

THE STORK FABLE—  
SOME PSYCHODYNAMIC  
CONSIDERATIONS

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ONE OF THE MOST URGENT QUESTIONS that preoccupy little children is the enigma of where babies come from. Freud (1907) stated that the origin of babies "is the oldest and most burning question that confronts immature humanity" (p. 135). The stork fable has long served as an explanation for this riddle in the Western World. For centuries, children have been told by their parents that their new brother or sister was brought by the stork. Because of the revolutionary changes in child-rearing practices in the past generation, and especially with the franker and biologically more correct explanations of conception and birth given to children, the use of the stork fable has been gradually declining. Yet it is still almost universally known at all levels of our culture. Our attachment to this fanciful notion is attested to by the widespread use of the symbol of the stork on commercial enterprises (diaper services and the like), in baby announcements, and in cartoons—particularly at the time of the new year. There must be a variety of reasons for both the widespread diffusion and persistence of this myth.

Freud made several references to the stork fable which hint at the significance of this story. He made several comments about a child's use of the stork fable in the case of Little Hans (1909). In his study of Leonardo (1910) he referred to, ". . . the fable of the stork with its wealth of mythological meaning" (pp. 78-79), and in

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*The Future of an Illusion* (1927), he states, "Here, too, we are telling the truth in symbolic clothing, for we know what the large bird signifies" (p. 44). Sterba (1944) referred to the stork fable in his study of Christmas. Rank (1911 and 1914) has also commented on it briefly.

To the best of our knowledge, there has not been a scientific study primarily devoted to an investigation of this fable. Therefore, it will be our aim in this paper to examine various aspects of the stork myth (fable variations and antecedent myths) and particularly to investigate its psychological dimensions.

### *Distribution, Origins, and Variations*

The stork fable is known throughout the world. It is one of the most popular myths about the origin of children in Europe and the United States. A large percentage of middle-aged to elderly Americans were told this fable in their childhood. One of the writers of this paper recently interviewed a lower-middle class patient in her late thirties who believed in the stork myth up to the time of her first pregnancy at age 15! It is interesting to note that the stork fable has found wide acceptance even in countries, such as the United States, in which the white stork is not native and can be seen only in zoos. The fable is also well known in South American countries and in some countries in the Far East (e.g., the Philippine Islands).

The origins of the myth can be traced back to the days of antiquity. The stork was dedicated to Juno by the Romans (Cirlot, 1962). Juno, a Mother Goddess in the Roman Pantheon of gods, was the goddess of fertility and protector of women. Women who were barren prayed to her. Grimm (1883), in discussing the origin of a German word for stork, *adebar*, states that it reaches back to heathen times. He concludes that the choice of meanings of the stem words is either "luck-bringer" or "child-bringer." In the 16th century, the stork is described as playing a maternal role in caring for the Christ child by feathering Jesus's manger with feathers plucked from her breast. Christ responds to the stork's kindness by pronouncing that "she" henceforth will be "called the blessed bird, and friend to babies all."

She found him in a maungier stalle  
with that most Holy Mayde.  
The gentle storke she wept to see  
the Lord so rudely layde.

Then from her panting breast she plucked  
the feathers white and warm.  
She strewed them in the maungier bed  
to keep the Lord from harm.

“Nowe blessed be the gentle storke  
for evermore,” quoth He,  
For that she saw my sadde estate  
and showed such pity.

Full welcome shall she ever be  
in hamlet and in halle,  
and called henceforth the blessed bird,  
and friend to babies all.<sup>1</sup>

It cannot be determined exactly when the popular fable assumed its present form; but it is probably at least several hundred years old.

In the most popular variations of the legend, the stork brings the new infant in a diaper clasped in its beak to the mother; or the infant might be carried in a basket directly on the stork's back or in its beak. It is either delivered directly to the mother or dropped down the chimney. The stork is said to have found the infant in a marsh, spring, well, or cave. The cave is often a mountain cave filled with *adebarsteine*, i.e., “stork stones.” Upon delivery, the stork is often described as also biting the mother on her leg with its beak. The general legend seems to involve a single bird with basically maternal characteristics, but the sex of the mythical stork is variable.

