

Frazer's *The Golden Bough*: A Critical Appreciation

“... as I was about to observe when I lost my way in this parenthesis ...”

J.G. Frazer, January 26, 1927¹

There is a lake near Rome known as ‘The Mirror of Diana.’ An ancient volcanic crater, the lake is perfectly round and almost completely enclosed by steep wooded slopes. A heavily numinous landscape still, Lake Nemi and its surrounding forest, in our age, is the property of the Vatican and not accessible to casual tourism. In classical times, there was a sacred grove of Diana at Aricia on the shores of this lake, and in command of this sanctuary was a royal and priestly steward of nature known as the King of the Wood. Sword in hand, this sacred king paces around a sacred oak in a sacred grove by an ancient sacred lake, in the extraordinary opening scenes of Sir James George Frazer’s pioneering study of magic and religion, *The Golden Bough*.

This enormous piece of work, first published in England in 1890 and expanded twenty years later into 12 volumes plus a supplement, is now recognized as “a milestone in the understanding of man’s cultural past, and a profoundly significant contribution to the history of ideas.”² In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer took the vast body of mythical and anthropological material available in his day and constructed an over-all picture of how, at the primitive level, humanity in general thinks and acts, and how that primitive mentality persists even into the modern age. Not only did the book provide a frame of reference for interpreting and understanding the phenomena of particular cultures, both ancient and modern, but Frazer’s work also “helped reveal the full significance of mythology, which otherwise might have remained an airy fancy with no social or psychological relevance to modern humanity.”³

In the intervening hundred years, *The Golden Bough* has had enormous influence on the rapidly expanding fields of anthropology and sociology, as

¹ J. Z. Smith, “When the Bough Breaks,” *History of Religions* (1972), vol. 12, p. 342.

² Theodor H. Gaster, ed., *The New Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. v.

³ John B. Vickery, *The Literary Impact of The Golden Bough* (Princeton UP, 1973), p. 5.

well as the studies of mythology and religion. The book, however, is not without its flaws. Frazer seems to have been willing to present as sober hypotheses even the most outrageous series of assumptions. To his own credit, Frazer predicted, with the Victorian scholar's amazing capacity for detachment, the future destruction of many of his ideas.⁴ This prediction has substantially come true, and so most of this report will take the form of an *appreciative* critique. But first, let us look at *The Golden Bough* itself and review Frazer's main theories of magic and religion in the primitive and ancient world.

According to Frazer, such royal and priestly stewards of nature as the Arician King of the Wood are found among primitive peoples everywhere. As magician and priestly king, chief and war-lord, protector and engineer of human and natural fertility,⁵ he literally incarnated the well-being of the community. As a result, this priest-king had to be kept alive and well at all cost. Over the course of the centuries, savage humanity developed for this sacred and essential purpose, strategies—both actual and symbolic—such as magic, taboo, sacrifice, and the use of scapegoats.⁶

In Frazer's model, magic is based on two major principles. First is *homeopathy*: the idea that 'like produces like.' In accordance with this principle, the priest-king serves also as the bridegroom of a corresponding female deity and mates with her annually to produce fecundity for the people. Such 'sacred marriages' are commonly found in both ancient and primitive cultures. They are a formal expression of the idea that sexual intercourse promotes vegetation—an belief which also inspires the orgiastic practices characteristic of primitive seasonal festivals.

As the embodiment of the spirit of fertility, the priestly king is a human god, and special care has to be taken to prevent any impairment of his 'soul' or vital essence. The 'soul' of all human beings, it is believed, can quit the body temporarily in moments of sleep, sickness, or stress; grow enfeebled through old age; or be deliberately (even accidentally) extracted by

⁴ Vickery, p. 13.

⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski, "Sir James George Frazer: A Biographical Appreciation," *A Scientific Theory of Culture* (North Carolina UP, 1944), p. 195.

⁶Robert Ackerman, "Frazer, James G," *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. IV, p. 415.

malevolence (or incompetence). Accordingly, all primitive people are subjected to a more or less elaborate system of *taboo*, by which such calamity is supposedly prevented. These systems of taboos are based on the second principle of magic, *contagion*: the idea that things or persons which have once been in contact can for ever after have an influence on each other. The priestly king, by virtue of the superior importance of his ‘soul,’ is subjected to these taboos to an increased degree.

