



2 0 2 3  
MYTHOLOGICAL  
STUDIES JOURNAL

V O L U M E X I

## ON THE COVER

Front Cover Image: Fruit on Pacifica's Ladera Campus / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

Back Cover Image: Students in the Orchard / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

*The Mythological Studies Journal* has been designed  
to be read in the printed version.  
Blank pages are intentional.

2 0 2 3  
MYTHOLOGICAL  
STUDIES JOURNAL

VOLUME XI



PACIFICA  
GRADUATE INSTITUTE

SENIOR EDITORS

Laurel M. Bergsten, MA  
Kira Kull, MA

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Aïda Bohm  
Casey Coste  
Jasmyne Gilbert  
Lydia Griffiths, MA  
Charlotte Moroz, MA  
Aven Lumi Whitehorne, MFA

ADDITIONAL READERS

Tosin King James  
Jessica Heilig Montanez Prince, MFA, MA  
Gerald Sheahan

LAYOUT & DESIGN

Jason D. Batt, MFA, MA  
Laurel M. Bergsten, MA  
Kira Kull, MA

FACULTY ADVISOR

Emily Lord-Kambitsch, PhD

PROGRAM CHAIRS

Emily Lord-Kambitsch, PhD  
David Odorisio, PhD

*Mythological Studies Journal*

is a publication of the Mythological Studies  
with an Emphasis in Depth Psychology MA/PhD  
program of Pacifica Graduate Institute

Copyright ©

Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2023

All Rights Reserved

249 Lambert Road Carpinteria, CA 93013  
pacifica.edu



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

7 / *Foreword*

Letter from the Faculty Advisor

11 / *Introduction*

Letter from the Editors

14 / **A Tale of Female Empowerment or Heroic Submission?**

*Three Feminist Perspectives on Psyche's Journey*

Jennifer Maile Kaku, MA

27 / **And Darkness Covered His Eyes**

*The Nature of Dying in the Iliad*

Elizabeth Andres

37 / **The Wisdom Inside Zeus's Head Splitting Migraine**

Heather A. Taylor, MA

48 / **Pheidippides' Sacred Journey**

*Exploring Inner and Outer Landscapes in the*

*Mythos of Running*

Paul Harvey, MA

60 / **YHWH as Primus Alchemist**

Paul Woolsey Davison, MA

70 / **The Contested Soul of the Ophidian Feminine**

Charlotte Moroz, MA

83 / **Alchemical Descent in Leonora Carrington's *Down Below***

Madison Stevens, MFA, MA

92 / **The Anti-Christ's Blessing**

*Rotting as a Virtue of Becoming Anew*

Amanda Barton, MA

105 / **Beyond the Sum of Their Parts**

*An Alchemical Flight Towards Freedom*

Kira Kull, MA

119 / **The Ground is Alive**

*A Psychology of Embodied Religion*

Rick Alexander, MA

130 / **The Priestess' Shadow**

*Ariadne and the Minotaur*

Laurel M. Bergsten, MA

139 / **Hermes Overdosed**

*The Archetypal Hermes in Social Media*

Lydia Griffiths, MA



Students Enjoy the Fruits of Campus / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

# FOREWORD

---

## *From the Faculty Advisor*

I am forever learning how to be a mythologist. I learn from the authors featured in this issue of the *Mythological Studies Journal*, authors whom I regard as my collaborators and companions on the journey of recasting old narratives with the luster of new meanings. These narratives invite us into the worlds they build, and by virtue of us entering these worlds, we leave our mark upon them, as they leave their mark upon us. Myth ages well for the perspective it receives over time.

