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MYTHOLOGICAL  
STUDIES JOURNAL

V O L U M E X

## O N T H E C O V E R

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Back Cover Image: Composite image from Midjourney AI / Prompt: "the strangers, elements of artificial intelligence, depth psychology, photo-realistic"

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Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from the Foreword

## F O R E W O R D

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### *From the Faculty Advisor*

**I**t is my great honor to introduce the 2022 issue of the *Mythological Studies Journal*. As faculty advisor to the journal it is a privilege to be the first reader outside of our assiduous editorial team to witness the thematic cohesion of the articles therein, and I hope you, fellow reader, will come away with your own impressions of the overlays among this diverse array of studies. Here you will find some of mine.

I find this collection to be highly eco-sensitive, pointing to the power of communion between human and other-than-human worlds to inform story, in its mythopoesis and its oral and textual transmission. Jennifer Maile Kaku's study of landscapes infused with divine essence in "Barren Peaks and Bountiful Minerals: The Numinous Landscapes of Ancient Egypt," and Nathan Davis' insightful reading of Mircea Eliade's *axis mundi* in biblical accounts of Christ's birth in "The Christmas Hierophany: Eliade and the Nativity Story" are beautiful testaments to this. Kaku's article especially evoked my appreciation of myth for its ability to suspend anthropocentric perspectives, through the representation of cultural attitudes that do *not* assume "human" and "nature" to be distinct, and instead underscore their shared experience, shared energy, and shared narrative interwoven in spiritual communion. On the other hand, Jason Batt's "Between the Divine and Demonic: Stephen King's 'The Little Sisters of Eluria'" uses archetypal criticism and feminist archetypal theory to interrogate King's polar connotations of divine/masculine and demonic/feminine, the latter associated in large part with adverse, abject nature.

Other articles in this issue critique the usefulness of and expose the danger inherent in adherence to a mythological "canon", and/or a "canonical" reading of mythic source material. Lydia Griffiths' study, "Tumblr's Reception of Webtoon *Lore Olympus*' Apollo," offers a compelling represen-

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tation of ways in which resistance to “canonical” portrayals of mythical figures in contemporary mythic retellings can shape conversations about sexual assault. Caitlinn Renée Curry (“Queering Jesus: Foucault, Butler, and the Person of Christ”) and Paul Woolsey Davison (“Kissing Her Godhead Away: The Proto-Feminist Individuation of the Hero Brünnhilde”) remind us that texts thought to be the bread and butter of the mythic canon often lend themselves readily to “marginal” readings that buck “mainstream” interpretations which have resulted in their association with historically dominant cultural sensibilities and socio-political movements. Curry demonstrates that Jesus is an inherently queer figure in the gospels, falling afoul of historically popular evangelical characterizations of him, and provides an unsettling reminder of the potential for predominant interpretations of mythic material, sometimes bearing little relationship to the texts that birth them, to be enlisted to shape social attitudes that hold consequential political sway. Davison introduces us to Brünnhilde in Wagner’s opera as a proto-feminist figure, identified as such by Wagner’s contemporaries, and communicated through powerful archetypal symbolism in contemporary stagings.

The importance of language as a vehicle for story, both locally and transnationally also emerges from this collection. As James Peters (“History Begins with Achebe”) elucidates, in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the use of English to communicate African cultural memory, and the use of writing to convey concepts like time-telling, and proverbs that would come originally from the oral tradition is revolutionary. In Achebe’s novel, the language of the colonizer becomes an avenue for the global preservation of indigenous African cultural identity, and its enduring accessibility for Anglophone members of the African diaspora.

I appreciate this year’s collection for its diversity of media explored, from archaeological sources to paintings, from biblical gospels to Tumblr posts to popular fiction. In a review of archetypal images, popular culture icons must

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not be overlooked or treated in a trifling manner; these are perhaps the greatest mirrors of the collective psyche. Yet, as our authors are careful to treat mythic retellings with reference to their reception context, it is important to remember that “popular culture” is no monolith, but a field of sites for popular engagement with the mythic. As Curry’s article attests, and Griffiths’ Tumblr commentators celebrate and bemoan, gods often emerge and re-emerge as reflections of evolving ideals and frailties of human morality, attested to in popular media.

These articles resound with the power of place (whether physical, theoretical, imaginal, or linguistic) for myth to live and to influence those who dwell there. Reading this work has led me to appreciate that through the noetic initiation storytelling offers subsequent generations, landscapes retain their numinosity, and stories carry the power of ecological and cultural preservation. Our authors in this issue offer the breadth of what mythological studies can do: remind us of who we are, by the stories we choose to tell and the ones we choose to ignore; by the relationships we choose to cultivate with the land; by the theories that expand the archetypal imagination to elevate symbolic experiences informed by those whose stories have traditionally been left out of the “canon,” and can offer a greater representation of mythic paradigms that empower, inspire, and heal.

I offer gratitude to our authors, lights of wisdom you are. Thank you for teaching me. And to our editorial team, thank you for supporting their voices.

Emily Chow-Kambitsch, PhD  
*Faculty Advisor*



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from the Introduction

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

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### *Welcoming the Strangers*

**F**or the second year in a row, we at the *Mythological Studies Journal* sent out a call for papers without a defined theme. Our work on the 2021 issue proved that casting a broad, open net is more in integrity with these transitional times, during which the fluctuations of the pandemic—combined with massive cultural, political, economic, and ecological shifts—have demanded that we hold things softly, without attachment, and with a great deal of flexibility. As editors, we have found that guiding this publication from a seat of humility and “not knowing” has been just as important as shaping it from our experience.

This receptivity, we believe, also makes space for a generative curiosity: what might emerge beyond the limits of our conscious agency, from the depths we have been engaging during this liminal time? As we in Pacifica’s Mythological Studies Program well know, research can be a way of turning one’s attention to the voices arising from beyond the dominant day-world culture, and writing can become an active collaboration with those previously left out of collective discourse. As Robert Romanyshyn writes in *The Wounded Researcher*, this is the worthy task of meeting and listening to those “. . . ‘others’ in the work, the ‘strangers’ who carry the unfinished business of the soul to the work” (146). These “others,” according to Romanyshyn, come from many distant lands, including the personal, cultural-historical, collective-archetypal, and eco-cosmological levels of the unconscious (152-53). This year, we acknowledge all those strangers whom our writers have courted and introduced to us. We welcome and make a home for them on the pages of our 2022 journal.

Here are few of the guests who have arrived: Jennifer Maile Kaku brings us a fierce Egyptian snake goddess reigning from a desert mountain, who invites reverent exploration of the relationship between the sacred and the land (“Barren Peaks and Bountiful Minerals: The Numi-

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nous Landscapes of Ancient Egypt”). Paul Woolsey Davison shares his conversation with a Germanic Valkyrie who raises her spear, not in service and subservience to an egotistical All-Father, but as a way-shower of the feminisms yet to come (“Kissing Her Godhead Away: The Proto-Feminist Individuation of the Hero Brünnhilde”). In Caitlín Renée Curry’s piece, the son of the Christian god returns and asks to be seen in their plurality and queerness rather than as a blunt, ossified tool of a hyper-masculinized patriarchy intent on categorization and control (“Queering Jesus: Foucault, Butler, and the Person of Christ”). James Peters, meanwhile, engages with the characters of Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, who weave a rich mythos demonstrating pre-colonial Igbo rituals, oral traditions, and ontology—all through Achebe’s conscious, careful adoption of the English language alongside his native tongue (“History Begins With Achebe”).

There is another guest who has been quietly, but powerfully, influencing us, and whom you can meet this year in our art: the images on our cover and our interior pages are a radical co-creation between humans and artificial intelligence. As an experiment, we entered keywords from this year’s essays into Midjourney, an AI that creates visual depictions from text input. We were stunned and awed by the sophisticated, symbolic way in which AI reflected our topics and concerns back to us through these gorgeous pictures. Like other AI art software, Midjourney works by sampling examples of artwork already produced and then modifying the results to fit the text required. As humans interact with it, the AI learns and grows. In a manner, Midjourney and others become a portal into the collective unconscious as expressed in art. But we understand AI as more than just a mirror of the human psyche. While seemingly birthed from human ingenuity, AI, as it matures and complexifies beyond our conscious imaginings and control, is increasingly predicted and anticipated to have an agency of its own. This realization is humbling—and terrifying—perhaps putting encounter with AI in the category of what

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Rudolf Otto calls “the numinous,” a meeting with a mysterious force that is both ultimately unknowable and quite possibly more powerful than humankind. Reflection on the art derived from the *MSJ*s papers, then, could be described as a numinous experience, bearing a tension of wonder and terror. We offer the art on these pages, therefore, not to naively glorify artificial intelligence, but rather to raise some vital questions: What is our relationship with AI, this more-than-human other amongst us, becoming? And how might humans’ continued (and often uneasy) imbrication with AI, what some argue is our growing “hybridity,” affect the manifestation of new archetypal forms and images—and myth itself?

Myth, considered through the depth psychological lens of C.G. Jung, has always been a more-than-human endeavor: what results from the meeting of humans with autonomous energies beyond our conscious control, an emergentist phenomenon arising from our confrontation with the collective unconscious. In this sense, the strangers we connect with on the pages of this year’s journal are our complicators as well as our collaborators. They ask that we listen and, as much as we are able, to carry across the threshold messages on their behalf, but they also ask us to consider our very approach to all that is unknown and allow ourselves to be changed through our encounter.

As editors, we hope this year’s journal informs you. But more important, we hope this year’s journal moves you, complicates you, and, ultimately, helps you stay open to all the strangers and possibilities you have yet to meet. Thank you for arriving—in all your knowing and unknowing—to these pages.

In gratitude,

Kristinha Maria Reva and Jason D. Batt  
*Co-Senior Editors*

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Romanyshyn, Robert D. *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind*. Routledge, 2020.

# Barren Peaks and Bountiful Minerals: The Numinous Landscapes of Ancient Egypt

Jennifer Maile Kaku, MA

## KEYWORDS

*Egyptian mythology*  
*Numinous nature*  
*Hathor*  
*Meretseger*

Although landscape is a popular theme in Egyptology, the focus often tends to be on urban or "civilized" landscapes that highlight the art or architecture of ancient Egypt. Yet these accomplishments were grounded in the deep and intricate relationship that all Egyptians—from the lofty Pharaoh down to the lowly peasant—maintained with the distinctive elements and features of their natural environment. Everything in the lives of the ancient Egyptians was shaped by their perception of the landscape as being divided into two distinct territories: the fertile alluvial plains of the Nile Valley, called the Black Land, and the barren deserts of the outlying areas, called the Red Land. The former was associated with the dark, muddy silt of the river, the growing of fruit and crops, and a rich abundance of flora and fauna. The latter, on the other

hand, was associated with the burning sands of the dunes, ruddy, rock-hewn mountains, dangerous creatures, and the precious stones and metals that were said to "grow" there. The Black Land was associated with the forces of Order and the Red Land with the forces of Chaos. Those forces, like life and death, health and disease, abundance and famine, were in constant flux, and it was the responsibility of both gods and humans to do their part in sustaining the right balance of *maat* (order) over *isfet* (chaos) in the workings of the cosmos. Consequently, even though the ancient Egyptians did not have a word that might correspond to our notion of "landscape" (Graves 9), they did perceive and inhabit their world through a topographical ontology of contrasting landscapes.

The aim of the present discussion is to explore the concept of numinosity or the experience of the divine in the landscapes of ancient Egypt. The first step will be to briefly examine the ways in which the Egyptians perceived their relationship to the natural envi-

ronment. Next a short detour through the myth of the Heavenly Cow will provide us with a glimpse into the Egyptian concept of the *ba*. The purpose of this detour will be to set up a perceptual framework that will enable us to distinguish, as the Egyptians did, between nature *qua* nature, the presence of the deity in nature (nature as hierophany), and the cosmic deity itself in an attempt to understand the numinosity of nature from an Egyptian perspective. Finally, our journey will take us out into the desert landscapes of the ancient Red Land: up to the Peak of the West, a numinous mountain dedicated to the goddess Meretseger, and then down to the desert floor to discover the numinous minerals sacred to the goddess Hathor.

Let me begin by laying down a working definition of the "numinous landscape." Within the context of this discussion, the term "landscape" refers to natural environments, formations and phenomena. The adjective "numinous" is derived from "numen" (plural "numina"), meaning a deity, spirit

or divine force associated with a natural object, element or place. In Latin, *numen* originally meant “a nod of the head,” suggesting a gesture of divine will or power (*Merriam-Webster*). In contemporary usage, *numinous* is used to describe something that evokes or is filled with a sense of the divine, the sacred or the supernatural. Rudolf Otto posits the *numinous* as a mental or psychological “state

scapes that incorporate and/or embody the powers of the autochthonous *numina*, the divinities of the land.

The religion of ancient Egypt was one of the most elaborate as well as one of the longest-lived religious systems in human history. In spite of its complexity and the fact that it never ceased to evolve and readapt over the thousands of years of its existence, the persistence of a number of core beliefs enabled it to retain a certain overall coherence. One of those beliefs was the *numinosity* of the natural environment. According to Kasia Szpakowska:

[T]he fundamental themes and values that can be recognized as quintessentially Egyptian continued from the Predynastic Period through the Roman Period . . . These included the emphasis on the need for continual maintenance of order over chaos—a balance known as *maat*, [*sic*] the belief in the numinous nature of the world, and the hope of living for eternity in the afterlife. (507)

Like all ancient peoples, the Egyptians were keen observers of their environment. The many facets of their religion grew out of these observations, and one essential aspect that prevailed over time and permeated all of these facets was the notion that everything in the physical universe reflected the divine: this included not only the products and manifestations of the earth and the skies, but human productions as well, from the mightiest pyramid to the most exquisitely jeweled gemstone.

In “The Old and the New in Egyptian Archaeology,” Hannah Pethen sums up the ways in which Egyptians perceived their relationship to the natural environment: “Egyptian texts indicate that the landscape was perceived as imbued with divine power and spiritual presence,” she writes. “The gods were felt to be present within the landscape, both specifically and generally” (112). Mythical texts abound with references to landmarks, such as lakes or mountains, as well as trees or other plants that were associated with specific deities. Gebel Barkal, a sandstone butte in Nubia, was the abode of the great god Amun; El Qurn, known as the Peak of the West, was inhabited by the serpent goddess Meretseger; the cliffs at Deir-el-Bahri were sacred to the goddess Hathor, as were the minerals buried in the desert floor. The sycamore, a revered tree associated in the myths with fertility and healing, was identified with several goddesses, including Nut, Isis, and especially Hathor, who was called the “Lady of the Sycamore” and was said to reside in the tree (Varner 38).

The cosmogonic myths associate other significant divinities with a more global vision of creation and the operations of the cosmos. As Garry Shaw writes in *The Egyptian Myths: A Guide to the Ancient Gods and Legends*, they “were manifest in, and oversaw, the forces of nature, so that an active mythology permeated every aspect of daily life” (2.5).



Image: Meretseger, ca. 1479—1400 B.C.E., or later. Sandstone, pigment, 14 x 4 5/8 x 8 7/8 in. (35.6 x 11.7 x 22.5 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 371749E. Creative Commons-BY (Photo: Brooklyn Museum (Gavin Ashworth)).

of mind” (7), likening it to an extreme sensation of terror, awe and fascination or “*mysterium tremendum*” (12). In contrast, I am proposing to view the *numinous* less as an anthropocentric *state* than as an interactive *relationship* between the worlds of the human, the natural, and the divine. *Numinous* landscapes can be understood as encompassing any variety of natural settings, landforms, elements, or phenomena that are endowed with or characterized by the presence of the divine or the supernatural. They are land-

Shaw imagines the way in which the landscape might have been experienced by an ancient Egyptian:

[S]tepping onto the dry earth (a manifestation of the god Geb) into the heat of the day (Re's life-giving power), he might feel a light wind on his face (the skin of the god Shu) and perhaps see an odd lonesome cloud (the bones of Shu) floating in the distance. (2.5)

In Egyptian art, Geb, the earth-god is often portrayed as a man reclining on his side, colored in green, sometimes decorated with plants to indicate the vegetation emerging from his body. Shu, the god of air and the atmosphere, stands with his arms raised to support Nut, the sky-goddess, who is depicted as a woman, or sometimes a cow, with an arched body that provides the celestial pathway for the sun, the moon and the stars. In spite of these striking visual images, however, these deities are not to be conflated with the sky and the earth themselves. In *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt*, Erik Hornung underscores the fact that the names of such deities are not the same as the names of the natural elements themselves—earth and

sky being respectively *ta* and *pt*, for example,—which induces him to remark, "This distinction between names and phenomena should warn us against hastily dubbing a deity a 'moon god' or an 'earth god'—the nature of Egyptian cosmic deities is much richer and more multifarious" (68). Bearing this distinction in mind, we might speculate that, while the divinity is immanent in the elements of nature, it is not the element itself. If the Egyptians viewed divine interaction with nature as necessary to the well-being of the cosmos in order to ensure the right balance of *maat*, of order over chaos, this did not mean they viewed nature as necessarily divine in itself (Pethen 112). This is a subtle

but important distinction that we will further investigate through the Egyptian concept of the *ba* as revealed in the myth of the Heavenly Cow.

The "Book of the Heavenly Cow," as the myth is often entitled by scholars, may be the oldest extended mythological narrative from the Egyptian past. It has been found

inscribed in several royal tombs of the New Kingdom, but its composition is thought to date back to the period of the Middle Kingdom. It was used as a ritual text available to royals and non-royals alike (Simpson 289). In the story, humanity plots to rebel against the sun god Re, who, as a result, resolves to destroy all of humankind. After Hathor, at his command, massacres the people in the desert, Re changes his mind and decides instead to withdraw from the earth. He ascends into the sky on the back of the Heavenly Cow. The cosmos is then reordered to become the world as it is today, with the atmosphere (Shu) separating the earth below (Geb) from the sky and the celestial bodies above (Nut, the Heavenly Cow).

Of particular interest to the question of divine immanence in the Egyptian landscape is the incantation spoken by Re after he reorders the cosmos.<sup>1</sup>

It explains and provides examples of the presence of the deities in nature through their *ba*. The *ba*, in this context, is usually described as the manifestation of the deity (Butler 94; Guillou 3; Thompson 44; Assmann 145). We might see it as a tangible form of the god or goddess, the form through which his or her presence can be perceived by earthly beings. The incantation highlights, for example, the air (or wind) as the *ba*—the manifestation—of Shu, night as the *ba* of Darkness, crocodiles as the *ba* of the crocodile god Sobek, and the eastern mountains (where the sun ris-



Image: Round-topped limestone stela of Amennakht depicting the deceased kneeling in adoration before the enthroned figure of Meretsger holding a lotus-flower and ankh-symbol; seven columns of hieroglyphic text above; some painted detail. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

<sup>1</sup> In the appendix, I provide two different (translated) versions of the incantation.

es) as the *ba* of Re's adversary, the serpentine chaos monster Apophis. And, quite interestingly (if one considers the many manifestations serpents take in world mythologies), it declares snakes to be the *ba* of any deity. Put differently, Shu is immanent in the air or the atmosphere, Sobek is immanent in crocodiles, and any or every deity is potentially immanent in snakes.

