

Portals of the Mind

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of a gateway or portal to another world is common in *myth* and *fantasy*, and, obviously, far older than the use of the same notion in computing. While computing portals take researchers to other domains of data, the use of portals in myths is often far more complex. In creation myths, the passing of portals has immense consequences for humankind, as in Adam and Eve's expulsion from their carefree existence in the Garden of Eden (unleashing the world's woes upon their descendants), and in the carrying away of Persephone by Pluto into the Underworld (leaving a legacy of cold and sunless months each year). In other types of myths, and in the fantastic tales they have bequeathed, portals provide *heroes* with strange and wonderful adventures, and with experiences that leave heroes irrevocably changed. This article will now explore these types of portals in more detail.

PORTALS OF THE MIND

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" (Tolkien, 1974, p. 1). So begins Tolkien's famous story of middle-earth, a tale that takes the reader from Bilbo Baggins' comfortable hole in the ground (1974), to the foul and murky depths of Mordor (Tolkien, 1954-1955). The portals Tolkien uses throughout his works serve as a useful starting point in illustrating the *psychological* potential of portals in mythic tales and in the fantasies myths influence.

While in its most general sense, a portal is just a gate (from the Latin *porta*) (Skeat, 1983, p. 403), when heroes pass through literal or *metaphorical* portals in works of myth or fantasy, they enter strange and dangerous landscapes of physical and psychological testing. Their journeys are very different to those of researchers who enter portals knowingly in search of information relevant to their purposes, for heroes are commonly unaware of the imperative that drives them, or of the profound nature of what is to come.

In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo is settling into a comfortable, although mundane, middle age, and sees no reason to change his situation, when Gandalf appears and throws his carefully ordered life into chaos. "To the end of his days Bilbo could never remember how he found himself outside, without a hat, a walking-stick or any money, or anything which he usually took with him when he went out" (Tolkien, 1974, p. 28).

Bilbo's route to psychological growth takes the form of a *quest* (to win back the dwarves' gold from the dragon Smaug), a motif common in myth and fantasy. Quests involve both a physical journey, compelling heroes to draw on scarcely guessed at physical and mental reserves, and a psychological journey where heroes are forced to question their most deeply held beliefs.

Unlike Alice (Carroll, 1865), who travels through the portal of a rabbit hole *down* into the strange world beneath the earth, Bilbo travels *up* from his subterranean dwelling through his "perfectly round door like a porthole" (Tolkien, 1974, p. 1) and out into the wild lands (the second of many portals in the story), to where "people spoke strangely, and sang songs Bilbo had never heard before" (1974, p. 29). The direction of Alice's travel is more usual in myth and fantasy, for entry *into* the earth commonly symbolizes descent into the *unconscious*. Aladdin and Ali Baba both go into caverns to claim treasure (metaphorically, the psychological riches necessary to *transcend* their present life stage), and the young Merlin (of Arthurian myths and legends) experiences his first vision doubly entombed, lying in a crystal cave *within* a cavern (Stewart, 1976, p. 58).

Whether up, down, or out, by passing through portals such as doorways, cave entrances, landscapes, or rabbit holes, heroes *journey* away from the safe and familiar known world to the hostile and dangerous unknown world. In doing so, they move from the conscious to the unconscious; from the testing domain of the physical landscape to the dark terrors of the psychological domain. Thus, when Bilbo sets off alone down the tunnel to the fearsome dragon Smaug, and hears the deadly dragon snoring, he stops at first, frozen with fear, but then forces himself on. As the narrator (Tolkien) says: "Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did ... He fought the real battle in that tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait" (1974, p. 197). Bilbo's physical journey *down* into the earth is metaphorically a journey *down* into the unconscious, where he struggles to overcome the limitations of self (legitimate fears for his own safety), and gains the wisdom and mental strength that he later uses to end the disastrous stand-off between the dwarves and Lake men.

This struggle with self, which occurs at the psychological level, is explored in depth by the mythologist Joseph Campbell, in his treatise *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1993). One of the myths Campbell analyses is the tale of

the Sumerian goddess Inanna, "the oldest recorded account of the passage through the gates of metamorphosis" (p. 105). The story details her journey from the world of light and life to the underworld of darkness and death (metaphorically the unconscious), a journey in which she passes through seven portals, at each one being forced to relinquish an item of jewelry or clothing, (the adornments of her conscious life), until, both physically and psychologically naked, she confronts her opposite aspect (her sister goddess Ereshkigal). As Campbell says: "The hero, whether god or goddess, man or woman, the figure in a myth or the dreamer of a dream, discovers and assimilates his opposite (his own unsuspected self) either by swallowing it or by being swallowed" (1993, p. 108).