Leach (1950) and the World Book Encyclopedia (1962), portray the stork of popular legends in the most charitable light. The storks are known for their warm parental care, marital fidelity, filial concern, and longevity. In addition, they are regarded as the harbingers of spring and the bringers of good luck. Storks are said

<sup>1</sup> From the flyleaf of a 16th-century Prayer Book. The above inscription is on a Christmas card issued by the Looart Press of Colorado Springs.

to be extremely devoted parents. Their offspring remain very attached to them and, in turn, take care of them when they are aged and infirm. Their family life is characterized by connubial bliss. The faithful couple return to the same nest each spring, after spending the winter months in a warmer climate. If one spouse dies, the other will remain single out of loyalty to the deceased stork-spouse. Adultery is unknown to the faithful couple. Seemingly as a reward for their righteous life and as a consequence of living the "good life," the stork is said to live to the ripe old age of 70 (Biblical three-score-and-ten years). These positive attributes were apparently responsible for the Hebrew term for stork, *chasidah*, which means "kind" or "merciful" one. The word *chasidah* has been in the Hebrew language since Biblical days, thus attesting again to the ancient roots of the stork legend.

Because of their positive attributes and because they are associated with good fortune, storks have been protected by law in many parts of Europe. In Germany and Holland, storks have been encouraged to build their nests on rooftops or on high platforms especially constructed for this purpose. It was believed that a stork's nest would guarantee offspring to the householder, as well as good luck in general. Sweets were sometimes left on window sills to let the stork know that a child was desired. It was further believed that one would have as many children as the stork. In addition, a mother would promise to ask the stork for a baby brother or sister, according to her children's wishes.

It is not commonly known, however, that there exists a rich folklore about negative characteristics of the stork. The inexplicable peck on the leg of the awaiting mother (which can send her to bed for weeks, according to some versions) is only a hint at the dark mythic underground of this supposedly benign bird.<sup>2</sup> The stork is held responsible for all maimed or stillborn infants. It is thought that she dropped them en route to delivery. It is sometimes said that a crippled infant is brought by the stork in punishment and revenge to those who formerly tormented or taunted

<sup>2</sup> Rank (1911) states that children in his day who questioned why mother was bedridden around the time of childbirth were told that mother has been bitten (*gebissen*) by the stork. The German word *gebissen* has both more human connotations and expresses a more sadistic intent than the English, to peck.

her. The stork is described in some legends as being, in fact, a harbinger of ill luck. If she flies over a crowd, one in the crowd will soon die (Bächtold-Stäubli, 1937). It is also said that where the stork nests, one of the family or a head of cattle dies (Hastings, 1951).

Far from being the model parent, the stork is, in this folklore tradition, described as rejecting its young. A Danish belief (Feilberg, 1896-1908) says that every second year the stork throws one of its young out of the nest and on every second year throws an egg down. This ambivalence to the stork's young is expressed in a 16th-century text (Lyly, 1580): "Ladies use their lovers as the stork doth her young ones who pecketh them to death til they bleed with her bill and then healeth them with her tongue" (p. 349). The sadistic trend in the stork folklore is also present in descriptions of the stork's tribunal, described by Pliny (1940). At these gatherings, the storks peck to death those birds who are sick and too weak to make the journey southward for the winter, as well as those females found guilty of adultery.

These few samplings of a voluminous folklore literature reveal that the stork can be described as being the opposite of a loyal spouse and kind, loving parent. Perhaps the following Polish folktale expresses a more balanced (and more humanlike) image of the stork (Dähnhardt, 1907): Both God and the Devil created the stork. God gave the stork white wings, while the Devil gave it black ones. The tale ends with a statement that this is not an exclusively benign bird because within it both good and evil impulses reside.

### *Ornithological Data*

Perhaps at this point it would be interesting to consider what ornithologists have written about storks (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911; Haverschmidt, 1949; Lorenz, 1967; *Encyclopedia Americana*, 1956). The data presented will demonstrate that the legends have some basis in fact. On the other hand, the legends in certain ways depart widely from fact and thereby reveal man's myth-making propensities.

The storks are members of the family Ciconiidae and, along

with such other large, long-legged wading birds as herons, egrets, and ibises, are included in the order Ciconiiformes (Herodiones). The stork in the stork legend is the white stork (*ciconia alba*), so called because it has pure white feathers with some black feathers on its wings. Its beak is red, and its long legs and feet are reddish pink. It feeds upon reptiles, frogs, small fish, eels, mice, and insects, which it captures in marshes and meadows.<sup>3</sup> The white stork is found in most parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa. Those that nest in Europe during the spring and summer migrate southward to Africa during the winter.<sup>4</sup>

Storks fly at great heights with their long legs stretched out straight behind. They are voiceless, but they do make a clattering noise with their bills. During mating season they dance about in a grotesque, stiff-legged manner, making a loud noise by clattering their mandibles. Male and female storks being of the same size and coloring are very difficult to tell apart.

