, is distant from the Earth, which is rife with evils. The distance of the maker causes man to look to the immediate world for signs of divinity--and particularly to the virtuous woman. The virtuous woman is evidence of God's perfection, so much missing from the world, and the love for woman, as it is practiced in the chivalric life-view, is an earthly figuration of divine love. This looking to woman for divinity is known as *domnei*, or "woman worship," as mentioned above. Clearly, the Old South's view of women may be located largely within the chivalric view. Broadly speaking, the chivalric tradition is pandemic to the Old South's definition of itself; more specifically, Richmond-in-Virginia had a correlation to Camelot during the reign of Arthur, the highest point of chivalry in legend. Southerners like to point out that the chivalric placing of woman on a pedestal is a regrettably lost characteristic of the Old South, or at least, that it is being stamped out; "Chivalry," the Southerner likes to say,

"is not dead (yet)."

The burden placed on women by *domnei* is a heavy one, requiring that they be perfect models of faithfulness, piety, beauty, and chastity. This burden, of course, is not one a modern woman is likely to desire. Cabell himself insisted that women's sex drive (i.e., the drive not to be virtuous) is as strong as men's. Discovering this fact, man might abandon *domnei*, as well as chivalry, in favor of gallantry. The gallant man's faith in the creator and his manifestation on Earth has been shaken, and he realizes that life is short, and no afterlife guaranteed. Thus, though he still practices rituals associated with chivalry (writing poetry about the beloved, exaggerating her virtues, for example), pleasure seeking with many women, as opposed to one, becomes the hallmark of his idea of love. Sex, it is believed, somehow counters the void left when faith disappears; surface becomes totality, rather than the reflection of a higher truth. Like chivalry, gallantry is associated with the Old South. The South is traditionally a warm, damp, sensuous region--particularly the deep South, where Southern myth-making is at its most concentrated--that invites languor and raw sexuality. The charming rake (e.g., Rhett Butler) is a character for whom the South seems to claim a special affinity.

Gallantry is, however, draining. The constant seeking of greater physical pleasure is a demanding task. From gallantry, man might move to the realm of the poetic, which transcends bodily limitations. The poetic view returns to a more spiritual love found in beauty, but this love owes no allegiance to the Creator. Life and beauty are perceived as raw

material for higher, poetic creations. The loved one is poetically perfected; hence, love creates its own spiritual and artistic ideal. The poetic is, perhaps, the least explicitly Southern of these three views, but its relationship to Chivalry, perhaps in the shared model of what was to become, in the Renaissance, Platonic love, which moves upward, toward a higher purpose (whether religious or aesthetic), seems to align it implicitly with the Old South. The romantic ideal of the Southern lover, it would seem, is one who is both elevated by his love, and whose love elevates his world. Though this formulation is admittedly vague and shadowy, I hope it demonstrates that the poetic, as well, may be aligned with the South. These three philosophies--the chivalric, the gallant, and the poetic--and the ramifications they have for the ideal of love are the narrative foci of *Jurgen*.

As *Jurgen*, given back his youth and freedom as a reward for a kind word to the Prince of Darkness, moves through a series of allegorical and mythical worlds in a quest to find his lost shrewish wife, Dame Lisa, he has affairs with many women, including a nymph, a vampiress, several queens, and the ghost of his step-grandmother. Chief among *Jurgen's* interests are Lady Guenevere, Queen Anaitis, and Queen Helen, who represent the ideals of chivalry, gallantry, and poetry, respectively. With each of these women, he indulges in one ideal: a search for the best kind of love.

I have already partially discussed Guenevere, for whose hand *Jurgen* asks Gogyrvan Gawr following his rescue of the damsel from Thragnar. *Jurgen* is refused because Guenevere is promised to Arthur, King of the Britons. Gogyrvan, however, urges *Jurgen* to continue with the affair he has already begun, provided he lies "like a gentleman" (*Jurgen* 90).

Guenevere, as the avatar of chivalric love, represents Faith, and is the symbol of heavenly virtue. Her virtue and beauty are evidence of God's covenant, and her love enacts the chivalric view of life as a sacred trust. She is a Madonna-like creature who must never lose the appearance of perfection because she in effect represents God. Jorgen and Guenevere consummate their love, but she refuses to show affection toward him by light of day because she cannot be seen as less than perfect. Jorgen rejects chivalric love, then, because, despite its claims of substance, it is really concerned with appearance over substance.

Disillusioned by the dishonest need of chivalry to retain a perfection that does not exist, Jorgen runs into the arms of Anaitis--or "Insatia." Anaitis is the advocate of gallant love, and represents Desire. Gallant love is purely physical, and relies on variety of experience. Accordingly, Anaitis introduces Jorgen to a range of new experiences, some of which he finds unpalatable. Gallant love clearly treats life as a plaything. As Anaitis says, "All men that live have but a little while to live, and none knows his fate thereafter. So that man possesses nothing certainly save a brief loan of his own body; and yet the body of man is capable of much curious pleasure" (149). Love, here, is nothing more than physical pleasure, and completely ignores the heart and the mind; the same is true for the gallant life: it consists only in seeking pleasure, wherever it may be found. Jorgen cannot accept so sterile a life-view. The ultimate nihilism of Anaitis' brand of love, combined with its physical rigors, soon drives Jorgen from Anaitis' home in Cogaingne, from whence he travels to Leuke, realm of Queen Helen.