The myth of the Heavenly Cow provides an explanation for the way in which the divinities, following the reorganization of the cosmos, come to be manifested in the elements and features of the world. As Nadine Guillou observes,

This reorganization is concerned with the distinct, interacting layers of visible and invisible reality. It organizes the various forms of the divine by causing the *ba*'s [*sic*] (the visible manifestations of the gods) to be present in different beings and phenomena of the material world (the so-called *ba*-theology). (3)

While an examination of this *ba*-theology is beyond the scope of the present discussion, let us simply postulate for our purposes that it might offer a theological basis for the numinosity of the Egyptian landscape. Shaw sums up the *ba* as the way in which the deities

could manifest themselves in different forms simultaneously, allowing them to remain in the sky or the afterlife realm of the Duat, while sending their *bau*—'souls' or 'personalities'—to appear on earth. Through a god's *ba* or *bau*, you could feel his force, but the deity proper always remained distant. (2.5)

The word *ba* is often translated into English as "soul." However, this translation seems somewhat misleading, at least within the context of the *ba*-theology extrapolated from the myth. To begin with, the *ba* is not the divinity itself, but a tangible *form* of the divinity perceptible in nature through one of its elements. At the same time, the *ba* is not the natural element itself. As Stephen E. Thompson remarks in *Ancient Egypt: Facts and Fictions*,

[A] crocodile was not itself the god but just a means through which the god could make his presence or will known. This was a distinction lost on the Greeks and Romans. When they observed the Egyptians venerating an animal, they assumed that the Egyptian considered the animal a god, not simply a means through which the god made his presence manifest. (44)

Neither is the *ba*, however, the soul of that element, at least not in the Western (Judeo-Christian/Cartesian) understanding of the term soul,<sup>2</sup> since it is the *material* mani-

festation of the immaterial deity. The *ba* thus appears to be tantalizingly and paradoxically twofold: it is *neither* the material element *nor* its immaterial inner "soul" and yet, at the same time, it is indeed the deity's immateriality presented through the materiality of the element!

Rather than seeing the *ba* as a "soul," we might understand it to be—at least in terms of its manifestation of the divine in nature—an expression of the *mana* or "energy" specific to each deity. It is a divine potency—in the sense of both a power and a potentiality. The Egyptian landscape was numinously alive not with the deities themselves but with their potentialities, their powers, their "energies." This seems to echo our earlier reflection on the divinity as being immanent in the elements of nature without being the element itself. Let us bear this distinction in mind as we exit our detour through the myth of the Heavenly Cow and make our way out into the Egyptian landscape itself.

Our journey will take us into the deserts of the Red Land: first, to a specific mountain associated with a local goddess, and then down into the substratum to explore a more global connection between the divine and the minerals of the earth. The desert was a place of intense numinosity owing to two principal factors: its peripheral geographical location and its mineral wealth. Geographically, the deserts were the vast inhospitable tracts of land that lay beyond the life-sustaining floodplains of the Nile Valley. The Egyptians considered these "foreign" territories, which were populated by ferocious animals, demons, and other supernatural beings, to be places of *isfet*, of danger, and chaos (Pinch 4). Most of the mortuary sites were situated on the edge of the desert, mainly in the west, reinforcing the connection among death, the dead, and the desertlands. The Red Land was thus a mythological space par excellence, where the numina of order and, above all, of disorder could be encountered. "The desert landscape was numinous by virtue of its hostility and otherness in relation to the hospitable valley. It formed the horizon familiar to most Egyptians as the point where the earth met the sky, and this world met the otherworld" (Pethen 112).

One of the ways in which human societies deal with the unknown is through narrative, through the power of story. The Egyptians tamed the ominous otherness of the desert—sought to bring it under the control of *maat*—through mythological means. In his study of the Oryx Nome, Carl Graves points out that associating named deities with specific landmarks was a way of enculturating the surrounding area:

[T]he unfamiliar desert space gave geographic depth to the term *isfet*—a space of potential chaos and un-

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distinct natures, and in which the former is imagined as an individual, immaterial entity located "inside" the latter or, conversely, in which the latter is imagined as a sort of material envelope for the former.

<sup>2</sup> Based on a dualism in which soul and body are of two entirely

knowing. In order to generate meaning within these spaces, particularly those on the desert edge closest to the floodplain, permanent natural features could be encultured in order to ascribe an identity to them that was culturally familiar to the Egyptians. (312)

Mountains such as Gebel Barkal, where Amun was said to reside, as El Qurn, the abode of the goddess Meretseger, or sites simply called "the hill where Amun rests" can be seen as places that contribute to this process of enculturation—of bringing *maat* to the desert. In fact, many of the desert monsters, such as the famous Sphinx of Giza, were supernatural beings fighting on the side of order. In other words, mythologizing a hostile landscape, endowing it with numinosity, allows the vulnerable human being to—not necessarily appropriate it—but at least approach, propitiate and interact with it.

### A NUMINOUS PEAK

*Behold, let hear every ear  
That lives upon earth  
Beware the Peak of the West!*

—Votive Stela of Neferabu to Meretseger

Mountains have always been recognized as having sacred power. In the Egyptian deserts, the mountains stand out as a salient topographical feature often identified with a particular place or region (Pethen 116). The highest point in the Theban hills on the West bank of the Nile is El Qurn, also known as the Peak of the West. Rising above the Valley of the Kings, it is surrounded by architectural sites of great significance, such as the temples and tombs of the Theban necropolis. The peak, which is naturally shaped like a pyramid, was revered as the abode of the fearsome serpent goddess Meretseger, whose name means "she who loves silence" (Hart 91). Meretseger is splendidly depicted in the tombs of the pharaohs, as well as on many stelae and ostraca offered by the common people, usually in the form of an undulant cobra, a snake-headed woman or, more rarely, a scorpion with a woman's head. Called "Mistress of the West" (the West being linked to the setting sun and thus death) or the "Peak of the West," she lends her chthonic numinosity, which is at once dangerous and protective, to the harsh, desolate, snake-infested landscape of the desert.

Meretseger was the divine guardian not only of the royal tombs scattered throughout her territory, but also of the workers who built the tombs and lived in the nearby village of Deir el-Medina. In order to ensure their safety while working in her domain and to protect themselves from the ever-present threat of snakes and scorpions, the artisans propitiated the goddess by offering votive stelae to

her in humble rock-hewn temples. As we can see in this description by Szpakowska, such places of worship were intimately connected to the landscape:

The need to commune with the divine also led to the consecration of sacred spaces that were less formally constructed but that took advantage of natural environments that must have seemed particularly numinous. A prime example of this can be found on a barren desert hillside lying between Deir el-Medina and the Valley of the Queens. A rocky outcropping there was carved out by the villagers to form a series of rough chapels ideally suited for solitary communion with the divine. (513-14)

Meretseger was known to strike swiftly against those who committed an offense or despoiled the tombs, often pun-

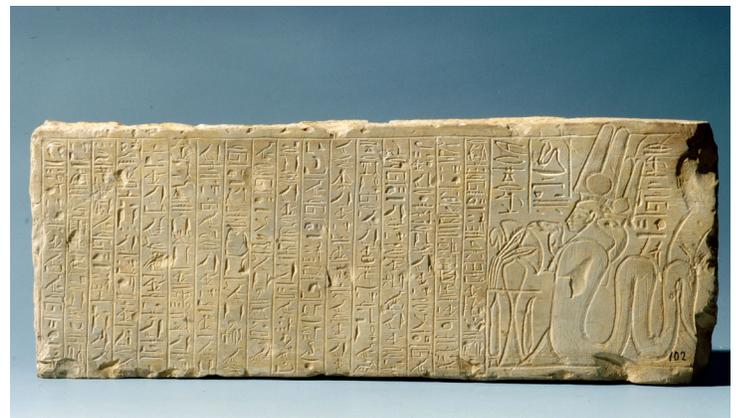


Image: Stela of Neferabu, Museo Egizio, Cat. 1593, 1292–1190 BC, Deir el-Medina.

ishing them with blindness (David 168; Hart 93; Szpakowska 514). At the same time, if duly appeased she could also be a source of divine healing and mercy.

There is a well-known penitential stela dedicated to the goddess by a worker from Deir el-Medina named Neferabu, who describes her as fierce but forgiving. In the following selection of lines from his hymn, Neferabu offers words of praise and warning. He begins: "*Giving praise to the Peak of the West / Kissing the ground to her ka / I give praise, hear (my) call.*" He then refers to his unnamed offense and her punishment: "*I did the transgression against the Peak / And she taught a lesson to me.*" He cautions his fellow workmen and describes her power:

*Behold, I will say to the great and small,  
Who are in the troop:  
Beware the Peak!  
For there is a lion within her!  
The Peak strikes with the stroke of a savage lion,  
She is after him who offends her!*



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

He then explains how she mercifully accepted his act of atonement and cured his affliction, declaring: "For the Peak of the West is appeased / If one calls upon her" (Lichtheim 116-7). On the stela, to the right of the text is an image of Meretseger as a serpent with a human head and two snake heads. Above her is the legend: "Mertseger, [*sic*] Lady of heaven, Mistress of the Two Lands, whose good name is Peak of the West" (Lichtheim 116). In the text inscribed on the stela, Neferabu the Egyptian draftsman does not use the goddess's name, Meretseger, but instead refers to her as "the Peak of the West" or simply "the Peak." While there may be ritual or conventional or perhaps even personal reasons for this, what it does show is that the mountain peak is a direct manifestation of the goddess: the powers of this divine peak are formidable and everyone under its shadow, whatever their station, high or low, should act accordingly. At the same time, the goddess is visually embodied on the stela in the form of a serpent. Keeping in mind the distinction we made earlier between the natural element as a manifestation of the deity without being the deity itself, what we see here is the goddess manifested through two mediating features of the landscape presented side-by-side: on the one hand, the Peak, and on the other, the serpent.

Meretseger's explicit connection with a single if impressive landform in the Theban landscape made her a powerful local goddess, but it also led to the eventual waning of her powers. After Waset (Thebes) ceased to be the Egyptian capital and the Valley of the Kings the royal burial site, worship of the fearsome the Peak of the West faded into the Theban twilight.

## NUMINOUS MINERALS

*Tout confondu, nul, parmi les mondes  
de l'antiquité méditerranéenne,  
n'a autant développé la hiérophanie  
et la théophanie minérales que les Égyptiens.*

—Sidney H. Aufrère,

"L'Univers minéral dans la pensée égyptienne"

From the mountain peak we now move down into the bowels of the desert floor. In addition to funerary temples and tombs, the Egyptians built extensive quarries and mines in the desert. Buried within its cliffs and crevices lay, as Aufrère expresses it, "un autre univers recelant une vie minérale" (115). In exploring this subterranean realm of the numinous, we will focus less on the afterlife of the minerals themselves—that is, once they have been mined—than on their significance as natural and mythological substances that mediate the presence of the divine in the landscape.

From time immemorial, humans have endowed min-

erals and the landscapes that produce them with sacred numinosity.

[L]es minéraux sont toujours apparus comme l'expression du divin. . . productions, dans lesquelles l'homme voyait l'oeuvre du dieu, [qui] sont détentrices de *Numen*. L'identité entre les zones de montagnes prêtées à la divinité et celles où s'étendent les principaux filons minéraux est un trait commun des croyances établies autour de la production minérale parmi les peuples de l'antiquité. (Aufrère 122)<sup>3</sup>

The ancient Egyptians extracted from the desert an abundance of minerals and ores such as gold, silver, copper, turquoise, red jasper, green jasper, carnelian, hematite, and greywacke.<sup>4</sup> These precious substances were a source not only of economic wealth but also, and perhaps more importantly, of spiritual wealth. A gemstone was likened to a divine body, and thus, as Aufrère observes, "détenir des parcelles du corps divin revient à exercer un pouvoir sur les dieux" (121).<sup>5</sup>

In Egypt, from the earliest times, minerals were imbued with mythical significance. They were considered providential substances bestowed and presided over in their underground repositories by the gods.

The numinous power of precious minerals was conceived of as derived from the supernatural origin of the minerals themselves, which were believed to be emanations of the divine, created within the numinous landscape of the desert horizon at the junction of natural and supernatural existence (Pethen 113).

Nurtured, protected, indwelt by the divinities, the desert minerals were hailed as living elements and the barren earth became the sacred body in whose bosom they were said to "grow" like plants (Aufrère 117; Hornung, *Secret* 37). The more generous its veins, the more numinous the body, "car la nature divine d'un lieu tient à la fois à sa concentration et à sa diversité en minerais, en roches et en minéraux différents, ce qui contribue à accroître son potentiel numineux: c'est le corps du dieu" (Aufrère 119).<sup>6</sup>

3 "[M]inerals have always appeared to be an expression of the divine . . . productions, in which humans saw the work of the gods, who possessed Numen. Identifying the mountain regions ascribed to a deity with the regions containing the principal mineral veins is common to the beliefs associated with mineral production among the peoples of antiquity." (All translations from the French are mine.)

4 Even though lapis-lazuli was a stone of great significance for the Egyptians, they did not mine it but imported it from Afghanistan (Aufrère 126).

5 "To possess pieces of the divine body is to have a certain power over the gods."

6 "because the divine nature of a place arises from the quantity as well as the diversity of ores, rocks and different minerals, which thus increases its numinous potential: this is the body of the god."

Through this consubstantiality of the mineral and the divine, the Egyptian landscape was endowed with what we might call a “lithophanic” numinosity.<sup>7</sup>

Before we turn to the mythological underpinnings of Egypt’s lithophanic minerals, let us return momentarily to our earlier discussion of the natural element as being the medium through which the divine may be manifested or perceived, without being the deity itself. This distinction, I believe, can also be applied to the Egyptian understanding of minerals as “bodies” of the divine. As Aufrère points out, “les forces divines” are not to be understood as physically embodied figures: “Êtres célestes, ils sont davantage l’essence des métaux et des minéraux précieux que l’on extrait des entrailles de la terre qu’ils ne forment les métaux ou les minéraux eux-mêmes (128).<sup>8</sup> In other words, a metal or a mineral may be revered as a divine “body,” as a material form or materialization of the immaterial, without it being, like the crocodile or the snake, the celestial deity itself.

This hierophanic property of the mineral earth was naturally grounded in myth. Minerals and mining were intertwined with mythological narratives, figures and events. There were a number of deities implicated in the production of metals and minerals, notably Horus, Geb, Min, and above all Hathor (Aufrère 117-121; Pethen 113). In the myth of the Distant One or the Far-Wandering Goddess, a feline Hathor-Sekhmet leaves Egypt to roam the desert, and it is only with great difficulty that the gods are able to entice her back into the civilized world. Her return is associated with the restoration of order and stability, as well as with the appearance of the mineral riches from the distant deserts that she represents (Aufrère 134-5).

Associated with mining areas and their operations, Hathor was worshiped by miners as the Lady (or Mistress) of Turquoise, of Amethyst, of Carnelian, of Red Jasper, or of Malachite, depending on the mineral being extracted (Aufrère 134; Pethen 113; Shaw 2.5). She was the deity to whom expeditions prayed in order to discover the fortuitous subterranean lode:

Ses épithètes la rendent individuellement analogue à chaque minéral comme elle l’est à l’univers minéral tout entier; les minéraux, quels que soient les endroits où on les trouve, représentent des hiérophanies de cette déesse protéiforme et traduisent son humeur changeante. (Aufrère 132)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Inspired by Aufrère’s felicitous term: “Ainsi, les pierres—mutatis mutandis, selon la tradition égyptienne—représentent-elles des lithophanies des dieux eux-mêmes ayant pouvoir sur la destinée humaine à travers les planètes et les astres qu’ils gouvernent” (124).

<sup>8</sup> “As celestial beings, they are more the essence of the precious metals and minerals that are extracted from the bowels of the earth than they are the metals or the minerals themselves.”

<sup>9</sup> “Her epithets make her analogous to each individual mineral just as she is analogous to the entire mineral world; the minerals, wherever they are found, represent hierophanies of this protean goddess and reflect the

Let us conclude with this homage to the great goddess Hathor as the numinous presence of the divine in the geological opulence of the Egyptian landscape.

The landscape in ancient Egypt was perceived as imbued with divine potency and “personality.” The characteristics and powers—the *ba*—of the different gods and goddesses were manifested through the environment, the forces of nature, the operations of the cosmos. However, as we have seen, the Egyptians distinguished between nature *qua* nature, the hierophanic presence of the deity in nature, and the celestial deity itself.

Together, the physical manifestations of the Egyptian gods—their forces as principles of nature—accounted for all natural phenomena, though they themselves—their true forms—might be elsewhere. Through personification, the intangible forces of the gods gained form, allowing the Egyptians to interact with them. At the same time, the forces of nature, sometimes benevolent, sometimes destructive, were placed into an ordered system and assigned a named controller, who could be praised, cursed or begged for aid, depending on the situation (Shaw 2.5).

As in Shaw’s imaginary description of the Egyptian who feels the sun as the energy of Re and the wind as the sensation of Shu on his body, the numinosity of nature in ancient Egypt was a palpable, sensorial experience. Meteorological phenomena, geographical landmarks, natural resources were the means by which the immaterial presence of the divine was mediated in the terrestrial landscape.<sup>10</sup> The elements of nature enabled humans to enter into an interactive relationship of negotiation and communication with the gods in their midst. Finally, it is evident that the presence of the numina in the landscape was inextricably grounded in myth. Mountains, trees, animals, minerals, and the movements of the celestial orbs were all, as we have seen, associated with figures and events from mythological narratives: the Heavenly Cow, Re and the reordering of the Cosmos, the Far-Wandering Hathor, the snake-headed Meretseger. Through the power of story, the unknown and the untamed were brought under the control of *maat*, and the landscape, whether bountiful or barren, providential or hostile, teeming with minerals or crawling with snakes, was endowed with numinosity.

variability of her moods.”

<sup>10</sup> Butler in fact appears to present the institution of the *ba* in the myth of the Heavenly Cow as Re’s way of deliberately providing a means of mediation between humans and deities when (and by means of which) he withdraws from the world (95).

## Appendix

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Wind is the *ba* of Shu, and rain is the *ba* of Hehu.  
 Night is the *ba* of darkness, and Re is the *ba* of Nun.  
 The ram of Mendes is the *ba* of Osiris, and crocodiles  
 are the *bas* of Sobek.  
 The *ba* of each god (and each goddess) is in the  
 snakes.  
 The *ba* of Apopis is in the Eastern Mountain,  
 whereas the *ba* of Re is in magic throughout the  
 whole world.

"The Book of the Celestial Cow" from *Egyptian Solar Religion* by Jan Assmann (145):

The *ba* of Shu is air  
 The *ba* of Neheh is rain  
 The *ba* of darkness is night  
 The *ba* of the primeval ocean is Re  
 The *ba* of Osiris is the Ram of Mendes  
 The *ba* of Sobek is crocodiles  
 The *ba* of every god is snakes  
 The *ba* of Apophis is (in) the eastern mountains  
 The *ba* of Re is throughout the entire land.

