

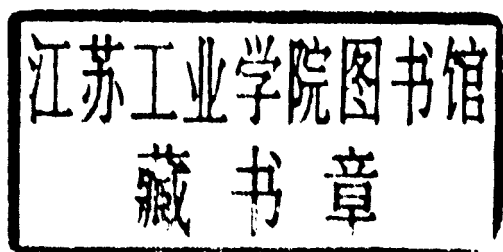
Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction

Susan Sellers



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Preface

My parents took me to the London Planetarium when I was eight years old. I have no memory of this trip other than a vista of stars in a night sky which may be no memory at all but merely the picture conjured in my mind by the word 'planetarium'. Indeed my mother insists that I spent the entire visit with my eyes floorwards as I tried in vain in the darkness to untangle the knots in the string of my yoyo. The point is that what should have been my first fervent encounter with the wonder and mystery of the heavens left me detached and bored. It was too scientific, too packed with information my brain could not take in, too remote from my own experience. An outing to the same Planetarium today is a very different proposition. The setting has not changed: there is still the domed ceiling with its panoply of stars, but now there is a story to help you through. A space craft navigates the sky looking for a planet on which to land. Those aboard have had to leave their home which is under threat from an exploding star. There is plenty of detail about the distances between planets and the precise gaseous mix of different atmospheres: a plethora of facts and figures to satisfy even the most curious. But this time there is also a narrative, with its usual ingredients of identification and drama which impel us finally to care about Mars' freezing temperatures or that Neptune is swept by raging hurricanes.

There is something else. Watching the face of the little boy I had taken with me, I realised that the story he was hearing connected to stories he already knew. He was perfectly familiar with space craft and unknown voyagers from television and books. On the way home he told me a tale he had read about a family lost in space whose ship did not have enough fuel to return to earth. The story of the London Planetarium gained impact from its relation to the tales and images that already created his cultural mindscape. There was yet another level to the Planetarium's decision to use narrative that set me thinking about myth. In a context of global warming and nuclear and chemical warfare the tale of a disintegrating planet strikes a pertinent and terrifying chord. The prospect of having to abandon the earth now lies within the realm of possibility. The portrayal of voyagers searching a hostile universe for a new home voices a contemporary configuration of the fundamental fear of survival.

This book is about the power of myth in giving expression to our common experiences and about the role of narrative in enabling us to undergo, shape and survive those experiences. It takes the view that stories play a formative part in creating who we are since they present a medium through which we can organise, communicate and remember our experiences, proffering ready-made schemata that equip us to understand and evaluate our lives by connecting what happens to us to a wider community and other points of view. It is also, more specifically, about the questions and alterations to existing paradigms generated by Western feminism in the final decades of the twentieth century and the imaginative, sometimes provocative, always interesting responses of women fiction writers to that interrogation. This is a vast topic, and one which is clearly beyond the scope of any single volume. While I abhor prefaces that begin with apologies, it is nevertheless the case that this study could have been written several times over, with a different set of writers and texts each time. Despite the immense corpus of work my initial research produced, I knew that I did not want my discussion to turn into a sweeping overview in which it would be impossible to do more than gloss a list of titles. I also knew that I wanted to cover as wide a range of contemporary women's rewriting of myth as I could, encompassing canonical figures and less well-known writers, the so-called literary novel alongside more popular works, as well as a broad band of fictional genres. Consequently I have chosen to include writing that might in other contexts come under the category of science fiction, romance, lesbian fiction, horror, erotic writing, crime fiction, comedy. One's choices nevertheless begin with oneself, and I am aware of the extent to which my previous work on French as well as English women's fiction has shaped the decisions I have made. The rich seam of women's postcolonial rewritings in English of myth and cultural traditions is not considered here, nor are fictions which I am only able to read in translation. While the texts I discuss cover a large spectrum of mythical antecedents from Egyptian, Greek, Christian, literary and contemporary cultural sources, their compass is not complete. When Anne Sexton, in her opening poem to her collection of radically altered fairy tales, has her narrator identify herself, she is locating a starting-point feminism has since revealed to be crucial.¹ Choices, then, are never neutral, but neither is reading. My work over the past twenty years has involved an ongoing engagement with literary theory and particularly French feminist preoccupations with the constitution of the self and the role of language and writing in that formation. This theoretical material has provided me

with a rich basis from which to read contemporary women's rewritings of myth, which I have preferred to the historical interests of feminist mythographers.