If, however, despite all precautions, the priestly king of savage society *does* show signs of bodily defect, blemish, or disease, he has to be deposed or put to death while he is still hale and hearty, in order that the divine spirit which he has inherited from his predecessors can be transmitted to his successor while it is still in full vigour and has not yet been impaired.⁷ It is often the custom among primitive peoples to slay or depose the king in any case after a fixed term. This explains the institution of seven-, eight- or nine-year kingships often attested in antiquity (e.g., Minos of Crete) and a survival may be seen in the annual election of mock sovereigns, like the Kings and Queens of the May, in European folklore.

The removal of the old and decrepit king has to be accompanied by the riddance of all noxious elements that might impair the continued life and prosperity of his people. To accomplish this, such influences are often saddled upon a *scapegoat* (animal or human) which is then killed or driven out of the community. Between the removal of the old king and the installation of the new, normal life is in a state of suspension. This is represented in popular custom by a *period of license* in which the normal order of society is halted or deliberately inverted, and a slave, misshapen person, or condemned felon is allowed temporarily to exercise sovereignty. The Roman Saturnalia is evidently a relic of this institution, as is also the European Feast of Fools, with its Lord of Misrule, Abbot of Unreason, and the like.

The concept of priestly king as the dying and reviving embodiment of fertility appears not only in ritual and popular custom, but also in mythology. Examples of this are found in the classical myths of Attis, Adonis, Osiris, Dionysos, and the Scandinavian myth of Balder, “all of whom Frazer understands as divine protagonists in the same, ubiquitous,

⁷ Vickery, p. 51.

recurrent vegetational drama.”⁸ This explains why Frazer’s priestly king at Lake Nemi carries a sword. In the tradition of sacred kingships everywhere, succession to the priesthood at Aricia could be won only by a person who managed to slay the ‘reigning’ incumbent in single combat. In order to qualify for this sacred if savage task, and to ensure proper transmission of the indwelling spirit of fertility, every aspirant to the office of King of the Wood had first to pluck a *golden bough* or sprig which grew high up on a sacred tree. Frazer identifies this bough or sprig, with its numinous allusion to Aeneas at the gates of the underworld, as the parasitic *mistletoe*, which is credited in European folklore with all manner of magical properties.

With its ubiquitous recurrence of oak trees and mistletoe, maternal goddesses and seasonal slaughter, sacred kings and dying gods; with its universal usage of magic (both homeopathic and contagious), sacrifice, taboos, and scapegoats; the circle is closed and Frazer’s labyrinthine system of primitive and classical magic and religion is complete. But any summary of Frazer’s argument gives little idea of how it actually feels to read *The Golden Bough*. A modern reader is struck by the great (and in the 12 volume edition absolutely mind-numbing) mass of ‘evidence’—whose relationship to the matter being argued is frequently anything but evident. One reason for such a profusion of data is Frazer’s unbridled willingness to digress. Another is the oceanic nature of the subject material, in which virtually any topic, as in a dream, may turn into any other.

His original Victorian readers, however, were quite untroubled by these failings. Frazer’s predecessors included F. Max Müller, a professor of Sanskrit at Oxford, who believed myths to be the result a linguistic breakdown that had occurred since the collapse of a pre-literate Golden Age. His theories were avidly opposed by Andrew Lang, a classic scholar and a brilliant wit. But by 1890, after a generation of controversy between Lang and Müller, most readers were weary of arguments about changes that may or may not have occurred millennia ago in the reconstructed languages that might have been spoken by the Indo-Europeans. On the other hand, everyone recognized the lore of everyday life, whether in the exotic colonies or at home in Britain among the lower classes. Everyone could understand

⁸ Ackerman, p. 415.

the importance of the fertility of the natural world and the anxieties that primitive humanity might have entertained about it.⁹

Frazer also possessed an enormous talent for physical description, and with his complex and almost Biblical rhythms and phrasing, he succeeded in maintaining an entertaining pace while engaged in seemingly endless summarization of extremely prosaic material.¹⁰ In fact, *The Golden Bough's* importance is really as much literary as scholarly, and from a purely literary point of view, it is certainly one of the most influential works in the twentieth century. At one end of the spectrum is its well-known importance to works like *The Waste Land* and *Finnegans Wake*. And at the other extreme is its mostly unrecognized effect on serious minor fiction: the novels of Mary Renault and “even Raymond Chandler detective stories.”¹¹ The book provided a unique opportunity for writers like Yeats to have a committed encounter with sacred reality, and for those like Conrad and Eliot to experience in its pages a full-scale confrontation with the primordial forces of evil. Under the influence of Frazer, mythology greatly broadened its significance to literature from what had been a source of predominantly ornamentative beauty to “a dynamic illumination of the wellsprings of the human imagination.”¹²

In addition, no other work in the field of anthropology has contributed so much to the psychological climate of our own times. Indeed, what Freud and the psychoanalytic school did for the individual, Frazer did for civilization as a whole. Just as psychology gave us a better understanding of the behavior of the individual by recognizing the ruder world of the unconscious, where so much of our behaviour originates, so Frazer “enlarged our understanding of the behavior of societies by laying bare the primitive concepts and traditional folk customs which, as a subliminal element of culture, underlie so many of our institutions.”¹³

⁹ Robert Ackerman, *J.B. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge UP, 1987), p. 100.