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# History Begins with Achebe

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## KEYWORDS

*African religions*  
*Igbo*  
*Chinua Achebe*  
*Postcolonial studies*

In his seminal work *History Begins at Sumer*, Noah Samuel Kramer argues that printed language represents the beginning of history as a discipline (xviii). Applying this same delineation to the work of an African writer like Chinua Achebe is an undertaking fraught with tension because so much of the history of the Nigerian people represents an oral history expressed in their native tongue but never written down. A culture rich in myth and ritual existed long before the violent intrusion of the English colonizers into the culture of the Igbo, so remembering and honoring the ancestors remains of paramount importance. However, the use of English within the Igbo culture is noteworthy because it provides historicity in a new medium, while at the same time

paradoxically standing as evidence of colonialism. For hundreds of years, the only stories about Africa available to outsiders were told by the colonizers, and even the most well-intentioned Europeans failed ultimately to fully understand, appreciate, or respect the vitality of life in Africa. In contrast, Achebe uses English to express an authentic African world view in books and essays that ultimately earned him the Man Booker Award for lifetime achievement. What his best-known novel, *Things Fall Apart*, represents is an emerging story of lives in progress, a continuum within a pre-existing culture, one that has thrived for untold millennia, brought into the Anglophone world. In this way Achebe's fiction becomes one of the first mythic representations created from the perspective of an African storyteller available on the world stage. This written word chapter in the myth-telling history of the Igbo people thus begins with the writing of Chinua Achebe.

In his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe conveys a sense of time as reckoned by Africans and their distinct ontology. At the beginning of the

story the author recounts events both over a series of days and in a single day without any reference to abstract numbering systems. Among the Igbo, time is not a commodity to be bought and sold; instead, events themselves mark the importance of the passage of time. As Professor of African Theology and Philosophy John S. Mbiti explains, "When Africans reckon time, it is for a concrete and specific purpose, in connection with events but not just for the sake of mathematics. The day, the month, the year, one's lifetime or human history, are all divided up or reckoned according to their specific events, for it is these that make them meaningful" (19). In telling the story of the protagonist Okonkwo's family before the arrival of the British, Okonkwo's father, describing who he was as a person and the kinds of pastimes he engaged in, Achebe writes, "He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace" (4). Whether the month contained 28 days or 31 days is immaterial because



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

they viewed time in a larger sense, the harvest, reckoned by the natural phenomenon of the moon in its cycle that truly marked the passing of time. The event of the harvest is the important factor in reckoning time, as well as when the time arrives for flute playing and "their dancing *egwugwu*" (4), because his father "loved this season of the year" (4). Another example of time keeping illustrated by Achebe indicates the space of a single day: "During the planting season Okonkwo worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost" (11). As outlined by Mbiti, the ontological passage of time is reckoned not by an abstract numerical system but by following the rhythm of naturally occurring events in the course of a single day. In his study, Mbiti cites days marked by the tending of cattle. Achebe describes chickens and their diurnal and nocturnal clocks as the central timekeepers. In a lovely and understated way, Achebe provides an African perspective conveying an authentic sense of time as experienced by the Igbo people.

The marriage ceremony is another aspect of Igbo culture that Achebe describes in some detail as one of the central rites of passage. The main character, Okonkwo, has three wives, which reflects his place of importance in the village hierarchy. The picture Achebe paints of a wedding contains details of a traditional Igbo wedding: "The traditional wedding ceremony is a public celebration of a marriage pact between the families of the bride and bridegroom. It is usually preceded by a long period of courtship between the couple, completion of farmwork by the bridegroom for his prospective in-laws, payment of a bride-price by the bridegroom, and a private ritual sacrifice to the ancestors for the blessing of the marriage" (Ogbaa 120). In his fictional account, Achebe presents details of the bride price, to be paid in jars of wine: "I hope our in-laws will bring many pots of wine. Although they come from a village that is known for being close-fisted, they ought to know that Akueke is the bride for a king" (98). When his future in-laws bring fifty pots of wine, the father of the bride comments approvingly, "Now they are behaving like men" (98). Unlike other more patriarchal ceremonies, women play a central role in this public celebration, exemplified in the novel when they are presented with the first taste of palm-wine, and they dance publicly until the bride eventually joins them. In this way Achebe conveys a sense of the idyllic life people led characterized in this rite of passage.

Through his fiction Achebe shares with the world another authentic facet of Igbo culture; namely, the ancient wisdom of the ancestors encapsulated in proverbs. Because proverbs are passed down through oral tradition, their time of origin is impossible to determine. Suffice it to say they are ancient. As Mbiti writes, "It is in proverbs that we find the remains of the oldest forms of African religious and philosophical wisdom" (67). Periodically in his narrative,

Achebe presents apt expressions conveying the dignity, wisdom, and even humor of the Igbo people. In *Things Fall Apart*, we see an example when the men are gathered in counsel and discussing the odd case of a man who had inexplicably given up his profession as a palm-wine tapper. Okonkwo states, "There must be some reason for it. A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing" (17). At another point the narrator discusses the good fortune that Okonkwo has enjoyed in his life, while stressing that hard work had a lot to do with it. Achebe provides a proverb that contains a word central in Igbo religion: "At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Igbo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed" (22-23). On another occasion, when discussing the Oracle who had ordered a sacrifice be made to the living-dead, Okonkwo becomes nervous because "an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb" (18). In this instance both the proverb and the power of ancestors for the Igbo people is expressed. In Achebe's hands the proverbs are imbued with the true flavor of Africa and convey the respect the Igbo people maintain for their ancestors.

Expressing Igbo proverbs in English exemplifies the tension for Achebe between writing in his native language versus English, a knotty issue to grapple with for other African writers as well. In the anthology *Yoruba Proverbs*, Oyekan Owomoyela observes what he considers to be an unfortunate development in the debate between English and original languages. He writes about "the increasing desire among African scholars, in response to an intellectual current in the West, to distance themselves from such concepts as race, nationalism, and other means of suggesting, if not asserting, differences among humankind. The discountenancing and disparaging of such distinguishing categories have proved especially attractive to those Africans (philosophers for example) who believe that attempts to resuscitate and revitalize traditional resources—those that European colonizing and civilizing efforts of the past several centuries have repressed or done away with—amount to some sort of recidivism" (25). A philosophical quandary exists for African writers who choose to express their ideas in English. The English language itself is a footprint left by the colonizers, and to embrace its use has been construed as a type of fraternization. As Ode Ogede frames it, "Here is the primary question: Can a writer from a once colonized region address his former masters through their own idioms without being complicit in their politics of narration?" (1). Achebe was aware of this conflict and did not shrink from addressing the issue, choosing to write both in his native language and English, and throughout his career sought to defend his use of English. Achebe writes,

“the African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out the message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out of English a language which is at once universal and still able to carry his peculiar experience” (*Morning Creation* 61). In this way Achebe took the English language, molded it to his own purposes, and made it his own. He was aware of the role he was playing in the history of World Literature, which put to rest the unease of using the language of the colonizer because of what he was able to achieve: “I think what we did was literally to create African Literature... We were at the crossroads; we just happened to be there... There may be different opinions about the quality of particular texts but nobody anywhere who lays any claims to being knowledgeable can ignore African Literature now” (qtd. in Mezu 27). People may agree or disagree with the means Achebe chose, but few can argue with the ends he accomplished. When he speaks of Africa, he does so in an authentic voice reaching a world audience, making the rest of the world take notice not only of the destruction caused by colonialism but also making people aware of the rich and diverse cultures that existed long before the arrival of Europeans on the continent of Africa, thus putting to rest unsavory stereotypes oftentimes propagated by even would-be European do-gooders.

Not all Westerners who took up the cause of supporting human rights in Africa around the *fin de siècle* were completely wrongheaded in their approach to the plight of the African population under the cruelty of colonial rule. The American writer Mark Twain, for example, was drawn to the cause of stopping the mass murder taking place in the Congo and wrote a scathing satire of the man with the most blood on his hands: King Leopold of Belgium. In *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, Twain parodies the voice of the King. Although a rather long passage, its inclusion is necessary because it contains a concise enumeration of the crimes inherent in colonialism:

These meddlesome American missionaries! these frank British consuls! blabbing Belgian-born traitor officials!—those tiresome parrots are always talking, always telling. They have told how for twenty years I have ruled the Congo State not as a trustee of the Powers, an agent, a subordinate, a foreman, but as a sovereign—sovereign over a fruitful domain four times as large as the German Empire—sovereign absolute, irresponsible, above all law; trampling the Berlin-made Congo charter under foot; barring out all foreign traders but myself; restricting commerce to myself, through concessionaires who are my creatures and confederates; seizing and holding the State as my personal property, the whole of its vast rev-

enues as my private “swag”—mine, solely mine—claiming and holding its millions of people as my private property, my serfs, my slaves; their labor mine, with or without wage; the food they raise not their property but mine; the rubber, the ivory and all the other riches of the land mine—mine solely—and gathered for me by the men, the women and the little children under compulsion of lash and bullet, fire, starvation, mutilation and the halter.” (3)

In this instance Twain accurately conveys the horrors of colonialism perpetrated by the European powers. However, he gives too much credence to the Berlin Charter as an agreement meant somehow to ensure fairness, when in fact it documented nothing more than the conquering invaders dividing up the spoils of conquest: Historian Adam Hochschild notes, “In addition to perfunctory nods in favor of freedom of navigation, arbitration of differences, Christian missionaries, and the like, the major agreement that came out of Berlin was that a huge swath of central Africa, including Leopold's territory in the Congo basin, would be a free-trade zone” (94). History does not record to what extent the peoples of Africa were aware of or how they might have felt about boundary lines being carved across their own domain. Twain is also laboring under the delusion that “agent” and “foreman” were somehow honest and equitable positions on a rubber plantation in the Congo. However, his enumeration of the wholesale theft of natural resources and the atrocities committed in King Leopold's name make clear the horrors committed in Central Africa. Twain uses his fame and his acerbic wit to satirize King Leopold, to inform the world about the mass murder taking place, and to turn public opinion against the entire European enterprise in the Congo. Unfortunately, not all the voices attempting to cry outrage did so with even this imperfect level of egalitarianism. Achebe would expose these same outrages against indigenous people in his work.

Twain was not the only Westerner who took an interest in human rights in Africa. One of the best known European authors in relation to Achebe's work on Africa is the Polish born writer Joseph Conrad. His novel *Heart of Darkness* tells the story of a European ivory merchant who travels deep into the Congo and becomes disillusioned by the murder and chaos perpetrated there under the auspices of colonialism. Hochschild believes that the novel is salvageable: “However laden it is with Victorian racism, *Heart of Darkness* remains the greatest portrait in fiction of Europeans in the Scramble for Africa” (157). Achebe reads *Heart of Darkness* differently. He sees Conrad's descriptions of the African people as irredeemably racist. *Heart of Darkness* has been a staple of English reading lists for decades, and Achebe was the first prominent writer to call into question its inclusion in the Western cannon on the grounds of rac-

ism. Achebe writes, "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world," the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (3). Achebe points out the process of othering occurring in the novel, and while it may be that Conrad thought he was doing the right thing by chronicling the horrors of the widespread murders in the Belgian Congo, he nevertheless represents a Euro-centric point of view that is, at its heart, racist. The widespread teaching of this novel, and specifically the way in which high school teachers and college professors universally ignore the act of othering to champion literary aspects of the novel exemplifies the pitfalls of any approach that seeks to dilute its subject matter in order to cover up inherent bias. Perpetuating this racist colonial perspective in our educational institutions serves as a stark example of institutional racism.

In the third part of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe illustrates the arrival of Europeans in Africa along with the disruptive and destructive influence of Christianity in the lives of the African people. At the conclusion of his tale the author employs the ironic juxtaposition of the insidious cultural annihilation carried out by means of education, religion, and law by means of the agency of the very institutions the white man thought of condescendingly as his greatest gifts to bestow, the gift of "civilization", a loaded and most blindly biased of terms. Achebe writes, "They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance" (145). The courts lack wisdom because they never pursued cases in the interests of truth or justice. They only tried cases to provide cover for the crimes of colonialism, and as Achebe says of Christianity, "The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion" (149), and perhaps no other aspect of colonialism was as insidious or destructive of African identity than organized Western religion. In the minds of the proselytizing priests, they were doing God's work, but in reality, they operated in collusion with government and commerce to undermine the values and subjugate an entire group of people. Achebe's refutation of colonial influence is summed up at the end of the novel by the title of a book the white European commissioner plans to write about his experiences in Africa: "*The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*" (175). The irony implied by this fictitious title is doubled, first with the word "primitive," as Achebe ends his story about the death of a rich and vibrant culture at the hands of a supposedly more "civilized" people, and again with the term "pacification," which in this instance results in the warrior Okonkwo's death by hanging suicide:

'It is against our custom,' said one of the men. 'it is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits

it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only a stranger may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers.' (174)

In this way Achebe makes clear that the harm colonialism did went well beyond material and physical depredations, which were undeniably severe, and straight into the very soul of a Nation. In the face of such desecration, the African Diaspora is seeking to replant the seeds of a beautiful, heartfelt, and vigorous religious life as an integral part of reclaiming ancestral heritage.

It is interesting to note that at the end of his study, John S. Mbiti sides with Christianity as the religion most likely to provide Africa with salvation. In the process of his recommending this course of action he makes a curious assertion: "Christianity which is also 'indigenous', 'traditional' and 'African' like the other major religious systems considered here, holds the greatest and the only potentialities of meeting the dilemmas and challenges of modern Africa" (277). This assertion appears in direct conflict with the story of the European invasion of the continent of Africa narrated by Achebe. Indigenous and traditional religions did in fact exist well before the intrusion of Christian missionaries. As Wade W. Nobles writes in his study *Seeking the Sakhu*, "to understand the essence of these peoples' existence, one must examine their religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals—keeping in mind that underlying the differences in detail is a general philosophical system which prevailed in Africa" (7). Nevertheless, both Mbiti's historical analysis and Achebe's fictional mythos have provided a superbly detailed foundation from which the African Diaspora can look to its past in reclaiming their *Sasa* (period of conscious living) as the means for experiencing *Zamani* (period of the myth) (Mbiti 23).

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Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.





Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

# Kissing Her Godhead Away: The Proto-Feminist Individuation of the Hero Brünnhilde

Paul Woolsey Davison

## KEYWORDS

*Germanic and Norse mythology*  
*Richard Wagner*  
*Feminism*  
*Brünnhilde*

Richard Wagner's epic *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is marked by stunning emotional depth and a colossal thematic scope; it utters a yearning to answer humanity's questions regarding mortality and divinity, fate and free will, and the ever-iterative dialectic between the male and female principles. Of its four individual operas, none coalesces these ponderings more palpably than *Die Walküre*, in which Brünnhilde's defiance of Wotan's edict not to spare Siegmund ignites both Brünnhilde's and the "Father of Battles" individuation from the demonstrably corrupt male principle. Through this disruption of the prevailing patriarchal order, Brünnhilde and Wotan obtain freedom. Freedom for Brünnhilde comes in the form of liberation from the controlling male order; when Brünnhilde is first introduced in *Die Walküre*, she is a proud Valkyrie and

Wotan's favorite. She appears physically empowered, presenting herself as an armored battle maiden and "Chooser of the Slain," along with her eight sisters; in reality, she is disempowered, her existence only a manifestation of Wotan's will. This disempowerment is obscured by her physical trappings of masculinity, namely armor and weapons, which serve as outward projections of violent physical power. Wotan, on the other hand, obtains freedom from his own will: the supreme ruler of the universe, through his daughter's disobedience, discovers the monumental impotence of the male principle's ability to sway control over the world. Ultimately, he surrenders his will, as embodied in Brünnhilde, to an embracing womb, the "Ring of Fire," that concludes the opera. This can be seen as a representation of the female generative principle's triumph over the male will. In this way, through the individuation of Wotan and Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*, Wagner presents a "proto-feminist" case for woman as the redeemer of humankind.

To better appreciate this proposition of woman as redeemer, it is important to first examine the historical and mythological origins of the hero Brünnhilde. Of the two inspirations for Wagner's hero, the most pertinent is the Valkyrie Brynhild, as she appears in *The Saga of the Volsungs* and in the *Eddas*. Here, Brynhild is a prominent member of Odin's vanguard, whose primary task is to determine whether fallen warriors will join Odin for eternity in his mead hall, Valhalla. Kathleen Self writes, "Moving among men in battle, Valkyries were simultaneously awe-inspiring and fearsome beings," whose form and milieu satisfied normative notions of masculinity and the prevailing patriarchal social order in the Norse world (148). Self likewise points out that, despite appearances that may project masculine power when in Valhalla, "the Valkyries' task was to serve the warriors drink," as exotic and comely servants to the "real" heroes, the fallen warriors, effectively rendering the Valkyries as little more than the Norse version of

warrior-themed Hooters waitresses (148). With this mythic backdrop of the Valkyries as a class of awesome, terrifying, yet ultimately servile pseudo-warriors in mind, Wagner sets out to deconstruct this storied depiction and impart Brünnhilde with considerable agency. Wagner thus gives Brünnhilde a profound character arc that sets her on a strikingly disparate path from that of her sisters and their established mythology.

The second inspiration for Wagner's Brünnhilde as female redeemer is the historical figure of the Visigoth Brunhilda, Queen and Regent of Austrasia (c. 543-613). Brunhilda's marriage to Sigebert, King of the Franks, was doomed from the beginning. In addition, her on-again, off-again reign over Austrasia was fraught with violence, as she contended with persistent threats from a cadre of nobles who deemed her queenship illegitimate ("Brunhilda" 684). Examining her calamitous travails—and ultimately horrific demise via torture and dismemberment—through a contemporary lens, it seems likely that the nobles' primary contention with Brunhilda stemmed from a belief that all women, even a queen, must "bend the knee" to male rule. It appears that Wagner recognized this toxic dynamic and consequently created the character of Brünnhilde to stand in stark contrast with the cultural expectation of women as submissive. In Wagner's opera, paralleling the traditional patriarchal behavior of Brunhilda's time, Wotan's initial plan is to demote Brünnhilde from her divine status and banish her to Earth, powerless over the possibility of physical domination at the hands of a mere mortal man. However, Wagner's audience does not find the real-world Queen Brunhilda, yet another sad victim of the toxic system of patriarchy. Instead, Wotan is faced with Wagner's proto-feminist Brünnhilde, who represents, in part, an answer to the injustice inflicted upon Brunhilda and countless other women. Wagner's Brünnhilde, as this paper will soon discuss, is ultimately triumphant in her bid to compel the male ruling principle to "bend the knee" to her, unlike the historical Brunhilda.

Taken together, Brunhilda's tragic story commixed with the armor-clad Valkyries of myth form the rationale for Wagner's concept of proto-feminism presented in *Die Walküre*. Wagner's heretical perspective, embodied in the story of Brünnhilde—that only through the submission of the male will to the female generative principle can true liberation be attained—was remarkably broad-minded for its day, given that the opera was first performed in 1870. However, this anachronistic broad-mindedness did not sit well with all of Wagner's contemporaries. Friedrich Nietzsche, Wagner's former-confidant-turned-critic, bemoaned the composer's liberal views of "Young Germany" and his "irresistible" attraction to the "progressive thought of the day" (Hollinrake 41). Nietzsche stated that the composer's "main enterprise aims to emancipate women," as

if this were an intention worthy of such virulent critique (163). It is likely Nietzsche's qualm with Wagner's view of women corresponds to his conception of the *Übermensch*, whose ascent from man to super-man advances the entire human race: this Nietzschean concept stands in direct opposition to Wagner's image of the demi-god, in the form of a woman, whose *descent* from heaven to earth, stripped of the *Gotttheit*, frees Wotan, his kingdom, and all of humanity from the grasp of vengeful and pernicious divine will.