When teaching Homer's *Iliad* once again this Fall, I found myself approaching it with a very different set of emphases than I have before, taking my cue from the interests those in class brought to bear: the contact between singer and audience; the effect of music and meter on the action of the poem; the whole poem as a set of teachings on grief. In this current iteration of global conflict, the poem emerged for me as one essentially of memorial, of invitations to attend innumerable lives in their dying process. The context in which we find ourselves cannot stand apart from our interpretations. Our bodies and lived experiences cannot stand apart from our interpretations. Our interpretations are representative of a collective experience, historically bound and transhistorical. Also when teaching the *Iliad* this year, I found particularly resonant for thinking about the work of interpreting myth one observation about the (unrelentingly debated) provenance of the epic: whether there was a sole author "Homer" or not, the text of the *Iliad* was allegedly undergoing noteworthy edits by a number of hands up to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE (Gregory Nagy, qtd. in West 389), around 600 years after its emergence. Myth ages well with perspective, which can only be accomplished through the work of many hands.

And part of the handiwork of preserving myth is the practice of applying lenses of interpretation with awareness, purpose, and care for the reader. At times the opacity of language in naming and even describing avenues of literary criticism has at its worst removed the enchantment from the stories themselves, divested them of their emotional import, their wisdom teachings, their *stakes*, personal and collective.

Part of learning how to be a mythologist for me is to see the stakes retained, through robust scholarly engagement, and I can only say, reader

of this issue, you are in for a treat. You are in for a crash course in ways to read mythic figures and spaces and story arcs with theoretical angles that reveal startling and resonant new dimensions of some of the oldest and most loved (or feared) tales.

Jennifer Maile Kaku's "A Tale of Female Empowerment of Heroic Submission?" enters the debate in scholarship over whether the character of Psyche from Apuleius' *Golden Ass* is a "true feminist heroine or is she a heroine for the patriarchy," by offering an illuminating reading through dynamics of gender and spatiality. In "And Darkness Covered His Eyes" Liz Andres brings us into close quarters with the *Iliad's* use of tranquil nature metaphors to characterize the epic's ubiquitous scenes of violent death. Heather A. Taylor's "The Wisdom Inside Zeus's Head Splitting Migraine" voices the importance of mythological metaphor and allegory to understand the causes and experience of pain, and gendered associations with pain. Paul Harvey places his contribution, "Pheidippides' Sacred Journey" in service of understanding from a spatial, phenomenological perspective the runner famed for the distance he ran between Marathon, Sparta, and Athens.

We then take a turn from the Greco-Roman mythos into the world of alchemy, which persists and transmutes itself through a number of mythic paradigms. Paul Woolsey Davison's work, "YHWH as Primus Alchemist" revisits the tradition of reading Genesis as an alchemical text with YHWH as the master or teacher of alchemy, creating the cosmos as an act of individuation. Charlotte Moroz's "The Contested Soul of the Ophidian Feminine" brings contemporary readers in closer alignment with the powerful alchemical influence of the mythic serpentine goddess and her interwoven receptions throughout different tales, from Melusine to Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. To further the reader's journey into the alchemical comes Madison Stevens' study of Leonora Carrington's *Down Below*, a memoir of harrowing, intimate contact with the *prima materia* of alchemical symbolism and the lived experiences of violation, transmutation, and individuation.

The next few articles invite us to reframe common Western reference points for religion and the body. In "The Anti-Christ's Blessing" Amanda Barton moves to apply depth psychological readings to recast the Anti-Christ figure in the Christian apocalyptic mythos as an initiator of psychological transformation. Kira Kull's article "Beyond the Sum of Their Parts," draws from a diverse pool of sources from surrealist literature to tarot to the author's dreams to inform a richly



conceptualized study of ornithological alchemy pertaining particularly to winged dual-sexed characters in myth, and how they speak to and empower experiences of gender expansive people. “The Ground is Alive” by Rick Alexander offers an expansive definition of religion as an embodied experience, a complex interplay of symbols, sources of divinity, and “the very ground of Being,” inspired by African diaspora religions.

In Laurel M. Bergsten’s “The Priestess’ Shadow,” the theme of the body continues with Man Ray’s *Minotaur* photograph as starting point for exploring the figure of Ariadne in relationship to her half-brother the Minotaur, to the Minoan Goddess traditions in her homeland of Crete, to other goddess figures presiding over cycles, to the labyrinth, and her embodied relationship with it.