It is generally true that they faithfully care for their young; at times, however, they may act in a very hostile manner toward them. Once grown to adulthood, there is no evidence that the adult stork is capable of recognizing its parents. Therefore there is no basis in fact to the notion that they take care of their infirm elders. Their reputation for life-long monogamy is also in question. Lorenz (1967) states, "In reality, a stork is not very fond of his wife, and it is doubtful whether he would recognize her away from the nest" (pp. 146-147). He describes an episode observed by Professor Ernest Schuz to support this viewpoint. Using leg bands to identify the birds, Schuz noticed a male stork who admitted a female stork into his nest. He treated her as he would have treated his "wife." The two were busy repairing and relining the nest when the old "wife" returned. After a battle between the two

<sup>3</sup> Birds of prey (including the stork) are forbidden to be used as food in Leviticus XI, lines 13-17. According to Cohen (1956), the rabbis commented, "The prohibited species are birds of prey which are cruel in their habits; they are, therefore, regarded as injurious to the humane feelings of those who eat their flesh" (p. 662). It is noteworthy that the commentators speak positively only of the stork in this listing of birds of prey: vulture, osprey, kite, falcon, raven, ostrich, sea-mew, cormorant, pelican, stork, heron, and hoopoe.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently, as a result of ecological changes, the white stork is on its way to becoming extinct in Western Europe. According to the *New York Times* (1970), there are now only 70 pairs of storks in Denmark, whereas there were 10,000 only a hundred years ago. The stork is already extinct in Sweden.

females, during which the male merely watched, the defeated new "wife" flew away. The male then continued with the repairing of the nest.

As for the notion that the same couple returns to the same nest year after year, again there is no corroborative data. Haverschmidt (1949) states, ". . . there exists up until now not a single record that a nest was inhabited by the same couple for more than one year" (p. 58). The longevity issue is also questioned by these ornithologists. Storks do not live to the ripe old age of 70. Haverschmidt (1949) notes that the oldest ringed bird out of captivity was 19 years old, while in captivity the record is 24 years. It therefore must be concluded that the overly benign and human image of the stork that most people carry about with them tells us more about people's fantasies than it does about the reality of the lives of storks.

### *Psychodynamics of the Stork Legend*

For the stork legend to have become so fixed in man's imagination as an explanation of the origin of babies, it must be answering many complex psychological needs. It will be our purpose in the following discussion to explore some of these issues.

The first question that faces us is why is there a myth at all? Why not explain the origin of babies in naturalistic terms, in keeping with the intellectual development of the child? The answer would seem to lie in mankind's persistent fear (even if somewhat diminished in recent times) of the powerful libidinal forces within him that are responsible for procreation. It is as if we are trying to dampen and contain these forces for as long as possible, in part, by denying their necessary relationship to the birth of babies. Libidinal and procreative urges provoke so much conflict, particularly in childhood, that a stork fable is needed to reduce disquiet. It is our hypothesis that the pervasive discomfort caused by anxiety and guilt arising from oedipal conflicts in early childhood constitutes the single most important reason for wishing to maintain the stork fable. The fable can allay both the pre-oedipal and oedipal conflicts of children and the revived, residual parallel conflicts of parents who have an apparent need to relate the fable.

Why are birds often selected to represent the mother-procreator and why has the stork in particular among these birds assumed such prominence? In bird-symbolism literature, birds often represent the soft breasts of mother (Schmier, 1952). Some birds make repetitious musical sounds, i.e., cooing, as do mothers. To the infant's mind, the mother's sudden appearance and disappearance in the course of her daily chores may also be reminiscent of a bird flying to and fro. Artists in the Middle Ages symbolically represented the Holy Ghost (the female personification of the Trinity) by a white dove. Birds may also have been selected as the baby bringers because their procreative functions appear to be more easily comprehensible to the small child. Cognitively he can readily understand that babies are hatched from eggs that are laid by the mother bird. His lack of comprehension of the existence of a vagina, his ignorance of the female internal reproductive organs, and even his difficulty in clearly understanding the sexual role of the father in the act of intercourse are all taken care of by his simplistic notion of avian reproduction. Of course, this can be more than a problem of a lack of biological sophistication. We can assume that conflict also interferes with obtaining a clearer understanding of the facts of human procreation. The avian model in a sense enables the child to asexualize birth and remove it from the area of potential anxiety and conflict. Thus, storks, herons, swans, crows, ravens, and many other birds have been described in legends as baby bringers.