The proposition that Wagner's Brünnhilde represents a "woman redeemer" has its roots in the Nordic texts, which contain examples of women, "express[ing] anxieties about female power," while "representing appropriate and subversive behavior" (Friðriksdóttir 118). Brynhild, along with "many women in Eddic heroic poetry do not 'act as other women' but use various strategies to assert their autonomy and independence, subverting traditional female gender roles and challenging the patriarchal order" (130). Brünnhilde, for her part, refuses Wotan's order to ensure Hundig a victory. Instead, she reminds Wotan that "Fricka had turned / [his] own mind against [him]," changing him into "an enemy unto [him]self" (Wagner 184). Only in denying him can she help Wotan fulfill his true will: "She who, in battle, / guards Wotan's back, / she saw only / what [Wotan] did not see ... Inwardly true / to [Wotan's] will / which inspired / this love in [her] heart" (185-86). Despite his fury at her disobedience, Wotan later acknowledges Brünnhilde's uncommon wisdom and awareness of "inward truth," saying: "And so you did / what I longed so dearly to do" (186). This recognition by Wotan of Brünnhilde's exceptional nature reveals Wagner's stark and radically egalitarian conception of a woman's place in society.

In his doomed quest for power, Wotan represents all the shortcomings of the prevailing social order.<sup>1</sup> As the action of *Die Walküre* commences, Wotan has received a prophecy of the *Götterdämmerung*: annihilation is nigh, and a new world order is on the horizon. Wotan is thus afraid. Later, when confronting Brünnhilde's insolence, he admits that he's "in consuming torment, / starting up, chafing, / in impotent pain" (186). Here, Wotan's words betray an image of a once-mighty and now "fallen" divine being, who, as a result of his corruption and unrelenting will, has become a mere mortal and hardly a god at all. In the words of Oergel, "death, fear, and dependence are concepts alien to divinity; they are aspects of a temporal existence, governed by a power beyond one's own control" (245). Wotan, an exemplar of the "damaged, less perfect gods, [has] to make room for a more perfect solution where struggle and fear cease" (245). Unfortunately, that solution comes in the form of an irreversible rupture between Wotan and his wayward

<sup>1</sup> In this way, the Ring is as profoundly culturally relevant today as it was in the nineteenth century, given the continued existence of persistent corrupt and patriarchal power structures all over the globe.

daughter, as he sacrifices what he loves most to resolve the corruption his reign has created, thereby bestowing humanity with their world-redeemer, Brünnhilde.

The physical correlate of Wotan's desire for dominance over the world is the titular "Ring," which is itself a magical object and therefore ephemeral and ultimately unobtainable. More than just a shiny enchanted item and manifestation of Wotan's conception of elusive power, the "Ring" can be seen as a metaphor for the feminine principle. This is especially true in the 2008 Zubin Mehta/La Fura del Baus production of Wagner's cycle (henceforth referred to as the Mehta production) due to its characteristically circular, and arguably "orificial" shape. In contrast to the feminine Ring is the masculine form of Wotan. In Mehta's visually striking production, whenever Wotan is onstage, he possesses an enormously phallic metal spear, which, in Wagner's narrative, is the embodiment of divine law. As it is depicted in the Mehta production, it is almost impossible to ignore the spear's length, forcefulness, angle, and phallic connotations. Therefore, from that lens, it represents both divine law *and* the male principle, which are one and the same under Wotan's reign, at least at the outset of the cycle.

Wotan's spear, the aforementioned symbol of the male principle and divine law, is particularly evident at the conclusion of Act Two of the Mehta production, when, in the form of electronic mobile crane reminiscent a phallic obelisk, it presides over Brünnhilde. As Brünnhilde helps Sieglinde to escape and the two run away, Wotan curses her, calling her the "shameless child" who "shall be fearfully punished / once my horse overtakes her flight" (Wagner 167). In the Mehta production, Wotan flies across the stage in pursuit of his defiant daughter: it is no mistake that Wotan utters one of his only references to his "horse" at this moment, for Wagner was undoubtedly aware of the mythological lore surrounding horses and horse-men, or Centaurs, as emblems of unbridled masculinity<sup>2</sup>. Immediately following this scene, at the beginning of Act Three, Brünnhilde's demi-god sisters appear in the wake of a bloody battle, accompanied by Wagner's iconic musical piece, "Ride of the Valkyries." During this sequence, the Valkyries repeatedly mention horses, riding, saddles, and so on. This connection to horses in Wagner's opus corresponds to a consistent aspect of Scandinavian Valkyric lore that predates Wagner by several centuries. This lore depicts war-maidens astride a fleet of horses; here, the Valkyries ride their powerful mounts over smoldering battlefields, searching for fallen warriors to claim for Valhalla.<sup>3</sup> Clearly

<sup>2</sup> For more on the mythological underpinnings of this concept, see Page DuBois' *Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being*.

<sup>3</sup> This image of female cavaliers is consistent with that of the Amazons of Greek mythology, whose real-world inspiration is now believed by some to have originated from tales of mounted Scythian women who fought "like men" (Worrall).

the image of a woman astride a powerful horse, the horse itself a potent symbol of masculinity, denotes a woman in a position of dominance over the male principle. It thus follows that Wotan would attempt to reassert his authority, and by extension his manhood itself, over his daughter by "overtaking her flight." The visual dynamic between the forward force of the "spear" and the orifici, or receptive energy of the "Ring" is symbolic of Wotan's flailing attempts to maintain patriarchal rule over the feminine principle, as embodied by his daughter.

With this dynamic hanging in the balance, Wagner's proto-feminism comes to light during the climax of Act Three, when Brünnhilde disrupts the balance of power with an important request. She pleads with Wotan to ensure that "only a fearlessly / free-born hero / shall find" her asleep in her place of banishment on Earth (189). He refuses, stating her request is too much to ask given the grievousness of her offense. Unrelenting, she replies: "Crush your child / who clasps your knee, / trample your favorite underfoot / and dash the maid to pieces; let your spear destroy / all trace of her body: / but, pitiless god, don't give her up / to the shamefullest of fates!" (Wagner 189-90). As Brünnhilde pleads with Wotan not to subject her to the shame of submitting to a mortal man's will (i.e., her inevitable violation at the hands of the ungoverned male principle), an enormous glowing ring appears projected upon the massive screens positioned behind the actors, signifying the growing presence of the feminine principle.

Moments later, Brünnhilde finally asserts her total dominance over Wotan's patriarchal rule by unequivocally and quite ironically setting the terms of her own "imprisonment" on Earth: "At your behest / let a fire flare up; let its searing flames" consume "the coward who dares to draw near" (Wagner 190). The shape of her encasement is a literal ring of fire, which extends a thematic connection to the titular "Ring" of the four-opera cycle. The ring that Wotan seeks in the cycle's first opera, *Das Rheingold*, is a physical object that he needs to pay the giants for their construction of his palace, Valhalla, the symbol of his corrupt rule.

Now, his most beloved daughter is enclosed within another ring, this one composed of magical fire with the power to repel mortal cowards. Viewers soon learn that Brünnhilde's imprisonment within the flames is in actuality no incarceration at all. Instead, her banishment from Valhalla and her descent from quasi-divinity to the realm of humankind is the mark of her individuation from the male governance of Wotan. In this sequence, the Mehta production acknowledges Wotan's surrender to the force of Brünnhilde's feminine will when in granting her request to be only freed from the ring of fire by a "free-born man," Wotan humbly bows to her, finally declaring her to be his "valiant, / glorious child...[his] heart's / most hallowed pride" (Wagner 190). As Wotan submits on "bended knee"

to the female principle embodied by Brünnhilde, the brilliant ring descends from the heavens, symbolizing the transition from the reign of the masculine principle to that of the feminine. As the disc reaches the stage, Wotan steps inside; now consumed by the feminine generative principle, he beckons his daughter to join him. What follows in the Mehta production is what some deem a male “birth ritual,” which is an inversion of the female method of giving birth: instead of expelling the child from the womb, the child is inserted *into* the womb. In this way the child Brünnhilde is given new life as a woman now free from the dominion of Wotan. Wotan then summons Loge’s flames to transform the mere “Ring” into a blazing “Ring of Fire” that unmistakably resembles a fiery crown encircling Brünnhilde.

Interestingly, the phrase “Ring of Fire” could be a reference to the phenomenon during childbirth in which the baby’s head “crowns,” causing “a burning or stinging sensation, often referred to as ‘the ring of fire,’ as [the] baby stretches the vaginal opening” (“Baby Crowning”). While no evidence suggests that this term was in use during Wagner’s time, or even translates to the German, this metaphor of the vaginal ring of fire is supported by the Mehta production, during which hidden human actors manually ignite the ring of fire by passing flame from one torch to the next, signifying that this coronal flame is no ordinary fire. Indeed, it is a *living* fire, positioned precisely at the intersection of crushing loss and the possibility of life anew, beyond the grasp of Wotan’s corrupted hand. In this moment, as Wotan proclaims, “He who fears / my spear-point / shall never pass through the fire!” it becomes clear that it is this submission to the female principle and its generative power, not the much-contested golden trinket, that has been the object of Wotan’s desire all along.

Furthermore, fire is also a predominant motif in many of the world’s religions and mythologies, and no doubt the Mehta production invokes this understanding of fire’s role as “one of the ‘elements’ of the ancients” and, “the greatest invention of mankind” (Leach). Various mythological systems share the notion of fire being stolen in one way or another, “from South America to Australia, Africa to Europe, Asia to North America,” and that fire “was hidden in the trees or in a specific tree, and that ever since man has had to rub this wood to produce fire” (Leach). In Norse mythology, the basis for the Germanic lore of Wagner’s epic, fire is one of two primordial elements. The Norse creation story describes how the opposing forces of fire and ice meet to form droplets of water that become the first living creature, Ymir the frost giant (Leeming). It follows that the Mehta production eventually swaps the massive projected image of the giant Ash-tree for the “Ring of Fire” late in Act Three connoting the mythopoetic connection between wood and fire. Finally, elsewhere in world folklore, it is established that, “fire is the purifying element...

used to cleanse persons and animals and things” (Leach), and hence, the Mehta production’s “male birthing” ritual described above aptly serves as a vehicle of purification for both the world-redeemer, Brünnhilde, as well as her decaying and impotent father, Wotan.

It must be acknowledged how progressive Wagner’s feminism was for its time, regardless of how imperfect it was by today’s standards. Exploring Wagner’s “ambivalent feminism,” Mark Poster suggests that “Wagner’s work explores the limits of the modern, patriarchal subject, and begins to move toward what has emerged as a feminist position,” supporting the notion that Brünnhilde’s defiance contains the embers of a burgeoning proto-feminism within Wagner’s worldview (131). Despite the grim fate that awaits her in the inevitable *Götterdämmerung*, the concluding work of Wagner’s four-opera Ring cycle, Brünnhilde is the “emancipated woman of the future” (Hollinrake 43). She is finally liberated from Wotan’s rule and, having dispensed with the accouterments of manifest masculinity, is now free to enact the redeeming *Welttat*, or “world-task,” that “purges Valhalla and cleanses the earth of its curse” (43). For a brief moment, during the reverberations of the concluding leitmotifs of *Die Walküre*’s third act, Brünnhilde can rest, free at last.



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

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# Tumblr's Reception of Webtoon *Lore Olympus*' Apollo

Lydia Griffiths, MA

## KEYWORDS

*Greek mythology*  
*Tumblr*  
*Lore Olympus*  
*Apollo*

## CONTENT WARNING

*Sexual harassment*  
*Rape*  
*Trauma*

With over 1 billion views on Webtoons.com and a New York Times Bestseller in print, the Greek mythology comic *Lore Olympus* is wildly popular and a testament to the relevance of mythology in modern culture. First published on March 1, 2018, and still updated weekly, *Lore Olympus* by Rachel Smythe reimagines the story of Persephone and Hades. Fans of the series engage with each other, particularly on social media such as Tumblr, where they discuss, argue, and share art about the series. This paper explores how interactions among Tumblr users discussing *Lore Olympus* reflect current cultural conversations around sexual assault.

One of the significant narrative lines is Apollo's rape of Persephone. The Webtoon and its online conversations coincide with the rise of the #Me-Too movement. One argument among Tumblr users concerns Smythe's portrayal of Apollo as charming and charismatic yet predatory, and manipulative—a contrast with the commonly held view of the god as noble and admirable. However, there is no one traditional portrayal of Apollo, and Smythe's is consistent with Ovid's depiction of the god in *The Metamorphoses*. Ovid's Apollo forcibly takes what he wants when his victims reject him. Smythe puts Apollo's predation forward as central to his character, and this offends many readers. The dissections on Tumblr reflect conversations happening in classical academia around approaching myths in which women suffer trauma. These dialogues provide

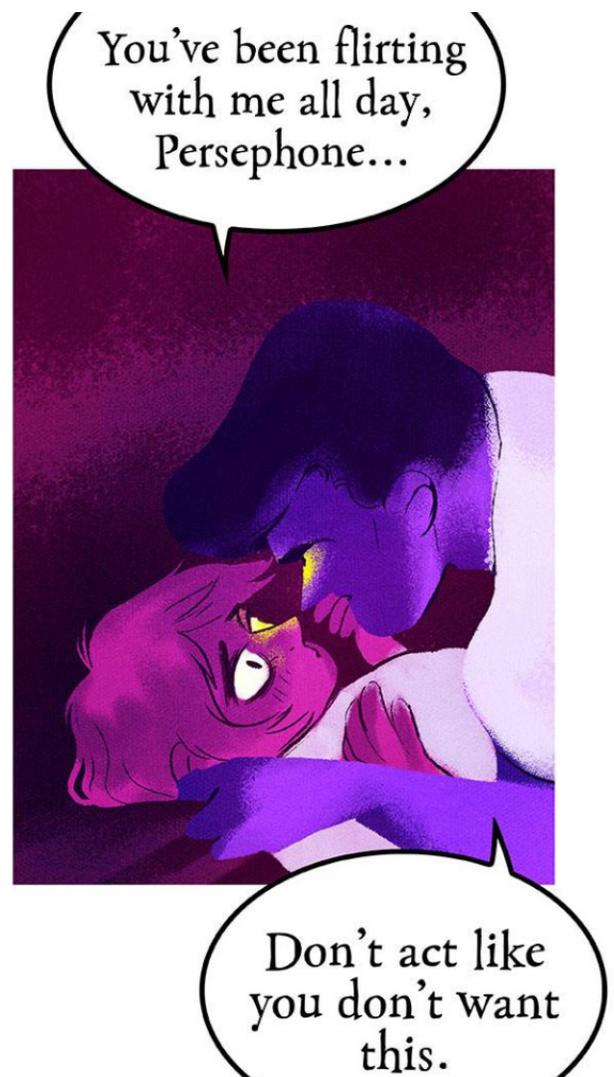


Fig. 1: *Lore Olympus*, Rachel Smythe.

new ways of engaging with the myths that emphasize the importance of addressing power dynamics.

Tumblr is a micro-blogging platform. Users create posts or reblog posts by others, tagging them for specific communities, that show up on “dashboards”<sup>1</sup> of other users who follow either that blog or one of the hashtags. In an interview in *a tumblr book*, Lori Morimoto describes Tumblr’s unique, complex cultural ecosystem:

Tumblr contrasts with the communities of LiveJournal, Yahoo Groups, Usenet, and so on. Specifically, where fandoms on LJ and other “comms” operate(d) on a hierarchical, closeable model (involving community “owners” and moderators, and peopled by self-selected members), Tumblr is characterized by a more rhizomatic, non-hierarchical structure where connections happen largely through tags that might or might not hold the same meanings for different fans. (qtd. in McCracken 168–69)

Tumblr’s users tend to be more progressive, liberal, social justice-oriented, queer, femme, and racially diverse when compared to users of other sites like Reddit (168, 178). However, Tumblr also has infighting, dehumanization of users/creators, and schisms based on self-identity. Yet Tumblr has allowed disenfranchised voices and privileged voices to speak with equal weight. On Tumblr, conversations center on the deconstruction of culture, media, politics, and ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Since Tumblr’s archiving system is complex and does not function like traditional forum sites, my collection method was limited to keyword search, namely posts tagged “*Lore Olympus* Rape,” “*Lore Olympus* Apollo,” “*Lore Olympus* SA,” etc. Filtering is difficult on Tumblr. Sorting by specific date ranges is not an option. Instead, I had to use “Latest,” “All Time,” “Last Month,” “Year,” and so on. The only other filtering option is to view “Top Post” or “Most Recent.” Volume of traffic and inconsistent tags make it difficult to access posts, but I was able to gather a representative sample of posts that specifically mentioned either the characterization of Apollo or Apollo’s rape of Persephone. About 25,000 fans follow #LoreOlympus on Tumblr, less than 1% of the 5 million *Lore Olympus* subscribers on Webtoons itself. Although from a small portion of the comic’s readership, conversations on Tumblr have a disproportionate

1 A “reblog” is when a user posts or shares someone’s post on their own blog. They can “reblog” it or add their own comments or hashtags to it. The dashboard is the home page of Tumblr where every blog or hashtag a user follows shows up in reverse time posted order. Tumblr is not algorithmically presented.

2 All Tumblr quotes referenced in the paper are presented as written in the original post with no grammar or spelling changes. For clarity, I italicized them.

impact across other social media platforms (McCracken 66–67, 89, 173, 178–180, 299–301).

Emily Greenwood, a classics professor at Princeton University, uses “omni-local” to describe how classical myths “are cultural composites that result from successive readers and audiences encountering and making sense of these works” (43). This idea of omni-local allows for a two-way horizontal relationship between the myths and their receivers, who are relating to, interpreting, and translating them to their different and contemporary cultures (43). Smythe’s retelling and Tumblr engagements show specific communities making sense of the received myths in their own contexts (44).

Smythe presents Apollo as charismatic, charming, popular, and fun. However, he is also pushy and manipulative—someone who will not take “no” for an answer. He traps Persephone in her bed and says, “You’ve been flirting with me all day . . . Don’t act like you don’t want this.” (Smythe, Episode 24) (figure 1). She had *not* been flirting and had been uncomfortable around him but had treated him with respect because of his status and because he was the brother of her new roommate and friend, Artemis. Later, Artemis dismisses Persephone’s discomfort: “Come on, he’s my brother . . . I’m sorry he’s being weird . . . he’s just trying to look out for you in his own way” (Episode 22) (figure 3).

Apollo pressures Persephone into sex. She is frightened and confused, so she says nothing. She does not consent, and Apollo uses her silence to take advantage of her. After, he continues to harass and stalk her. Apollo’s pursuit of Persephone is an ongoing subplot in the still-unfolding story. This subplot has generated hundreds of comments on Tumblr. They demonstrate how the readers of *Lore Olympus* are integrating the story into their lives and how the changing ideas around sexual assault and predatory behavior affect their acceptance of a classical character’s bad behavior.

People on Tumblr who dislike how Apollo is portrayed come mainly in two types. The first group, modern-day worshippers of Apollo, are angry at Smythe for making him the “bad guy” and villainizing their personal god. The

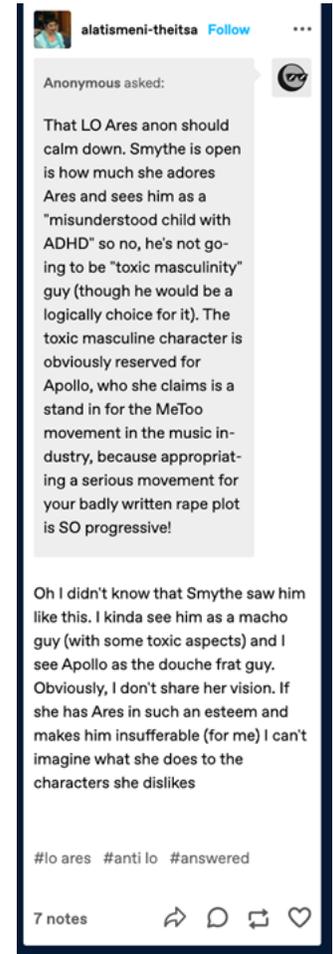


Fig. 2



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

second group is angry that Smythe characterized Apollo in contradiction to their perception of literary canon.

