

**The Function of Myth:  
Transmission of Ancestral Memory and the Shaping of Cultural Consciousness**

**Sub-topics:**

**Western Theories of Myth**

**Greek Mythology**

**Pueblo Mythology**



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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.goddessariadne.org/ariadnegoddess.htm>

Mythology, like the severed head of Orpheus, goes on singing even in death and from afar. In its lifetime, among the peoples where it was indigenous, it was not only sung like a kind of music it was also lived.

-Carl Kerény<sup>2</sup>

The Western study of myth is inherently interdisciplinary and the myriad of voices contributing to this field include religious historians, classicists, anthropologists, folklorists, psychologists and theologians. It is a field of study that offers theoretically rich and often complex academic analysis, and is dynamic because the core theoretical assumptions have shifted over time from the nineteenth century diachronic focus on origins of myth to the twentieth century synchronic focus on the function and structure of myth.<sup>3</sup> This theoretical change in a relatively small span of historic time is due to the influx of data from anthropological field work and archaeological discoveries. This transformation was in part facilitated by the advancements in technology that occurred during this time period. More advanced technologies allowed for increased access to the world for Western people in the form of international travel, quicker and more thorough ways to obtain and disseminate information from foreign lands, and more accurate analysis of such things as material finds and field specimens. As Western thought evolved so did the ability to articulate it via technologies. In the case of the study of mythology, the theoretical arena shifted from being the sole realm the British classicists to incorporating the observations of anthropologists. As a result, academics expanded their scholarship from what had up until that point been primarily

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Kerényi and Carl Jung, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 3.

focused on Greek and Indo-European history to include indigenous and non-Western societies. As more myths were recorded by travelers, missionaries, colonialist administrators, ethnographers, and folklorists, the similarities in content and narrative patterns of global myths became apparent. These new ideas shifted the study of myth from a subject no longer seen primarily as a branch of literature or art but as within the realm of religion and cult.<sup>4</sup> This new focus facilitated the adaptation of a comparative method borrowed from the comparative study of language, philology and religion.<sup>5</sup> Theories of myth began to be grounded within particular disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, comparative religion, and folklore. Schools of thought arose within these disciplines and the nineteenth century idea that myth was a pre-scientific explanation of nature<sup>6</sup> began to be replaced by theories that interpreted myth from historical, psychological, social, and structural perspectives.<sup>7</sup>

This bibliographical essay looks at the study of myth and mythology. The first section summarizes some of the major theories of mythology from within several Western academic disciplines. The second section looks specifically at theories surrounding classical Greek mythology and its unique influence upon this field of study. The last section looks at Pueblo mythology and theories surrounding indigenous explanations and functions of these stories in an effort to offer ontological contrast, and to explore a deeper understanding of myth-making cross-culturally. The academic fields of the Western theories of myth, and of Greek mythology, are vast. I do not propose that this work is comprehensive, but instead I offer samples from a continuum of theories that have developed along with other fields of study

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<sup>4</sup> Theodor H. Gaster, "Myth and Story," in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, Ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 112.

<sup>5</sup> Dundes, *Sacred Narrative*, 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>7</sup> Lauri Honko, "The Problem of Defining Myth," in Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, 46.

and have contributed to the evolution of Western thought. My section on the Pueblo material is certainly not a comprehensive treatment, but represents a survey of some of the theories about the role and function of indigenous myth within the diverse societies that make up the greater Pueblo culture.

### **Perspective**

This study has been an intriguing journey for me. The subject of myth is close to my heart because my heart is pagan and my personal belief system is animistic. This means I believe that most of the deities in mythic stories are real, not in the Platonic sense of being purely conceptual, but in the sense they are, or have been, “persons”<sup>8</sup> with whom one can engage in relationships that have practical and empirical results. However, as a Euro-American, my perspective is inherently shaped by modern Western culture. I acknowledge this, and found this material an intriguing history of the philosophies that have sculpted my identity and the framework of interpretation that I bring to research. As a feminist, my Western academic lens is focused tightly on the treatment of the feminine by previous (male) scholars, including the tacitly assumed biased generalizations of the role of women and the feminine aspects of the divine in “primitive” societies, the usurpation of female contributions to history, religion and the development of culture, and the oftentimes complete erasure of the feminine element from history by the forces of patriarchy. Much of this material offended my modern feminist sensibilities. However, along with the nineteenth century racist, sexist, and colonialist arrogance exhibited by the new Western “scientists,” I recognized a passion in their work that manifested as a desire to understand the world and to push into new intellectual territory. These are traits I recognize in myself, and this deeper understanding of

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<sup>8</sup> A “person” is any manifestation of reality that one can engage with to some degree reciprocally. They are understood in this definition to be relational, volitional, and social beings in their own unique ecosystems. Graham Harvey, *Respecting the Living World*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), xvii.

my own philosophical and cultural legacy has given me both a feeling of strength and passion, as well as a reason to even more deeply deconstruct my own Western biases.

After the nineteenth century Western scholars, the Pueblo material felt like a relief to me, but also like a different sort of challenge. Because the structure of “Indian”<sup>9</sup> mythology originates from an indigenous worldview rather than a Western one, the narrative elements are not the same. The primordial and timeless nature of the stories and the lack of a clear cut beginning, middle, and end can be very disorienting for a “modern.”<sup>10</sup> However, being American I am made of this soil and that truth connects me to the indigenous people of this land. I feel I owe it to them, and to all the Ancestors to listen to the indigenous stories, not for the purposes of co-opting or interpreting them, but to allow them to sing to me. I had a vision once when writing another paper about Pueblo creation stories (I had been up writing for twelve hours) in which some Southwestern Indians were laughing at my attempt to write about them. It was as if my every attempt at understanding them failed because they refused to be pinned down in a manner in which my Western academic mind could capture in words. Then the vision shifted to a bunch of “white” guys with clipboards and lab coats pontificating about the “natives” while hovering around a big cactus. I looked at them, and then noticed off to side the “real” Indians were laughing their heads off because the subject of the scientists intense inquiry was the cactus and not the “savages.” They suddenly took notice of me watching them and one of them said to me, “Finally, a European daughter of this land who is listening.” I bring that spirit of reverence to my study of Indian mythology.

### **Western Theories of Myth**

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<sup>9</sup> This the term Professor Paula Gunn Allen used to describe her own ethnology in the online class she taught. Native American Spiritual Paths, Fall 2007.

<sup>10</sup> This is the term she used for we who do not share Indian ethnography.

This section surveys bibliographical material representing some of the major theories of Western mythology as it shifted during the last century. It is important to understand that this field evolved in concert with other areas of Western thought and philosophy. Besides anthropology, the study of myth was strongly influenced by new ideas such as the naturalist Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and Sigmund Freud's groundbreaking work in psychoanalysis. The influences of colonialism and monotheistic religion have inextricably left their mark on the discipline, and all theories discussed here are steeped in their own oftentimes undeconstructed Western ontological assumptions arising from the rationalism that contributed to the current model of modern science.<sup>11</sup> This is evident in the use of language and terminology that was acceptable decades ago but is decidedly offensive in this twenty-first century. For example, the word "savage" in some of these readings is taken for granted and used repeatedly to describe non-Western people. Similarly, the term "civilized" is used to differentiate modern culture from the cultures of the "savages." Of course, the ubiquitous pronoun "he," tacitly understood to include every "she," is used exclusively and without any blink of a self-reflecting eye. Ironically, these Western European (mostly) male theorists believed that they were using these words scientifically. They believed they had chosen an objective term for the purposes of identifying non-Western people and their non-Western models of society, and that they were following the rules of grammar that has dogmatized use of the male pronoun as the "correct" way to speak and write. However, these terms reveal undeconstructed racist, sexist, and colonialist worldviews that are no longer tolerated in modern scholarship. This kind of Euro-centric arrogance has been called to task in the last hundred years by feminists, people of color, and other global thinkers and activists who have challenged the European male model as the normative measure of humanity, and

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<sup>11</sup> Charlene Spretnak, *The Resurgence of the Real: Body, Nature, and Place in a Hypermodern World* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 54.

Western culture as the definitive model of “civilization. The result has been that Western thought from the twentieth century to our current times has expanded even more exponentially than the century before, with new fields of scholarship being born and creating themselves in the same way as the field of mythological studies has. Think of the fields of ecology and eco-feminism, African studies, Native American studies, feminist and womanist theologies, and the many different schools of psychology, to name but a few. Most of the nineteenth century theories that follow have been disproved or modernized in light of these new voices. However, they are important in that they are the foundational building blocks of the once fledging field of Western mythological studies and integral to the development of current theories.

### **Defining Myth**

A reoccurring and fundamental theme in this material is the attempt to establish a definition of the term “myth.” This is no easy task since this conversation has included diverse scholars from many academic perspectives. However, one idea loosely agreed upon across disciplines is that myth is no longer regarded as synonymous with fallacy, but in fact offers its own truth by its nature and by the nature of the information it carries. With this assumption, myth can be true both as method and as subject, even if its content is not necessarily factual in the historic sense. The folklorist Alan Dundes prefaces his comprehensive anthology *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, which features selections from scholars in several fields on the topic of the study of mythology, with an initial definition of myth: one which is shared by other theorists offered here in various forms. He states that myth is a “sacred narrative explaining how the world and ‘man’

(*emphasis mine*) came to be in their present form.”<sup>12</sup> This definition specifically narrows the parameters of what constitutes a myth. William Bascom, the folklorist and anthropologist, contributes the first essay in this anthology in which he delineates the characteristics of myth as distinct from legend and folktales. In *The Forms of Folklore* he offers a general template that categorizes all ancestral stories as “prose narratives,” but with distinct characteristics.<sup>13</sup> In his model myth is considered true because it is a factual account of the world’s sacred origins that occurred in the primordial past, and its principal characters were super-human and operating in a different or other non-linear world. Legend by his definition is also considered true as in being a factual account, but not sacred because it is an account of the recent past and speaks of secular human activities relative to current time. Finally, he considers folktales, indicated by tell-tale markers such as “once upon a time,” as being fictional because they never happened in real time, and they function as secular moral tales that can take place at any time and involve human or non-human characters.<sup>14</sup>

The Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko also contributes to this work with his gorgeously succinct essay *The Problem of Defining Myth*. He discusses the problematic semantic implications of using the term “myth,” noting that definitions widely range from meaning simple-minded and fictitious on the one end of the spectrum to an absolute true and sacred account on the other. He acknowledges that this term tends to carry emotional weight which biases it, and that this undeconstructed bias has “crept its way into common parlance as well as into scientific usage.”<sup>15</sup> He calls for definitions of myth to be based on a balance between empirical data, including using those traditions which are actually available, and the history

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<sup>12</sup> Dundes, *Sacred Narrative*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> William Bascom, “The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives,” in Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> Honko, *The Problem of Defining Myth*, 41.