The selection of the white stork as the most popular of these baby-bringing birds is another intriguing question. The stork has apparently been especially associated with maternal virtues of selfless devotion to the care of their young for many centuries. The color white is associatively linked to milk, purity, and femaleness. The stork is a marsh-wading bird and thus can be easily involved with the retrieval of infants from bodies of water (which are themselves linked in the unconscious with the mother). The stork is a large bird seemingly capable of carrying an infant on its back or in its beak. The stork's flight patterns may also have suggested heavenly, divine messengers to mankind. They are high soarers and do little wing-flapping. They tend to glide motionless on currents of air at great heights, thus giving their flight a stately



and majestic quality. The white stork's long neck and long red beak which have phallic associative value also have contributed to the choice of this bird as the baby bringer. The stork's physical attributes thus lend themselves readily to a rich nexus of bisexual associations.

Finally, it should be noted that storks have been intimately linked with female deities and fertility throughout history. We have already spoken of the link between the Virgin Mary and the stork. Storks have also been described as an invariable part of Holda's entourage (Holda was a teutonic fertility goddess). Artemis, the Greek goddess of childbirth, and originally an orgiastic fertility goddess, is said by Graves (1955) to be associated with the ibis-like Stymphalian birds. (The ibis, stork, heron, spoonbill, flamingo, etc., all belong to the order Ciconiiformes.) At Stymphalus, in the ancient temple of Stymphalian Artemis, images of these man-eating birds are hung from the roof, and behind the building stand statues of maidens with birds' legs.

Ancient mother deities were very frequently associated with birds or had bird-like features and characteristics. Mut, the Vulture-headed Egyptian goddess, wore a robe made of feathers. Isis was represented as a kite, particularly while mourning over the dead body of her husband Osiris. Nekhbet, another Egyptian vulture goddess linked with childbirth was also called the "white one." The Greek goddess Aphrodite was accompanied by doves and sparrows who were noted for their lechery. Lilith, the fertility goddess, is represented in a Sumerian terracotta relief ca. 2,000 B.C. as having wings, bird legs, and feet standing erect on two reclining lions; on her head she also wears a cap embellished by several pairs of horns (Patai, 1967). These fertility goddesses like the stork itself, can also be seen as androgynous deities. (Note the phallic stance of the war-like Lilith capped by pairs of horns.) In a way, we might regard the stork legend in part as one of the more subtle survivals of the pagan fertility goddess religions in Western culture. Furthermore, our impression is that storks represent mankind's most recent major cultural invention on which to project his fantasies and conflicts regarding childbirth and its connection with the child-parent relationship (particularly the child-mother

relationship). The ancient fertility religions would, therefore, represent one of our first such cultural creations.

The origins of the associative links between storks in particular and birds in general and childbirth can be traced through mythology to the dawn of recorded history. In a large number of mythologic traditions (Austin, 1961), one finds creation myths intimately bound up with representatives of the Ciconiiformes order of marsh-wading, long-legged, long-necked, long-billed birds—an ancient group dating back some 100 million years to Cretaceous times. A Scandinavian legend of creation (MacCulloch, 1930), for example, tells of a god that laid and hatched an egg out of which came the earth. The god is a long-legged one, and his name may be connected with the Sanskrit word for a white bird, swan, or stork. The image is that of a creator walking in chaos and finally hatching the egg of the world. Of course, the most familiar mythic account of creation is that of Genesis, and it too seems linked up to a birdlike deity. According to Cohen (1956), the text reads:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters [p. 1].