¹⁰ Vickery, p. 32.

¹¹ Vickery, p. 3.

¹² Vickery, p. 36.

¹³ Gaster, pp. xix-xx.

Clearly, *The Golden Bough* has now become part of the basis of modern culture, so much so that many educated people who, often casually, employ its arguments are unaware of their origins.¹⁴ However, in spite of the literary value and cultural impact of his work, it is important to remember that Frazer thought of himself, like Darwin and Freud, as a scientist, as one for whom truth and fact were not only accessible values, but the ultimate values.¹⁵ Unfortunately, as a scientific work, the book is seriously flawed. Since the completion of *The Golden Bough*, our knowledge of primitive thought, folklore, and religion has been broadly systematized and vastly increased. Many of Frazer's basic premises have been shaken by the findings of modern scholarship, and the reliability of his sources—many of them the unscientific observations of missionaries and travelers—has been seriously impeached.¹⁶

This is not to say that Frazer was a dishonest scholar or an incompetent scientist. "His unwavering empirical sense often led him, after he had painstakingly formulated a theory, to scour ethnographic literature and to extract from it evidence which often completely annihilates his own assumptions."¹⁷ But Frazer clearly began and ended his work with the substantially unquestioned belief that man moves progressively from barbarism and savagery to a civilized culture, that the evolution of religion—and society in general—is basically the same everywhere in the world, and that the human mind operates in accordance with fixed laws. He believed, along with Lewis Henry Morgan, that the customs and convictions of humanity can be arranged in chronological order; and he made continuous use of the evolutionary anthropology of Edward B. Tylor, which held that human nature and development are relatively homogeneous and that variants from the norm of a particular evolutionary stage are to be explained as survivals from an earlier state.¹⁸ As a result of his adherence to these superficial interpretations of evolutionary theory, none of which remained in currency past the middle of our century, Frazer seems himself to be a relic of a habit of thought that, if not exactly primitive, then is at

¹⁴ Ackerman, "Frazer," p. 415.

¹⁵ Vickery, p. 6.

¹⁶ Gaster, p. v.

¹⁷ Malinowski, p. 185.

¹⁸ Vickery, p. 24.

least of long ago and far away. He seems to us “a victim, finally, of his mountains of data, an unfortunate example of the ‘armchair school’ of anthropology that was swept away by the advent of fieldwork.”¹⁹

Nowhere are the flaws in Frazer’s system more apparent than in his most central thesis concerning the connection between savage custom and classical myth: the *leitmotif* of the Golden Bough itself. Frazer’s opening description of the sacred grove on Lake Nemi and its warrior-priest has become justly famous as a masterful example of Victorian romantic nature prose-poetry. But far more than half of those 466 words of purple prose is derived entirely from Frazer’s imagination. His sole reference for this lengthy description is Strabo’s *Geography* V.3.12, which itself is a model of verbal economy, consisting of only seventeen words in the Greek original: ‘He is appointed priest who, being a runaway slave, has managed to murder the man who was priest before him; he is always armed with a sword, keeping watch against attacks and ready to ward them off.’ The motifs of the tree, the sacred kingship of the priest, and even the golden bough itself, are not even hinted at in Strabo.²⁰ Modern scholars now believe that the sanctuary at Aricia was probably no more than an asylum for runaway slaves; and the golden bough, “far from being a vessel of divine power or identical with that carried by Aeneas on his journey to the underworld, was in all likelihood simply the branch characteristically borne in antiquity by suppliants at a shrine.”²¹

The equation of the golden bough of Virgil with the branch at Lake Nemi, and its further identification as mistletoe, serves as *the* connecting link between all of the various elements in Frazer’s theory.²² It is an all-too-central assumption in the work. But even a casual reading of Book 6 of the *Aeneid* clearly shows that Virgil’s magical bough is said to be ‘like mistletoe’ in its golden appearance, so it is unlikely that the branch itself was actually mistletoe, for what classical poet ever compared a thing to itself? In Icelandic mythology, Balder is slain with a shaft of *mistilteinn*, which is alternately described in the text of the saga as being “pulled up” rather than down, as mistletoe would be from a tree, “a tall branch of fate,”

¹⁹ Ackerman, “Frazer,” p. 416.