of the scholarship of myth, including the language used to define it. His definition of myth is similar to Dundes.' It is a story of the gods and a religious account of the beginnings of the world, nature and culture. He builds his definition on four criteria; form, content, function and context. While the content of individual myths differ, they share the form of a narrative which can be brought to life through rituals, dramas, and liturgies that contain information about decisive creative events that occurred in the beginning of time. He sees the function of myth as expressing and confirming society's religious values and norms and providing patterns testifying to the efficacy of ritual.<sup>16</sup>

In *The Truth of Myth*, Raffaele Pettazoni, professor of the history of religions at the University of Rome, rejects the idea that myth, being the realm of imagination, is distinct from, or opposed to, the "real world."<sup>17</sup> His comparative study of religions outside of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, such as various North American Indian tribes, led him to conclude that myth is distinguished from other stories it by its "truthfulness." For Pettazoni, myths are stories of beginnings, of cosmogonies, and of the superhuman entities that brought reality into existence. They are true by their nature in that they are sacred history and by their content in that they represent the initiation of the "concrete sacral forces" that get repeated and retold through ritual. They are different from what he calls "false stories," which are treated ritually different and do not represent a true account of origins. Further, he contends that myth becomes the dogma that accounts for the "cultic" preservation of the world and the life of the society.<sup>18</sup> Another sampling from Dundes' anthology is Theodore H. Gaster's essay *Myth and Story*. Gaster is a folklorist and specialist in comparative religion. In this piece he speaks to the transformation in the study of mythology and calls it a young science

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>17</sup> Pettazoni, *The Truth of Myth*, 98.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 102.

that has perhaps reached “if not maturity, at least adolescence.”<sup>19</sup> He finds that theory has not caught up with the influx of data and new developments in the field over the last century, and that a redefinition and a new broader context for the study of myth are now necessary. Gaster is a myth-ritualist in the tradition of anthropologist Sir James Frazer. He rejects the idea of the study of myth solely as literature in which its truth depends upon the veracity of historic particulars. In this essay he is rejecting the idea that myth represents fiction and instead calls for a definition to include the idea that myth is cultic in function and inherently allegorical. He defines myth broadly as “any presentation of the actual in terms of the ideal.”<sup>20</sup> For Gaster, myth uniquely expresses the concept that the temporal, as well as the eternal, can be understood simultaneously. It is a metaphysical concept to be sure, and to get definitions tied up in the details of the narratives is to miss his point. This idea reveals a common point of disagreement within the many theories in this field of study. Does a myth represent a construct of a single phenomenon that can be applied universally, or is it best understood particular to its own cultural context and content?

### **Western Theories of Myth: Myth-Ritual, Unilinear Evolutionary Theory and Functionalism**

The advancement of the field of anthropology and archaeology changed the landscape of mythic studies. As ethnographic data began to become relevant in Western scholarship, theory began to shift. The many myths, and material finds, from various and “exotic” parts of the world revealed a commonality of narrative pattern. Nineteenth century scholars adopted a comparative methodology, using linguistics, structural analysis, social science, and eventually psychology to piece together myths from different sources in order to reconstruct a

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<sup>19</sup> Gaster, *Myth and Story*, 111.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

hypothetical original form of myth, a proto-myth, from which all individual myths were assumed to derive.<sup>21</sup> This began a trend in the field toward the universalization of common mythic elements and themes. Of course, theories rejecting universalization also arose and there were some who vehemently opposed this trend, notably from the field of anthropology. What follows is some of the major players in the field of the Western study of mythology in the nineteenth century during its formative years.

Perhaps one of the most influential theorists here is Sir James Frazer, a “library”<sup>22</sup> or “armchair” anthropologist who traveled relatively little and who obtained the majority of his ethnographical data by questionnaire. He managed though, to write one of the most read books of his time *The Golden Bough*, which is nothing less than a thirteen volume compilation of ethnographic information on rite and magic. Frazer has been critiqued for making generalizations extrapolated from diverse and particular societal rites and from taking that data out of ethnic context. However, his influence on the Western study of myth is profound. His large body of cited ethnographical material inspired subsequent theorists, as well as fascinated his public of the day with the raw newness of the accounts of other (brown) people.<sup>23</sup> He is known as the first myth-ritualist because he was the first person to connect myth with ritual as integral to understanding primitive religion, which he viewed as a remedial human attempt at science. Frazer was also a proponent of the unilinear anthropological evolutionary theory, which was inspired by a Darwinian model of evolution. In this theory, all humans and their societies pass through identical successive phases of cultural development, transforming from the “primitive” stages to our current “civilized” era. Further, it was assumed that contemporary “savages” reflect an earlier stage of modern

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<sup>21</sup> Dundes, *Sacred Narratives*, 72.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

people's evolution and that primitive cultures could be studied by "scientific" Westerners as a means to understand their own "primitive" history. Frazier saw the development of religion in the same way, as evolving from primitive magic to civilized religion and ultimately, to science.<sup>24</sup>

One of the most noted themes in Frazier's work is the application of the comparative method to the story of Genesis. In his essay *The Fall of Man* he pulls thematic similarities from indigenous myths to explain the differing versions of the story of Eden and the tree of life in the Old Testament. In this essay he looks at the phenomena of the serpent and its role as the trickster in indigenous stories and compares these elements to the pre-Semitic elements in the biblical story. Here he finds remnants of two stories. One is an older version in which the serpent represents a "cruder"<sup>25</sup> version of renewal and resurrection, and a later Hebraic version in which the human relationship to death has been re-written. He credits comparative methodology with being able "to supply the blank in the ancient canvas, and to report, in all their primitive crudity, the gay barbaric colors which the skilful hand of the Hebrew artist or effaced."<sup>26</sup> He interprets this shift, or clashing of stories, as an evolution of human culture from in which the "vein of rationalism" stripped away the many "grotesque features that adorn or disfigure the corresponding Babylonian traditions."<sup>27</sup>

Though eventually falling out of fashion, the myth-ritual theory was greatly influential and its proponents were key theorists in the study of myth. Robert A. Segal, a professor in the theories of religion, wrote a definitive essay on this subject. His work *The Myth-Ritualist Theory of Religion* is amazingly detailed and offers a thorough summary of

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<sup>24</sup> Pettazzoni, *The Truth of Myth*, 107.

<sup>25</sup> James G. Frazer, "The Fall of Man," in Dundes, *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, 97.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

the theoretical nuances debated by some of the most noted thinkers of the day. He writes that this theory was the first to focus on the importance of both myth and ritual to the study of religion, and to challenge the assumption of a gap between beliefs and practices.<sup>28</sup> Basically all myth-ritualists assume that a relationship exists between myth and ritual and they differ only in the particulars of what that relationship may be in terms of linear development and cultural function. This theory represents a scientific view of religion, as does the similarly significant intellectualist theory, which was also relevant at the time. For the myth-ritualists, primitive religion is assumed to be a magical way of controlling the physical world and represents an inherently practical adaptation by early humans as a means of relating to their environment. For the intellectualists, religion functions as an *explanation* of the world and its forces, and so belief is more important than practice. For both the intellectualists and the myth-ritualists, who were both clearly influenced by Frazer, religion is seen as primitive science. In this context religion is understood to serve the same function as science, the purpose of which is to understand and manipulate the natural world. Even though these two schools of thought disagree about whether religion is as an explanation of the world or a means of controlling it, both theories assume is myth false and science is true. This is distinct from later scientific functions of religion that are concerned with social, psychological and anthropological interpretations.

Anthropologist Edward Tylor was the classic exponent of the intellectualist theory. For Tylor original religion is the primitive belief in the ensoulment of nature and the gods, and humans make myths to explain the actions of those entities and forces they have personified. Myth-making is a response to intellectual problems rather than social,

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<sup>28</sup> Robert A. Segal, "The Myth-ritualist Theory of Religion," *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* vol. 19, no. 2 (1980): 173.

psychological, or existential ones.<sup>29</sup> Segal sees the classicists Jane Harrison and Samuel Hooke as the definitive representatives of the myth-ritualist theory because although Frazer is typically credited with this distinction, Segal writes that he actually shared elements of both the intellectualist Taylor and the myth-ritualists. Harrison and Hooke accused Tylor of “over-intellectualizing primitive man and primitive religion.”<sup>30</sup> For them, it was not so much that “primitive man” was philosophically oriented as “he” was focused on the practical and pressing needs of surviving in daily life. Ritual was a means of controlling the otherwise chaotic and potentially lethal forces of nature through the use of what Frazer identified as “sympathetic magic,” which functions under the premise that “like produces like.”<sup>31</sup> However, for Hooke and Harrison ritual did not directly manipulate nature toward man’s good, but instead manipulated the gods who then turned nature’s forces in favor of human society. Ritually, “men” play the parts of the gods in the mythic story of origins that binds their community and by rite imitate what they magically induce the gods to do. For Harrison, the primary definition of myth is that it is the script of the ritual. It is the spoken corollary of the acted rite and equally as potent. As much as Harrison and Hooke rejected the idea that myth is an explanation, they acknowledge that it may become so once it has ceased to be tied into ritual: once it stops being magical and instead functions as an apology for rites still performed by society even after the reason for performing them has been forgotten. However, the ontological rift is clear here. For Tylor religion originally serves as explanation. For Harrison and Hooke religion has actually lost its significance when it is reduced to explanation.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 175.

According to Segal, the main critique of the myth-ritualist theory of religion is that it assumes that myths and rituals exist only in relationship to each other, and that their primary function is magical. Rituals and myths can be interpreted as being independent of each other and there are other ways to interpret the phenomena of religion than primitive science. However, he finds looking at the evolution of this theory is as useful as describing the theory itself because it illuminates, not only its influences on other disciplines such as literary criticism, but the way myth and rite have been treated by Western theories of religion, whether that is by focusing on one or the other or by an absence of consideration of both.<sup>32</sup> Another problem is that theories of myth and ritual tend to suggest an underlying assumption of a unity of religious phenomenon. This implies a universalization of theory that tends to reduce theory to one dimension rather than viewing religion as ritualistic, ideological, intellectual *and* consequential, as others did after them.<sup>33</sup>

Segal does an excellent job of outlining the main theorists of religion who concentrated mostly on myth or on ritual. For the anthropologist Emile Durkheim, ritual was more important than myth, which he finds represents a system of group beliefs and arises after rite to explain it. Durkheim saw religion as centered, not upon a *belief* of god, but upon an *experience* of god. Rite produces the experiences of joy, serenity, and belonging that facilitate a collective renewal of faith and an affirmation of social beliefs. For the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who is best known for his field work in the Trobriand Islands, myth serves to explain ritual, which he describes as practical traditions designed to deal with the very real human relationship to the world. Segal excludes him from being a strict myth-ritualist because he also held that myth explained other social traditions.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 179.