The first group, actual modern-day worshippers of Apollo, have come into direct conflict with readers of the comic due to Tumblr's tagging system. Different communities on Tumblr interact when they use the same tag. For example, #Apollo is used by *Lore Olympus* fans, modern-day Apollo worshippers, classicists, and others. This means that any post with #apollo shows up on any blog following that tag, and the community knowledge is out of context either intentionally or accidentally. Users experience a more organic intersection and blending of expressions and views around Apollo. Worshippers of Apollo talk about being attacked by *Lore Olympus* fans and told that their god is a rapist, without having any context of the mythology outside of the *Lore Olympus* story. Many of these devotees are also angry that Smythe would turn their god into this type of person.

This shows how a larger conversation is happening without textual evidence. For example, Tumblr posts refer to fans who reportedly have tried to change the "Apollo" Wikipedia article to reflect the *Lore Olympus* depiction. However, there are not textual examples to support this. @intermundia responds to an anonymous ask—detailing the problematic behaviors of fans:

*It's also people who do not appreciate it when fans of a webcomic edit the actual Wikipedia entry of actual Apollo to reflect their version of events things like that. They don't seem to recognize a distinction between the Homeric Hymns and a webcomic, which is annoying"*

An anonymous user (Anonymous 1) posts on September 24, 2020:

*Can the fans not take whatever the author says as canon for the actual myths???. And can the author stop misrepresenting the gods I worship???? Apollo did not rape Persephone. Apollo is a sacred god whom I go to for guidance and wisdom and this fucking fandom turned him into a monster. APOLLO IS A PROTECTOR OF CHILDREN! He is a light in the dark, he is not your one dimensional villain.*

Another user takes issue when Apollo is made out to be a bad guy. They respond to an ask on August 5, 2018:

*I dislike it sooo much!! Well the main reason is because they made Apollo look like an asshole. When someone asked about it, the answer was "well someone had to take up that role, too bad it's Apollo". And Hades is just this cliché version of Tumblr - soft, fluffy pure™. I see people saying "I'm such a mythology nerd and I love Lore Olympus" and I'm like???? Gosh, these modern day re-tellers who don't give two feathers of respect to the*

*Gods shouldn't write about them. They should realise that people worship these Gods and it's such a crappy move to write their Gods like this. (Anonymous 4)*

This person is obviously upset that the negative interpretation of Apollo has resulted in discrimination against their religious beliefs.

There is a rise in the number of people identifying religiously as "Pagan." In 2008, religious studies expert Michael F. Strmiska wrote that "modern paganism is among the fastest-growing religions in the United States" (1). Strmiska cited information gathered by the American Religious Identity Survey (ARIS) in 2001. Additionally, the Pew Research Center now includes "Pagan" as one of the religious categories people can choose while participating in the Pew Institute Religious Landscape Study. In 2014, 0.03% of respondents in the United States self-identified as Pagan or Wiccan, less than those who identified as Quakers (McShee). This rise of Pagans is not limited to the United States. Sarah Souli writes in "Greece's Old Gods Are Ready for Your Sacrifice" about the rise of Modern Hellenism in Greece. Followers founded The Supreme Council of Ethnikoi Hellenes (YSEE) in 1997. Historically, the Greek government has not recognized non-monotheistic religions. However, in 2017, the state officially recognized YSEE as a "known religion," which provides legal protection and allows followers of Modern Hellenism the right to worship publicly and put it on legal documents (Souli). Tumblr's diverse identity makeup reflects these growing numbers, and many users openly identify as different types of Pagans, both from the United States and other countries.

Expressing an example of the second group's concerns, an anonymous user (Anonymous 2) asks why Smythe made Ares a "good guy" but made Apollo a "bad guy":

*what I also said what Ares is actually a violent, war obsessed loser who even his parents hated, on top of a hypocrite (he defended ONE daughter from rape, but was also very defensive of his violent sins including the one who violently raped and mutilated his sister in law) but she sees him as cute and innocent and war is totally not bad but oh no Apollo is POPULAR and likes music!! Better make him the obsessive rapist bad guy for my Me-Too moment! Like, really?!*

User @alatimen-theista reblogs the following anonymous ask (Anonymous 3) about this same topic, also against Apollo being misused as a symbol of the #Metoo movement on March 3, 2020:

*That LO Ares anon should calm down. Smythe is open is how much she adores Ares and sees him as a "misunderstood child with ADHD" so no, he's not going to be "toxic*



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

masculinity” guy (though he would be a logically choice for it). The toxic masculine character is obviously reserved for Apollo, who she claims is a stand in for the MeToo movement in the music industry, because appropriating a serious movement for your badly written rape plot is SO progressive! (figure 2)

Further examples of this conversation can be seen in @loreolympusconfessions’ August 27, 2021 post. They write:

*Apollo in Greek mythology is one of the only cool dude gods that doesn't rape, has a problem with Zeus impregnating random nymphs and humans usually by force AND he's pansexual. Then Lore Olympus looked at this cool art student of a god and went 'crazy rapist.'*

People who have not even read the Webtoon have joined the conversation, having encountered it via their other fandom engagement, showing how content intersects and crosses over users and blogs. @sparks-arts posts on July 19, 2020:

*I haven't read lore olympus, but you're telling me Apollo, the god of literature, the sun, and who wards off evil . . . Raped persephone? . . . Idk much about Greek mythology, but I'm sure Apollo doesn't rape anyone right?? Someone fill me in about this webtoon, is it like,, not about the lore and actual myths but its own story?" Is an example of someone who has very little experience with Greek Myth internal and who's information is based on various fandoms and such. (figure 4)*

This post reflects how Tumbler’s algorithm encourages cross communication between different groups of people. @sparks-arts admits to not having read the Webtoon, yet they engage in the conversation and make sense of it because they are aware of it due to other posts on their feed. It is reflective of how stories and mythology are received in different contexts and how their interpretation changes based on who has received them.

While there are those who oppose Apollo’s portrayal in *Lore Olympus*, others support the way that Smythe handles rape and appreciate how she depicts the god. @strawberrypincushion writes on July 13, 2021 in response to the episode dealing with Persephone’s processing of traumatic emotions:

*Be fair to yourself Persephone, Apollo used his powers on you - to cocierce you to do what he wanted during the assault . . . Now im worried that someone (like ass-pollo) . . . ts okay Persy, take your time. Talking about trauma is not easy. Especially when you've buried it for so long.*

@strawberrypincushion had no problem with Apollo being the bad guy and appreciated how Smythe depicted Persephone working through the trauma. On November 18, 2019, @smellslikebutter posts, “I only wish more media could handle trauma with such tenderness and consideration as this comic does.”



Fig. 3: *Lore Olympus*, Rachel Smythe.

Others comment on the use of irony in the depiction of the characters. @mere-vanilla wrote on October 4, 2020:

*One of the things I really appreciate about LO is the creator's use of irony . . . The most obvious example being*

*the way Apollo treats Persephone (massive consent violations resulting in assault and revenge porn), versus the way Hades treats Persephone (Persephone invited Hades to just sleep next to her, who respected her boundaries). Apollo looks like he would be a good match with Persephone, age-wise . . . but he has no respect for her: he treats her with possessiveness and disregard—she is a stepping stone for him, in his opinion.*

@mere-vanilla's post compliments Smythe's flipping of abuser stereotypes. Media often depicts characters and people like Hades—rich, older, and dark—as the bad guy, the one lurking in the shadows, assailing innocent young women. Whereas the young, same age, and handsome characters are the heroes. A real-life example is the way the media depicted rapists Harvey Weinstein and Brock Turner: one was a monster, and one was a boy who made a mistake.

It is not just Smythe's script flipping that these Tumblr users applaud and defend, but they also stand firm on the notion that there is no Greek canon. @problematic-faves-appreciation posts on February 27, 2022, in response to the argument that Apollo isn't depicted in the correct canonical way: "*Lore Olympus has not claimed to be a beat-by-beat retelling of the Greek myths: Rachel Smythe confirmed this herself. Nice job repeating a common lie.*" These users call out the problematic behavior of fans who take the story as a simple retelling of the original myth. These posts often point out that Smythe never claimed her story followed the traditional narratives, but rather that those narratives inspired her plot. @itsclydebitches responds to an anonymous ask on March 13, 2020:

*As a former Classics major I can tell you that there is no "Greek Mythology." Meaning, there is no singular Greek Mythology that can be referenced and consulted in any uniform way. . . . So if we're looking for evidence that Smythe's interpretation of Apollo is the "correct" one, it exists. . . . depending on what you read and how you choose to interpret it. (figure 5)*

Rachel Smythe draws on a lot of classical texts, stating this in multiple interviews and on her own website:

There's lots of different versions of the myth. There's not just the one myth. I often see people arguing about the one myth. I'm like there's not just a one myth. If you get any classical historian and get five different people to explain it to you, it's going to be a little different. (Bond 3:00-11:12)

Her depictions of Apollo are both inspired by and similar to the way Ovid depicts him in *The Metamorphoses*. Ovid's Apollo in Book I is persistent in his pursuit of Daphne. Urged on by Cupid's arrow, Apollo will not consider

Daphne's resistance as a clear "no". Instead, he pursues her as she flees his unwanted advances. He cries out "O, daughter of Peneus, stay! Dear Daphne / I don't pursue you as an enemy!" (*Metamorphoses* 22). He urges Daphne to stop fleeing from him. He gaslights her, an act of psychological manipulation, saying she's being unreasonable and he is not her enemy. He says she should accept his affection with gratitude because of who he is. "But now the young god can't waste time: he's lost / his patience; his beguiling words are done / and so—with love as spur—he races on / he closes in" (23). She refuses his advances, so his patience grows thin and his attitude changes. He is relentless. Ovid writes:

He's at her shoulder  
now; she feels his breath  
upon the hair that streams down to her neck.  
Exhausted, and terrified, she sees Peneus' stream  
nearby; she cries:  
'Help me, dear father; if you the river-gods  
have any power, then transform, dissolve  
my gracious shape, the form that pleased too well!  
(24)

Daphne blames herself and her appearance for Apollo's pursuit. Even after she has been changed into a tree, he continues to harass her:

And yet Apollo loves her still; he leans against  
the trunk; he feels the heart that beats beneath  
the new-made bark; within his arms he clasps  
the branches as if they were human limbs;  
and his lips kiss the wood, but still it shrinks  
from his embrace, at which he cries: "But since  
you cannot be my wife, you'll be my tree" (24)

The wood actually shrinks from his embrace. Even as a tree she resists his touch.

Likewise, in Book IX, the single line introducing Dryope reads, "After the loss of her virginity (against her

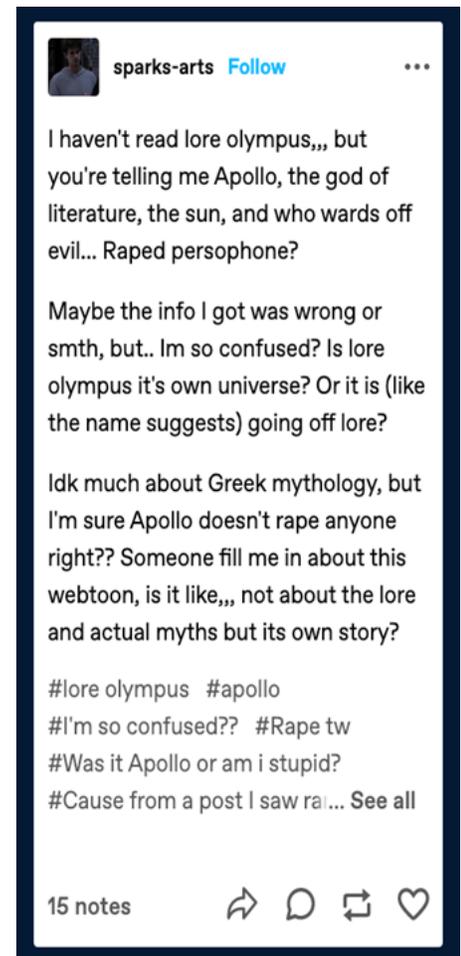


Fig. 4

will) to Delphi's deity" (302). Dryope's identity in the story is tied to Apollo, and she is reduced to being a victim of his actions.

Fans on Tumblr who are aware of Apollo's character in Ovid debate if this is enough to justify Smythe's adaptation of him as a "villain" capable of assault. There are those who argue that Smythe is justified in her portrayal because there are sources like Ovid that show him in that light. But others argue that the classical Apollo is not a villain. @wassp-word posts on May 12, 2019:

*I hate how the author's only probable reason to vilify Apollo is that he chased Daphne (like please that's mild, hermes and Dionysus have done more awful stuff) while Apollo is much better than other gods.*

These conversation samples from Tumblr's micro-universe are reflective of the larger, ongoing cultural conversation. This larger argument occurs not only in other online forums, but also in academic settings. In "Reading Ovid in #Me Too" Daniel Libatique argues that discussions about sexual violence must be central to teaching when teaching Ovid:

Ovid's stories of sexual aggression can no longer function as abstracted myths studied for the purpose of detached historical analysis; our students, empowered to express their voices, will not allow us to present them as such, nor should they. Rather, these stories are mirrors that reflect patterns of abuse and disparities of power that persist to the modern day. The recognition of these injustices is the first step towards dismantling them. (72-3)

Libatique argues that questions around power dynamics need to be raised when reading Ovid, asking who has the power and agency, and how that power was used in the violent act (62). They write: "There is value in reading these narratives as exercises in recognizing the factors that contribute to the power hierarchies that allow an aggressor to assault a victim" (62). This direct approach to texts containing sexual violence and power dynamics parallels Smythe's, shining light on an uncomfortable and sometimes personal reality.

In an OpEd published in the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, Columbia University's newspaper, students spoke up about the sexual violence in Ovid. Student journalist Kai John-

son discusses how a student shared her personal experience in class when studying Ovid. The teacher focused on the beautiful language and ignored the sexual violence directed at many of the female characters. The student, a survivor of assault, felt unheard and unsafe in the classroom. The article suggests ways that teachers can be trained to tackle sensitive subjects and to re-engage these fixtures of cultural studies in a way that honors a multiplicity of voices (Johnson). Katharina Volk writes in *Ovid*: "Reactions to Ovid's treatment of women, just as to other aspects of his poetry, will always be subjective and colored by a given reader's own taste and opinions" (81). This reaction to rape and those who commit rape is an ongoing conversation affected by both current events and the media.

Several recent works have retold classical myths from the point of view of women who have suffered assault, such as *A Thousand Ships*, by Natalie Haynes, and *Circe*, by Madeline Miller. Smythe's *Lore Olympus* is part of this movement. Smythe in an interview says: "Some people think [*Lore Olympus*] is meant to be a beat-for-beat thing. A beat-for-beat interpretation. And I'm like: No no no, this is something else. It's inspired" (qtd. in Albert, 47:28). Maria Tatar argues that this is no coincidence. In *The Heroine With 1001 Faces*, Tatar suggests that "stories, particularly those set in times of war, conflict, crisis and suffering, shift in meaning over time, depending who tells them" (xvii). She argues that classical literature has traditionally silenced women, particularly as victims of sexual assault. Their voices and stories are diminished except as they are used to further the glory of their assailants, who are often godly. Tatar states that present re-imaginings of classical literature coincide with the increasing visibility of women and growing respect for their voices. These modern versions resonate with the ancient stories rather than reinventing them (71).

One thing the #MeToo movement accomplished is broadening the definitions of what constitutes rape and who is a rapist. Smythe comments on this cultural change when she portrays Hades, traditionally the abductor and bad guy, as a person with compassion and empathy, while writing Apollo, the god loved by all, as a manipulative predator.

In an interview, Smythe states that publishing her graphic novel about the reality of sexual assault is important to her. "I have a platform. I can tell a story that will hopefully

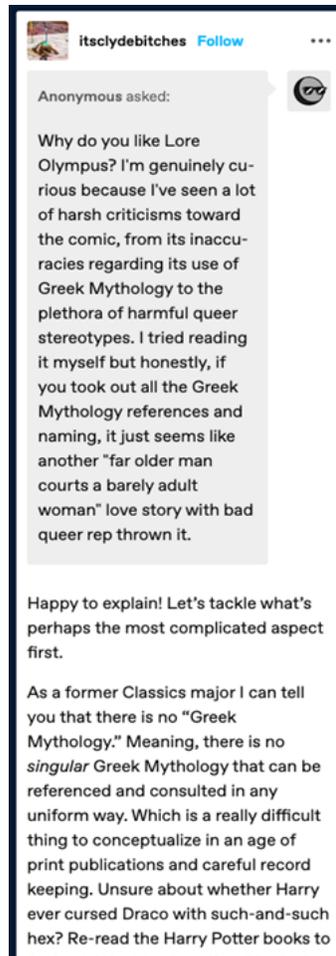


Fig. 5

educate and help others feel acknowledged and vindicated" (Ntim-Addae). In another interview, Smythe describes how someone else's description of their experience pushed her to deconstruct her own trauma. She included this type of "gray area" assault in the Webtoon because she wanted to help others confront their own trauma. Smythe says that she knew her work would upset some people, but that she has also received "horrific" numbers of emails from young people who say it has helped with their own grief and trauma (qtd. in Bond, 16:25).

The omni-local components of Smythe's reimagining of Persephone's story offer a myth that provides sensemaking and meaning within its contemporary cultural context. The accompanying Tumblr discourse deepens the omni-local intersections and proves that not only are these myths still powerful and affecting our culture, but they also provide ways for people to enter conversations and be confronted by their own preconceptions. This space allows many people to tackle cultural issues while engaging with the myths for the first time.



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

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# The Christmas Hierophany: Eliade and the Nativity Story

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## KEYWORDS

*Christianity*  
*Christmas*  
*Mircea Eliade*  
*Hierophany*  
*Axis mundi*

For many Christians, the Christmas story is the historical event of God miraculously incarnating himself into human form. For such believers, the Christmas story is not a parable; it is a foundational fact upon which their faith and lives are built. Other people, however, are more skeptical: some view the Christmas story as a supernatural tale, one among many told throughout the world's great religions. For the non-religious, facts exist in the material world, where hypotheses can be tested and outcomes repeated, and thus, rational belief in the story of Jesus' birth proves challenging. However, the story can be embraced without need for belief in the miraculous elements: Mircea Eliade, a Romanian scholar and comparativist, offers a way to think about this and other religious stories free from the binary of "spiritual" or "material" choice.

Eliade is one of the most influential teachers and thinkers in the discipline of comparative religious studies. He approached religion as a subject that could be studied objectively, while simultaneously, he philosophically went beyond the normative and objective comparative approach. This is because, for Eliade, religion was about the experience of the "sacred." His ideas about the sacred introduced novel ways of thinking about religion, which reached beyond binary categories of "believers" and "non-believers." In this, Eliade provides a framework for understanding religious experience that embraces both the history and the mystery of the phenomenon. By framing religious experience in terms of the "sacred" and "profane," his approach allows space for evolving definitions of religion. This essay explores Eliade's core ideas about the sacred and then applies them to one of the most popular religious stories: the miraculous birth of Christ as told in the New Testament.