²⁰ Smith, pp. 347-48.

²¹ Gaster, p. xvi.

²² Smith, p. 355.

“a branch that seemed so slender,” etc. Mistletoe has none of these characteristics, and furthermore does not grow in Iceland, so whatever slays Baldur—if it is a plant—it is certainly something more reed-, spear-, or arrow-like than mistletoe. More likely what is being referred to is the name of a specific weapon: “...in several sagas and one poetic gloss, *mistilteinn* occurs as a sword name.”²³ In the words of J. Z. Smith, one of Frazer’s modern critics, “With the collapse of this hypothesis one is tempted to write ‘balderdash,’ but, alas, the word has nothing to do with the Norse deity...”²⁴

One of the major themes of *The Golden Bough* is the suggestion that primitive as well as classical deities were primarily vegetative spirits rather than solar gods.²⁵ Frazer’s discussion of the beliefs and behavior of the ancient Greeks and Romans, detailing the ways in which life and thought in classical antiquity strongly resembled that of the primitives and savages, may have appealed to his cultured readers who were just beginning to feel a little uneasy about the superior literary value of classical mythology.²⁶ But it is now no longer accepted that the ‘dying and reviving gods of ancient religion,’ i.e., such figures as Adonis, Attis, and Osiris, merely personify vegetation. (Andrew Lang called this ‘the Covent Garden school of mythology,’ in allusion to London’s well-known fruit market.) Now they are rather considered as embodiments of ‘providence’ in general. The myths and rituals associated with these classical deities are thus no mere allegories of sowing and reaping, but account for the rhythm of nature by furnishing reasons why that providence is periodically withdrawn or absent. In the particular case of Osiris, for example, his character as a god of vegetation is not, in fact, original, but entirely secondary, being a later accretion.²⁷

Furthermore, Frazer’s thinking became involved in a complex web of contradictions as a result of the strain that aesthetic idealism had placed on 19th century thought. The most notable example of this is found in *The Golden Bough*’s circumspect and dispassionate catering (one might even say ‘pandering’) to “the fascination with the interrelationship of pain, love,

²³ Smith, pp. 359-66.

²⁴ Smith, p. 369.

²⁵ Vickery, p. 67.

²⁶ Ackerman, “Frazer,” p. 415.

²⁷ Gaster, p. xvii.

and death that polite Victorian society had for so long tabooed.”²⁸ Frazer was a follower of John F. McLennen, who died in 1881, but who had developed in the middle of the century two topics that served to pervade (and distort) the study of religion through the 1920’s: exogamy and totemism.²⁹ Morgan and J. J. Bachofen, along with McLennen, postulated a primitive world that was the diametric opposite of their own Victorian society—with its deep-lying obsessions with sexuality, private property, and social class. Under their influence, Frazer blandly assumed as a given that his primitives must be universally promiscuous, non-monogamous, incestuous, and matrilineal. “With an almost salaciously maternal attitude of concern, he delighted in their pranks and pleasures, while regretting their naughtiness.”³⁰ “Unfortunately he does not show us how marriage develops out of this original state.”³¹

Even more unfortunately, he widely popularized the armchair theories of these philosophical anthropologists, many of which were already being discredited in his own time, ‘re-popularizing’ some of their typically Victorian theories of savage sexuality and the nature of primitive family structure, which—subsequent to the publication of *The Golden Bough*—enjoyed a resurgence of credibility and began appearing in equally popular works by Engels and others (including Freud) before the turn of the century. They contributed to the anthropological calamity of Margret Mead’s theories in the 1930’s, were further repopularized in the 1950’s works of Robert Graves, and continue to resurface as unquestionable givens in the popular ‘anthropological’ fiction and ‘Golden Age’ polemic writings of today. This latter is particularly ironic in that Frazer was clearly opposed to the Neo-Rousseau Golden Age theories of his own day as represented by Müller, Bishop Whatley, and others.

Even more ironic was Frazer’s reaction to Freud. He rejected psychoanalysis and could never be persuaded to read anything by Freud or his school, “in spite of the fact that Freud’s anthropological contributions

²⁸ Vickery, p. 34.

²⁹ Ackerman, “Frazer,” p. 80.

³⁰ Malinowski, p. 186.

³¹ Malinowski, p. 194.

are clearly based on Frazer's writings."³² It is interesting to note that one of the major differences between the theories of Freud and those of Jung is based on the fact that Jung took it on himself to do his own ethno-mythological research, and came as a result to dramatically different conclusions than had Freud in his reliance on Frazer's material.