In the opening chapter, I survey past and current thinking on myth in order to consider myth's nature and function, as well as recent literary theory to examine the issue of feminist rewriting. Chapter 2 begins with Apuleius' tale of Psyche and pursues its twin themes of beauty and monstrosity in relation to stories by A. S. Byatt and Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*. Since both authors employ comic techniques, my reading draws on theories of comedy as well as feminist material. Chapter 3 focuses on Hélène Cixous's *The Book of Promethea* and Christine Crow's *Miss X or the Wolf Woman*, both of which foreground love as a crucial arena for myth-making and myth-breaking. Religious and particularly Christian myth is the concern of Chapter 4, which explores the issue of women's relation to God in the context of Michèle Roberts's fiction and the theoretical writings of Luce Irigaray. Chapter 5 examines the rewriting of literary myths, concentrating on horror stories by Anne Rice and Emma Tennant. Julia Kristeva's work provides the theoretical framework for the discussion here. Female beauty is once again the starting-point for Chapter 6, in which Marina Warner's retelling of the legend of the Queen of Sheba, Emma Donoghue's feminist fairy tales, Sheri Tepper's ecological fantasy and Alice Thompson's spoof detective novel are read in connection with Judith Butler's concept of performativity. The final chapter continues this investigation into the nature of perception and reflection through the fiction of Angela Carter. Carter's view of myth as 'consolatory nonsense' is linked to her portrayal of the maternal, and to Nicole Ward Jouve's notion of literature as a powerful aid in the ongoing task of separation from the mother and accomplishment of selfhood. Underlying the entire sequence of readings is my thesis that myth's form and collaborative gestation offers empowering paradigms for our collective and individual presentations, analyses and transformations.

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1

Contexts

Theories of Myth

What is myth?

Dictionaries are always a useful place to start, even if only to provide a jumping-off point for disagreement and quibble. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives a surprisingly short definition of the word ‘myth’. It states it is ‘a purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena’. It points out that as a consequence it can mean ‘a fictitious or imaginary person or object’, and that there is the subsidiary meaning in standard usage of ‘an untrue or popular tale, a rumour’. In this instance, the dictionary definition does not advance us very far, since its insistence on the ‘purely fictitious’ appears to override the complex interactions between life and story that seem the generating force of myth even while its inclusion of the ‘popular’ returns it to the common domain. Perhaps mythographers will provide us with more fruitful descriptions.

A myth, writes Lewis Spence in what appears to be an expanded gloss of the *OED*, is the account of the deeds of a god or supernatural being, often devised in order to explain our relation to the universe, the environment or a social programme.¹ Michael Bell, hedging his bets on the dictionary options, defines it as ‘both a supremely significant foundational story and a falsehood’.² For Eric Dardell, myth is a ‘typical’ story with immediate and exemplary impact, whereas for Riane Eisler it concerns ‘larger-than-life’ people and events that are passed down from generation to generation.³ R. G. Stone stresses myth’s moral dimension, whereas what is important for John J. White is the fact that myth is so continually repeated that it gradually creates