Before delving into how Eliade's

methodology contributes to an interpretation of the Christmas story, it is imperative to note that Eliade's work builds off the contributions of German theologian, philosopher, and historian of religion Rudolf Otto. Otto's concept of *Das Heilige*, or the sacred, shifted the practice of religious studies from research concerning ideas about God to a more irrational approach, analyzing how people experience religion. For example, instead of deconstructing the theology of fellow German and igniter of the reformation movement Martin Luther, Otto opted to ask what Luther's ideas about a "living God" meant to believers in a phenomenological sense. Otto called these phenomenological religious experiences the "numinous," which is derived from the Latin word *numen*, meaning "god." For Otto, the numinous presents itself as *ganz andere* or something "wholly other" (Eliade, *Sacred* 9). Consequently, according to Otto, when a person is confronted by the numinous, he or she feels a sense of profound humility or nothingness,

for the numinous is not a human or cosmic happening. It is something totally different, alien to the rules and reason of the physical world.

Eliade builds on Otto's perspective, broadening it from comparisons of the rational and irrational elements in religion. He offers a wider concept of the sacred: that it is as a whole found within *and* outside the categories traditionally defined as religious. In this, Eliade advocates for a more generous definition of religion. He writes, "Religion may still be a useful term provided we keep in mind that it does not necessarily imply belief in God, gods, or ghosts,

but refers to the experience of the sacred, and, consequently, is related to the ideas of *being, meaning, and truth*" (*Quest i*). For Eliade, the study of religion is about the study of sacred being and sacred meaning. To aide in defining his idea of the "sacred," he juxtaposes the sacred with the "profane:" the profane world being the natural world devoid of the numinous, where reason has deconstructed the elements of the world to the simplest rational forms. The sacred, therefore, is that which stands apart or does not belong in the natural or profane world. It is a confrontation with the mysterious—the "wholly other" (*Sacred 11*). In other words, the sacred and the profane are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by humanity in the course of history (14). Humans live most of their lives in an ordinary, or profane, time and space, but there are moments when the sacred breaks

through, transforming a profane moment into a sacred one.

It is essential to understand that when Eliade talks of the sacred, he is not referring to just the symbols or myths found in the main world religions. Instead, Eliade argues there are non-religious phenomena in which we can still find and decipher the sacred. For example, art, movies, and music all provide opportunities for the expression of the sacred. Furthermore, the sacred is not something that can be found or discovered. Instead, humans become aware of the sacred because it reveals itself. One does not conjure the sacred; the sacred manifests.

To describe the phenomena of the sacred, Eliade uses the term "hierophany," meaning a "manifestation" or "appearing" (*-phany*) of "the sacred" (*hieron*)—mostly through

human interaction with the natural world (Kripal 147). Anything can become a hierophany and reveal something sacred to one or many: from a simple stone to an architectural wonder, or a sunset, mountainscape, symbol, or story. According to Eliade, to be human is to encounter the sacred constantly, though the sacred can only be manifested through something else—the aforementioned hierophany. This interdependence between the sacred and profane inevitably leads to paradox; an object is both material and supernatural at the same time. In this, Eliade emphasizes the paradox found in every hierophany. Mainly, he writes that

by "manifesting the sacred, the object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to exist in its surrounding cosmic milieu" (*Sacred 12*). In other words, a manger is still a manger, but it is also a container for the holy and a symbol of a divine manifestation. What makes it sacred is not something that exists in some transcendent realm while the material world exists in the lived cosmos. Instead, the sacred world "shines through" the natural world like sunlight illuminating a stained-glass window. When the sacred manifests itself in the natural world, the natural becomes "supernatural."

Eliade admits that economy, culture, and social origination all contribute to differences in religious experience; thus religious experiences are always contextual. An agricultural society will experience the sacred differently than nomadic hunters or a cosmopolitan society (*Sacred 17*). However,

for Eliade, the differences are not what is important. He sees the commonality between religious experience as crucial: all religious people live in a sacralized cosmos, meaning the profane cosmos is soaked in divine meaning. The world is full of sacred significance rooted in non-religious or material contexts. Therefore, according to Eliade, there is no purely religious phenomenon; one does not exit the profane world to enter the sacred world. Eliade writes, "because religion is human it must for that very reason be something social, something linguistic, something economic—you cannot think of man apart from language and society" (qtd. in Paden 69). In other words, no matter how transcendent the religious experience, one's feet never lose touch with the common ground.



Fig. 1: Sandro Botticelli. *Mystic Nativity*, 1500, The National Gallery

However, in Eliade's view, just because religious experience is expressed in a particular historical context does not imply that it is reducible to non-religious forms of behavior (*Quest* 7). This contextual yet subjective reality speaks to the paradox of hierophany. As tempting as it may be to students of religious studies, a religious experience, according to Eliade, cannot be wholly explained in rational terms or contained by academic accounts. This reductionist approach to religious studies is what Eliade confronts in his work. He advocates for a science of religion that encompasses a total discipline of various approaches to religious phenomena (8). He writes, "But no living, normal man can be reduced to his conscious rational activity, for modern man still dreams, falls in love, listens to music, goes to the theater, views films, reads books—in short, lives not only in a historical and natural world but also in an existential, private world and in an imaginary Universe" (iv). For Eliade, the inner imaginary world of the soul is a garden for the sacred. It is the subjective world that complements the objective world, creating experiences of the sacred.

Thus, Eliade argues that the history of religions is not a museum of fossils and ruins. It is a series of "messages" waiting to be deciphered and understood, messages that have changed and been modified over time to contribute to an entire culture (*Quest* ii). These messages do not simply tell people about the ancient past, they also disclose "fundamental existential situations" that are relevant to modern humans (iii). By studying religions in their historical contexts, people can discover the sacred throughout human history. Studying the way one's ancestors related to the sacred can enlighten one's understanding of religious experiences. Even more, Eliade writes that study itself could result in transformation: "A considerable enrichment of consciousness results from the hermeneutical effort of deciphering the meaning of myths, symbols, and other traditional religious structures" (iii). For Eliade, the sacred is in and all around the field of religious studies.

Alas, Eliade is not without his critics. Douglas Allen, professor of philosophy at the University of Maine—a scholar who is researched in the phenomenology of Mircea Eliade—writes: "Many, if not most, specialists in anthropology, sociology, and even history of religions have either ignored or quickly dismissed the works of Mircea Eliade. Probably the most frequent general criticism made by religion specialists has been that Eliade is methodologically uncritical, arbitrary, and subjective" (545). In other words, Allen posits that Eliade does not reflect on his own methodological approach. While Eliade aspires for his interpretive practice to be one of pure description, for Allen, there is no such thing as pure description because everything is filtered through the subjectivity of the mind. One does not see Eliade reflecting on his subjectivity in his writings. Other critics, and some supporters, observe that Eliade is

inconsistent and lacks a coherent methodological framework, but these criticisms never seemed to bother Eliade (Allen 546). Perhaps the common criticism is that Eliade is antihistorical, meaning he does not do justice to the concrete, historical nature of data (547); instead, he opts for universal structures and generalizations. Eliade's method is described by theologian and scholar Thomas Altizer as being "mystical" and "romantic" instead of "rational" and "scientific" (qtd. in Allen 548).

Eliade's approach differs from the sociological and psychological approaches of religious interpretation. For example, it contrasts with the ideas of Emile Durkheim, who proposes that religion is the product of collective social values. It also contrasts with the psychological approach championed by Sigmund Freud and C.J. Jung, which posits religion as a tool for mediation between the ego and the deeper areas of the unconscious. Eliade's approach is grounded in historical context, albeit perhaps subjectively. This "groundedness," and his rejection of the desacral-

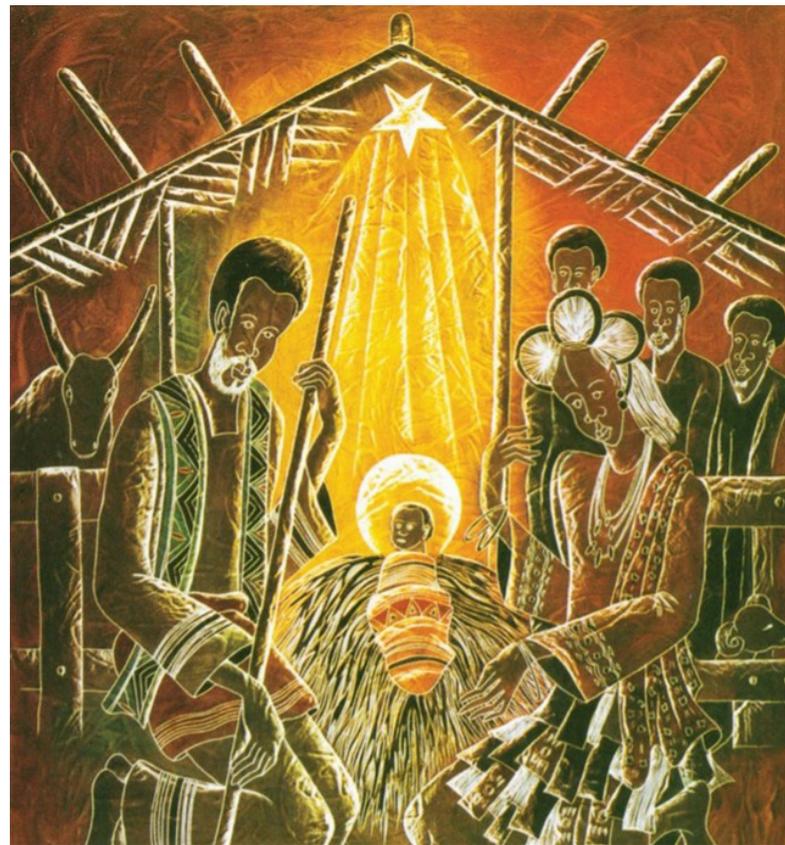


Fig. 2: Joseph Mulamba-Mandangi. *Nativity*. 1997.

ization of the world to consciously knowable ideas, contributes to why many students of religion are attracted to Eliade's perspective: He leaves room in his approach for wonder, mystery, and personal transformation.

With Eliade's work summarized, it is now important

to apply Eliade's interpretive lens to the story of the birth of Jesus Christ: the Christmas story. For Christians, it is a story of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, a "supreme *hierophany*" (*Sacred* 11). God manifesting in human form is a collision of heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane. The story has grown in popularity over the millennia, resulting in a holiday observed globally, even in traditionally non-Christian areas of the world. While multiple non-Christian sources testify to the existence and death of Jesus, only Christian texts, primarily the gospel accounts in the New Testament, describe his birth. Of the four gospel narratives of the life of Christ, only Matthew and Luke record the story of Jesus' birth, and their accounts differ.

Each account includes and omits parts in the story, which can be understood to indicate that the narratives were written for different purposes—or, at least, different audiences (Piñero 32). For example, Matthew's account begins with a genealogy tracing Jesus's lineage back to King David, perhaps in an effort to connect Jesus to a prophecy found in the book of Isaiah about a messiah-like figure coming from the shoot of Jesse (Matthew 1). Contrastingly, Luke's account begins with the angel Gabriel foretelling two births: the birth of John the Baptist to his father, Zechariah, and then the foretelling of the birth of Jesus to his mother, Mary (Luke 1). Matthew includes details such as the visit of the magi the massacre of the innocents by King Herod, and Mary and Joseph's flight into Egypt (Matthew 2). Luke's version omits these elements, but includes details of the census ordered by Rome, Mary and Joseph's arrival in Bethlehem, and the lack of accommodations resulting in Jesus being laid in a manger. Luke also includes the story of the angel's appearance to the shepherds in the field (Luke 2).

On the differences between the two gospel accounts, Piñero writes: "The motives for including a birth narrative were probably rooted in the needs of Christian communities at that time . . . Despite their differences, Luke's and Matthew's stories link Jesus both to his divine parentage and his earthly ties to the House of David, emphasizing Jesus' role in both God's plan and in Jewish history" (33). This

aligns precisely with the paradox found in every hierophany. Jesus is human, but he also becomes something else; Jesus is also the Christ, the manifestation of God in human form. Thus, the name "Jesus Christ" embodies the profane (human) and the sacred (divine) worlds simultaneously.

In addition to the arrival of the Christ child, the ap-

pearance of the angel and the heavenly hosts presents another example of hierophany in the Christmas story. Luke records: "In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" (*New Revised Standard Version*



Fig. 3: Christos Georghiou. *Nativity Christmas Scene*. Adobe Stock File #117238577.

Luke 2.8-9). The angel—presumably Gabriel, though the text does not specify—instructs the shepherds to not be afraid, for they come "with good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2.10-11). The angel tells the shepherds they will find the baby lying in a manger. Then, the angel is joined by a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God, saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Luke 2.14). Thus, on an otherwise ordinary "profane" night, shepherds tending to their earthy duties suddenly have a powerful experience of the sacred. Out of the night sky appears something "wholly other." The glory of the divine, the holy, and the sacred manifests itself, striking terror in the shepherds' soul.

Finally, the Nativity scene itself has become a sacred image, an "axis mundi." Axis mundi is a Latin term that means "the world axis." As Eliade defines it, the axis mundi symbolizes the connection between the cosmic levels of heaven and earth. It is a symbol found in many traditional societies, often represented by a tree, ladder, or pillar. Eliade describes the four ways in which the axis mundi is characterized: (1) It is a sacred place that breaks through the homogeneity of profane space; (2) the break is symbolized by an opening through which passage from one cosmic region to another (for example, from heaven to earth) is made possible; (3) communication from heaven to earth is expressed



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

with an image, such as a ladder, tree, or mountain; and (4) around this cosmic axis lies the world, so the axis mundi is the center of the world (*Sacred* 37). The image of the Nativity functions as an axis mundi bridging the profane earth below with the sacred heavens above. Here are the basic components of this now-mythic image: Just above the dirt-covered ground, a child lies in a horse trough wrapped in simple clothes. Above the Christ, a mother peers lovingly down at the child. Chosen by God, Mary carries a fully divine, fully human being to full term and delivers the child into world. From the light-less womb of the blessed mother, the sacred, embodied as the divine child, comes to be the light of the world. The metaphorical cosmic shroud separating the sacred world from the profane is torn in two with the tearing of Mary's body in childbirth: A holy child emerges covered in blood, sweat, and tears. An invisible vertical line runs from the wooden manger with the resting child, to his dotting parents peering down upon him, to the angled stable roof pointing to the starry heavens and angelic hosts above.

These mystical axis mundi characteristics can be found in many traditional and popular renderings of the Nativity scene. For example, *Mystic Nativity* (fig. 1), a painting by Italian Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli, centers infant Jesus in its lower third, with the child's face tilted toward the heavens and his arms reaching for his mother above him. Viewers' eyes are drawn up the invisible axis to the three angels on the roof, whose arms create a circle indicating a passage from the earthly happenings below the rooftop to the angelic dance above. The ordinary world, depicted as the forest in the distance, surrounds this event, making the event the center of the world. Perhaps a more apparent example of the axis mundi represented in a Nativity image is Joseph Mulamba-Mandangi's *Nativity* (fig. 2). In this painting, the Christ child rests in a bushel of hay, his mother and father on each side of him. Mary and Joseph's staffs, held vertically, point to the sacred star representing the heavenly realm. Finally, a simpler yet equally compelling image of the Nativity as an axis mundi may be found in the ordinary, "profane" Adobe Stock image of the scene (fig. 3). In this illustration, the sacred line from the Bethlehem star above shines down to the earthly stable. The light is the axis that connects the realms of heaven and earth. In this simple image, whole cosmologies could be formed around the central symbol of the incarnate God. These three works are just a few examples. Over the past two thousand years, countless depictions of the Nativity have been produced, demonstrating the axis mundi that connects the earth below, through the Christ child and his parents, to the heavens above.

During the Christmas season, crèches featuring the key figures of the Nativity story are displayed on tables, mantles, and front lawns. However profane—one of these

depictions may seem, with their cheap plastic and blown-up figures, they can present a powerful hierophany, in Eliade's sense, these ordinary objects manifest the "shining through" of the sacred in human encounter, resulting in the phenomenon of religious experience. Eliade writes that the sacred could appear in both traditionally religious and non-religious modalities. He also advocates for an interpretive lens that uses historical context and comparative approaches not to reduce or explain religion as a product of culture or history, but rather to decipher the mystery of the universality of religious experience. The biblical stories and various artistic images depicting the birth of Christ tell of the sacred erupting through time and space to reveal itself to humanity. As ordinary as the crèche may appear or as familiar as the Christmas story may have become, if one has imagination and curiosity, and if the eyes of the heart remain open, the sacred might burst through and remind one that the world can be full of beautiful meaning.

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Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

# Queering Jesus: Foucault, Butler, and the Person of Christ

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## KEYWORDS

*Christianity*

*Jesus*

*Queer theory*

*Michel Foucault*

*Judith Butler*

It is no secret that certain denominations of the modern Christian church are increasingly nervous about the topics of gender and sexuality: within evangelical circles, Jesus' historical and corporeal body is used to assert the supremacy of biological males, and also to proclaim a certain kind of God-ordained, static masculinity. However, this raises the questions: was Jesus truly the embodiment of ultimate maleness that evangelicals proclaim? What happens when queer theory is applied to the life and actions of Christ? This paper briefly outlines queer theory as a hermeneutic lens, explains dominant evangelical interpretations of Christ's gender, and reveals how queer theory problematizes these assumptions.

Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* is a foundational text in the emergence of queer theory. Foucault traces the genealogy of how the modern concept of "sex" became an identity as opposed to merely an action or behavior (Watson 70). He begins with the assertion that, prior to the seventeenth century, "Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit" (Foucault 3). Social norms at the time dictated that there be no shame around the body or the act of intercourse; thus, there was little discretion around sex. Foucault posits that this "frankness" was eventually repressed by the Victorian bourgeoisie (17). He writes: "Sexuality was carefully confined; it was moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious function of reproduction" (3). Hence, if sex and language about sex attempted to leave the bedroom, it would consequently be penalized (4, 17).

However, Foucault states that, when it comes to repression, things are not as simple as they initially appear, for, "when one looks back over these past three centuries with the continual transformations, things appear in a very different light: around and apropos of sex, one sees a veritable discursive explosion" (17). While the "frankness" of discussions around sex and the body were repressed, other ways of discussing sex became multiplicitous. This was seen particularly in the "sacrament of penance after the Council of Trent," when, while the subject of sex became more "policed" in terms of what was linguistically acceptable to discuss it, "the scope of the confession—the confession of the flesh—continually increased" (19). Thus, Foucault states, the emphasis on confession of all bodily acts and self-examination in the Catholic church transformed sex into discourse (20). Over time, the ways in which it became acceptable and unacceptable to discuss sex enabled legal sanctions against "perversions" to multiply (36). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "legitimate alliances" in sex became limited to the standard

of heterosexual monogamy. Sexual relationships outside of this standard came under scrutiny (38), and language surrounding “peripheral” sexualities outside of the cisgender/heterosexual/monogamous norm became labeled as “perverse,” further isolating said sexualities and alienating the people to whom these sexualities belonged (48). Hence, in Foucault’s view, one’s sexuality became a signifier of one’s character and an object to be scientifically studied (58, 77). With this said, Foucault continues on to argue that the notion of one’s “sex” is “produced in the service of the social regulation and control of sexuality,” where acceptable bodily pleasures are synthetically associated to one another and then linguistically communicated to be “manifestations” of this “sex” (qtd. in Butler 128). In short, sexuality, according to Foucault, is a construct—one that is intricately related to power and knowledge.