And finally, Lydia Griffiths brings the reader into the quotidian world of instantaneous communication, misinformation, and the unending desire for more of the aforementioned, with “Hermes Overdosed,” which follows the (backward-walking-cattle) traces of Hermes’ archetypal energy on social media, an energy if followed unwittingly, can spell danger for the psyche.

All of these pieces speak to one another, alchemically and archetypally. The interpretations offered in each one are purposeful, carry a considerable contribution to existing literature, and are as earnest as acts of love.

As faculty advisor to the *Mythological Studies Journal*, my enduring gratitude goes to Laurel Bergsten and Kira Kull, co-editors of this year’s issue, who have directed the work and shepherded this impressive collection of papers into cohesive and well-ordered form. I also thank the team of development and line editors for the well-balanced infusions of fastidiousness and compassion required to support our authors. And of course, I thank and congratulate our authors for their wonderful work. Thank you for lending your hands to the palimpsest of understandings, and for remaining enchanted by the process.

Emily Lord-Kambitsch, PhD  
*Faculty Advisor*

---

West, Martin. “The Homeric Question Today.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 155, no. 4, 2011, pp. 383–393.





Demeter Goddess Statue / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull



# INTRODUCTION

---

## *Encountering Wonder as Cosmogony*

The school year 2022-2023 marked the first full year back on campus following the pandemic. The Myth program observed the grounds of Pacifica Graduate Institute through the full range of seasons. We explored with fresh eyes and curiosity, buoyed by the time spent in isolation and zoom fatigue. This was a triumphant return, and the land our beloved school rests on welcomed us with an orchard bursting with color and flavor, thriving in spite of the dormant years. In the morning, the misty marine layer floated between trees and buildings, inviting mystery-turned-revelation when the afternoon sun burned it all away. Our exploration of the campus ecosystem mirrored our exploration of mythology. Our *essay* of the land led us naturally to *essay*.

This year's edition of *The Mythological Studies Journal* is without a theme for the third year in a row. The pieces selected were chosen for how they excite, and how they move within the field of myth. In these pieces are curiosity-driven explorations pursuing the guidance of Joseph Campbell: "The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with Nature" (202). These works do the job of path-finding with that heartbeat as a guide. They result in trail-building as new connections are forged.

Many of this edition's authors contextualize their findings with personal reflections, posing questions like: What dominant socio-historical trends have influenced classical interpretations of myth? How am I perpetuating or critiquing those trends? What medicine does my unique positionality allow me to uncover from these myths and offer to our modern world? The first grouping of pieces engages the roots of our field, uncovering modern and personal approaches to classical works from the Greek and Roman traditions. Tilling the rich soil of our mythic and methodological history unearths new nutrients in which seedling ideas bear ripe fruits. A remarkable number of submissions this year focused on alchemical interpretations of myth, and these works comprise the central bulk of our collection. Given the enormity of challenges that our world has undergone in recent years, it is no wonder that many of our authors embarked on

quests of transformational guidance seeking ways to alchemize the proverbial lead of life into gold. The final few pieces invite reflections on a return to embodiment in the age of overthinking.

In an era which teeters on the technological tightrope between isolation and media inundation, our human hearts crave community, ritual, and a return to nature and the physical. In choosing images to display on the cover and throughout this edition, we followed Laurel's inspiration to honor the beauty of campus by utilizing Kira's film photography, captured during our first few weekends on campus, and several weekends that followed. These images portray the wonder and recognition as we encountered and discovered the land and one another.

So much of our work as graduate students exists in intangible thought that it can feel at times like this work of study, research, and writing is more of a surrealist dream sequence than academic pursuit. How many of our ideas remain hidden behind a screen, or are freed only for the eyes of one professor? This journal is an opportunity for us to continue getting to know one another. It is an honor to share your ideas, inspiration, and discoveries in this year's edition of the *Mythological Studies Journal*, to offer a platform for our work to ring free and loud for all to hear.