its own resonant force.⁴ For Sigmund Freud myth is the projection of psychology onto the external world; for Jean-François Lyotard it is a form of fantasy; for Albert Cook it is a 'technique for handling the unknown'.⁵ Robert Graves suggests that myth has two main functions: the first is to answer the type of 'awkward' questions children ask, such as 'who made the world?', the second is to justify the existing social system and to account for rites and customs. Myth, according to his view, offers a 'dramatic shorthand record' of historical, geographical and social changes.⁶ W. R. Halliday agrees with Graves that the origins of myth lie in the human endeavour to understand the universe, and he sees the commonality of the problems of existence as the reason for the striking similarity of myths around the world.⁷ F. Max Müller calls myth 'a disease of language', while Nor Hall describes it as 'the original mother tongue'.⁸ For Mircea Eliade myth is timeless and eternal; for Eric Dardell, what is striking about myth is that it actualises everything in a constantly repeated 'now'.⁹ Lauri Honko identifies twelve different ways of perceiving myth, ranging from myth as explanation for enigmatic phenomena, to myth as unconscious projection, myth as art form symbolically structuring the world, myth as religious genre, myth as a charter for behaviour, and myth as a legitimisation of social institutions.¹⁰ For T. S. Eliot myth's usefulness lies in the order its designs impose on the flux and anarchy of modern life; for Marina Warner, it is the openness of myth, allowing for the weaving of new meanings and patterns, that creates its ongoing potency.¹¹

A common view of myth, particularly among nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mythographers, is that it is the means by which so-called 'primitive' peoples understood the world. J. G. Frazer, for instance, in his pioneering twelve-volume study *The Golden Bough*, sees human evolution as progressing through cycles characterised by magic, then religion and culminating in the rationalism of science.¹² Raffaele Pettazzoni, to cite just one critique of Frazer's approach, refutes the idea of successive cycles, on the grounds that magic and religion are inextricable and that human thought is both 'mythical and logical at the same time'.¹³ Pettazzoni's first point parallels the concerns of Jessie L. Weston's influential study *From Ritual to Romance*, in which she shows the links between fertility rites that involve a dying and reviving god and the Christian Jesus.¹⁴ Margaret Dalziel argues that myth originated in the incantation accompanying a ritual act, while G. R. Manton shows how this spoken component was freshly elaborated at each performance, depending on the occasion and the

nature of the audience.¹⁵ Implicit in Manton's view is the notion that myths were gradually embellished and honed over time through audience participation and the invention of the tellers until they achieved the maximum effect.¹⁶ Bronislaw Malinowski believes that although myths depict the origins of phenomena and customs, they serve to perpetuate rather than elucidate these. Myths posit an ideal precedent which warrants the validity of things as they are. In some instances, he writes, in an interesting twist on the stigma of falsehood that appears woven into the very etymology of myth, their function may even be one of deception; he details, as an example, how a myth of rebirth does not explain death but on the contrary explains it away, by diminishing or denying it.¹⁷

This traditional view of myth as a 'primitive' people's equivalent of science has continued to hold sway among more recent mythographers – though with some interesting new twists. An example is the work of Hans Blumenberg, who sees myth as a means of dealing with the anxiety generated by our first ancestors' transition to an upright, bipedal position. He argues that their subsequent exodus from the sheltering forest left them vulnerable in open savanna where there was rarely a direct threat, and where the 'fight or flee' mechanism was consequently inappropriate. Myth, he suggests, evolved as a way of rationalising anxiety by subdividing it into specific agencies which could be addressed and dealt with. It compensates for our biological non-adaptation by reducing the absolutism of reality, a fact which explains its continuing power since it assuages where rational explanation cannot.¹⁸ While there are evidently many problems with Blumenberg's position – his crude analysis of the evolution of the human brain and his narrow definition of myth among them – I cite his argument here as an illustration of the ongoing endeavour to connect mythology to human origins.

Sigmund Freud's infamous account of an 'Oedipus' complex at the core of psychic life is itself an example of how myth can frame the way we understand and interpret our experience. What is perhaps less well known is his study of myth in terms of human individuation. In an interesting reworking of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Freud equates myth with the blissful ignorance of early infancy, religion with the developing awareness of childhood, and science with the fully mature adult who has come to terms with reality. According to this view, myth-making belongs to the infant period of fusion with the world, before the differences between self and m/other and the laws that govern the social order are assimilated – a point to which I shall

