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One-Eyed Gods and One-Armed Gods

Does *True Grit* tap into an ancient myth?

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True Grit, the surprise hit from the Coen brothers, has captivated audiences and [the Academy](#) with its perfect balance of earnestness, humor, and Wild West derring-do. There is a dimension to the film that has not yet been pointed out, however. *True Grit's* main characters, Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) and Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) closely parallel two ancient Indo-European conceptions of justice represented by the one-eyed sovereign (wild, unreliable, ruling through bravado) and the one-handed sovereign (solemn, proper, ruling by the letter of the law).

These conceptions of justice and their attendant myths were originally described at length by prominent philologist Georges Dumézil (1898-1986) in his 1948 book [Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty](#). Perhaps you own a copy. Perhaps you have two, so you can keep one in the car. Or maybe you came across Dumézil's essay in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's influential [A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia](#) (1980), in which it is discussed at length. Regardless, it's worth revisiting Dumézil's work, as it enriches our understanding of the Coens' movie. I'll demonstrate how below, but be warned: Spoilers will be as prevalent as rattlers in Choctaw territory.

Dumézil observed that a wide range of Indo-European cultures produced myths—philologically related to one another—in which the universe was governed by one-eyed and one-handed gods acting in concert. The one-eyed gods tended to rule through magic, strong personalities, and mad bravado. The one-handed gods, by contrast, represented the rule of law—the ordering and arrangement of society through contracts, covenants, and statutes. In many narratives, the one-handed god loses his hand or arm after breaking a contract or reneging on a deal—illustrating the idea that in times of crisis, the law must be bent or broken, though the price for doing so can be dear.

In Nordic mythology, for example, a young wolf named Fenrir is thought (by shrewd prognosticators attuned to supernatural wolf strength) to be capable of destroying the world of the gods.* The one-eyed god [Odhinn](#) thus tries to get Fenrir to submit to a leash. This he does through deceit: Odhinn presents the leashing as a challenge—see how long it takes you to get out of it. The

savvy wolf suspects, correctly, that the leash is magic and will subdue him for eternity. So as a gesture of goodwill, Tyr, a god representing the rule of law, offers to put his hand in Fenrir's mouth as a pledge to the wolf that there is no hocus-pocus afoot—if Fenrir cannot get out of the leash, Tyr will lose his hand. The wolf submits, the world is saved, but at the cost of Tyr's hand.

In Roman mytho-history (Romans liked to give their history a mythic burnish), one-eyed Horatio Cocles ("Cocles" being derived from "Cyclops") and soon to be one-handed Mucius Scaevola team up to defeat Lars Porsenna, an invading Etruscan determined to sack Rome. According to Dumzeil, the one-eyed Cocles "holds the enemy in check by his strangely wild behavior." Citing the Roman historian Livy, Dumezil writes that "remaining alone at the entrance to the bridge, [Cocles] casts terrible and menacing looks at the Etruscan leaders, challenging them individually, insulting them collectively." He also deploys "terrible grimaces."

Cocles' antics stop Porsenna temporarily, but the surly Etruscan soon brings war upon Rome again, and this time it's Scaevola, whose mind ran in a more statesmanlike track than his comrade Cocles, to the rescue. He warns Porsenna that he has 300 assassins at his disposal—it's a bluff, but Scaevola burns his hand in a fire to convince his enemy his threat is bona fide. Porsenna agrees to leave Rome be.

How does this all relate to *True Grit*? Rooster Cogburn is a one-eyed U.S. Marshal who doles out his own brand of frontier justice, not caring much for the niceties of the legal system. When we first meet him, he's being forced under cross-examination to admit that he's killed 23 men while working as a marshal. It's clear he'd rather be behind a rifle sight than on the witness stand. Like Odhinn, Cogburn is comfortable with lying to his enemies (he exaggerates the number of marshals he has with him when attempting to take on a crew of bandits in a cabin). Like Cocles, he attacks his enemy with wild behavior. In the climactic fight scene, Cogburn takes on the four men of the Lucky Ned Pepper gang with abandon—his two revolvers drawn and the reins of his horse between his teeth. In [Charles Portis' novel](#), from which *True Grit* was adapted, Cogburn is described as "snapping his head from side to side to bring his good eye into play." In the film, we see a menacing look in his eye when his teeth take the reins. Earlier in the film he tells Mattie of a time he pulled a similar stunt against seven men.

Contrast Cogburn's approach with Mattie's. Her precocious, legalistic manner is established right from the beginning of *True Grit*. Early in the film, she threatens a horse trader with a "writ of replevin." (The bewildered horse trader replies "*a what?*") When she finally comes face-to-face with Tom Chaney, the man she is trying to bring to justice for killing her father, she shoots intending to subdue him, not to kill. Even after she has been taken hostage by Chaney and the Pepper gang, she talks of swearing affidavits to his good behavior so that his sentence may be more humane. Yet at the end of the film Mattie shoots Chaney with intent to kill—the pressing needs of justice having forced her to act outside the legal code she has heretofore championed. The kickback of the gun knocks her over into a pit, where she suffers a snakebite that will cause her to lose her left arm.*

Are Rooster and Mattie modern manifestations of the ancient allegorical characters Dumezil studied? Or are they merely two different personality types: the charismatic, devil-may-care swaggerer and the exacting, careful planner—Dionysus and Apollo, Oscar and Felix. Whether