With the new ideas presented in this journal, the field of mythology changes. Our academic work is inherently cosmogonic, changing worlds from the personal sphere and rippling outward. Our time on campus and in the Myth program is brief, a handful of days, but the sense of curiosity cultivated here carries us forward. We hope the urge to explore guides your encounter with these works and inspires your own expeditions into yet untraversed landscapes of both nature and thought.

In gratitude and delight,

Laurel M. Bergsten & Kira Kull  
*Co-Senior Editors*

---

Campbell, Joseph, and Diane K. Osbon. *A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living*. E-book ed, Joseph Campbell Foundation, 2011, ePub.





On a Break from Class / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

# A Tale of Female Empowerment or Heroic Submission?

## *Three Feminist Perspectives on Psyche's Journey*

---

Jennifer Maile Kaku, MA

Keywords: Greek Mythology, Feminist Theory, Heroine's Journey, Psyche

One of the few human female figures who can be said to undertake  
an adventure comparable to those of the male heroes is Psyche. . .

–Lillian Doherty

*Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth*

For millennia, the heroic quests glorified in poems, epics, *chansons de geste* or scriptures were undertaken by men. Women were given secondary roles that might, in some instances, be crucial for the advancement of the plot or the protagonist, but they were rarely if ever promoted to the rank of hero. One exception to the rule is the story of Cupid and Psyche, an “old wives’ tale” inserted into the *Metamorphoses*, a second-century novel by the Roman author Apuleius. Psyche’s story stands out in the history of Western literature as a rare example of the mythical hero’s journey accomplished, for once, by a heroine. Her exceptional status in the unabashedly virile tradition of narrative heroism has, quite naturally, drawn the attention of feminist readers. However, feminist receptions of Apuleius’ tale have given rise to strikingly contradictory interpretations. At one end of the spectrum, Psyche’s journey is celebrated as a narrative of female emancipation and empowerment; at the other end, it is critiqued as a narrative of complicity and compliance with patriarchal ideologies and gender norms. We might call the former the “celebratory feminist reading” and the latter the “critical feminist reading.” Both the celebrationists as well as the critics see Psyche as heroic, but they diverge as to the feminist implications of her journey.

The aim of the present inquiry is to explore these paradoxical interpretations through the motif of the heroine’s journey. Does Psyche’s journey end in emancipation and empowerment or, on the contrary, in submission and subjugation? Is she a true

feminist heroine or is she a heroine for the patriarchy? In order to unravel these questions, I take a look at Apuleius’ tale from three different perspectives. Starting with the celebratory perspective, I examine Psyche’s story as an empowering journey of

self-transformation and liberation through representative works by Maureen Murdock and Valerie Estelle Frankel. Secondly, from the critical perspective, I consider interpretations that link Apuleius' tale to the AT 425 folktale pattern known as "The Search for the Lost Husband." Feminist analyses from this intertextual perspective foreground the ways in which the tale reinforces masculine hegemony and female subordination through the institution of marriage. Finally, I offer a third reading that explores Psyche's journey from a spatial perspective. Apuleius' tale is structured across four narrative spaces. Each space has its own specific setting and is coterminous with a single narrative segment in the heroine's journey. I dissect the ways in which the gendering of power inscribed in those spaces implies either emancipation and empowerment or, conversely, submission and subjugation for the female protagonist. As it turns out, the spatial perspective intersects in significant ways with the critical feminist reading of Psyche's journey.