Malinowski's work came out against the prevailing theories of the day, which tended to assume that myths were either true histories or that mythic characters always represented natural phenomena. He also rejected theories that intellectualized the function of myth or reduced myth to universal symbolism. The majority of myth-ritualists and the early students of the history of religions are what Dundes calls "library scholars" who hypothesize about myth on the basis of data gathered by others.<sup>35</sup> Malinowski was a proponent of an oppositional school of thought called functionalism that called for the study of myth to be squarely situated within its societal context and evaluated by the ways it specifically functions in a living community. He was deeply embedded in an anthropological view that arose from his own experience in field work with real non-Western people. In response to the "library" scholarship of the myth-ritualists, Malinowski called for "participant observation,"<sup>36</sup> in which researchers collect their own data and actually live among the people they study. For Malinowski this methodology meant not only getting out of England, but also not approaching anthropological field work solely from the comfort of a hotel or missionary. In his essay *The Role of Myth in Life* Malinowski criticizes theories that are not based on empirical data. Further, he is deeply antipathetic to the idea that myth could be viewed as symbolic or as a primitive attempt at a scientific explanation. For him, myth is a living reality that is a narrative resurrection of primordial reality accompanying religious, moral, and social traditions integral to the cohesion of a society.<sup>37</sup> He does not think one should universalize the phenomena of myth and he adamantly critiques Freud's theory that the Oedipus complex was a universal phenomenon. He points out that in a matrilineal society such as the Tobriand Islands, the relationship to the father is not the same as it is in patriarchal societies so that

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<sup>35</sup> Dundes, *Sacred Narratives*, 152.

<sup>36</sup> Dundes, *Sacred Narratives*, 194.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.



generalization cannot be applied to non-Western cultures. In this work he has a wonderfully sarcastic passage outlining the clashing academic viewpoints and many variations of theory within the Western study of mythology. Even though it is long, I cite it here because it is succinct and mirrors my own feelings after studying these European white men parsing theory on the “isms” of the “savages.”

“The science of mythology has been the meeting-point of various scholarships: the classical humanist must decide for himself whether Zeus is the moon, or the sun, or a strictly historical personality; and whether his ox-eyed spouse is the morning star, or a cow, or a personification of the win – the loquacity of wives being proverbial. Then all questions have to be re-discussed upon the stage of mythology by the various tribes of archaeologists, Chaldean and Egyptian, Indian and Chinese, Peruvian and Mayan. The historian and the sociologist, the student of literature, the grammarian, the Germanist and the Romanist, the Celtic scholar and the Slavist discuss, each little crowd among themselves. Nor is mythology quite safe from the logicians and psychologists, from the metaphysician and the epistemologists – to say nothing of such visitors as the theosophist, the modern astrologists, and the Christian Scientists. Finally we have the psychoanalysis who has come at last to teach us that the myth is a day-dream of the race and that we can explain it by turning our back upon nature, history, and culture, and diving deep into the dark pools of the subconscious...”<sup>38</sup>

Another nineteenth century “godfather” in the field of mythic studies was the anthropologist, sociologist, and historian Johann Jakob Bachofen who is best known for this theory of “Mutterrecht” or mother right in which he postulates that the earliest human historic cultural period was matriarchal. Bachofen’s theory was in alignment with the unilinear

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 197.

Darwinian model. He assumed that this early stage of human culture was a less developed version than the later patriarchal one, and that the shift from female-centered culture to male rule was a necessary evolutionary human advancement. In *Myth, Religion and Mother Right*, a compilation of selected writings translated from the German, Bachofen uses the comparative method to identify the matriarchal mythic elements from the later patriarchal ones. Like Frazer and the two versions of the fall of man in Genesis, he finds remnants of the older order mixed with the new order deeply embedded in myth and symbols and cites several examples, including the Greek matricidal story of Orestes and Aelmaeon<sup>39</sup> to prove his theory. For Bachofen, the matriarchal period revealed the “lowest stage of religion,” one he termed “tellurism,”<sup>40</sup> which he symbolically connected to the womb and to the earth. This lowly human phase was then surpassed by the higher religious stage, which was represented by the sun and characterized by the “greater glory of male power.”<sup>41</sup> This stage, which he links with Apollo, marks the historic era when the phenomenon of birth was removed from the “baser” realms of the physical and elevated to the male Zeus-like realm of pure intellectual conception. To Bachofen, the crown jewel of human religious evolution was the transformation of the sacred from the womb to the mind of men because it represented a “total liberation from the maternal bond.”<sup>42</sup> The idea that “man” must harness and tame women and nature in order to reach his totally transcendent legacy is a dominant mythic theme in Western thought and points to an undeconstructed assumption that has influenced all aspects of our “civilized” society. This assumption is the idea of men being less material than women and animals, and therefore superior to all other creatures. This assumption is validated and even ordained by the monotheistic theologies that dominate modern culture.

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<sup>39</sup> J.J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 110.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

The negative ramifications of this idea has been the subject of much feminist discourse and critiqued by thinkers and activists globally. A definitive example of this critique is the work of the poet Susan Griffin who takes on this subject in her groundbreaking feminist offering *Woman and Nature: The Roar Inside Her*. Succinctly, she writes “That Adam is soul and Eve is flesh.”<sup>43</sup>

Bachofen’s theory is universalist because it assumes that a single set of laws govern the development of human consciousness, culture, and history. He argued that since myth and symbol preceded science, they uniquely illuminate the way early “man” thought. Myth, for Bachofen, is a valid methodology in the excavation of historical antiquity<sup>44</sup> if one looks at the general idea or the symbol rather than the contents of the narrative.<sup>45</sup> He assumes a commonality of idea or theme can reveal a “greater dimension of general historicity.”<sup>46</sup> In his model, the Greek Aphrodite represents not a real entity or a historic personage, but the stage of matriarchy in which women were closest to their sensual, animal nature, and in which sex was unregulated by marriage. Demeter represents the next stage of development in which society began to regulate “maternity.”<sup>47</sup> Dionysus represents the struggle between the two stages, and Apollo represents the full articulated male “imperium” completely emancipated from materiality.<sup>48</sup>

As much as his interpretations have been critiqued and his theories rejected, one important point about Bachofen’s work is his assertion that there was an era in human history in which women were at the center. This theory was rejected by scholars of the day as preposterous, but this idea has been proposed by others, including the classist Jane Harrison.

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<sup>43</sup> Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 17.

<sup>44</sup> Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Rights*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

The feminist scholar and professor of comparative religion Rita M. Gross calls this the “pre-patriarchal hypothesis”<sup>49</sup> in which the idea of a universal patriarchy that originated from the beginning of human history is questioned. In her work *Feminism & Religion: An Introduction* she cites Bachofen for his assertion of a matriarchy, but deconstructs the bias of the term as meaning a reversal of patriarchy. The issue here, and many other scholars have addressed this including the feminist Riane Eisler and the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, is that one cannot impose power dynamics specific to patriarchal systems onto non-Western cultures in which women exhibit differently valued social roles. As Gross points out, such an interpretation is inherently biased because it assumes a single patriarchal model as a priori.

The classicist Jane Harrison, like Frazer and Bachofen, also theorized that an older substratum of indigenous deities, including a primal earth goddess, preceded the Hellenic Greek societies and their Olympian religion. What Frazer called “barbaric,” and Bachofen called “tellurian,” Harrison termed “Chthonic.”<sup>50</sup> She also applied a comparative methodology to distinguish and reclaim the chthonic elements in the Greek myths from the later Olympian ones. She finds that the chthonic female-centered ancestral deities were suppressed and usurped by the subsequent conquering male deities.<sup>51</sup> Harrison was a female pioneer in a very restrictive male environment. Trained in the classics, her studies were based on her knowledge of Western art and languages. She quite literally had the best education of the time for any man, much less for a woman. Harrison was a myth-ritualist theorist and a revolutionary in that she formulated her theories on Greek mythology from the evidence of archaeology, and not solely on the basis of the literature.<sup>52</sup> For Harrison, myth is most

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<sup>49</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Feminism & Religion* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1996), 153.

<sup>50</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 11.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvi.

accurately studied by examining the rituals because “rites and ceremonies are the facts, and are of amazing permanence,”<sup>53</sup> while the stories themselves shift and vary in version according to the “mental development of generations of worshipers.”<sup>54</sup> She espouses her approach to the study of myth in the essay *Mythological Studies* written for the Journal of Hellenic studies in 1891. In this succinct piece focusing on the three daughters of the Athenian Cecrops, we find the essence of Harrison. When looking at mythic characters, especially females and their roles in Greek mythology, she insisted on discovering their significance based on their cultic function. She asserted that by examining the shrines, which she found to be the material remains of religious system underlying the Greek myths,<sup>55</sup> and the remaining inscriptions, which she found to be the “actual ritual statements and records and not . . . merely poetical fantasies of literature,”<sup>56</sup> that these three sisters are aspects of the older earth goddess Themis and not Athenian in origin. She hypothesizes that this primitive female earth goddess manifests in different forms bearing different names, transforming over time as the culture of Greece transformed into Hellenic patriarchy. It is through her meticulous examination of ritual that led her to conclude that the chthonic elements are distinct and discernable from the Olympian elements because the nature of the rites performed to each level of deities is different in function, and cannot be interpreted to be an unbroken development.<sup>57</sup>

In her later work *Ancient Art and Ritual* she discusses the indigenous or “primitive” relationship to art and ritual that has been misunderstood in Western thought. In this work she extends her application of the comparative method and cites other cultures besides the Greek,

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<sup>53</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, "Mythological Studies," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* vol. 12 (1891): 350.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>55</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, xvii.

<sup>56</sup> Harrison, *Mythological Studies*, 351.

<sup>57</sup> Harrison, *Prolegomena*, 11.

including the Egyptian, the North American Shoshone and the Australian Aborigines. She contends that although ritual and art appear to be separate phenomena, they share a common root in ancient religion. While ritual in Western culture has come to mean a rote and obligated act lacking emotion or intention, and while art has been reduced to mere entertainment, both art and ritual played an integral role in Greek religion. She cites the city-wide reverential atmosphere surrounding the Athenian theater, which is more in accordance with a religious rite or ceremony than a secular whimsy. Harrison finds the pantomimes and dances to be examples of a primitive invocation of a god such as Dionysus,<sup>58</sup> and a ritual bridge between actual life and those representations of life we call art.<sup>59</sup> Although she is consistent with her theory that religion is a primitive science, and that rite is the means of that science, and that myth describes the mechanics of the rite, this work shows more of an influence of anthropology and psychology. Here she attempts to explain this primitive worldview by deconstructing the Western philosophical tendency to value reason at the expense of emotion. She contends that it is the generation of emotion that is the purpose of, and power of, ritual and that ritual is a practical means of securing the necessities of life.<sup>60</sup> This is why so many rites constellate around the seasons, the weather, and other natural forces that affect human life in the environment.