Frazer believed that Magic and Religion stand in genealogical succession, that Religion is due to a refinement of the more primitive 'magical' mentality. According to Frazer, only in the very earliest stage of human development did magic exist by itself as the simplest possible exercise of mental powers, specifically, the confused and mistaken association of ideas. When its practical inadequacy as a means of coercing nature was discovered, then the general cultural shift from magic to religion occurred.³³ His effort to trace universal Ages of Magic, Religion, and Science led Frazer to believe in a rigid, uniform progression from magic through religion to a positive science as the pathway toward understanding that humanity was in fact in the process of following.³⁴ "While early man moves historically from a society founded on the hunt through a pastoral order to an agricultural state, he also progresses from a psychological state controlled by magic to one under the sway of religion, and finally to a scientific view of life."³⁵

The polemical subtext of *The Golden Bough* becomes more apparent to the modern reader when Frazer begins to align magic with science in basic outlook. According to Frazer, both magic and science view the world as rigid and invariable and founded on impersonal laws, the knowledge of which permits us to gratify our wishes in any respect. Religion, on the other hand, is in Frazer's mind opposed in principle to both. Religion regards the world as elastic or variable, capable of being altered by the superhuman powers that created it. Frazer believed that the deep-seated hostility between priest and magician that he postulated in antiquity was the forerunner to an equally deep-seated hostility between priest and scientist that occurs later in human history. The basic premise of *The Golden Bough* relies on a belief in the essentially magical character of primitive outlook and primitive

³² Malinowski, p. 182.

³³ Vickery, p. 43.

³⁴ Ackerman, "Frazer," p. 416.

³⁵ Vickery, p. 67.

behavior. Yet, according to Bronislaw Malinowski, throughout Frazer's voluminous presentation of factual material, he unintentionally confirms—not his untenable theory of magic as a misapplied principle of association, nor even his evolutionary theory of three stages—but the sound and (to a modern reader) correct view that “science, magic, and religion have always controlled different phases of human behavior.”³⁶ The real difference between magic and religion is to be found first in the subject matter. “Religion refers to the fundamental issues of human existence, while magic always turns round specific, concrete, and detailed problems.”³⁷ Whereas science is embodied in technology, based on observation and contained in systems of knowledge, magical systems are *revealed*, not through observation and experience, but in mythological miracles. Religion, on the other hand, takes the eminently practical form of public or private ceremonial, prayer, sacrifice and sacrament. “In all this we find that evolution, as a metamorphosis of one type of belief or activity into an entirely different one, is not acceptable.”³⁸

By using (we would now say ‘misusing’) the evolutionary point of view, which focused on lower or less developed forms of nature, *The Golden Bough* could trace sophisticated religious concepts such as incarnation and immortality to primitive mimetic rituals and misconceptions about natural phenomena—both of which were based, according to Frazer, on a faulty psychology of association—and thus provide the explanation for current modes of belief. Frazer never mentions the name of Jesus, but only the slowest of his readers could have failed to make the comparison between the pagan rites—that result from an imperfect (because irrational) understanding of the universe—and contemporary Christianity. Basically, Frazer employed the ‘objective,’ scientific comparative method as a weapon “to finally dispatch Christianity specifically, and religion in general, as an outworn relic of misunderstanding, credulity, and superstition.”³⁹ If Christianity derives from primitive fertility or vegetative cults in which the

³⁶ Malinowski, p. 197.

³⁷ Malinowski, p. 200.

³⁸ Malinowski, p. 201.

³⁹ Ackerman, p. 416.

dying and reviving god is central, then “the uniqueness of Christianity is dissolved in its emergence from primitive fertility cults.”⁴⁰

Frazer intended with his evolutionary methods and voluminous material to free humanity from the clutches of Religion and to allow the universal acceptance and unfettered advance of the obviously (to his mind) superior model of Science. Yet it is Frazer’s elaboration of mythological material, along with the more recent work of anthropological scientists and scholarly mythologists—which he more than partially inspired—that has led to our modern reevaluation of religion, even of magic, as a positive and creative cultural force, the very study of which promises to not only enhance our potential to become more expressive and creative beings, but to enable us (just possibly) to bring the fearsome run-away results of a century of uncontrolled scientific inquiry under some kind of enlightened and ethical control, and thus ensure (hopefully) the continuation of the very life of the planet. I believe that we owe to Frazer the honour of making elaborate use, not of his naive theories, but of his enormous volumes of information—by essentially not throwing out the timeless baby of mythology with the muddied Victorian bath water.

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⁴⁰ Vickery, p. 67.

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