

"Of Beowulf, Boxing, and the Ali Myth"
by Edmund Fuller
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- 1 The myths do not die, my friends; they are acted out around us all the time.
- 2 I almost didn't watch the fight but some prudential intuition guided me unbeknownst to myself and I saw it from brawling start to brawling finish. What fight? There was only one, of course: Ali-Spinks. If there is a rematch, it will be Spinks-Ali, but I agree with one of the chattering men on TV, Ali's doctor, I think, in hoping that "the greatest" will hang up the gloves.
- 3 Sports are not my true bag, yet I have followed the fights ever since, as a boy, I always rooted against Dempsey. That was not due to a consistent pro-underdog bias in my temperament, for later I always rooted for Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson and Archie Moore. Indeed, I always rooted for Floyd Patterson; which was paradoxically like rooting for the champion as underdog, for Mr. Patterson was the most Dostoyevskian, self-psyched-out fighter ever to enter the squared circle.
- 4 But I digress. The Ali-Spinks fight inspired me to devote an entire English class session the next morning to a discussion of it as an event not unrelated to a curriculum pursuing "Beowulf," "King Lear," "Hamlet," "Oedipus Rex," and "Paradise Lost." For just as primal myths bounce and rebound through all those works, so the fight unexpectedly flashed forth as the embodiment of a myth — a dual myth. "Myth" in this sense does not mean something unreal or false but means the expression, in universal metaphor, of a profound and recurring human experience.
- 5 In Muhammad Ali we saw reenacted the myth of the falling hero, for he has been one of the dancing legends of the ring -- "The Fancy," as they used to call prizefighting when William Hazlitt wrote his great 18th-century essay "The Fight." Ali was the idol of millions, especially but not exclusively of blacks. Here I must confess that I have always, in the loose language of fan or antifan, "hated" him, always rooted for anyone against him. That was because I detested his persona, his strutting and chest beating, his doggerel predictions of knock-out rounds, his ring clowning and "rope-a-dope" tricks, his braying, "I'm the Greatest!"
- 6 Mind you, it was not the man but the persona I hated, knowing full well that it was deliberately put on just to inflame such feelings in some of us because the wish to see somebody get beaten is at least as big a box-office draw — or bigger — than the wish to see someone win. But I felt no guilt; if it was his right to adopt that mask it was my right to loathe it, knowing his skills, aware that he was a great ring figure -- though I shall go to my grave certain that Louis in his prime would have knocked out Ali in his.
- 7 Yet watching him that night against Leon Spinks, I experienced a sudden deep ambivalence as it began to appear that he was really losing. This was the first time I had ever liked or admired him. Nothing in his championship so became him as his leaving it. There had been a premonitory note in the live interview a few moments before he entered the ring. He was quiet, even somber, declined to make predictions, said, not meaning it so literally, "I'm at the end of my career."
- 8 Afterwards, there were no recriminations or excuses. Asked if different tactics in the early rounds might have won, he said starkly, "I did the best I could." He added, "It was God's will." (It was a good night for God; Spinks averred that He gave him the strength.) So always the myth must be reenacted; the King must die. Age and the young Lochinvar carried him away.
- 9 After the dreary, cautious shuffle of the last preliminary bout it was galvanizing to see Leon Spinks race forward before the bell was silent, throwing punches with all ten of his arms -- so it seemed in that blizzard of aggression. Here was the myth of the hungry nobody, the unknown challenger, guarding nothing, contemptuous of peril, risking all to gain all. It was the thing we feel never happens while knowing that ultimately it always happens. The difference is that it seldom happens quite so unexpectedly or in such purity of form as here.
- 10 Pity the men discussing the action. Spinks couldn't keep up that pace. They knew it. Spinks didn't know it, and he did keep it up. When Ali began to dance and jab and toy and show apparent control, everybody but Spinks knew the decisive turn had come. When the 24-year-old challenger passed the mythical barrier of 10 rounds into the realm he had never entered before, but where the 35-year-old champion dwelt, all said, "Now he's in Ali's territory." Now Ali would calmly carve him up.
- 11 The mini-epic 15th round, a jaded crowd on its feet and screaming, brushed close to another kind of myth, the never-never movie land of "Rocky." The unflagging fury of those three minutes, the all-out mutual risk, was as close as one gets to the choreographed constant action of movie prizefights, short of course of the bloody, mangled faces and gallant struggles to rise from the floor. It was a remarkably bloodless fight, except for Ali's cut lip, and there were no knock-downs. Yet it was a gripper. The single-purposed drive of Spinks, looking extraordinarily little in the ring with Ali, kept any round from being dull.
- 12 J. V. Langmead-Casserley, a theologian no less, once said that the ending of the tragedy of Hamlet is the beginning of the tragedy of Fortinbras. The spotlight passed to young Spinks, and with it the glory, the purse, even if only for one title defense, but also the temptations to hubris and the certainty that, in time, he must fall.
- 13 At the last one is tempted by the remotest possibility of a future super-myth. Michael Spinks, Leon's brother, a light heavyweight, also won in a preliminary bout. This poses the riddle of the Spinks: Might we see a title fight someday of Spinks vs. Spinks? That would match the myth of the mortal father-son battle of Sohrab and Rustum. After all, Leon Spinks said about cutting down his own one-time idol that in the ring you do what you have to do, and that is to get the top man.
- 14 No, the myths don't die. But the King does.