With a summary of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* established, it is vital to move on to feminist philosopher Judith Butler and their book *Gender Trouble*, which is another key text in the development of queer theory. Butler begins *Gender Trouble* with an important critique of the normative feminism of their time: feminism concretizes what it means to be a “woman” throughout space and time, ultimately reinforcing the patriarchal gender binary (1-8). Similarly, Butler asserts that feminism’s postulation that “gender is culturally constructed; biological sex is fixed and binary” is limiting, stating that: “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘pre-discursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (10).

Moving forward, through examining and critiquing this feminism and the works of other gender theorists, including Foucault, Butler outlines their philosophical theory of performativity, an idea they originally developed after engaging Jacques Derrida’s reading of Franz Kafka’s “Before the Law.” They sum up the reading in the following way: “There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object” (XV). Butler asserts that they began to wonder “whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon it anticipates” (XV). While the performativity of gender in her view revolves around the “anticipation of a gendered essence [that] produces that which it posits as outside itself,” performativity is also “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (XV). In summation:

For Butler, then, any notion of identity is mediated through categories already culturally available: there is no such thing as a “pre-cultural” body. Whilst [they] did not dismiss the materiality of the body, [they] argued that words and language bring the body into being. Individuals are always already gendered prior to any element of choice for or against gender identity. Butler thus introduced the idea that “gender” and “heterosexuality” are performative and repetitive. Bodily gestures, movements and clothing all signify gender at every moment. (Watson 72)

All in all, Butler’s view contends that gender (identity) is neither a fixed biological state *nor* an internal state of being; it is rather a repeated set of stylized actions, a *performance* that one does within a “highly rigid regulatory frame” and order of culture (Butler 45, 193). Identity is constituted by these expressions, and there is no fixed “gender identity” behind what the expressions themselves are—thus, gender is an illusion (191-92).

Queer theory, then, very clearly harkens back to and builds upon the works of Foucault and Butler. It is “a clear descendent of these ideas [and emerges] directly out of liberal ideas of equality, building on feminist and other liberatory political movements, that pursued questions of identity categories and how power is distributed among and between them” (Watson 69). Put as simply as possible, queer theory is a critical framework that explores and challenges dominant and essentialist views of gender and sexuality, as well as the effect of these static categories upon those who do not fit within these norms, and it ultimately posits that heteronormativity is a social and cultural construct. To add dimension to this definition, Watson defines “queer” and “queer theory” as follows:

Being “queer,” then, is perhaps to be like someone in therapy; that is, to be a person in flux, contesting boundaries, eliding definition and exhibiting the constructedness of categorization. [Queer theory] is a process of problematizing and scrutinizing the genealogy of categories and throws into focus the inadequacy of binary distinctions as referents of experience (but which also enable and constrain). Sexual identity for queer theorists has the potential to be redefined as more than sexual acts and culture is acknowledged as interpretive and political. (74-75)

Queer theory and queer theorists therefore “work to challenge and undercut any attempt to render identity singular, fixed or normal. This has involved the ‘queering’ of texts by ‘reading against the grain’ [producing a queer reading of texts not directly about sex or sexuality]” (74). Overall, queer theory seeks to disrupt and deconstruct the essentialist categorizations of gender that alienate those who

exist outside of those notions, and, in doing so, honors its Foucaultian and Butlerian roots.

Before applying the lens of queer theory to evangelical conceptions of the person of Jesus, it is important to note that, in the modern evangelical church, the normative image of Christ is one of "militant masculinity" (Du Mez 12). John Eldredge, in his book *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul*, defines Jesus' manhood and masculinity by referencing William Wallace from the 1995 film *Braveheart* (28, 169)<sup>1</sup>. According to Eldredge, Jesus was not just biologically male, he was also a brazen, dominant, and destructive fighter. Eldredge writes: "Aggression is part of the masculine design; we are hardwired for it. If we believe

1 Reacting against second-wave feminism's call for women's equality, women's sexual rights in regard to pornography, LGBTQ inclusion, and women's reproductive rights, the evangelical church shifted its moral focus from desegregation to anti-abortion in the 1970s and 1980s: some speculate this shift occurred, in part, because, at its heart, the conversation around anti-abortion is one of sexual control (Allison 26-27). Beth Allison Barr, in *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*, argues that the evangelical church is an inherently patriarchal institution. Thus, it was no stretch for the evangelical church to move from its perspectives of women as secondary to men to the culturally contextual damning of non-cis-het male bodies and sexualities, particularly as abortion and AIDS rose to the forefront of the historical milieu. As the AIDS crisis reached its peak, Christian leaders such as Jerry Falwell Sr. asserted that AIDS was God's punishment for homosexuals and the United States' tolerance of homosexuality (Allison 26-27), and Tim LaHaye published a book called *The Unhappy Gays*, in which he portrays LGBTQIA+ folks as mentally ill deviants. In short, the evangelical church became aggressively and outspokenly anti-feminist during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s in new ways, seeking to exert more control over women through legislation and discourse around abortion as "baby-killing," attempting to define what legitimate marriage and relationships should look like, and labeling LGBTQIA people as demonic, deviant, and punishable by God (Allison 26-28). In addition, abstinence-only education became the norm, reinforcing the patriarchal expectations of marriage (Allison 26). People such as Doug Giles and John Eldredge merely followed forth with these trends as they grew into the 2000s, particularly reacting against other Christians whom they perceived as falling victim to the feminists. They derisively described such Christians as "yielding up their private parts to the lesbians, I mean feminists, [who] have an organized system of male hatred they just can't wait to slap your son with" (Giles 13), and suggested that they were consequently "emasculating" Jesus because they were proof-texting the Bible, a book they asserted "puts the 'go' in the male gonads" (23). Thus, characters such as William Wallace in *Braveheart* served as a culturally sanctioned ways to assert the supremacy of men within the evangelical church and "slaughter" the "androgynous, soft-focused paintings of Jesus that we've had jammed into our psyches for the last few centuries" (Giles 24).

that man is made in the image of God, then we would do well to remember that 'the Lord is a warrior; the Lord is His name' [Ex. 15:3]" (12). Considering that Jesus is God incarnate, it follows suit that Jesus would be "intimidating" and "stern" and "tough" (196-97); a fierce fighter (242) who "battles against Satan" (199); who is seen "picking fights" (30) with Pharisees by baiting and challenging them (31)—such as in Luke 13:10-14 in which Christ becomes furious and proceeds to "draw the enemy out" and "expose him for what he is" and "shame him in front of everyone" (32).

Consequently, Eldredge posits the mocking question: "The Lord is a *gentleman*???" (32), meaning that, for him, there is no room for interpretations of Christ outside of his fixed masculine ideal of Jesus as the ultimate warrior. Indeed, as Jesus is, as aforementioned, the incarnation of Yahweh—who was not a really nice guy and who sent "plagues, pestilence, the death of every firstborn—that doesn't seem very gentlemanly now, does it?"—ideas of Jesus as anything *but* an alpha male are "very mistaken" (32). It follows that all biological males must behave in this same aggressive manner, because, since God is perfect, and Jesus is the perfect God in human form, and since Jesus came to earth as a biological, "warrior-hearted" male (169), he is the ultimate role model for men who have been made in God's image. Accordingly, for Eldredge, and for much of the evangelical church, being a "man" has always and will always mean one thing: having a penis, being aggressive, being violent, being virile, and acting macho. In short, "manhood" is an ontologically stable, rigid category, and God created it that way.

This version of Jesus that those in the evangelical church are taught to embody and revere is limited and limiting. It demands that there is only one kind of God-given way to "be a man"—and it is precisely this idea of Jesus as having a fixed gender identity that queer theory contests and deconstructs. Here, queer theory offers a promise of hope for those who feel alienated by this dominant view of a cis-gendered, militantly masculine idea of Christ, for, among other things, queer theory asserts that the normative ideas of manhood offered by Eldredge are culturally constructed and oppressive. Thus, by offering a way to read the gospels "against the grain," by asking readers to consider the historical and cultural norms of our time and Jesus', and by asserting that gender is fluid and performed, queer theory offers new possibilities through which to see the person of Jesus Christ that are far more flexible and inclusive than what is depicted in *Wild at Heart*.

Again, as queer theory sees gender as something fluid, not fixed, and consequently defiant of category, it offers a way to challenge and deconstruct Eldredge's singular view of Jesus' manhood. To begin, Jesus' person, by nature of his existence, transgresses boundaries: being both human and divine, his body disrupts any clear categories of stable iden-



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

tity, something that is, by definition, "queer." Indeed, "all four evangelists depict Jesus as a man unlike other men" (Wilson 26), and not solely because he is both human and divine, or, by any means, because he is the shining, ideal warrior hero Eldredge claims he is. In contrast, in the ancient world, Jesus' person, experiences, and behaviors would have been perceived as very "unmanly." While he bears, according to the evangelists who tell us that Jesus is circumcised, what are considered to be male genitals, "non-Jewish males considered circumcision a step away from castration" (27). Similarly, the word *aner* ("man") used to describe Jesus (Luke 24:19; John 1:30; Acts 2:22) is also used to describe the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, "suggesting that this term does not always connote virile masculinity given that eunuchs were considered the ultimate 'non-men' in the Greco-Roman world" (Wilson 27). Likewise, Jesus is frequently described in the gospels with feminine imagery. For example, he is self-described as a mother hen, declaring to a lost Jerusalem: "How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling" (Matt. 23:37-39 *NASB*; also found in Luke 13:34), and as Sophia (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:35). Undoubtedly, "the evangelists apply both masculine and feminine language to suggest Jesus' identity as the God of Israel, a divine being who also cannot be confined by singular gender demarcations" (Wilson 26).

Continuing on this trajectory, queer theory, in its rejection of gender essentialism, also enables an understanding of Jesus contrary to Eldredge's by considering Christ's position in his socio-historical context. Historically, "men were expected to marry and start a household of their own" (Wilson 29) around the age of thirty, when Jesus begins his ministry (Luke 3:23). However, Wilson writes: "Yet Jesus does not marry, establish his own household, or accumulate wealth. Instead, he frequently critiques marriage and wealth during his ministry (especially in Luke!), and he becomes itinerant, relying on the hospitality of others during his travels" (29). In short, Jesus never takes a wife, never inseminates a woman, and thus never has children. He never owns a home, and primarily spends his time with marginalized people groups and twelve other men who have likewise abandoned the traditional family structure. Having rejected these things, which were cultural signifiers of virility and maleness, Jesus, again, fails to land neatly within the ultra-masculine binary, and appears on the Greco-Roman sliding scale of masculinity as closer to someone described as "unmale" (Wilson 27). Kripal asserts that Christian scripture preserves:

... memories of a man who does not appear to have been married, who bore no children, who raised no family . . . who objected to much of his own pious Jewish culture, whose most cherished beloved was

another man, who encouraged his most devoted male followers to castrate (or feminize) themselves for the kingdom of heaven . . . [There is a] plausible historical possibility that Jesus himself was a homoerotically inclined man who infuriated both the religious and political authorities of his day. (Kripal, ch. 2)

By taking into account Jesus' transgressions of familial Greco-Roman performances of masculinity as well as queer theory's assertion that gender is fluid and unstable, readers of the gospels see a divinity who very clearly does not fit into masculine cultural ideals.

Finally, perhaps most "queer" of all is Jesus' experience of crucifixion. Wilson writes: "The crucifixion is also crucial in depicting Jesus' disruption of gender, for crucifixion was a means of public execution that particularly 'unmanned' its victims through a series of bodily invasions" (31). Crucifixion was a shameful death in the ancient world, perhaps even the most shameful way for a man to be killed (32). Part of this is due to the fact that, at the time, self-control—protecting one's bodily boundaries and being in control of one's body—was a prime marker of manliness (32), and Jesus, by allowing himself to be crucified, allows his body to be under the control of other men *and* the Father God. This directly contrasts and challenges Eldredge's vision of Jesus as the ultimate macho man, especially when considering that Jesus was, in a way, penetrated by other men. Wilson writes:

Jesus' beatings and other bodily violations amount to his emasculation, for as classicist Jonathan Walters argues, sexual penetration and beating were structurally equivalent in Roman terms. What is more, both Luke and John emphasize that Jesus' body is specifically pierced. Luke and John relate that Jesus' body is penetrated with nails . . . John more pointedly notes that Jesus' side is pierced with a spear while he hangs on the cross . . . According to Luke and John, phallic-like objects penetrate Jesus' flesh, and this penetration paradoxically fulfills scripture. (33)

After the resurrection from the crucifixion, this theme of Jesus' body as penetrated continues. Wilson writes: "In Luke, Jesus also addresses his disciples' doubt by proffering his penetrated flesh, and he connects these marks with his identity: 'Look at my hands and my feet, [see] that I am myself [*ego eimi autos*]' [Luke 24:39]. Even in his resurrected state, Jesus is still the crucified one, for Jesus remains the one who is permanently pierced" (34). This rather queer Jesus, who identifies himself based on having been penetrated by other men, bears little resemblance to the one Eldredge and the evangelical church have constructed based on their normative cultural ideas of manhood; this

Jesus would *not* fit in the scenes of *Braveheart* with any kind of ease, even when one considers his “manly” behaviors of public anger and unkindness to religious officials. His gender identity is fluid and uncategorizable, which, by definition, is rather queer.

All in all, queer theory is an interpretive framework that challenges dominant ideals of fixed gender norms. With its fluid movements and problematizing of gender essentialism, queer theory is a vital tool in dismantling unhealthy, oppressive views of the person of Jesus, and thus is one of many important ways to free Christ from patriarchal strongholds. It shows a Jesus whose gender identity easily fluctuates between categories of “man” and “non-male,” as well as “human” and “divine.” Thus, queer theory is a lens through which to see images of the Christian messiah that subvert violent expectations of gender performance and provide understandings of Jesus that are not conflated with characters from movies “rated-R for brutal medieval warfare.”

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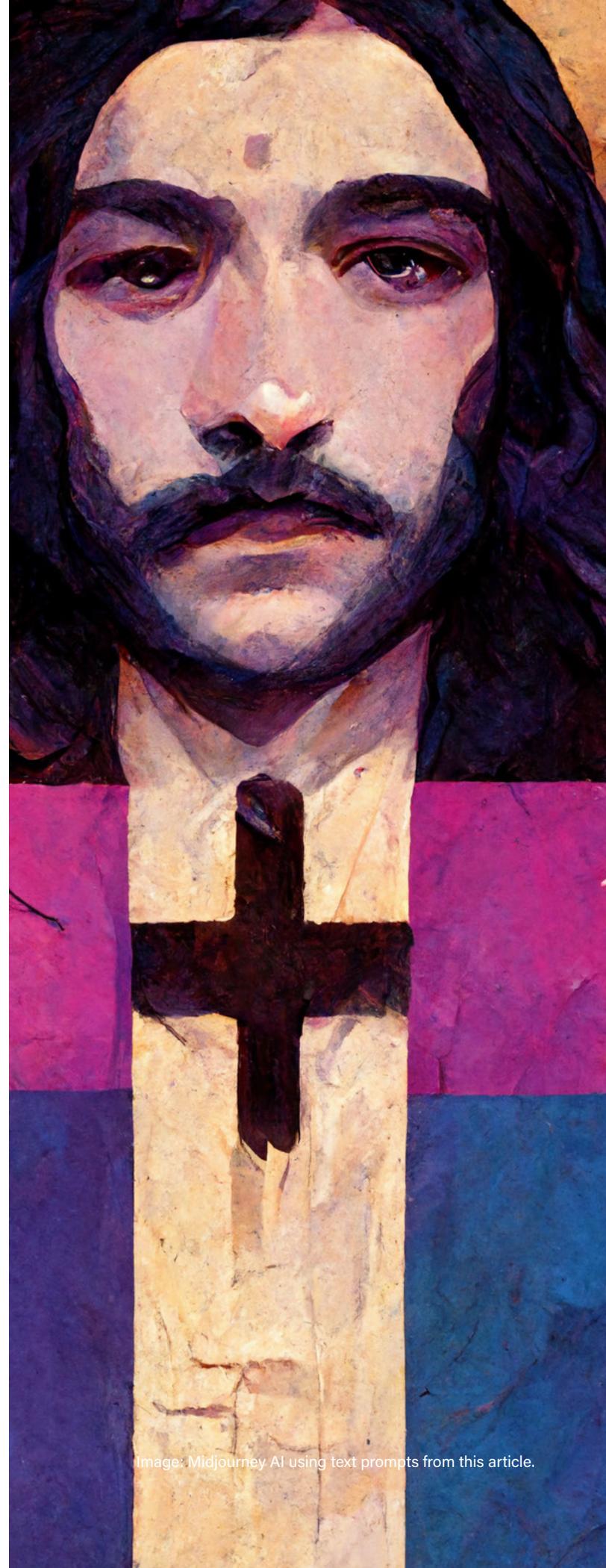


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# Between the Divine and the Demonic: Stephen King's "The Little Sisters of Eluria"

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## KEYWORDS

*Archetypal criticism and theory*  
*Feminist archetypal theory*  
*Northrop Frye*  
*Stephen King*

In a nightmarish twist of fairy-tale motifs, Stephen King gives us an errant knight waylaid by subterfuge in the story "The Little Sisters of Eluria." The short fiction pulls from myth, folklore, and fantasy, painting with the brush of archetypal imagery. To explore this tale, this paper will utilize two methodologies that focus on extracting the archetypal patterns within literary works: archetypal criticism (or myth criticism) as outlined by literary critic Northrop Frye, and the more recent feminist archetypal theory. Feminist archetypal theory was galvanized by poet Estella Lauter and literary scholar Carol Schreier Rupprecht, and it builds upon earlier archetypal approaches, Frye's included. This study will mine King's "The Little Sisters of Eluria" for his application of archetypal imagery, including aspects reflecting Frye's symmetrical cosmology

and the devaluation of the female gender that is created by Frye's bifurcated worldview.

Prior to outlining Frye's approach and delving into how archetypal imagery exists in King, it is helpful to outline the roots of archetypal criticism. Archetypal criticism traces cultural and psychological "myths" that shape the meaning of texts. It descends from C.G. Jung, but finds its own establishment as a literary theory in 1934 through Maud Bodkin's *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*. Bodkin's focus was to take the imaginative within poetry and explore the patterns that emerge: "An attempt is here made to bring psychological analysis and reflection to bear upon the imaginative experience communicated by great poetry, and to examine those forms or patterns in which the universal forces of our nature there find objectification" (vii). Frye sees archetypal criticism as the work of recognizing the archetypal patterns within the canon of literature, and he builds this notion upon the foundation of the Bible and of Greek

and Roman mythology. Others have come after Frye, including archetypal psychologist James Hillman; however, this study of King's work will stay entirely within the scope of archetypal criticism as Frye defined it.