The Hebrew word *m'rachefet* signifies "to flutter," "to hover." It clearly refers to the Spirit of God in birdlike terms. Cohen (1956) states that Rashi, the medieval biblical commentator referring to the famous passage used the simile, "like a dove hovering over the nest" (p. 1). Gastor (1969) feels that this is a faded reminiscence of a wind-bird such as Imdugud, the mighty Sumerian storm-bird, carrier of thunder and fertility (2,600 B.C.). Imdugud, a female deity, was a lioness-headed eagle of special attraction to the Sumerians. Imdugud was the bird who knew all and who determined destiny. Imdugud was often represented hovering with widespread wings over a pair of male bulls bowing in adoration, or appearing to attack lions or stags with her talons or beak. Another mythical bird that ought to be mentioned in this context is the phoenix. This bird as it appears in Egyptian art is obviously in the same order (Ciconiiformes) as the stork. It is bisexual and partheno-

genetic. The phoenix is intimately linked with regeneration and birth. It rises anew from its own ashes each 500 years.

It is our major thesis that the poetic economy of the stork fable not only allows for an unconscious acknowledgment of the true state of affairs with regard to the facts of life, but also reflects earlier infantile sexual theories and notions of conception that children evolve before they arrive at a correct understanding of the relationship of intercourse and birth. Let us see how the infantile sexual theories first described by Freud (1908) relate to the stork fable.

One of the earliest conceptions the child has with regard to procreation is that his mother somehow accomplished it all by herself. The child sees the mother's enlarging abdomen and knows that a baby is growing there. He may even have a vague notion that father is in some way involved, but he cannot give father a concrete role as he can with the mother. Mother is seen as the powerful figure which, in a certain sense, she is to the small child, for father plays a relatively minor role in the early years. She is also thought by the child to possess a phallus at this stage. Now, the stork fable may be expressing this parthenogenetic notion in terms of the single stork (which is typically described as being basically female) being responsible for obtaining the infant and delivering it to the mother. The maternal white stork with the long red beak is thus not unlike the Egyptian fertility goddess Mut who has been depicted with an erect phallus.

A second infantile theory of birth is the anal (cloacal) theory: namely, that babies come out of the rectum (the only hole in the perineal area known to young children) and that the act of birth is in some way identical to or analogous with having a bowel movement. This is hinted at in the fact that the stork may bring or drop the baby down the chimney, a dirty tunnel that can readily be seen as representing the rectum and anus. This cloacal theory of childbirth is furthered by the stork's actual anatomy. Some children may be aware of the existence of a common birth-fecal canal in birds, if only by the fecal discoloration of bird eggs. The cloacal theory, as Freud pointed out, gives both boys and girls the anatomic possibility of having children. This may be another determinant of the stork being sometimes depicted in cartoons as

a male physician with top hat and black medical bag. In cartoons the doctor's bag or diaper-cum-baby often projects like a pregnant abdomen in front of the physician-stork. Is it possible that this is a visual representation of the male's passive feminine longings to bear and give birth to a child himself?

The stork fable, amusingly enough, seems to relate more completely to the true biological facts of childbirth than to infantile sexual theories. Perhaps this is what contributes to its persistent popularity. The stork is said to find the babies in caves, wells, or ponds. These are common symbols for the vagina and uterus in particular, and mother-woman in general. The stork then flies through the air to deliver its precious cargo. Flying, as Freud (1910) pointed out, is often symbolic of both erection and intercourse. Perhaps the implied bisexuality of the stork fable can also now be interpreted as a fusion of the necessary father and mother for the procreative process.<sup>5</sup>

The stork fable for the child who has just recently learned the facts of intercourse can still serve as a refuge when he wants to deny that "mommy and daddy would do that awful thing." It would thus serve as another of the transitional phenomena that Winnicott (1953) speaks of to allow temporary respite to the child from the "strain inherent in objective perception" (p. 96).

When the stork arrives, it is said to bite the mother's leg which results in her having to go to bed for a number of days or weeks. It will be recalled that the stork's beak is red and certainly phallic enough in appearance to support the speculation that the end of the fable recapitulates the coition-confinement-delivery sequence. It may also be that the bite is a hint of another common sexual theory of children, the sadistic theory of coitus. Finally, the stork's cruel bite represents the threat of castration which inevitably is linked in the unconscious with such libidinal strivings.