Helen represents the ideal of poetic love, and is perceived by anyone who sees her as the perfected double of their first lost love--perhaps without a blemish on the cheek, or a bony hand. Jurgen sees Helen as the perfected image of his first love, Dorothy. One's first love is always somehow idealized in memory. This is the essence of the poetic view: life and beauty are raw material for the creation of an ideal. Helen is the vision of love, the loved one perfected by the lover to the status of art. But her perfection is also her downfall for Jurgen, for he cannot touch her for fear it will mar her perfection. Given the opportunity to seduce Helen, Jurgen refrains (showing unprecedented self-control) because, as he says,

It may be that this woman has some fault: it may be that there is some fleck in her beauty somewhere. And sooner than know that, I would prefer to retain my unreasonable dreams, and this longing which is unfed and hopeless, and the memory of tonight. Besides, if she were perfect in everything, how could I live any longer, who would have no more to desire? (228-29)

This is at once a nod to Goethe's *Faust*, whose Helen disappears on being touched, and an admission of the inadequacies of poetic love. Poetic love thrives on the creation of illusion, and the illusion prevents real love, because it is itself (and not the beloved woman) the object of love. Poetic love cannot be grasped for fear of destroying the illusion of perfection; thus, it finally raises a barrier between lovers.

Jurgen leaves Leuke and, after further adventures, finds Koshchei, the creator of all, who offers to return Jurgen to any of his three loves forever. Given another view of each, Jurgen rejects Guenevere, Anaitis, and Helen, each in turn. Each of the three ideals they represent is, for Jurgen, ultimately empty. Rather than taking any of the three beauties, Jurgen elects to return to his former life with the shrewish Dame Lisa. Dame Lisa seems to

represent a more fruitful, more mature, (and, interestingly, less libidinous) brand of love than any of the three ideals: a love which might be called realistic as opposed to their idealistic varieties.

After being confronted with his three ideal loves, Jurgen moans,

But in the presence of these famous ones now departed from me forever, with what glowing words I ought to have spoken! upon a wondrous ladder of trophes, metaphors and recondite allusions, to what stylistic heights of Asiatic prose I ought to have ascended! and instead, I twaddled like a schoolmaster. (350)

Of course, Jurgen *is* ascending those heights, but the point is that the "wondrous ladder of trophes" is nothing more than a castle in the air--love has little to do with ideas and ideals, but everything to do with sharing between individuals. And this, Lisa can offer him, while the others cannot. Lisa herself "was always resentful of long words," (353) suggesting that words--ideals--are exactly what is not real. But, even more interestingly, the rhetoric of words here recalls the Master Philologist, who is the master of all words, *as well as the arbiter of myth*. What Jurgen describes above is the myth-making process, glorious in its dishonesty. He has found each of the women, and each of their ideals, to be insufficient. Yet, though he does not give in, Jurgen still feels the impulse to aggrandize and mythologize them--to make them what they are not.

Jurgen's rejection of idealism is Cabell's rejection of the South mythologizing itself. The South could not possibly have embraced all these ideals. Even were they valid, attainable ideals, they are simply at odds with one another. By attempting to subsume them, the South

is merely attempting to become ideal, itself. The ideal South is a myth. Each of these purported ideals of love ultimately sacrifices love in the name of some other thing: appearance, pleasure, or illusion. And in the same way, the South insists on a set of mythologized ideals, to which we are required to sacrifice the South itself. By creating an ideal South that never existed, the South refuses to look forward, to look at itself as it really is. One is reminded of Cabell's elders, granting the South a reverence they knew it didn't deserve or require. Like Jurgen, Cabell rejects myth in favor of reality.

Of course, it is inaccurate to say that Cabell truly rejects myth. If one thing is obvious in his writing, it is that he loves myth, both as a form and as a subject. But what I am suggesting is that he rejects myth as it is commonly understood and employed. He rejects the mythologizing of the Old South because it uses myth in a dishonest way. He rejects the notion that myth appears as a natural consequence of man's universal instincts. He rejects myth as a vehicle of pedagogical authority. He embraces myth, however, when it is destabilized, when it is perceived as a construct. He embraces myth as an artificial structure for his writing. And he embraces the idea that myth reveals our failings in its own failings. Cabell's understanding of myth was at least half a century ahead of its time, and it still lies beyond common perception. It might be noted that I have credited Cabell with what amounts to a deconstruction of myth. If this is true, then perhaps what is truly remarkable is that Cabell was dabbling in postmodernist ideas in 1919, before the modernist movement had even properly begun.



Works Cited

- Allen, Mark. "Enchantment and Delusion: Fantasy in the Biography of Manuel." Inge and MacDonald: (122-30).
- Atteberry, Brian. *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to LeGuin*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980.
- Cabell, James Branch. *Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice*. New York: McBride & Co., 1919.
- . *Let Me Lie*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Co., 1947.
- . *Straws and Prayer-Books*. New York: McBride & Co., 1924.
- . *Preface to the Past*. New York: McBride & Co., 1927.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. New York: Bollingen, 1949.
- Davis, Joe Lee. *James Branch Cabell*. New York: Twayne, 1962.
- Frazer, Sir James George. *The Golden Bough* (Abridged edition). New York: Macmillan, 1922.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977.
- Inge, M.Thomas and Macdonald, Edgar, eds. *James Branch Cabell: Centennial Essays*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1983.
- MacDonald, Edgar. "Cabell's Hero: Cosmic Rebel." *Southern Literary Journal* 2 (1969): 22-42.
- . *James Branch Cabell and Richmond-in-Virginia*. Jackson: Mississippi UP, 1993.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Trans. Walter Kaufman. Random House: New York, 1967: (57-97).
- Riemer, James D. *From Satire to Subversion: The Fantasies of James Branch Cabell*. New York: Greenwood, 1989.
- . "The Innovative Fantasies of James Branch Cabell." *Southern Quarterly* 23:2 (1985): 75-86.
- Tarrant, Desmond. *James Branch Cabell: The Dream and the Reality*. Norman: Oklahoma UP, 1967.