

CHAPTER
16

Section 3

LITERATURE SELECTION *from Quetzalcoatl*

According to this myth, Quetzalcoatl was a god-king who brought civilization to the Toltecs. He taught them art, agriculture, peace, and knowledge but was driven away by his enemies. The following passages, which come from different versions of the story, were translated from Nahuatl, the language of ancient Aztecs. What does the myth of Quetzalcoatl reveal about Mesoamerican values and beliefs?

A Cycle of Transformation

In the year 1 Reed it is told, they say—in its time in that year—Quetzalcoatl was born, called Topiltzin Priest 1-Reed Quetzalcoatl, and his mother they say was named Chimalma, and they say that this was the manner in which Quetzalcoatl was placed in his mother’s belly: she swallowed an emerald. Came the years 2 Flint, 3 House, 4 Rabbit; 5 Reed, 6 Flint, 7 House, 8 Rabbit; 9 Reed.

Then in the time of 9 Reed, when he’d reached some awareness, when he’d reached his ninth year, he asked for his father, saying, “What does my father resemble? May I see him, may I see his face?”

Thereupon he was told: “He is dead, he is buried yonder. Go see!” Quetzalcoatl went there at once, and he opened the earth. He searched for the corpse, and he gathered the bones. In a place called the shrine of Quilaztli he buried them. Came the years 10 Flint, 11 House, 12 Rabbit; 13 Reed, 1 Flint, 2 House, 3 Rabbit; 4 Reed, 5 Flint, 6 House, 7 Rabbit; 8 Reed, 9 Flint.

10 House: this was the year of the death of Cuauhtitlan’s king who was Huactli; for sixty-two years he had ruled. This was the king who did not know how to plant edible corn. Nor could his subjects weave robes. As yet they dressed only in hides. As yet their food was but birds, snakes, rabbits, and deer. As yet they were homeless. Rather they wandered from place to place.

In the year 11 Rabbit, lady Xiuhtlacuiloxochitzin ascended the throne. Her house of thatch stood beside the square, where today it is paved with stones. And they say that this lady was given the city because she was Huactli’s wife; moreover she ably invoked the “devil”

Itzpapatl. 12 Reed, 13 Flint, 1 House.

2 Rabbit it was, when Quetzalcoatl came to Tollantzinco. There he remained four years and built his house of penance, his turquoise house of beams. From there he passed on to Cuextlan, so crossing the river; and in that particular place he erected a bridge that still stands, they say. 3 Reed, 4 Flint.

In the year 5 House the Toltecs came for Quetzalcoatl to install him as king in Tollan, and he was their priest. The story thereof has been written elsewhere. 6 Rabbit. 7 Reed was the time of lady Xiuhtlacuiloxochitzin’s death. Twelve years had she ruled in Cuauhtitlan. In the year 8 Flint, at the place called Palace in the Woods, Ayauhcoyotzin ascended the throne as Cuauhtitlan’s king.

9 House, 10 Rabbit; 11 Reed, 12 Flint, 13 House, 1 Rabbit. 2 Reed: according to the tradition of Texcoco, this was the year of the death of Quetzalcoatl, prince of Tollan Colhuacan. But in 2 Reed it was that he built his house of penance, his place of worship, his place of prayer. He the prince, 1-Reed Quetzalcoatl, built his house as four: house of turquoise, house of redshell, house of whiteshell, house of precious feathers. There he worshipped, did his penance, and also fasted.

And even at midnight he went down to the stream, to the place called Edge of the Water, where the water moss was.

And he set thorns into his flesh on the summit of Xicocotl, also on Huitzco, also on Tzincoc, also on Mount Nonohualca. And he made his thorns of jadestone.

His fir boughs were quetzal plumes. And his thorns of turquoise, of jadestone, of redshell were fumed with incense. And the offerings that he sacrificed were snakes, birds, and butterflies.

***His fir boughs were
quetzal plumes. And
his thorns of
turquoise, of jade-
stone, of redshell
were fumed with
incense.***

And it is related, they say, that he sent up his prayers, his supplications, into the heart of the sky, and he called out to Skirt-of-Stars Light-of-Day, Lady-of-Sustenance Lord-of-Sustenance, Wrapped-in-Coal Wrapped-in-Blood, Tlallamanac Tlallichcatl.

And they knew that he was crying out to the Place of Duality, which lies above the ninefold heavens. And thus they knew, they who dwell there, that he called upon them and petitioned them most humbly and contritely.

And also in his time he discovered great riches: jadestone, fine turquoise, and gold, silver, redshell, whiteshell, plumes of quetzal, cotinga, roseate spoonbill, oropendola, trogon, and blue heron.

And also he discovered cacao of various colors and cotton of various colors.