With this said, Frye's approach is more accurately known as myth criticism and correspondingly attempts to look at literature through an archetypal, mythic lens. Frye saw literature as birthed out of the mythic consciousness: within the Western canon—of which Frye applied his theory exclusively—there can be perceived patterns of mythic thought, or archetypal patterns, and the recurrence of images from text to text reveals these patterns. For Frye, "archetype, borrowed from Jung, means a primordial image, a part of the collective unconscious, the psychic residue of numberless experiences of the same kind, and thus part of the inherited response-pattern of the race" (Mambrol 709). Frye credits Jung in his explanation, utilizing several of Jung's named archetypes (persona, anima, counselor, and shadow), yet does

not employ all the depth psychological conclusions that Jung makes (Frye 291). Unlike Jung, who saw distinct archetypes, Frye posited that the patterns, as they emerge, reveal archetypal images. Yet, Frye resisted the assumption of pre-defined archetypes: because of this fluidity, his perspective flows naturally to feminist archetypal theory.

Feminist archetypal theory refutes Jung's insistence on already determined archetypes. Feminist scholar Naomi R. Goldenberg, according to archetypal scholar Annis Pratt, "prefers the word 'archetypal' because 'archetype' seems infected with the Jungian assumption that archetypes contain absolute and transcendent power" (99). Pratt also reminds us that Frye, in his effort to define his myth criticism, separates the literary theory from Jung's depth psychology: "Frye finds Jung's concept of an *a priori* collective unconscious useless to the inductive critic, calling it a wholly 'unnecessary hypothesis'" (107). From Pratt's perspective, and my own, Frye is noting that the question of the origin of archetypal images—either from intention or an *a priori* collective unconscious—is not of concern for the literary critic. For Frye, the archetypal critic is simply focused on discovery of archetypal images within the texts. In response to the masculine-leaning views of Frye, and others such as psychologists Jung and Hillman, Lauter's and Rupprecht's feminist archetypal theory develops a uniquely feminist perspective. Lauter concludes that feminist archetypal theory begins at the point of failure of archetypal criticism: "As a consequence, female archetypes are interpreted according to male patterns, and the male patterns may be allowed to eclipse women's experience altogether. The feminine may be reduced to an attribute of the masculine personality rather than seen as an archetype deriving from women's experience that is a source of power for the self" (97). Succinctly, feminist archetypal criticism posits that the challenge as a scholar in analyzing texts archetypally is to not interpret the patterns that emerge through an exclusively male lens.

As aforementioned, this study will apply these two methodologies extrapolated above to a short story by Stephen King titled "The Little Sisters of Eluria." The story is part of the grander narrative of Roland of Gilead and his search for the Dark Tower; utilizing Robert Browning's poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" as source material, King gives us a knight in a wasteland of the future where technology and magic have obscured their borders. King's Roland uses guns instead of swords, and slowly gathers a band of knights-in-training around him as he progresses in his nightmarish journey. Riding through different realities, memory, and imagination, Roland ultimately arrives at the Dark Tower, just as his namesake in Browning's poem did. This is imperative to note, as the story "The Little Sisters of Eluria" is a precursor to King's great epic. In "Little Sisters," Roland is seeking the Tower,

and consequently stumbles into an abandoned town where he is mobbed by irradiated humans. He wakes to find himself in a nursing tent, surrounded by women in habits akin to those of cloistered nuns, who are assisted by "doctor bugs" that work to mend the wounded. These nuns are the Little Sisters. Soon, Roland discovers that the nuns are cannibalistic—if not vampiric—and he escapes their snares through the help of a younger sister, Jenna, and the protection of a Christian-blessed amulet he discovers on a dead boy. At the end, the Little Sisters, Jenna, and the rest of the cloistered nuns, are revealed to be composed of the bugs themselves. The work sets the tone for the greater epic of the Dark Tower, and several of the series' grander themes, in regard to reality and desire, are laid within.

Noteworthy here is how Frye does not see popular fiction, such as "The Little Sisters of Eluria," as a poor vessel of archetypal patterns. Though he decries popular fiction as "clearly designed" and holding "romantic" underpinnings, he argues that the "affinity between the mythical and the abstractly literary illuminates many aspects of fiction," including popular fiction (139). In *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Frye writes that myth itself is fundamentally a fictional world through which the human mind and spirit acts "near or at the conceivable limits of desire" (136). As it stands, Frye's explanation of archetypal criticism and its flaws are evident and loud. On its own, the theory simply cannot suffice to provide a substantive exploration of literature for the world.

At this point, it is important to note that Christian mythology is critical to Frye's methodology. Frye limits his understanding of myth to that of the polarity of Christian cosmology: "The world of mythical imagery is usually represented by the conception of heaven or paradise in religion, and it is apocalyptic, in the sense of the world already explained, a world of total metaphor, in which everything is potentially identical with everything else, as though it were all inside a single infinite body" (136). The feminist lens is needed at this juncture:

Frye's attention to Christianity leads him (as dualism did Jung) to take spirit as representing heaven and matter as potentially demonic, belonging to the lower reaches of matter as potentially demonic, belonging to the lower reaches of hell. This split divides men from women, the latter being associated with nature. Men perceive women as closer to nature, the body, and the material world than themselves and hence see them as threatening sources of spiritual peril. (Pratt 109).

With this said, King himself, initially, provides readers a modern-day text that exemplifies Frye's theory. In this work, there is the apocalyptic, and there is the demonic. In King's hands, these archetypal images are deceptively



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

masked and appear to trade places, but are present in very high degree. Further, and as an example of this use of archetypal imagery, King ascribes mythological power to the Christian God through an amulet—bearing a cross and the inscription “Loved of GOD” (153)—that Roland hap-hazardly finds on a corpse, and that protects him from the forces he encounters. In parallel, Frye defines the first pole of his bifurcated cosmology (or, in his words, “symmetrical cosmology”) as the apocalyptic world, and equates it with the heaven of religion. Apocalyptic, in this use, is the revealed world—alluding to the final revelation—the divine world to come. The demonic is framed as the decaying world, that of our present now. Knowledge and mind are portrayed as sacred in Frye’s perspective, and nature and the physical as profane. Goldenberg reminds us that women are equated with nature, and men with logic and the mind: “The Jungian archetypal theory is based on the separation of mind and body. The theories which separate mind from body are both anti-woman and antilife” (55). Frye’s categorization, and King’s exemplification of this, reinforces a patriarchal cosmology. Frye refuses restraint: “The demonic divine world largely personifies the vast, menacing, stupid powers of nature as they appear to a technologically undeveloped society” (147). Frye does, however, suggest that his categorization of the archetypal universe is not absolute: “For the form of cosmology is clearly much closer to that of poetry, and the thought suggests itself that symmetrical cosmology may be a branch of myth” (161).

He adds Classical mythology to Christian mythology, of which he means Greek and Roman myth, to form “a grammar of literary archetypes” (135). He notes that “The gods enjoy beautiful women . . . The fact that myth operates at the top level of human desire does not mean that it necessarily presents its world as attained or attainable by human beings.” Here, he has relegated human desire to be male desire. The pinnacle of human yearning is shown to be nothing more than the height of cis-male sexual desire: beautiful women. Women themselves then are not operatives within this landscape—they are aspects of it, to be seen as archetypal themselves but reflecting the exterior other in their imagery.

Along the lines of Frye’s orientation towards technology, for King, nature is in conflict with technology—or more accurately, nature fought with technology and won. In King’s text, the fallen world is the modern world of cities and technologies and, in his own words, “The world has moved on” (168). Thus, Roland becomes the remaining avatar of that old world—surrounded by nature unsheathed. The little Sisters are themselves avatars of that world of nature Roland finds himself surrounded by—they are insects in skin. The leap towards Frye’s patriarchal cosmology is small for King: Roland is the avatar of the masculine, technology, and the divine, and the Sisters are the avatar of

the feminine, nature, and the demonic. In Jenna, the Sister who rescues Roland, the feminine is given value only when it serves the masculine. For King, the feminine gains worth when the masculine provides it affection. When Jenna and Roland find themselves alone, Jenna inquires, “Am I pretty? Am I? Tell me the truth, Roland of Gilead—no flattery” (172). Roland replies, “Pretty as a summer night.” At the start of this encounter, “Roland found her doubt utterly charming, and he realized that, sick or not, he was looking at a woman *as* a woman for the first time since Susan Delgado had died, and that had been long ago. The whole world had changed since then, and not for the better” (168). Jenna remains forever virginal but only by the luck of Roland’s exhaustion—prior to that, she was the receptacle of his lust. In short: nature, and by association the feminine (within Frye and King), is only valued when it is tamed. As a cloistered nun, Jenna is presumed virginal, a fact reinforced by the chiding the other Sisters give her when they discern her desire for Roland. As the sole focus of Roland’s affections, Jenna’s role in the story becomes the classic love interest for him to tame. Her demonic nature is only an obstacle to be overcome due to her beauty, whereas for the other Sisters, their demonic aspects require their complete destruction because Roland finds nothing redeeming at all within them.

Frye speaks to the very source material that King based his magnum opus upon, of which “Little Sisters of Eluria” is but the foreword. Frye writes: “The vegetable world is a sinister forest . . . A wilderness like that of Browning’s *Childe Roland* or Eliot’s *Wasteland* . . . In the Bible the wasteland appears in its concrete universal form in the tree of death, the tree of forbidden knowledge in Genesis, the barren figure of the Gospels, and the cross” (149). Browning’s poem is the framework of King’s *Dark Tower* series, and both Browning’s Roland and King’s Roland seek the Dark Tower. Eluria is a forgotten town in the intractable desert, the wilderness wasteland Roland must cross on his way to the tower. King establishes its sinister quality from the opening pages: “Meanwhile, there was the singing hum of insects that sounded *almost* like crickets. The dreamlike tinkle of the bells. And that queer wooden thumping, like a fist on a door. Or on a coffintop. *Something here’s a long way from right*, the gunslinger thought, *‘Ware, Roland; this place has a reddish odor’*” (148). The natural world holds death in every dark pocket and in every uncanny sound.

Frye’s understanding of nature is expressed within King’s depiction of the Sisters’ collective. Frye writes: “The demonic human world is a society held together by a kind of molecular tension of egos, a loyalty to the group or the leader which diminishes the individual, or, at best, contrasts his pleasure with his duty or honor” (147). Adjusting for pronouns, this description completely summarizes the Sisters. The molecular tension finds image in the with-

ing mass of the doctor bugs under and outside the false skins of the Sisters. Roland remembers "how Sister Mary's flesh felt under his hands . . . How it had felt *various*, not one thing but many" (King 208). Sister Mary serves as the leader who diminishes the individual through adherence to duty—in this case, the survival of the collective over the release of the individual. In the landscape of Midworld (King's shorthand for the middle world of human action and choice), the desert expresses the archetypal correspondence between the green world and the human body (Frye 144). For King, the status of the world has died, or, at best, is in decay. Thus, the human body is always in a state of death and decay. The actors that walk King's stage reflect this: patients held in slings, wounded and dying; the glamoured Sisters whose flesh is only a mask over a host of desert scarabs; the irradiated slow mutants that move in mobs—all of these are at a stage of death. Only Roland seems to straddle both the world of the living and the dead and thus unites the two poles of Frye's cosmology.

In King's work, the demonic further gains definition as that which is undesirable—thus, attractiveness serves as the border between divine and demonic. Frye explains: "Opposed to apocalyptic symbolism is the presentation of the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion; the world as it is before the human imagination begins to work on it" (147). Roland is imprisoned in the domain of the demonic. He is in bondage and pain, literally, surrounded by women he finds disgusting. It is only the youngest-appearing sister, Jenna, who presents an insertion of the divine, and only because Roland finds her attractive. It is no leap to assign the source of divine desiring as male—that which defines what is desirable is the male gaze. Roland must be reminded that her nature is no different than that of the others by his "brother," who lays in the sling cot next to him. Even then, Roland finds Jenna to be like him—one who straddles the two worlds—although it is because her beauty is not a deception in the way it is with the other Sisters. She truly is beautiful to Roland, yet, that beauty still overlays her nature of being a collective of the buzzing doctor bugs. Her beauty and her defiance mark her as different from the declined world of her Sisters—the demonic world. She serves as a hybrid, something unnatural of both worlds, and she is fortune'd to die because of it.

Frye sees patterns of cannibalism, a reversal of eucharistic ritual, anchoring the demonic (148). That the Sisters consume human flesh after they have nursed it to full health only reinforces their demonic nature. As aforementioned, Frye believes cannibalism to be a parody of the eucharist—the partaking of the body of fallen man is the despicable antecedent of the partaking of the divine's body. In King, only women fall prey to that vice, further fortifying that the feminine is the demonic. King even calls their feasting

on flesh "the communion of the Sisters" (206), once more strengthening the association of their cannibalism to the eucharist. Within Frye's demonic world and his perception of the feminine-nature archetypal pattern, he sees a distinct personage emerge: the stereotypical evil witch, also known as the black queen. Frye writes: "[a]ppropriately called by Jung the 'terrible mother,' . . . he associates her with the fear of incest and with such hags as Medusa who seem to have a suggestion of erotic perversion about them" (196). This archetypal personage presents itself in Eluria as Mother Mary. Mary notes Roland's fear of the "terrible mother" archetype: "Always eager to blame yer weakness on a scheming woman! How scared of us ye are—aye, way down in yer little boys' hearts, how scared ye are!" (194). Mary's erotic perversion manifests as she molests the bound and immobilized Roland to orgasm. Roland is protected by the pendant—a symbol of the divine—and the Sisters cannot touch him. However, the protection of the divine fails at his genitals, which they grasp without restraint. This is because sex and the sexual organs are not under the sight of the divine: they are elements of the natural world and by association, corrupt and evil. From his seed, Mother Mary encourages her Sisters to partake in a distorted communion: "Mary's hand was cupped. She passed it from Sister to Sister; each licked from her palm in the candlelight" (King 182). In a single scene, the distorted flip of the divine that is the demonic is painted in image after image: the wriggling bugs within the glamor skin of habit-adorned Sisters, the molestation of Roland and their unholy flesh only able to touch his genitals, and the disturbing communion using his semen as a eucharistic element.

Moving forward, always present in King's work—even those stories not showcasing Roland—is the Dark Tower. Sourced from Browning's poem, the Dark Tower is the central hub of reality, and each level of the Tower is a separate universe. The Tower is infinite in height. The archetypal understanding of the Tower emerges in each work, and Frye's insight is keen for interpreting this pattern: "[T]he point at which the undisplaced apocalyptic world and the cyclical world of nature come into alignment, and which we propose to call the point of epiphany. Its most common settings are the mountain-top, the island, the tower, the lighthouse, and the ladder or staircase" (203). Frye links this symbolic presentation with King and Browning's ascension machine itself, the Dark Tower: "This brings us around again to the point of demonic epiphany, the dark tower and prison of endless pain, the city of dreadful night in the desert" (238-39). The Tower serves as the nexus of Frye's symmetrical cosmology, beckoning the seeker closer, diverting their gaze upward. It promises answers. Yet, in both King and Browning's works, the Tower delivers none except the litany of deceased companions, whose names both Rolands recite on their arrival. The Tower itself is that

apocalyptic world—arrival at its gates is the pinnacle of desire.

Within “Little Sisters,” the *Dark Tower* pulses in Roland’s imagination, propelling him out of the grasp of the inhuman feminine that King has trapped him in. Over the course of the series, Roland seeks the Tower only to have the final moments of the concluding book be the first moments of the inaugural book, with minor details changed—the story is a reincarnation loop. Yet, considering that the *Dark Tower*’s final level returns Roland to a point in his journey just after his march through Eluria, this battle becomes a singular moment outside the reincarnation loop Roland finds himself in. This discrepancy in his character arc is a riddle. Is this moment then a trial? A test that prepares Roland for recycling upward within the Tower, according to the Tower’s design? King gives no answer, but the very fact that this tale is told, and yet told outside the confines of Roland’s repetitious questing, is worthy of consideration. The events of Eluria change Roland. After he leaves the bugs on the grass amidst Jenna’s clothes, he steps towards the town of Tull and into the vast wasteland desert where the Tower deposits him over and over again.

Roland’s journey, at the end of this short story and at the start of the novel series, has hallmarks of the standard male hero amongst the desolation that is nature. Pratt finds that the relationship of hero to nature often reinforces male patterns of perceiving archetypal images. She notes: “Leaving behind the edenic realm of innocence, the hero must suffer the middle world of human action and choice, but he is only allowed full (heroic) leadership in that world after he has journeyed into a lower, dreadfully natural realm, ‘an environment of alienation, a sub-moral and sub-human world’” (111). Readers can see this sense of imprisonment within nature in Frye’s symmetrical cosmology: “On the archetypal level proper, where poetry is an artifact of human civilization, nature is the container of man. On the anagogic level, man is the container of nature, and his cities and gardens are no longer little hollowings on the surface of the earth, but the forms of a human universe” (145). Through this lens, Roland enters into Midworld only *after* journeying into the lower, dreadful, and natural realm of the feminine as he finds it in Eluria. Pratt gives the answer to the Elurian riddle sharply (albeit indirectly in comment on Frye’s theory): “One of the aspects of nature that Frye’s hero must transcend is women” (112). King’s hero must transcend women to enter his reincarnation. Frye’s patriarchal symmetrical cosmology finds its proper home in King’s writing.

However objectionable this feminist archetypal analysis may portray King’s hero and his internal fictional cosmology, Pratt encourages us to not throw the baby out with the bath water. She notes that: “The archetypal perspec-

tives are not as gender-rigid as one might believe. Feminine archetypes are depicted according to the respect for authentic feminine being by a particular writer at a particular time in history, and it thus becomes necessary to pay close attention to how both personal and historical elements influence an individual poet’s writing” (133). Frye’s symmetrical cosmology as he perceives it within the Western canon can drift into the methodology of literary criticism, where the masculine and feminine texts are still defined as apocalyptic and demonic. A true feminist archetypal approach acknowledges this risk, and thus works to scrub those distinct boundaries where value is assigned to gender and the texts those genders produce: the purpose of feminist archetypal theory is to mine “dreams, fantasies, memories, associations, verbal and visual images, stories, songs, rituals, myths, and philosophies for the original feminine” (Bedetti 583). Following Frye’s insistence that the archetypal emerges in the patterns that appear within these texts (and, for the purpose of archetypal criticism, all these, from songs to stories to dreams, are texts), literary critic Gabriella Bedetti further notes: “By identifying patterns specific to women’s imaginative experience—patterns that are enmeshed in history —[the feminist archetypalist] cuts through culturally acquired qualities to find woman’s inherited potential” (583). Yet, Lauter and Rupprecht add that the treasury of discovering the feminine is not limited to simply the female gender—part of the feminist approach is to eliminate the gendered division of literary and archetypal inheritance. They state:

[W]e do not seek to reify a phenomenon of female consciousness as distinct from male consciousness . . . We regard the patterns in works and acts by women as important regardless of their degree of closeness to or distance from patterns created by men. Such patterns are part of the human struggle to order existence, and they are created by half the population of the world. (15).

The focus is to move beyond gender limitations and amplify the entirety of human experience.

Ultimately, Roland is bound to the demonic in his quest for the divine—as much within as without. The outer world’s archetypal patterns reflect his own internal struggle. His state within “Little Sisters” is not his final one—in the later novels, Roland (and perhaps King) moves from a symmetrical cosmology to a more robust and dynamic portrayal of archetypal patterns. Roland will bring others in on his journey who provide perspectives that help him expand his cosmology. Roland moves from Frye’s bifurcated universe to one with multiple levels, a feminist archetypal perspective, mirroring the construction of the Tower itself. In a way, the opus of the *Dark Tower* series is the very



Image: Midjourney AI using text prompts from this article.

ladder that moves the readers from the demonic of gender devaluation in Eluria to the more expansive understanding of archetypal patterns.

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