return.¹⁹ For Freud, myths function in the mature adult in the same way as individual fantasy by offering concocted solutions to intolerable situations, and he suggests that they operate according to the processes of condensation and substitution, dramatisation and symbolisation that structure dreams.²⁰ Freud's correlation between the origins of myth and individual human development has continued to resonate in the assessments of more recent critics, such as Colin Falck, who argues that myth is a universal stage that precedes and accompanies the acquisition of language. He links the emergence of myth to a child's gradual discovery of its bodily capacities and limitations, and he sees the attribution of 'gods' as satisfying the need to give form and comprehension to powers that cannot yet be fully conceptualised. Falck rejects the view that myths are proto-science or 'primitive' endeavours to explain the world, stressing that at this stage the disjunction between fact and reason has not occurred. Myth, in his account, is thus a mode of perception rather than an attempt at elucidation, and he insists that 'mythic consciousness' continues to shape our vision of the world.²¹ Nicole Ward Jouve, taking up psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's notion of the function of a 'transitional object' in easing the child's passage from the early, illusory state of connectedness and omnipotence to acceptance of the world of others, sees literature (and myth as a crucial part of it) as effecting such a role. She endorses Winnicott's view that this process of 'reality-acceptance' is never complete to argue for the continuing importance of narrative and symbol, with the reminder that – like the child's thumb, cuddle-blanket or floppy toy – such an 'object' is in itself gender-neutral.²² Joseph Campbell also sees myth's significance in its capacity to deal with what he identifies as the two major transition points of human life: the passage from immaturity to autonomous adult and the ultimate relinquishing of responsibility and preparation for death. His assessment prompts him to describe this function of myth as a 'second womb'.²³

The work of Carl Jung underpins so much current thinking about myth that it is worth outlining his position in some detail. The key to his theory of myth lies in his idea of a collective unconscious common to all, comprised of 'archetypes'.²⁴ These he defines as typical forms of behaviour which manifest themselves as ideas and images to the conscious mind. He argues that archetypes generate and shape all our most powerful thinking, initiating science and philosophy as well as mythology and religion. Drawing on the writings of Schopenhauer, Jung posits the idea of the ultimate unity of existence, which he

considers stands outside space and time: such categories, he believes, are imposed on reality by the limitations of human thought and language. Archetypes derive from this transcendental unity, and even though they may be shaped by consciousness into opposing concepts they remain facets of the same reality. For Jung, the continuing influence of archetypes explains why identical motifs reoccur throughout world mythology and even appear in the thoughts and dreams of individuals today who have no knowledge of mythical tradition. If his theory is correct, then it would also shed light on why myth continues to exert such a compelling hold, since the motifs it employs derive from our most basic motivating instincts. Jung describes the archetypes as 'deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity', thereby leaving open the possibility that as our experiences alter so will the archetypes that instigate our myths.²⁵ Jung also believes that myths have an organising function since they 'behave empirically like agents that tend towards the repetition of these same experiences'.²⁶ Given that we are no longer, thankfully, living at the time of Homer when – as anyone who has read his *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* can testify – war dominated and women figured as prizes to be possessed and exchanged by men, Jung's theories offer a compelling manifesto for feminist myth-makers despite the many objections, ranging from mysticism to a tendency to universalise on the basis of Western sources, that can be laid against them.²⁷

Jung argues that the archetypes are not determined in terms of their content but in terms of their form, and this only to a very limited degree. They provide an 'empty' structure, the content of which is filled with the material of conscious experience and which consequently changes in each new manifestation:²⁸

the archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear.²⁹

For Jung, myths are much more than an allegorical expression of natural phenomena: they are the symbols of inner, unconscious drama which only become accessible through projection and telling. As such they offer crucial messages, providing insights into unrealised or neglected aspects of personality and issuing warnings of imbalance or wrong action. Jung insists that it is the structure rather than the content of myth which constitutes its power, since the structure is transhistorical while the content is relevant only within a specific time

and place. The myths and folk tales we have inherited are consequently expressions of the archetype which have received a specific time stamp and been handed down.