Another influential theoretic giant is Mircea Eliade, a twentieth century religious historian and philosopher who is most noted for his contribution to the Western body of knowledge on ancient religious practices and myths. Eliade is an important theorist because he was prolific, very well read, and integral in shaping the academic parameters of religious studies. His work *The Sacred and Profane: the Nature of Religion* is a comparative study of

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 50.

diverse religious and mythic elements. In this work he postulates the specific dimensions of religious experience and asserts that “man” is aware of the sacred because it manifests as something distinctive from the profane. His term for this manifestation is “hierophany,”<sup>61</sup> which he attributes to the core of religious experience because it points to an experience of reality that transcends the realm of mundane or ordinary consciousness. Eliade, as others mentioned here, employs a comparative method to interpret myth and religious rituals, and compiles examples of hierophanies from the ethnographical data of many “primitive” societies. In this work he focuses on the rites that sacralize space and time. In *Myth, Dreams, And Mysteries: the Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, Eliade discusses the importance of myth. He rejects the interpretation that myth is fable because it may be ahistoric, a trend that he attributes to the influence of Western positivism and Christianity and calls for the consideration of the phenomena of myth to be separated from the “Christian polemics against the pagan world.”<sup>62</sup> For Eliade, whose knowledge of “primitive” religious traditions is vast, myth is a “true history” of what came to pass at the beginning of time and a template providing a pattern for human societal behavior. Ritual is the re-enactment of the original sacred historic account of myth that is repeatable and therefore integral to religion because it facilitates our human elevation from profane reality into sacred space and time.

As brilliant and influential as Eliade was, his bias is glaring. Besides referring to himself in the “imperial we,” his theories are based on a Western dualistic philosophical assumption that elevates the sacred over the mundane, and the orientation of the male perspective over the female. This is not necessarily a distinction made in the cultures that he

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<sup>61</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1957), 11.

<sup>62</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: the Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities* (New York: Harper&Row, 1960), 23.

surveys. Further, he biases male contributions to religious structures and ignores the possibilities of female-centered mythologies that may have originated from positions other than patriarchal models. For example, he biases the hunting rites of Paleolithic males over the gathering rites of females. He contends that if agriculture did not develop then the many goddesses of the Neolithic period *could not have arisen*<sup>63</sup> (emphasis mine). This is, of course, an erroneous interpretation that fails to observe the obvious – if the “gathering” rites and practices of Paleolithic women were not central to Paleolithic culture, then no Neolithic agricultural revolution could have occurred because there would have been no ancestral knowledge or tradition from which a new culture of domestication could have evolved. Further, he consistently interprets imagery as primarily phallic and takes the hieros gamos, the union of male and female principles, as a primordial metaphysical template.<sup>64</sup> For example, he privileges the image of the agricultural accoutrement of the spade as the dominant activator in fertilizing the “telluric” earth. Recall that “telluric” is a term taken from Bachofen to describe a female form of materiality that represents a lesser stage of evolution by its very nature.<sup>65</sup> An excellent critique of Eliade is in the process theologian Carol P. Christ’s stalwart feminist spirituality work *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning In Feminist Spirituality*. She finds that Eliade’s interpretive framework precludes women and goddesses from contributing significantly to the study of religion. She succinctly calls him on his tactic of acknowledging the evidence of female-centered symbology, and then presenting it within the framework of andocentric theories.<sup>66</sup> Another to take Eliade to task for his universalist assumptions is the religious studies scholar Ivan Stenski. In his essay *Mircea*

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>64</sup> According to the feminist scholar Marguerite Rigoglioso, the union of the male and the female principal as the creative template is a patriarchal layer eclipsing the primordial pattern of parthenogenesis, which is female creative reproduction solely from the female. Marguerite Rigoglioso, *The Cult of the Divine Birth in Ancient Greece* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 33.

<sup>65</sup> Eliade, *Myth, Dreams and Mysteries*, 138.

<sup>66</sup> Carol P. Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1997), 80.



*Eliade: Some Theoretical Problems* he is vehement in his critique of Eliade's methodology. He derides Eliade's focus on the eternal rather than the historical, the metaphysical rather than the ethnographical particulars,<sup>67</sup> and accuses him of dogmatizing his theories into absolutes above the reach of any genuine scientific scrutiny. Eliade's metaphysical interpretation of the function of myth as existing psychically beyond historic and cultural particulars reveals the influence of psychoanalysis and the theories of Carl Jung.

Carl Jung's influence on the study of myth, and on Western thought, is incontrovertible. Jung was a protégé of Sigmund Freud, the first psychoanalyst. Jung diverged from his mentor and founded the analytical school of psychology. It was Jung who introduced the idea of the archetype into Western thought. In this theory, archetypes are motifs that repeat themselves in the human imagination, in culture, myth, and art as symbol and as motif, and continually emerge in myths and in dreams, and stem from what he termed the "collective unconsciousness." He describes this term as the part of the psyche that retains and transmits the common psychological inheritance of "mankind."<sup>68</sup> According to this theory, archetypes are not fantasies, delusions, or allegories of physical processes, but are real phenomena of unknown and unknowable origin. What is important to understand is that this theory assumes that as humans we are neurologically wired to perceive archetypes but that archetypes do not originate from our mind. For Jung, they represent "psychic organs" present in all humans,<sup>69</sup> and appear as involuntary manifestations of the collective unconscious.

In the beautifully illustrated work *Man and his Symbols*, Jung and his colleagues explain his theories in a series of essays that are accompanied by provocative images of

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<sup>67</sup> Ivan Strenski, "Mircea Eliade: Some Theoretical Problems," in *The Theory of Myth: Six Studies*, ed Adrian Cunningham (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973), 47.

<sup>68</sup> Joseph L. Henderson, "Ancient Myth and Modern Man," *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 107.

<sup>69</sup> Carl G. Jung, "The Psychology of the Child Archetype," in Carl Kerényi and Carl G. Jung, *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and Mysteries of Eleusis*, 79.

global symbology and mythology. While this is not strictly an academic work, it does express his theories about the unconscious, mythology, symbols, art, and the anima and animus.<sup>70</sup>

What is significant here is that Jung felt that archetypes are psychic remnants from earlier human states of development that exist because the unconscious mind of modern “man” has the innate ability to still make the symbols that once found expression in primitive religion’s beliefs and rituals. For Jung, embedded in myths are the archetypes manifesting symbolically in such motifs as the hero and the trickster, and in the processes of natural and psychological development such as individuation, and the integration of the shadow.

In his contribution to *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, which he co-wrote with classist Carl Kerényi, he rejects previous academic treatments of mythological motifs as discussed by the various disciplines mentioned here as “not exactly a help to us in recognizing their universality.”<sup>71</sup> Jung is perhaps the quintessential universalist because in his theory archetypes are pre-mental and not of human making, and yet they appear in every culture. With this reasoning he is able to apply his theory to all people in every culture throughout time. Jung’s theory is unilinear because he equates the stages of the psyche from unconscious to consciousness to the historic stages of human cultural development. So for Jung, the primitive mind represents the “pre-conscious”<sup>72</sup> stage of development that is most closely akin to myth. Our current stage in the “civilized” world reflects the more completely, but not quite fully, the consciousness state of mind that has evolved to be conscious of itself. This is a state of self-reflection that can be understood as “I know that I think.” In fact, Jung contends that “the primitive” cannot assert

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<sup>70</sup> Carl Jung, “Approaching the Unconsciousness,” *Man and his Symbols* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), 31.

<sup>71</sup> Jung, *the Psychology of the Child Archetype*, 70.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

that “he” thinks; it is rather that something thinks in him...moreover he is incapable of any conscious effort of will...”<sup>73</sup>

Like all of these giant thinkers, much criticism has been generated in response their grand theories. Kwok Pui-lan, a Christian theologian who writes about the influences of colonialism on religion and culture, deconstructs the unilinear assumptions of Jung’s theory (and similarly calls to task Durkheim and Freud). In *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* she writes that Western “men of reason” blindly labeled native and indigenous people as elementary, primitive, and childlike, and reduced them to objects of pity that needed the “civilized man” to teach them how to read and bathe.<sup>74</sup> Further, she contends that Western people have in fact imposed reductionist interpretations on the myths and religions of non-Western people and have failed to view them from within their non-Western Cultural context.<sup>75</sup> The feminist and religious studies scholar Naomi R. Goldenberg also critiques Jung’s theories in her essay *A Feminist Critique of Jung*. In this piece she asserts that Jungian psychology warrants a feminist critique because it has become a form of patriarchal religion, which is impermeable to critique, resistant to questioning its own assumptions scientifically, and to fostering of a cult of personality surrounding Jung.<sup>76</sup> Goldenberg deconstructs the inequity of the anima-animus model, and accuses it of being gender-biased, and rooted in un-deconstructed definitions of gender roles.<sup>77</sup> Jung theorized that an archetypal female is inherent in every male psyche, a phenomena he termed “the anima.” Conversely, he called the archetypal male that he posits is inherent in every female psyche “the animus.” Further, Jung characterized women as being oriented toward “eros,” which is a term that describes

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>74</sup> Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonialist Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Ky: WKJ Press, 2005), 72.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>76</sup> Naomi R. Goldenberg, "A Feminist Critique of Jung," *Signs* vol. 2, no 2 (Winter, 1976): 444.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 447.

animal intuition and attraction, and men toward “logos,”<sup>78</sup> which is a term that describes the human proclivity to cognate abstractions from physical, emotional and spiritual stimuli. This dualistic interpretation re-rings the bell of Bachofen and his tellurian and Apollonian designations and is a dominant theme running through the Western philosophical show that assumes the nature of the male is mental, and therefore elevated in value because of this distinction, while the female is associated with the physical, and is deemed inferior and less evolved. Goldenberg contends in her critique that the animus in the female personality is more of an afterthought for Jung. She quotes Jung, “Since the anima is an archetype, it is reasonable to suppose that an equivalent archetype must be present in women.”<sup>79</sup> Further, and perhaps more dangerously, she contends that the assumed archetypal nature of the feminine leads to biased interpretation of mythological material. Like the criticism of Eliade by Strenski, she posits that in Jungian theory the archetype is often assumed to be an absolute, rather than a working theory subject to change based on new data. She writes that as feminists we must challenge this absolute nature of the feminine archetype as it is currently embedded in patriarchal assumptions and “indulge in a rival search to find female archetypes” that can support feminist conclusions.<sup>80</sup>

The other contributor to *Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, is Carl Kerényi, a classicist who is a foundational theorist in Greek mythology. In his essay *Prolegomena* he discusses the meaning and significance of mythology. In this almost poetic essay he concerns himself with the aetiological aspects of mythology and posits a paradox which he claims faces historians of religion. “Mythology is held to explain itself and everything in the universe not because it was invented for the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 446.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 448.

purpose of explanation but because it possesses among other things the property of being explanatory.”<sup>81</sup> For Kerényi myth is both form and function in the same way that music operates. Reciting the lyrics of a song is not the same as hearing them sung. He asserts that myth is the same sort of experiential medium and that contemporary people have lost the ability to access the real meaning of myth because we are conditioned with the explanatory language of science, which basically kills the mystery of the medium. Like others mentioned here, Kerényi’s definition of myth speaks to origins and to the gods, but this origin continually renews in every new layer of deities. “The gods are so ‘original’ that a new world is always born with a new god – a new epoch, and a new aspect of the world.”<sup>82</sup> This theme of continual renewal takes myth out of the realm of linear historic time and back into Gaster’s description of myth as functioning both temporally and eternally. Kerényi is obviously influenced by Jung and likens the experience of myth to a psychoanalytic model. He applies the idea of continual renewal to the return of an individual to “his” personal origins, and defines myth as a sort of holographic germ in which “wholeness” can be experienced.<sup>83</sup> In this essay he acknowledges Malinowski’s theories of myth being a “lived reality,”<sup>84</sup> but critiques the functionalist position that denies the symbolical and aetiological characteristics of myth.