In Apuleius' famous novel, also known as *The Golden Ass*, the tale of Psyche and Cupid is told by an old lady to a young girl and then retold (for the readers) through the mouth of an eavesdropping ass. Due in part to this mise-en-abyme context, the tale is often extracted and analyzed as a stand-alone narrative. It consists of four distinctive episodes, which may be summarized as follows. In the first episode, Psyche is a princess of such extraordinary beauty that people begin to worship her in place of Venus. Incensed, the goddess of love orders her son Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with the vilest of men, but Cupid ends up falling in love with her himself. Psyche remains unwed in spite of her beauty, leading her despairing father to consult

Apollo's oracle. He is told to prepare his daughter for marriage to a terrible monster. In the second episode, Psyche is transported to a secluded mansion. There, Cupid comes to sleep with her every night but commands her not to look at him. Goaded by her jealous sisters, she decides to shine a light on his face. Cupid thus abandons her and flees to his mother's house. In the third segment, Psyche travels far and wide in search of Cupid. She finally comes to Venus' abode and is given four impossible tasks to perform. Before she can complete the fourth, her curiosity causes her to peek inside a forbidden box. Psyche falls into a deathly sleep, but Cupid comes to her rescue and revives her. In the fourth segment, Jupiter allows Cupid to marry Psyche. She is brought up to heaven, deified by Jupiter and triumphantly wed to Cupid.

### **I. The Celebratory Feminist Perspective**

Two examples of feminist receptions that celebrate Psyche's story as a model for the heroine's journey can be found in Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness* and Valerie Estelle Frankel's *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine's Journey through Myth and Legend*. Murdock's seminal work was published in direct response to Joseph Campbell's now infamous assertion that women do not need to make the journey because they are the object of the journey (*Heroine* Introduction). Her book in fact launched the long-neglected theme of the heroine's journey as, in her words, an "alternative journey model to that of patriarchal hegemony" ("Articles"). Frankel's book gathers female-centered myths, folktales and fairytales from around the world to offer an analysis of the heroine's journey as "just as valid, just as universal and empowering" (4) as

the traditional male hero's journey.

Murdock and Frankel feature Psyche's story as an illustration of their respective models of the heroine's journey. It begins with Psyche's defiance of Cupid's orders not to look at him, which both authors interpret as an act of resistance against masculine domination. Murdock sees Psyche as liberating herself from the "myth of romantic love," which leads women to believe that their fulfillment depends on a "father/lover/savior" (Ch. 3). By disobeying Cupid, she "challenges the myth of male supremacy" (Ch. 3). Frankel sees this moment as a legitimate act of rebellion in which Psyche "only seeks the equality denied her. . ." (78). In standing up to Cupid, she "realizes that her male 'protector' is not an omnipotent god worthy of her blind devotion. . . ." (80).

In the next part of the journey, Venus' four tasks are interpreted as labors that edify and empower the heroine. In Murdock's schema, they constitute the "road of trials" whose purpose is to help the heroine "discover her strengths and abilities" as she journeys "in search of her self." (Ch. 3) Frankel describes Venus' tasks as "teaching quests" that enable Psyche to acquire the capacities and maturity she needs to achieve equality with her divine spouse. "Psyche quests to become Cupid's equal: wife and goddess rather than mortal mistress" (42). The deathly sleep that overcomes Psyche after she opens Persephone's box is seen as a necessary step toward her final transformation and rebirth as a new self or woman. Murdock writes, "She must die to an old way of being before achieving wholeness" (Ch. 3). Similarly, Frankel declares, "Her old self must perish in order for a new, stronger personality to spring forth" (126).

At the end of the journey, the heroine's reward is a well-merited marriage of equals.<sup>1</sup> Psyche's deification and nuptial reunion are presented by both authors as the felicitous achievements of her heroine's journey. In Murdock's words,

Psyche has been transformed through the endurance of her trials. She no longer lives under the spell of romantic love. Through her own hard work she has become a goddess. She marries Eros as an equal and achieves true love. . . . When a woman is liberated or liberates herself from the belief that her fulfillment comes at the hands of a lover, then she can find a partner who is an equal and enjoy true love.