Our final interest is in discussing briefly the overridealization

<sup>5</sup> Richard Sterba (1944) has suggested that, "it may be that the fusion of masculine and feminine attributes in one person in the stories which are used to hide the facts of childbirth from children, symbolically tell them of the fusion of the male and female for procreative purposes, and that we are again unable to lie without telling the truth" (p. 81). Sterba has related this both to Santa Claus and to the stork, particularly when the latter is portrayed as a male physician with a doctor's bag. Both Santa's bag (and his rotund abdomen) and the stork's bag, would stand for the pregnant belly of an androgynous figure.

of the stork in the general legend. It has been demonstrated that the gentle, good stork has other, less benign characteristics both in legend and in fact. The stork is often sadistic, rejecting, and hateful to her own young and relatives and to mankind in general. It is our impression that these less well-known, malevolent characteristics have been obscured for very good reasons. These reasons have already been hinted at in our explication of the sadistic tendencies of the antecedent female deities with whom the stork is linked. Our impression furthermore is that very excessively charitable, kind, and loving qualities attributed to the stork and associated maternal aspects of the deity in Western religion (e.g., Virgin Mary in Christianity and the Shechina in Judaism) represent a cultural reaction formation designed to keep our more terrifying conceptions of mother in repression. In short, we would hypothesize that the God-Stork-Virgin Mary-Shechina connection may overlay a malevolent Stork-Witch-Fertility Goddess linkage. Holda, for example, the German goddess of childbirth and sky, resided in fountains and wells where she was the protectress of the unborn children which the stork brought. Often in Holda's wild rides through the sky, she was said to be accompanied by a procession of witch-like creatures (Leach, 1950). When she held her spring procession of peace and fertility, storks flew in front of her as messengers of her arrival. We see a further connection between storks, Holda, and witches in teutonic mythology. According to one legend (Wolf, 1852), the storks gather together on Mt. Blocksberg, the "Dancing Place of Witches," and remain there until the witches (the followers of Holda) finish their moon dances. (Moon rites are often associated with fertility ceremonials.) Again, there is a suggestion in the mythology literature that the negative, darker legendary descriptions of Holda are of greater antiquity than the more benign traditions concerning this goddess. One is also struck by the similarity between a witch flying through the air with her long nose and pointed hat and her broomstick trailing behind her and the long-beaked stork in flight with its feet trailing behind.

Similar mythologic data for Greek (Artemis, Aphrodite), Egyptian (Isis, Hathor, Mut), Canaanite (Ashera, Astarte, Anath), and Babylonian (Lilith) mother goddesses can be produced to support this thesis. Aphrodite, goddess of love, beauty, and fertility,

was among the most promiscuous of the gods. She was known for her countless acts of infidelity and for the many children she bore to men other than her husband. Her jealousy and her wanton behavior (which led to her lover's jealousy) resulted in very bloody consequences. It is said that she slept with her adoptive father, Zeus. Aphrodite destroyed Anchises, a king who mated with her on a mountain top (as a queen bee destroys a drone), by tearing out his sexual organs. Anchises was only one of the many sacred kings who were struck with a ritual thunderbolt after consorting with the "Death-in-Life Goddess." One of Aphrodite's titles was "man slayer." Graves (1955) also mentions that in the worship of Cybele, the Phrygian Aphrodite of Mount Ida (as a queen bee), it was customary for her priests to castrate themselves in ecstatic rites in memory of her lover, Attis. The ancient fertility goddesses were often war-like, savage, and cruel. Patai (1967) described Anath as the Canaanite female deity who was a "goddess of love and war, virginal and yet wanton, amorous and yet given to uncontrollable outbursts of rage and appalling acts of cruelty" (p. 61). Her major energies were expended on the battlefield, where she went berserk, killing with great abandon and reveling in her bloody deeds. She bound the freshly severed heads and hands of her enemies to her body and continued to kill afresh, plunging hip deep in the gore of heroes. The Valkyries (Odin's "War-like Virgins"), riding through the skies with helmets and spears to the battlefield to select the brave warriors for death and to carry the heroes to Valhalla, would also fit this category of savage, man-killing female deities.<sup>6</sup> Finally, it is especially fitting to recall to a psychoanalytic audience another mythical female monster who was vanquished by Oedipus, namely the Theban Sphinx. This Sphinx was winged and had the head and breasts of a woman. In *Oedipus Rex*, the Sphinx is the double of Jocasta, the mother and wife of Oedipus, who causes both to seek their own death.