One way of distinguishing between nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies of myth and more recent analyses is to see the former as endeavouring in the main to establish origins and the latter as more concerned with structure and functions. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in a series of ground-breaking investigations conducted from the 1940s to the 1970s, worked on thousands of myths from around the world in an attempt to articulate their common format. He categorically rejects the idea of myth's origin in a 'primitive' mind as itself a myth, arguing that the level of thinking myth displays is as rigorous as that to be found in modern science. Similarly he discredits the idea that myths are devised to express common feelings or to explain phenomena since such a notion does not answer the question of why, if it is the case, this should be done in such elaborate or circuitous ways. Lévi-Strauss draws on structural linguistics to examine the composition of myth. He argues that myth, unlike poetry, is infinitely translatable, and he analyses its presentation of events as apparently timeless to suggest that its substance is contained not in its style or syntax but in the story it tells: in the way its constituent components or 'mythemes' combine together to create meaning. He proceeds from this to see the structure of myth as a progression from the awareness of opposites to their resolution, stressing that it is this that gives energy to a myth as it burgeons and mutates through its various tellings, until the impulse from which it sprang is exhausted and the myth dies.³⁰

Roland Barthes, another influential French thinker of the 1950s to 1970s, also draws on structural linguistics in his analysis of myth. For Barthes, myth is best thought of as a type of speech, characterised not by its message or purpose but by the way the form in which its message is couched is elaborated. He describes myth as a 'second-order semiological system', a definition he explains with reference to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's model of language as a tripartite structure, encompassing the concept to be expressed, an acoustic or graphic form representing the concept, and the relation between the two.³¹ Barthes suggests that this pattern is found in myth, but with the crucial difference that it is built upon an already established linguistic conjunction. In other words, myth arises from an existing association between concept and form, on which it then builds its own supplementary system of signification. It is this 'language-robbery', Barthes writes, which gives myth its richness and makes it appear

natural, since its oppressive exhortations are disguised while the primary signification is overlaid with new directives.³² The imperative, 'button-holing' character of myth is nevertheless neither constant nor inevitable.³³ Barthes insists that 'there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely', and that around the meaning of every myth 'there is a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating'.³⁴ Another equally crucial conclusion of Barthes' work in the light of feminist rewriting is his insistence that anything can be turned into a myth, as his colourful essays on a variety of social phenomena – from a plate of steak and chips to a boxing contest – show. As the readings in this volume demonstrate, feminist critique necessarily spans the broad spectrum of classical, religious, literary, psychoanalytic, media and other myths that have chronicled women's existence.

Marina Warner endorses Roland Barthes' view that myth's 'secret cunning' is its pretence to present things as they are and must always be, and, like him, she disputes the idea that this means that they are therefore immutable.³⁵ She believes that myths can operate as a lens onto human culture in its historical and social context, binding the reader in stock reactions or else providing the starting point for new tellings. Even the most immediate and intense personal experience, she suggests, passes through the common net of images and tales that comprise our understanding of the world. Myths offer ways of making sense of our experience and give crucial insights into the ideologies that underlie our understandings. By scrutinising myth we can work to loosen its negative strangleholds, sew new variations into its weave, and jettison those myths that cannot be satisfactorily altered. Warner insists that any new tellings are at least as authentic as those of antiquity which themselves derive from a long tradition of borrowings and mendings, and that this tailoring is an activity we should all engage in.

My own view, and the one I shall present in this book, is that Warner is right to stress the careful examination, reworking and fresh creation of myths as a valuable and communal enterprise. Even the most cursory survey of the history of myth supports her insistence that there is no *ur*-version, and the continuing popularity of monster-slaying and 'Cinderella' variants, the current fascination for stories of Princess Diana, and the circulation of such new tales as that of the wife who sells a brand new Mercedes to spite her divorcing husband testify to the continuing vitality and invention of myth.³⁶ Though I reject the notion of an original, I do believe that the communal process of telling and retelling a myth until it contains the input of