Another theorist influenced by Jung was Joseph Campbell who wrote prolifically in the area of myth and comparative religions. Campbell’s work compares mythic elements cross-culturally and universalizes them as “monomyths,”<sup>85</sup> which he applies globally and without much distinction of ethnographic or historic particulars. He theorized that such a

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<sup>81</sup> Carl Kerényi, “Prolegomena,” in Kerényi and Jung, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, 5.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>85</sup> Dundes, *Sacred Narrative*, 256.

monomyth is represented in the archetype of the hero, which is of course biased toward particular male roles in mythic stories. His work *Hero with a Thousand faces* was a comparative analysis of hero myths, which introduced the concept of the hero's journey to modern culture and popularized the field of comparative mythology. In *The Power of Myth* Campbell is interviewed by the journalist Bill Moyers. This is not an academic work but a conversation with Campbell about his ideas in a book beautifully illustrated with mythic motifs and symbols. For Campbell, myth is ultimately a portal into spiritual mystery and functions to teach the initiations of life, to validate and maintain cultural cohesion, and to impart meaning.<sup>86</sup> When myths are no longer living part of society, he finds society suffers in turmoil. To this end Campbell, like Kerényi, sees the language of science as a factor in the loss of the power of myth in contemporary times. Campbell's theories are derivative of Jung. He felt the meaning of myth was not literal but symbolic and that the symbolic meaning of myth was psychological.<sup>87</sup>

Campbell's work was critiqued for sloppy scholarship, uncited assertions, and a tendency to make broad unsupported generalizations. About Campbell, Dundes writes "Like most universalists, he is content to merely assert universality rather than bother to document it."<sup>88</sup> Segal offers a critique of Campbell in his essay *Joseph Campbell's Theory of Myth*. He refutes Campbell's assumptions that all myths are spiritual, that the meaning of myth is symbolic or even psychological, and accuses him of arbitrarily privileging myth as the source of meaning. "Why is man's travail not ascribable to the absence of, say, rituals or religion generally? Do myths alone provide meaning?"<sup>89</sup> Campbell himself acknowledges that he was

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<sup>86</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth: With Bill Moyers*, (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 14.

<sup>87</sup> Dundes, *Sacred Narrative*, 259.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

a generalist and that generalists are not respected in Western academia.<sup>90</sup> As I read his interview with Bill Moyers, it occurred to me that more than a scholar, Campbell was a mystic. His idea that mythic motifs are portals into spiritual states of consciousness makes sense in that context, as does his apparent lack of concern regarding the strict parameters of academic scholarship. He was more enamored with the spiritual and mythic journey that leads one to their “bliss.”

### **Theories of the Feminine**

Up until now, this section has presented the voices of men, with the exception of Jane Harrison. As we move into contemporary times we see the effects of the feminist movement on Western thought. Women’s voices now begin to add to academic discussions and are instrumental in shaping theory in all fields of study. In the area of myth, women have taken the comparative method and focused on female elements that have been traditionally subsumed within patriarchal models or outright erased. One such pioneering contributor is the poet Judy Grahn. Her work *Blood, Bread, and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* assumes a universalist theory of mythic human origins but positions it squarely in the realm of the feminine. Grahn takes a comparative analysis of anthropological material to unearth the contributions women have made to the development of culture and science. She looked at the varied and often dramatic menstrual seclusion rites exemplified in such works as Frazer’s *Golden Bough* and re-examined them from a female-centered context. Rather than simply assuming these rites to be products of male tyranny that victimized women, she

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<sup>90</sup> Campbell, *Power of Myth*, 12.

assumed instead that gendered rites evolved separately and that menstrual seclusion rites were based in “women’s logic.”<sup>91</sup>

She postulates that our original human ancestors began the evolutionary journey toward a cognitive self-reflective consciousness by a process of externalizing the world. “Our menstrual-minded ancestress stepped out of her excellent net of animal intelligence into the potentially chaotic external mind, the mind unique to human beings.”<sup>92</sup> The initial catalyst of this human evolution was women’s experience of menstruation and their rites of seclusion. For Grahn, this externalization of consciousness was a result of the cyclical nature of menstruation and its entrainment with the lunar cycles of light and dark that allowed our ancestors to make distinction, to learn to separate and therefore discriminate, and eventually to make sacred.<sup>93</sup> She contends that this process facilitated the need to externalize knowledge and that the female transmission of information eventually led to the creation of language, culture, and eventually science. According to Grahn, this externalized knowledge was imparted to society by way of metaphor as an act of instruction that makes a connection between menstruation and a mental idea. She calls this original metaphor a “metaform.”<sup>94</sup> In this work, she applies her theory comparatively to creation myths from diverse cultures. She interprets the characteristic mythic elements in creation stories, such as the separation of earth and sky, an emergence from chaos or an abyss, and timelessness as evidence of the original ancestral metaform.

Another trend in feminist writings on myth is the recovery of the feminine in pre-historic religion. The archaeologist Marija Gimbutas’ comprehensive research into Neolithic

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<sup>91</sup> Judy Grahn, *Blood, Bread and Roses: How Menstruation Created the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



Europe revealed an abundance of female “goddess” figurines, symbols, and art. She used a comparative method she termed “archaeomythology” that draws from archaeology, mythology, linguistics, folklore, and historical data<sup>95</sup> to inform her interpretation. Gimbutas postulated that a vast “pre-patriarchal” egalitarian and matristic<sup>96</sup> culture existed in Europe before being invaded by proto-Indo-Europeans at the beginning of the Bronze Age. Most controversially she hypothesized that the primordial deity for our Paleolithic and Neolithic ancestors was female.<sup>97</sup> Gimbutas has drawn much attention for her research, both in the form of acclaim and of criticism. However, she is a foundational theorist because she informed an entire generation of scholars who expanded upon her work. Two such theorists are Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, both Jungian analysts who co-wrote *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image*. This work is an attempt to bring the subaltern, or chthonic, aspects of the divine feminine back into the discussion of history through a comparative study of the female image in Western culture beginning with the Paleolithic. They assert that what has been lost in history is an original ancestral mythic model, one that reveals a way of human existence based on the idea that the universe is organic, alive, and sacred. They find that the mythic model of the divine as mother is a part of our human legacy and must be retrieved from its erasure, and its marginalization within images such as the Christian Mary. Even though the mother goddess myth was subverted, they contend in classic Jungian logic, that it still influences human consciousness because the female principal is an aspect of our human psyche.<sup>98</sup> They call for this myth to be “restored to full complementarity with the masculine

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<sup>95</sup> Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), viii.

<sup>96</sup> Gimbutas intentionally did not use the word “matriarchy” because of its connotation as a reversal of patriarchy. Gimbutas, *Civilization of the Goddess*, x.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>98</sup> Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London: Arkana Books, 1991), xiii.

principle if we are to achieve harmonious balance between these two essential ways of experiencing life.”<sup>99</sup>

The idea of a mythic ancient earth goddess has drawn criticism from a diversity of scholars, many who are feminist. Not only is the idea itself apparently cause for academic consternation, but the comparative method is almost always attacked when it has been applied to this subject. The archaeologists Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris take on this critique in *Ancient Goddesses: the Myths and the Evidence*. They represent this work as an effort to fairly explore the myth of an original mother goddess from both sides of the feminist debate. At hand is the question of methodology and the interpretation of evidence. In their essay *Exploring Female Divinity: From Modern Myths to Ancient Evidence* they reject the universalist interpretation some scholars apply to the goddess myth and discredit the influence of Jung in scientific interpretation. They claim that just because Jung assigned “her” the immutable status of an archetypal reality, that does not legitimize a generalized interpretation of specific and diverse material finds.<sup>100</sup> This work is a gathering of essays from feminists from scientific fields who apparently offered their “coherent yet undogmatic interpretations”<sup>101</sup> on the topic. For the authors, the “result has been a revelation. Apparently, this revelation did not illuminate a single, fundamental pattern universally repeating itself, but a picture of staggering diversity.”<sup>102</sup> What is ironic here is that Cashford and Baring claim to have approached their comparative study of historic goddess images without an intention of proposing a theory of an ancient goddess, and yet they ended up doing so because they discovered “such surprising similarities and parallels in the goddess myths of apparently

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>100</sup> Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, “Exploring Female Divinity: From Modern Myths to Ancient Evidence,” *Ancient Goddesses: the Myths and the Evidence*, Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris (University of Wisconsin, 1998), 8.

<sup>101</sup> Whew, what a relief!

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 16.

unrelated cultures that we concluded that there had been a continuous transmission of images throughout history.”<sup>103</sup> Goodison and Morrison saw the same evidence and came to the opposite conclusion. On the surface this debate appears to be another example of the universalism of the analysts versus the functionalism of the scientists. However, the cards are stacked in this debate, and in this work, because the “scientists” enjoy the tacit assumption of a position of objectivity while the analysts are already marginalized by the authors as unscientific. This is what Christ accused Eliade of: the acceptance of the presence of female images but presenting them from with a patriarchal framework. In this way, the bias of the framework is eclipsed because it is assumed to be normative and objective. Anything contrary is therefore seen as irrational and unscientific, and those who reframe the interpretation in a different light, regardless of how meticulous their research may be, automatically are relegated to the marginalized periphery of the academic discussion.

The last work offered in this section is *Wise Women of the Dreamtime: Aboriginal Tales of Ancestral Power*, collected by Katie Langloh Parker in the nineteenth century in Australia and edited by Johanna Lambert. Parker was the daughter of colonialist landowner and the wife of an European sheep farmer who spent most of her life in intimate contact with the Australian Aboriginal culture. She was one of the first non-Aboriginal people to record their legends and one of the first to be honored access to their deeply spiritual female rites.<sup>104</sup> This book represents a meticulous and culturally respectful<sup>105</sup> anthropological work by a Victorian woman who Lambert describes as lacking any “academic education or motivation.”<sup>106</sup> By accident and by passion, Parker appears to be an example of a researcher

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<sup>103</sup> Baring and Cashford, *Myth of the Goddess*, xi.

<sup>104</sup> K. Langloh Parker, *Wise Women of the Dreamtime: Aboriginal Tales of Ancestral Power*, Ed. Johanna Lambert (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1993), xiv.