And truly in his time he was a great artisan in all his works, in the blue, green, white, yellow, and red painted earthenware from which he drank and ate, and in many other things besides.

And in the time that he lived Quetzalcoatl started and began his temple and raised its serpent pillars, but he did not finish or complete it.

And in the time that he lived he did not show himself in public. Deep within his house he dwelled, protected. And his pages guarded him at many points surrounding him. In each apartment there were pages, and his apartment was the last.

And in his house were mats of jewels, mats of precious feathers, mats of gold. And his house of penance, so they say, was built as four, they say.

And it is told and related that many times during the life of Quetzalcoatl certain sorcerers attempted to shame him into making human offerings, into sacrificing humans. But he would not consent. He would not comply, because he greatly loved his subjects, who were Toltecs.

The offerings he made were always and only snakes, birds, and butterflies.

And it is related, they say, that he thereby angered the sorcerers, so that they took to mocking and taunting him. And the sorcerers asserted and willed that Quetzalcoatl be vexed and put to flight. And so it happened, it came to pass. 3 Flint, 4 House, 5 Rabbit; 6 Reed, 7 Flint, 8 House, 9

Rabbit; 10 Reed, 11 Flint, 12 House, 13 Rabbit.

In the year 1 Reed Quetzalcoatl died. And they say that he went to Tlillan Tlapallan to die. . . .

The Fall of Tollan

Quetzalcoatl was looked upon as a god. He was worshipped and prayed to in former times in Tollan, and there his temple stood: very high, very tall. Extremely tall, extremely high. Very many were its steps and close together, hardly wide, but narrow. Upon each step indeed one's foot could not be straightened.

And they say that he was always veiled, always his face was veiled: and they say that he was monstrous, his face like a pitifully battered thing, pitifully covered with lumps—inhuman. Also his beard was very long, exceedingly long and copious.

And his subjects, the Toltecs, were highly skilled. Nothing was difficult for them to do. They cut jadestone and cast gold, and pursued yet other crafts. Highly skilled indeed they were in feather work.

Truly with him it began, truly from him it flowed out, from Quetzalcoatl all art and knowledge.

And there his house of jade-stone stood, and his house of gold, and his house of redshell, and his house of whiteshell; and his house of Beams, his turquoise house, and

his house of quetzal plumes.

And for his subjects, the Toltecs, there was no place too remote to reach. Indeed they quickly arrived where they were going. And because they ran exceedingly, one called them “they who crook the knee all day.”

And there was a mountain called Crying Out Mountain, still so called today. They say that there a herald stood. And whatever was needed, he stood there crying out. From there indeed it spread over Anahuac, indeed it was clearly heard in all places, whatever he uttered, whatever law had been ordered. And quickly all hastened to hear what Quetzalcoatl commanded.

And also they had great abundance. Cheap were foods and all the crops. They say calabashes were enormous, some a fathom round, the corn ears very much like mulling stones, extremely long: they merely rolled them to pulverize the grain. And

Certain sorcerers attempted to shame him into making human offerings, into sacrificing humans. But he would not consent.

amaranths grew as palms: they truly climbed them, they truly could be climbed.

And there as well grew tinted cotton: crimson, yellow, rose, violet, pale green, azure, dark green, orange, brown, purplish, dark gold, and coyote-colored cotton. All these kinds were immediately thus. They did not dye them.

And all the precious birds dwelled there: catin-ga, quetzal, oropendola, roseate spoonbill, also all the different birds that very ably sing, that ably warble, in the mountains.

And also gold and jadestone—all of it was scarcely prized, so much did they possess.

And cacao, flower cacao, also grew. Indeed in many places there were cacao trees.

And the Toltecs were very prosperous and comfortable. They never wanted. There was nothing lacking in their houses, they were never hungry. And they didn't need the stunted ears of corn except as fuel to heat the baths.

And Quetzalcoatl did penance also. He bled the flesh of his shinbone, he stained maguey thorns with blood. Also he bathed at midnight. And his

pool was where he bathed himself—the place called Turquoises Are Washed Here.

He was imitated by the incense keepers and the priests. The life of Quetzalcoatl became a pattern for the life of every priest: so it was established—the regimen of Tollan—so it was adopted here in Mexico.

from John Bierhorst, trans., Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1974), 24–28, 38–40.

Activity Options

1. **Comparing** Create a before-and-after chart listing details that illustrate what Toltec society was like before and after Quetzalcoatl came to rule Tollan. Then share your chart with classmates.
2. **Clarifying** Use a dictionary to find definitions of the following: amaranth, cacao, calabash, quetzal, roseate spoonbill, and trogon. Then work with your classmates to create an illustrated handbook of plants and animals of Mesoamerica.