Inanna's meeting with the other part of herself, buried deep in her unconscious, is mirrored in the ending of the fantasy, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Le Guin, 1968). In this story, the wizard Ged is pursued by an underworld demon that his arrogance and pride have earlier unleashed. Finally, in desperation, Ged turns and pursues *it*, eventually drawing near. "Aloud and clearly, breaking that old silence, Ged spoke the shadow's name, and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: 'Ged.' And the two voices were one voice ... Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one" (1976, pp. 197-198). Like Inanna, Ged recognizes (calls by name) and embraces (accepts) the dark elements within his unconscious, and by so doing, transcends his previous, flawed state.

This treasure of transcendence is gained by facing that which the conscious mind has forced into the unconscious. These ugly and/or unacceptable parts of self commonly include such things as each person's opposite sexual aspect—for men, the anima; for women, the animus. What powerful myths and fantasies teach is that only by recognizing and embracing these unacceptable parts of self, can the individual achieve wholeness and move onto the next life stage. Ged literally embraces these parts of himself (his past arrogance and pride), despite their manifestation as a horrendous creature, as Bilbo faces the loathsome dragon (representing his timidity and the barriers to him living a fuller life), to become much more than the hobbit who set out on the adventure. As Gandalf exclaims when Bilbo delivers the dwarves' precious Arkenstone to the Lake men (as a bargaining chip for peace): "There is always more about you than anyone expects!" (p. 250)

Caverns, rabbit holes, and labyrinths; the literal portals into mother earth are widespread in myth and fantasy, but the shapes portals assume are not limited to these. There are a multitude of portals heroes might use to enter the place of the unconscious, for beyond the terror of the dragon, the dark, lipless beast of Earthsea, and the deadly threat of the Gorgon and Minotaur, lies the hero quest of psychological growth.

Many portals are hidden in the simple and sanitized lines of nursery stories, for these stories carry much of the power of myth, albeit in diluted form. In the well known story of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Jack uses an oversized beanstalk to access a cloud portal to the lands of the giants, the journey forcing him to draw on his cunning and wits to bring back treasure, which changes his life forever (McKie, 1992). Likewise, the ugly duckling (in the nursery story of the same name) flees the farm yard full of teasing animals to dwell in the harshness of the wilds, where its will to survive is severely tested. Finally, after extremity and suffering, it emerges (both physically and psychologically) as a beautiful swan (*My Best Nursery Rhymes and Stories*, 1986, p. 133).

In fairy tales, stone walls figure prominently as portals, either surrounding gardens or as parts of towers and castles, and though they look impenetrable, there is always a way through into the unconscious world beyond. In the fairy tale of *Rapunzel* (Segal & Sendak, 1973, p. 247), a fairy/witch keeps a beautiful girl (Rapunzel) locked in a stone tower without doors or staircase, the only access being through a high window reached via the ladder of Rapunzel's long hair. A prince appears, falls in love with Rapunzel and, finding the tower's entry point, becomes her lover. When the fairy discovers this, she takes Rapunzel away and hides her beyond tangled forests and deserts (depending on the version). In grief, the prince hurls himself from the tower and is blinded, spending the next years of his life wandering in the wilderness until he happens upon Rapunzel again, and her tears restore his sight. This is the literal reading of a charming fairy tale that is highly recognizable by people of a Western literary heritage, but "read" psychologically, the tale takes on new power. In this type of reading, the prince is restlessly searching for something he senses is missing (he is incomplete). He breaches the portals (of his unconscious) to find the treasure (Rapunzel/his anima), but must also face his repugnance and doubts (the fairy/witch) guarding these unacceptable parts of self. In his struggle with the fairy/witch, he is temporarily defeated (blinded, he literally cannot see his way forward), and wanders in the wilderness (his previous state is now barren and unrewarding) before finally reclaiming his treasure (anima) and being healed (made whole by Rapunzel's tears). The literal quest of the prince in *Rapunzel* is, in fact, the same as the quests of countless princes in countless tales. They must overcome castle walls or scale stone towers in order to rescue "damsels in distress," that is, metaphorically, to descend into their unconscious and assimilate their feminine aspects (anima) in order to become complete.

The Frog Prince is a particularly rich example of such a tale, and less usual in that the hero is female. In this story, a princess loses her precious golden ball deep in a well or spring (like caves, springs or pools as openings into Mother Earth are common symbols of the unconscious). The ball

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