<sup>105</sup> Parker, *Wise Women of the Dreamtime*, xii.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

who employed what Malinowski termed “participant observation.”<sup>107</sup> Lambert writes that Parker would engage in dialogue with the Aboriginal storyteller until she translated the meaning of each word and the concept of each story as accurately as she found possible. This collection of stories is unique because “these renditions breathe life into our experience of Aboriginal legends,” which Lambert writes had previously been “handled in the sterile terminology of the andocentric world of British Anthropology.”<sup>108</sup> Although her field work was received enthusiastically in London and America, Australian anthologists gave it little merit because they found her subject matter “primitive” and “inconsequential.”<sup>109</sup> Parker’s response to this Western philosophical bias was to superimpose monotheism on the clearly animistic ancestral beings of the Aboriginals. She emphasized a male deity, one among many, and equated him with a monotheistic god in an effort to bypass the unilinear label of “primitive,” in Western perceptions. She did this to present to the world in the best way she knew how the depth of Aboriginal spiritual traditions and their indigenous ontological perceptions.<sup>110</sup> However, Lambert acknowledges that this approach was also a result of her own nineteenth century bias. She writes that Parker could not fully reconcile Aboriginal “spiritual, sexual and emotional freedom,”<sup>111</sup> or the polytheism of indigenous religion, with Victorian thought and Christian monotheism.

Lambert describes the Aboriginal culture as one of the oldest continuous and matrilineal societies in the world, and dates the legacy of these stories to Paleolithic times. Further, she contends that their culture is founded on the “preeminence of the characteristics” of what Lambert calls in a Jungian fashion, the “Universal Mother,”<sup>112</sup> and a priori

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<sup>107</sup> Dundes, *Sacred Narratives*, 194.

<sup>108</sup> Parker, *Wise Women of the Dreamtime*, xiii.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

relationship with nature as provider of life. If this is so then the myth of an original pre-patriarchal goddess has historic relevancy if we are allowed interpretation based on an aboriginal culture in which neither the women, nor the gods function according to Western norms, and in which focus is on relationship with the earth and the ancestors as living aspects (persons), rather than dead theories, of the community. Lambert writes that Aboriginal dreamtime stories are predecessors of what we have come to call myths (in Western culture), and that they encompass all of the definitions and functions that have been attributed to the word 'myth' throughout history." Far from being ahistoric fictitious tales, she describes the dreamtime stories as representing mythic processes, and a "mode of perceiving, experiencing and expressing the relationships between our visible world and the invisible forces, patterns, and intelligences that have existed since before the world's creation."<sup>113</sup>

### **Summary**

The last two hundred years has revealed a dynamic and diverse theoretical evolution in the field of the study of myth as the new sciences of anthropology, archaeology, and comparative religion began to exert influence from their particular perspectives. Theories evolved that viewed myth as a form of primitive religion that should be studied in context with rituals or else seen as an explanation of religious beliefs. A comparative methodology was adapted in order to study myths cross-culturally, and the question of the universality of common mythic themes and elements became a dominant theoretical assertion. In response, the school of functionalism rejected universalist interpretations and insisted that myths could not be stripped of their narrative content and cultural context, and must be understood by the role they played in the societies that generated them. As Western thought evolved, contributions to the discussion of the nature and function of myth were made by the

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psychologists who found meaning in symbol, and by feminists who used myth to reclaim the role of women in history and the presence of a divine feminine in religion. Within this discussion we have also witnessed the oftentimes racist, sexist, and colonialist assumptions that have influenced these theories, and we have witnessed the shifting from those worldviews with the influx of new voices from feminists, and global thinkers, and activists who have begun to shape academics. In the next section, we apply these ideas specifically to Greek mythology.

### **Theories of Greek Mythology**

A few dominant themes emerge when discussing the particularities of the study of Greek mythology. First, many scholars acknowledge that these stories contain pre-Hellenic and Hellenic elements and represent a mixing of cultures and ideologies. For many, and certainly for feminists, the earlier chthonic elements reveal a matrilineal cultural sensibility that valued women and the role of feminine in “primitive” religion differently than in patriarchal societies. Further, the Greek myths were one of the first and primary focuses in the study of mythology before the influence of anthropology and psychology. For the classicists, they were primarily understood as, and associated with, the study of literature. Theories about them have greatly shifted with the influx of new theory and data. Finally, the development of logic in Greece that was fundamental in development of Western philosophy, which occurred during the time of Plato, assigns the Greek culture and mythology a unique place in history and in the field of mythological studies. This section looks at some of the theories past and present that discuss the origin, role, and function of Greek mythology.

In his work *The Greeks and their Gods*, the classicist *William K. C. Guthrie* discusses the fledgling theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and finds that the enthusiasm exhibited by the new scientists did not always translate into accurate theory. Further, it was

with the Greeks that mythology changed from being considered a study of art that was without a religious context, and derived from the literature of a dead culture, to a field that comparatively contextualized the stories within the genre of primitive religion, cult, and rite. In fact, he says the study of the history of religion was born at this same creative time, and it was with the study of the Greek myths that diverse scholars began to seek a “kernel of true religion” that was the “central and original impulse behind all religions.”<sup>114</sup> This idea of a single original pattern of religions reflects the same universalistic theoretical trend discussed in section one, and further attests to the development of science and academic fields of study during this time period. Guthrie asserts that the theories of the time that sought an a priori common pattern were initially applied to pre-Homeric Greek mythology in which the people whose stories these myths represent were clearly pagan.

Guthrie understood that the Greek myths were complex and must be understood, not as a simplistic dogma of one culture, but as a hybrid of conquering migratory people and the indigenous people that made culture before them. According to him, the Greek gods are hybrids and their myths at the Hellenic level do not represent an orthodox account of origins,<sup>115</sup> but rather represent a complex and genius record of the mix of these beliefs in the Mediterranean. This is not a new idea to other scholars, including Harrison and Gimbutas, and Guthrie’s work here is dedicated to the exploration of the different origins and influences of the Olympian gods who he says arose from different tribal peoples and then “set up house together on Olympus.”<sup>116</sup>

Guthrie makes a very interesting point about this mixing of religious and mythic elements. He writes that the conquering “race does not wipe out all trace of the conquered,

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 36.

more often it is the indigenous stock which displays the greater vitality and stronger powers of survival.” Guthrie sees this tendency as the result of the invader’s inherently pagan practicality because “in these strange lands their own gods may well be *less powerful* (emphasis mine) to them, if indeed that are present at all, and it is of great importance to get the new gods on their side”<sup>117</sup> through ritual offerings. This observation points to a polytheistic ontology and reflects an indigenous world view more than a Western intellectualist interpretation because it perceives the gods, and therefore the source of religion, directly connected to the local geography.

Clearly, the Greeks and their mythology represent an important evolutionary turning point in religious thought as it transferred from paganism to monotheism. The most obvious example is Zeus who was the transplanted sky and weather god of the invading tribes from the East, and who is the template for the monotheistic god of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Guthrie cites the many variations of the names of Zeus that are associated with diverse local cults, and finds the mythic elements of his marriage and his rapes of the local earth goddesses<sup>118</sup> to be evidence of the assimilation the diverse, and often clashing cultures. However, Guthrie rejects the unilinear theory of a progressively more civilized evolution of culture that moves from female to male, and from polytheistic to monotheistic religion. He deconstructs that bias and instead finds that “the terms ‘primitive’ and ‘developed’ are unsatisfactory because they contain no hint of an explanation why one of form of religion is different from another.”<sup>119</sup>

The myth-ritualist theorist, Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* is a classic in the study of the Greek myths. In this eighteenth century work she uses

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 34.



a comparative methodology that draws from archaeology and philology in order to painstakingly separate the chthonic and Olympian mythic elements. This method was revolutionary at the time because she insisted that myths should be understood by examining the rites associated with them, and not be solely viewed solely as literature. She was responding to the tendency of early theorists to romanticize the image of the Greeks as the “paragons of transcendent rationality,”<sup>120</sup> and extol the glories of Greek literature in a kind of “creative amnesia” while ignoring the “savage” elements.<sup>121</sup> In this work she accuses the poet Homer of this perception, as well as fifth century historians such as Thucydides. Her assertion that the chthonic and Olympian mythic elements are distinct, and represent the religious practices of two diverse cultures, arises from her examination of the evidence of rites, which she says are functionally different. Harrison finds that the rites originating from chthonic elements were not intended as religious celebrations, a view that was often imposed on them by interpretation through the lens of Christianity, but as a means of practical negotiation with ancestral spirits and deities. She asserts that this kind of religious practice does not share the concerns of modern religions in the areas of ethics, repentance, sacrificial atonement, fear of judgment, or a longing after a heavenly beatitude.<sup>122</sup> Primitive religion in this interpretation functions more as a practical business deal, or a negotiated transaction between the gods and “man.”<sup>123</sup>

Though this work has been influential, her interpretation of the connection between myth and ritual has been discounted or modified in subsequent theory. She herself amended her earlier assumptions in her later definitive and cumulative work *Themis: A Study of the*

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<sup>120</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), xix.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

*Social Origins of Greek Religion*. Here she retracts her assertion that the elaboration of myth occurs when ritual practice becomes obscured or misunderstood. She also acknowledges the new minds in the field that had subsequently influenced her thinking. In this work, she exhibits a deepening of her understanding of her life's research. She writes that primitive religion was not based on a "tissue of errors leading to mistaken conduct; rather it was a web of practices emphasizing particular parts of life, issuing necessarily in representations and ultimately dying out into abstract conceptions."<sup>124</sup>

The poet and novelist Robert Graves's infamous work "The Greek Myths" is a compendium of thousands of details from what he calls the "disorganized corpus of Greek mythology" that contain a mix of historical, political, philosophical, and allegorical elements from Crete, Egypt, the Levant, and Babylonia.<sup>125</sup> In this work, he defines myth along the same lines as Harrison does, as a reduction to narrative shorthand of rituals that were recorded pictorially on archaeological material finds. Graves was a prolific writer and an esteemed poet in the first part of the twentieth century, but as a scholar his methodology and interpretation have been discredited as being sloppy and overly generalized (he is reminiscent of Joseph Campbell in this respect). However, two things stand out about this work. First, he views the Greek myths from the assumption that Europe was at first "matriarchal" and that the first divinity was a great mother goddess who was immortal and changeless.<sup>126</sup> Graves, like Gimbutas and others, found that the early mythic elements dealt with cyclical phenomena and the life cycles of plants and mammals that were connected to the regenerative power of this mother goddess. Secondly, Like Gimbutas and Guthrie, he asserts that invading tribes conquered and merged with the indigenous cultures in the Bronze Age. He writes "A study of

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<sup>124</sup> Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Gloucester, Mass., 1974), xii.

<sup>125</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Combined Edition* (London: Penguin, 1982), 12.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Greek mythology should begin with the consideration of what political and religious systems existed in Europe before the arrival of Aryan invaders from the distant North and East.<sup>127</sup>

Graves found the clashing of the chthonic and Olympian elements to be indicative of this major cultural shift, one that transformed an ancient “Pelasgian”<sup>128</sup> female-oriented and pagan Europe, into a patriarchal culture that worshiped, not the moon and the cycles of birth, death, and regeneration, but the deification of an idea which was represented by the myth of the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus.