Freud (1913) stated, "The great Mother-Goddesses of the oriental peoples, however, all seem to have been both creators and destroyers—both goddesses of life and fertility and goddesses of

<sup>6</sup> In this connection, one is also reminded of the man-hating Sirens (part bird) and of the Harpies, described by Bulfinch (1934) as "disgusting birds with heads of maidens and long claws, and faces pale with hunger" (p. 208).

death" (p. 299). These savage, sadistic mother-goddesses, of course, represent man's projections into the cosmos of his impressions of women's malevolence, particularly those closest to him, namely his mother and wife. It is, of course, also true that the hateful characteristics can represent man's own sadistic impulses toward women, projected onto them. What is the source of these volcanic destructive urges? We would think that their origin lies in the countless inevitable acts of cruelty, irritation, indifference that are repeated endlessly in the relationships of a man and woman from birth to death. Every mother must frustrate her child thousands of times in the course of his childhood from the weaning experience through the denial of her body for sexual purposes. These frustrating experiences will be repeated countless times throughout his lifetime. During his marriage, he will have to endure seeing his wife turn her major attentions away from him to their children. Ultimately, as death approaches, man will often experience this last rejection in similar terms. Yet another possible source of his fear and hatred of women stems from an oceanic yearning in each man, covered up by the veneer of adulthood, to return to the early preoedipal tender nurturing relationship with mother. This accounts for the persistent Shangri-la-type visions of men throughout the ages. But the literal gratifications of these yearnings would spell death to the adult aspirations of man and would destroy him utterly. It has been speculated (Barry and Johnson, 1958, for example), that this is the most basic underlying reason for the incest taboo. No doubt the onus for this kind of destruction of manliness is also projected onto the mother-lover-wife.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps, then, the stork fable can be seen as another attempt by man to celebrate and affirm the regenerative life force (particularly as manifested by woman) on the one hand, but on the other hand to deny and avoid facing his eventual death and ultimate

<sup>7</sup> The following is a typical Shangri-la-type theme associated with the teutonic fertility mother-goddess, Holda: "A poem dating from the Middle Ages places Holda in the Mt. of Venus, a place that is generally supposed to be the Homselbern in Thuringia. She was then called Mistress Venus, and held a splendid court with her women. Nobel knights, amongst whom was Ritter Tannhauser, were drawn to her into the mountain, where they lived such a gay, merry life of pleasure that they could hardly ever again free themselves from her spell and make their escape even though thoughts of honour and duty might now and then return to them" (Wagner, 1886, p. 113).



return to Mother Earth. One is reminded here of Freud's (1913) attempt to understand the symbolic meaning of the three sisters in *King Lear*, particularly the gentle, loyal Cordelia. Freud hypothesized that the old and infirm Lear does not want to accept his decline and approaching death (symbolized by a woman, Cordelia). ". . . The Goddess of Death was replaced by the Goddess of Love. . . . The third of the sisters was no longer Death; she was the fairest, best, most desirable and most loveable of women" (p. 299). Thus, the play ends with the grieving Lear holding his dead daughter in his arms. Undoing this reversal would have the Goddess of Death carrying the old, dying King.<sup>8</sup> We would suggest that a similar psychological process is at work in the stork fable and accounts for the overidealization of the stork, i.e., mother.

The stork fable is an extremely artful condensation of a host of human conflicts, attitudes, and aspirations. It serves both defensive and ego-adaptive purposes in the course of normal child development. The stork fable, as well as the stork itself, is now becoming extinct. It is doubtful whether because of the multifaceted irrational needs that the fable served, the scientific explanations of childbirth given to children can adequately replace it to the child's satisfaction. One wonders what new mythic structures may be arising to take its place in the minds of children. Perhaps no new myths are being born. Perhaps, as Erikson (1935) has suggested, our new enlightened explanations do not meet the affective needs of children. In any case, our scientific explanations will be just as suspect in the child's mind as the stork fable in an earlier generation.

### Summary

Impressed by the popularity and persistence of the stork fable, we have traced its history through the mythology of many cultures. We have noted the discrepancies and similarities between the stork of the fable and the real bird. We have offered an explanation for its survival, based on the psychological needs of both children and their parents.

<sup>8</sup> Woman as the Goddess of Death receiving the dead man into her arms is represented most dramatically in some Egyptian sarcophagi in which the goddess, Mut was painted with outstretched arms waiting for the deposit of the dead man in her "star-decked bosom, arms, and wings" (Müller, 1918, p. 42).



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