many in a pared-down form has the paradoxical effect of reflecting our experiences more powerfully than if it were to retain a profusion of personal details. I see practising and creative story-tellers and writers as playing a vital but not unique role in this process. While I agree with Warner that some myths must be reworked and others rehabilitated (and that some should be simply deleted from our repertoire), I would also place emphasis on the importance of myth's ability to resist change. Warner, in my view, grants the individual with too much self-knowledge. My own experience of reading myth is that its knack of surviving all but the most sustained attacks can challenge us to confront issues we would rather avoid, force us to examine our prejudices, or perceive things in a new way. Myth's finely honed symbolism and form contribute to this process by lodging in the mind to re-emerge at unexpected, apposite, or occasionally unwelcome moments. Alix Pirani, in her account of her use of myth in psychotherapeutic workshops, gives a poignant illustration of this, as she describes how the inexorability of a mythical figure's actions forces the follower to encounter difficult situations and perhaps discover new insights.³⁷ I am not arguing here for a return to the misogynies or staggering and apparently gratuitous violence of the *Mahabharata* or *The Iliad*, far from it; but I am suggesting that the different voices that contribute to the creation of a myth may be instructive and prevent us from automatically rejecting tales which do not flatter our individual view.

Myth versus Fairy Tale

If myths are stories which distil aspects of common experience in a concentrated and therefore highly potent form, what then are fairy tales? Even the term 'fairy tale' appears open to question, as Italo Calvino's use of the label 'folk tales' for his collection of Italian stories or Marina Warner's decision to adopt 'wonder tales' for her edition of the fantastical *contes* told by aristocratic French women during the reign of Louis XIV illustrates: as Angela Carter so pertinently points out, fairy tales rarely have fairies in them.³⁸ Jack Zipes argues that the pervasive English coinage is a misnomer, since it derives from the translation of the published literary tales of the Paris salons in the seventeenth century and is then transferred to all subsequent stories, including the oral folk tales collected in the Grimms' *Die Kinder und Hausmärchen* (Children's and Household Tales).³⁹

Critics and analysts of the genre once again provide an Aladdin's cave of interpretations. G. S. Kirk, for instance, insists that myth has a serious underlying purpose whereas folk tales (his preferred term) reflect simple social situations that play on ordinary fears and aspirations and pander to our wish for neat and ingenious solutions.⁴⁰ Alan Dundes draws on 'sacred' and 'secular' to designate the differences between the genres; in this he follows Mircea Eliade for whom folk tales are a profane and even rebellious alternative to the sanctity of myth.⁴¹ Marie-Louise Von Franz, by contrast, refuses to distinguish between myth and fairy tale on the grounds that both deal with 'archetypal figures'; her view is shared by Jack Zipes, who argues that any initial distinctions have disappeared in their long history of oral and printed retellings.⁴² Zipes endorses Roland Barthes' view of myth's transformation of what is cultural and contingent into what appears to be natural and inevitable to suggest that this is now also the purpose of fairy tale. Margaret Dalziel perceives subtle distinctions between a range of genres that includes myth, folk and fairy tale but stresses that what they have in common is a refusal of verisimilitude, a notion Angela Carter shares.⁴³ Maria M. Tatar, studying the Grimms' tales, argues that a crucial identifying feature is the way fairy tale reverses all the conditions outlined at the beginning of the story.⁴⁴ It is, she writes, a radically unstable genre which violates all narrative norms and confounds immutability. Tatar argues that it nevertheless betrays misogynist and inflexible attitudes to gender: the hero's rewards of power, wealth and wedded bliss are presented as consequences of his innate qualities, whereas the heroine must endure a process of humiliation for an ending that signals loss of pride and an abdication of power. She points out that the protagonists of the tales are often schematised or reduced to their function within the plot, and she cites, as examples, the way adjectives such as 'innocent' or 'foolish' are applied again and again to characters or the way the prince-rescuer rarely has a name or history.⁴⁵ G. S. Kirk sees this tendency to employ generic characters as a distinguishing feature from myth where, he suggests, the character's background is fleshed out.⁴⁶ While this is laboriously true of Homer, where even the frequent battle scenes are interrupted to document the (usually patrilineal) history of competing warriors, Kirk's distinction holds less sway if we consider contemporary urban myths such as the one detailed in the previous section. Vladimir Propp, an influential figure in the field, takes this point a stage further to suggest that what the protagonists of fairy tale do is more important than who they are, and that what they do follows