I find Robert Graves to be uniquely important in the discussion of European history because he expressed in no uncertain terms the power struggle inherent in the shift from matrilineal to patriarchal culture in Europe, the shift from oral mythic language to written logical language, and the corresponding evolution from polytheism to Western monotheism evident in the myths of Greeks. He does this in a directness best left to the poets, rather than to the academics. In his other definitive work *The White Goddess: a Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, which looks at the mother goddess of Europe from the poetic language of the Celts, he most fabulously and brazenly writes about the struggle for political power and cultural identity that occurred during this time. “Socrates, (the teacher of Plato) in turning his back on poetic myths, was really turning his back on the Moon-Goddess who inspired them and who demanded that man should pay woman spiritual and sexual homage: what is called Platonic love, the philosopher’s escape from the power of the Goddess into intellectual homosexuality, was really Socratic love.”<sup>129</sup>

The next offering in the study of the Greeks is Geoffrey Stephen Kirk, a classicist scholar from the twentieth century. In his work *Greek Mythology: Some New Perspectives*

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 11.

published in the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* in 1972, he critiques the myth-ritual, the functionalist, and the psychological theories as they have been applied to Greek mythology. He asserts that the Greek myths are unique and cannot be viewed to be the definitive pattern of a universalist theory of myth because they were altered by the rise of literacy. He asserts that literacy makes an enormous difference to a mythical tradition and in the case of Greece, the content of oral myths was retained as the basic plot element of literature, while “new kinds of elaboration and variation changed the underlying emphasis.”<sup>130</sup> Specifically, he finds these stories unique in their thematic restrictions in the tales of the deities, the elaborate, but conventionalized heroic myths, and the shortage of fantasy by comparison with other mythologies. In other words, certain themes were emphasized and made common above others, and then became the un-deconstructed focus of early theories of Greek myths. Read here – patriarchal elements that emphasized the father and the rise of tribal patriarchy. Further, he sees a great influence from the near east and Egypt in this mythic literature which also puts its “pure status” as mythic template into question. He contends that all theory must take into account the “inconsequentialities” (reminiscent of Harrison’s “savage” chthonic mythic themes), those elements that are not congruent with Greek culture, such as the flood motif, which was not an actual concern for the living societies in that area.<sup>131</sup>

Enter now the psychologists and the feminists who have taken the themes of mythic theory and applied them to Greek mythology. In this vein, Carl Kerényi wrote a hermeneutical work *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* in which he explores the rites of the mythic Demeter and Persephone/Kore at Eleusis. Although he was a classist he was greatly influenced by Jung and the psychoanalytic model of interpretation. In this

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<sup>130</sup> Geoffrey S. Kirk, "Greek Mythology: Some New Perspective." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 92 (1972): 77.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

work, he seeks to reconstruct the mystical core of the mother/daughter rites that were enacted in Eleusis for a thousand years and were an integral aspect of Greek society. His methodology is comparative, using on-site archaeological investigation and mythology to explore the “historical fact” of visionary experience that appears to be at the center of the Eleusinian mysteries.<sup>132</sup> He assumes that “sacred action”<sup>133</sup> is at the heart of religious rites. In this view, the Eleusinian rites were not dramatic pantomimes or theatric reenactment of the myths, but rituals designed to facilitate the initiate’s direct experience of the mysteries of the goddesses Persephone and Demeter. It is important to note that although he was certainly inspired by the universal application of Jungian theory, Kerényi rejects an abstract application of Jungian archetype to these myths and any Jungian application to all religious rites universally. He states that his research and his methodology are intended to recreate only the particulars of the ecstatic experience at *Eleusis*.<sup>134</sup> This work is an interesting interpretation of ancient pagan religion based on material finds and the detailed accounts of rites and mythology<sup>135</sup> by a classical theorist who embodied a Jungian model of religious phenomena and who was mystical in his approach.

The modern classicist Helen P. Foley writes in *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary and Interpretive Essays*, that the hymn to Demeter is a central text in the study of Greek mythology because it is accessible to analysis from many theoretical perspectives. She gives as examples the myth-ritualist, anthropological, psychoanalytical, literary criticism, and feminist approaches.<sup>136</sup> In this work, she attempts to reposition the

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<sup>132</sup> Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton, New Jersey: 1967), xxxvii.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, xxix.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>136</sup> Helene P. Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretive Essays* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), xiii.

classic myth of the mother and daughter from within a female perspective in order to understand the ways in which Greek women related to their society and to each other. This work is an anthology from feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives that explores this myth as a way to understand Greek family structure and gender roles in a politically and culturally changing Hellenic Greek society. Foley, like Kerényi, understands this myth as representing the pre-Hellenic, chthonic elements, but deliberately chooses to highlight the Homeric version of the Hymn as classic poetic literature that is female-oriented rather than religiously focused. She does this to counteract the traditional privileging of the works and interpretations of “upper-class, Western, white males in introductory humanities courses” who set the standard in classic literature in the nineteenth century and obviously biased the study of literature and the classics toward patriarchal interpretations.<sup>137</sup> In this work she offers a wonderfully rich translation of the Homeric version of the hymn from the Greek. She explains line by line the historic and narrative references inherent in the work. This depth of translation allows the archaic poem to be revealed to the modern reader and make relevant and personal its coded mythic richness.

Another work by a modern feminist classicist is Miriam Robbins Dexter’s *Whence the Goddesses: A Sourcebook*. This meticulous cross-study of ancient female Neolithic goddesses from Europe and the Near East brings into awareness the abundant mythology and symbology of female deities that have been usurped, marginalized, and erased from traditional scientific and academic interpretations. This work is reminiscent of the offering discussed by Cashford and Baring and is an academically rigorous effort that expands upon the work of Gimbutas. She uses comparative methodology to examine the historic evolution of female motifs and iconography in conjunction with myth, and to excavate chthonic cultural

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., xi.

levels that reveal a multiplicity of goddesses as manifestations of an ancient understanding of a divine feminine as a “unity.”<sup>138</sup> She presents archaeological and mythic evidence of distinct cultural versions of similar motifs that are clearly female, and point to an original human religious sensibility that perceived the divine in terms of the female as mother, and the function of religious rites as perpetuating her natural cycles.

Two other modern works that bring Greek mythology into the realm of feminist psychoanalysis and herstoric revision are the feminist scholar Christine Downing’s *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for our Time*, and *Life’s Daughter/Death’s Bride: Inner Transformations Through the Goddess Demeter/Persephone* by the feminist and Jungian Kathie Carlson. Both works acknowledge the matristic layers embedded in the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, explore the stories as modern tools for healing the effects of being female in patriarchal culture, and are embedded in the field of goddess spirituality and scholarship. In Downing’s anthology, she especially focuses on the retrieval of positive female images inherent in the myth that describe on the bonds between women, and which use chthonic elements of the myth to re-envision a pre-patriarchal world.<sup>139</sup> Carlson focuses on the myth and its rich elements to explore archetypes of being female in the world, the natural and cyclical patterns of maturation and relation, and the dynamics of gender and sexual roles.

One last important feminist and goddess-oriented work relevant to this discussion is *The Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: a Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths* by the eco-feminist scholar Charlene Spretnak. Written in 1971 and prefaced by Joseph Campbell, this slim offering rewrites the classically accepted versions of the Hellenic Greek myths from a

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<sup>138</sup> Miriam Robbins Dexter, *Whence the Goddesses: A Source Book* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990), ix.

<sup>139</sup> Christine Downing, *The Long Journey Home; Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for Our Time* (Boston: Shamabala, 1994), 3.

female-centered perspective. This work is a pioneering feminist attempt to bring into relevancy the chthonic female elements of the Greek myths and to bring into relief the patriarchal overlays imposed onto early Neolithic cultural matristic elements that are evident in the Hellenic forms of the Greek myths. Spretnak discusses the theory proposed by Gimbutas of a clashing of indigenous and tribal cultures in Neolithic Europe and the Near East and rewrites the patriarchal Hellenic versions of female goddesses to reflect a matristic and female-oriented sensibility. She discusses, as did Harrison and others mentioned, the original “Neolithic earth mother”<sup>140</sup> and the usurpation of the potent cultural myths of the Greeks<sup>141</sup> that played an integral role in the development of patriarchal and monotheistic Western thought.

### Summary

The Greek myths occupy a unique place in the history of Western mythological studies and in the development of Western thought. In the nineteenth century these stories were seen as the universal and definitive templates for all myths globally and were the focus of classic literature. As the new academic fields of anthropology, psychology, and feminism developed, theories regarding the role and the relevancy of Greek mythology in Western history changed. These myths began to be understood as hybrid stories influenced by a historical rise in literacy in antiquity, and mythically representing a cultural collision in early Europe between indigenous and conquering tribal peoples and their opposing religions, rites, and customs. Some theorists focused on separating the earlier pre-Hellenic elements from the later Hellenic ones and interpreting their findings from within their diverse fields. In that exploration many theorists found that the earlier mythic layers may have originated from a

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<sup>140</sup> Charlene Spretnak, *The Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 45.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



pre-patriarchal culture that constellated around a female mother goddess who evolved into multiple cultural forms and represented a world view distinct from later layers in which male heroes and deities were emphasized. Interpretations of the idea of an evolution of a matristic to a patriarchal culture ranged from unilinear theories of a progressive and more civilized human development from primitive cultures to theories of an archetypal universalization of human mythic and religious experience, and finally to feminist theories that sought to recover the eclipsed role of the feminine in history, religion and myth.

### **Theories of Pueblo Mythology**

*Pueblo* is a collective term used to refer to the many native peoples of the Pueblo crescent located in the Southwestern United States. This area stretches from Taos in north central New Mexico westward to the Hopi mesas of northeastern Arizona. Tribes include the Hopi, Zuni, Laguna, and Keres<sup>142</sup> and do not represent a single homogenous culture. Mythology functions differently in these Indigenous American societies than in Western culture for several reasons. First, Indian culture is based on oral rather than literary traditions. This fact means the role of myth in society, in rite, and in literature is fundamentally different than it is in literate societies in which myth is most often regarded as fallacious dead literature. Secondly, for Indians, mythology has always functioned to bring cyclical ancestral wisdom to the community, to impart a sense of identity to society members, and to reinforce a harmonious human relationship to the land that has sustained them for millennia. For the Pueblo, myth is a living tradition that is interconnected with the religious traditions and ceremonies that are at central to their societies. Finally, it is important to that understand mythology in Indian culture has been changed by the impact of colonialism, Christianization, and the attempted genocide perpetrated by Western people on indigenous societies.

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<sup>142</sup> <http://puebloindians.aanativearts.com/>

The idea that Western theorists of myth have missed the indigenous point when looking at Indian mythology is conveyed in “Re-inscribing Mythopoetic Vision in Native American Studies” by the scholar Kelley E. Rowley. In this work he acknowledges the development of the many Western theories of myth over the last century as discussed in this essay and describes the focus of current theory as either emphasizing the words and symbols of myths or the ritual function of myths in society. He writes that these Western theoretic debates are destined to continue as long as interpretation is grounded within the perspective of Western academic fields of study. Kelley proposes another interpretation that is vital in understanding the role of myth in indigenous societies. He finds the missing piece in current theoretic applications in the study of mythology to be the overlooked idea that “myth and ritual are based on visionary experience.”<sup>143</sup> Informed by the Indian poet and scholar Paula Gunn Allen, he illuminates the ontological distinction between Western “objective” scientific approaches to the study of myth and those of “visionary people.” The visionary basis of both myth and ritual has been deliberately ignored in Kelley’s view because of Western rationalistic bias toward such non-rational experiences.<sup>144</sup> By grounding interpretation within anthropological, ethnographical, and sociological frameworks, Western scholars easily dismiss indigenous peoples’ description of visionary experiences as “anthropomorphic, primal, savage and primitive.”<sup>145</sup> Further, he finds that once the visionary experience is rejected the formation of Indian culture is no longer understood to be the result of a revealed religion but reduced to only socio-historic factors. In this piece he is calling for Indian myths to be put back into a mythopoetic context that recognizes the true nature of myths as transmitters of sacred power. To take myths out of such a context relegates them to a “dying

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<sup>143</sup> Kelley E. Rowley, “Re-inscribing Mythopoetic Vision in Native American Studies,” *American Indian Quarterly* vol. 26 no. 3 (Summer, 2002): 493.

<sup>144</sup>

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

curiosity.” He writes that “the tragic end of a myth is when footnotes are mistaken for scholarly endeavor.”<sup>146</sup>

One of the most salient voices in Indian scholarship is the feminist poet and Laguna Indian Paula Gunn Allen. Her corpus of works focuses on the feminine aspects of the misunderstood and subsumed Indian religious traditions and on modern Indian literature. In *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* she brings to light the struggles Indian people, particularly women, suffer as they attempt to keep their identities, myths, and traditions intact after surviving the debilitating effects of European-American colonialism.<sup>147</sup> She critiques the terms Western scholars have used to describe Indian mythologies that reveal an obvious lack of understanding in interpreting Indian myths and rituals from within indigenous ontologies, and that perpetuate the Western racist and colonialist theoretical biases. She writes that the “great mythic and ceremonial cycles of the American Indian people are neither primitive, in any meaningful sense of the word, nor necessarily the province of the folk; much of the literature, in fact, is known only to educated, specialized persons who are privy to the philosophical, mystical, and literary wealth of their own tribe.”<sup>148</sup> She further critiques the Western bias against visionary experiences as being hyper-intellectual and a result of the philosophical climate in Western thought that has been influenced by Freudian and Darwinian theories.<sup>149</sup> In this work she describes myth to be a sacred reality that one participates in, if one is lucky, and that symbols are “statements of perceived reality rather than metaphoric or poetic statements” that fall into a Western universalist and psychoanalytical interpretations. Lastly, she critiques the unilinear theory

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 494.

<sup>147</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 43.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 68.

that assumes non-Western societies are childlike, primitive, and less evolved than Western societies. She poignantly writes that “no Indian can grow to any age without being informed that her people were ‘savages.’”<sup>150</sup>

In *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman’s Sourcebook* Gunn Allen has collected stories from the oral tradition of Native North America. This work wonderfully focuses on the feminine power inherent in Indian mythology and gives us a glimpse of the potency of Pueblo goddesses such as Spider Woman, Thought Woman, and Iyatiku.<sup>151</sup> In her introduction she describes myths as telling of origins and as factual accounts that inform consciousness and facilitate direct awareness with the forces of nature. However, they are also multivalent and offer portals into the social, environmental, and ritual realities of Indian culture when properly situated within their broader tribal context.<sup>152</sup> For Gunn Allen, original Indian religious traditions are centered upon the creative power of the feminine and interchanges with the supernaturals that were created by the ancient goddesses. In this work she focuses on the metaphysics of the myths so that they function as “ritual maps or guides” that enable women to “recover our path to the gynocosmos that is our spiritual home.”<sup>153</sup> She rejects Western theories that reduce myth to psychological patterns and instead grounds her interpretation within her indigenous perspective. For Gunn Allen myths are stories that connect the human world with the supernatural world of power and function, with ritual, to keep the tribal society in balance with the holographic forces of the natural world.

These stories can feel almost alien to read. This is because their narrative structure is built upon oral traditions and do not always conclude in an ending that Western people are

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<sup>150</sup> 46.

<sup>151</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Women’s Sourcebook* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), xiii.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

used to reading in literature. One can get lost in the cyclical nature of the stories that seem to spiral back upon themselves in a timeless and disorienting way. This is because the Indian “multiverse”<sup>154</sup> is always cycling and because the focus of female religious traditions is not hierarchal or transcendent, but based upon a spinning web of complex relations that facilitate the continuance of life. In this work Gunn Allen invites we “moderns” to read the myths with spiritual, rather than physical eyes, so that we can experience the changes in consciousness these potent stories elicit.<sup>155</sup> To this end she also offers a historic range of Indian stories by Native writers in *Voice of the Turtle: American Indian Literature 1900 – 1970*. In her preface she discusses the history of Indian literature and how it has been affected by colonialism. She also discusses the silencing of Native voices due to extreme racism, the reshaping of the ancient stories by the end of the nineteenth century, and the resurgence of Indian literature in contemporary times.<sup>156</sup> This is a rare jewel because she has sampled most of the Native writers that published during the last two hundred years.

One source cited by Gunn Allen is Hamilton A. Tyler’s work *Pueblo Gods and their Myths*. This is a wonderfully comprehensive work that details some of the major Pueblo mythic themes and their varying forms. In this work he presents many tribal versions of common Pueblo stories, such as Thought Woman’s creation of the world<sup>157</sup> and the Hopi emergence myth.<sup>158</sup> Tyler was not a scholar and admits this in his preface. Rather, he became interested in the landscape of the Southwest and the many Pueblo archaeological sites in that area. Since he was not situated within any academic discipline, he was free to present the complexities of Pueblo mythology and the corresponding cosmologies without taking a

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>156</sup> Paula Gunn Allen, *Voice of the Turtle: American Indian Literature 1900 – 1970* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 6.

<sup>157</sup> Hamilton A. Tyler *Pueblo Gods and Myths* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 116.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 103.

position on their meaning. He absorbed himself in the culture simply because we wanted to understand it and because current theories by Western scholars were inadequate to explain the phenomena of Pueblo deities. He writes that Pueblo scholars at the time mostly ignored the deities or considered them unimportant. “The invisibility of the deities is not an answer; they are not negligible merely because we cannot see them, but only because we are blind. I wanted to see. When one cannot find the book he needs, the best alternative is to write one himself.”<sup>159</sup>

Two more works should be noted here that offer sampling of two distinct perspectives on the study of Pueblo culture and the role of myth. “Aspects of Pueblo Mythology and Society,” by the early twentieth century anthropologists Karl A. Whittfogel and Esther S. Goldfrank, discusses the methodological failings of the then current study of Pueblo culture. In this work they find that scholarship had focused almost solely upon the religious and mythological aspects of the society rather than the secular spheres of life and did not represent a true picture of the complexities of Southwestern Native populations. In this work they called for the inclusion of historical data such as agricultural traditions of subsistence, climate changes, and socio-political structures,<sup>160</sup> and the effects of such factors on the very distinct and dynamic Pueblo societies. In “Dreaming of Double Woman; the Ambivalent Role of the Female Artist in North American Indian Myth,” the art historian and professor of cultural studies Janet Catherine Berlo offers a feminist reading of native American women’s position as artist. In this work she draws from the rich body of myth and folklore to express the central position of women as artists in Indian societies.<sup>161</sup> She re-frames mythic analysis

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>160</sup> Karl A. Wittfogel and Esther S. Goldfrank, “Some Aspects of Pueblo Mythology and Society,” *The Journal of American Folklore* vol. 56, no. 219 (Jan. – Mar., 1943): 19.

<sup>161</sup> Janet Catherine Berlo, “Dreaming of Double Woman; the Ambivalent Role of the Female Artist in North American Indian Myth,” *American Indian Quarterly* vol. 17, no.1 (Winter, 1993): 32.

from within a feminist perspective in order to provide a more balanced picture of gender relations and cultural values that “may prove to be different from what we have been led to expect from other sources.”<sup>162</sup> She makes the point that it is not adequate to simply read myths as mirrors of social values but that it is necessary to approach them as multivalent mediums because myths about women may give a different message to woman than to men. The double woman theme that appears in many Indian stories describes the Indian woman artist, who weaves, beads, and quills, as the holder of great and primal creative power. However, she finds this mythic element reflects a dual lesson. On the one hand it positions the role of women artists as creators of and maintainers of culture. On the other hand, it warns of excessive or obsessive use of this inherent female creativity.<sup>163</sup>

### **Summary**

Pueblo myths cannot be analyzed by the same criterion as European myths because they do not originate from within Western culture. The role of myth as sacred story, as living oral tradition, and as portals into consciousness-shifting non-rational visionary realms makes the function of mythology in diverse Pueblo societies different than in Western societies, in which classic mythology is still viewed as tradition from a dead literary past. Theories of Pueblo mythology necessarily take into account the historic context of colonialism and racism that have reshaped the living stories over two centuries and reflect the changing Indian cultural identity. Theories vary on how much emphasis should be placed on religion, rite, mythology, and history when attempting to understand Pueblo culture. Further, feminist interpretations have highlighted the central role of the feminine in Indian myth, culture, and

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 34.

religion, in a way that illuminates a worldview fundamentally different from Western unilinear explanations of gender roles and relations.

### **Conclusion**

Mythology is a complex aspect of the human religious traditions and a foundational aspect of human culture. Myths are ancestral legacies that have presented themselves in various forms in numerous societies throughout historic time. At first glance, the study of myth can appear to be a deceptive venture because most modern Western people have come to believe that the word “myth” means something inherently ahistorical, non-sensical, or decidedly fallacious. However, myth is rich both experientially, and as an object of study, precisely because it calls into question the definitions of history, memory, time, identity and community. Ultimately, what this field of study actualizes is the relative nature of the concept of truth and how it relates to history. It also brings into focus the nature of cultural identity and the role that religion, rite, and myth play in defining what we call “self” and “society.” Further, the field of mythic studies offers a revealing portal into the evolution of Western thought as it transformed from the nineteenth century to contemporary times, revealing itself ontologically as it turned its academic focus onto non-Western cultures that have been subjected to being the subject of Western “science.”

The study of mythology is a dynamic and evolving field, transforming from the nineteenth century focus on mythology as classic literature to theories that included anthropological, psychoanalytical, Darwinian, historic, and feminist perspectives. The study of the Greeks played a key role in the evolution in the theories of mythology in Western academic disciplines and shifted as the philosophical environment incorporated the data from anthropological field work and archaeological material finds. These new theories also brought to the forefront re-visioned ideas of pre-history, including feminist explorations into



matristic versions of early human. Finally, the study of myth as it pertains to non-Western societies, such as the Southwestern Pueblos also shifted from Western driven interpretations to analysis based from within indigenous perspectives that view myth as a living, oral tradition with women in a different role than in Western culture. This is by no mean a comprehensive analysis. There are so many more strands of the web to explore in this inquiry. However, I have tried to touch broadly upon some dominant themes in the study of the theories of mythology and to illuminate the shaping of this relatively new field of scholarship as it has shifted over the last two hundred years and represents a marker for the evolution of Western philosophical thought.###