Similarly, Frankel celebrates Psyche's wedding as a sign of hard-earned matrimonial equality:

Now that Psyche has completed Venus's assigned tasks and learned death's secrets, she is fit to be a partner to her husband. She has earned her autonomy and no longer worships her husband as a helpless shut-in. Cupid sweeps her up to Olympus, weds her, and offers her the ambrosia to make her a goddess and his equal throughout eternity. (126)

In sum, Murdock and Frankel engage Apuleius' tale as a feminist heroine's journey in which the female protagonist moves from a situation of submission and subjugation to one of emancipation and empowerment, from concubinal inequality to matrimonial equality. Psyche stands up to masculine domination, pursues her transformative quest for

---

<sup>1</sup> In Murdock's and Frankel's Jungian-influenced interpretations, the masculine figure represented by Cupid is also associated with the "animus," Jung's term for a woman's "inner male."



autonomy, earns her apotheosis, and, in the end, is reborn as a goddess, as a new self, equal in marriage to her heavenly spouse.

Any tale worth its salt provides sustenance for a rich variety of meanings. Apuleius' tale is no exception. Within the realm of feminist receptions, it has even engendered contradictory interpretations. If, at one end of the spectrum, Psyche is celebrated as a mythical figure of female empowerment and equality, at the other end, she is accused of being a duplicitous figure of compliance and complicity with the masculine powers that be.

## II. The Critical Feminist Perspective

Scholars generally agree that the story of Cupid and Psyche in *The Golden Ass* is Apuleius' own *sui generis* literary creation (Gaisser 337; Katz 112; May and Harrison 22). Its source, however, may in fact be an "old wives' tale," for it has been linked to a widespread folktale type known as AT 425, "The Search for the Lost Husband."<sup>2</sup> Folklorists have recorded over one thousand versions of this ancient tale type, but its first known appearance in a literary context is in Apuleius' novel (Bamford 254; Doherty 70). Bamford outlines the tale as follows:

a girl is married or betrothed to a supernatural male, who may appear as a beast or monster by day and a man at night. She violates a tabu—frequently an injunction to secrecy about his condition—and he vanishes. To regain him, she must typically perform a penitential search, overcoming

apparently insuperable obstacles. . .  
(253)

Viewing Apuleius' tale as part of a larger narrative family provides an entirely different and indeed antithetical understanding of Psyche's journey. Bamford notes that "[f]eminist scholars and critics, have challenged ahistorical interpretations of the AT 425 tale, highlighting its gender ideology" as part of "a patriarchal script for women" (256). Bacchilega and Tatar show how stories such as "Cupid and Psyche" or "Beauty and the Beast"<sup>3</sup> perfidiously sanction masculine hegemony and female subordination. As Tatar observes, "[I]t is extraordinary to see how easily a tale about heroic defiance can slide into a story about the virtues of obedience to the law of the father" (*Off* Ch. 7). The impetus behind all of these tales is the male-piloted marriage plot whose aim is to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies with the active participation of the questing heroine. According to Bacchilega, "The Search for the Lost Husband' cycle repeatedly reenacts the patriarchal exchange of women, and affirms women's collusion with the system" (Ch. 4).

The female-centered AT 425 tale tells the story of a heroine's journey: the protagonist sets out to retrieve her husband or lover, endures adversity, surmounts obstacles, and heroically accomplishes her mission. However, this journey ultimately implies her own disenfranchisement. As Haskins points out in reference to Psyche, "Her happy ending only comes about once any further action on

<sup>2</sup> From the Aarne–Thompson (AT) Index, a numerical system used to classify folktale types. Although it is now known as the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index (ATU), all of the works cited herein use the older AT designation.

<sup>3</sup> In eighteenth-century France, Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont rewrote Psyche's story into female-centered "fairy tales" of their own, publishing notably the stories known today as "Beauty and the Beast" (May and Harrison 27; Zipes 24).

her part is prevented, when the males of her conjugal family take control, not for her sake but due to their own desires” (13-14). Bacchilega maintains that in spite of “the courage, determination, and dignity they exhibit on their journeys,” these heroines “learn that *compliance* is the female virtue their worlds honor and reward. Marriage is their path to success—and an arduous one, with fear

achieved by the female is that of integration with the male through marriage. (113)

The heroine undergoes this prenuptial testing not for her own personal development or empowerment but in order to prove herself worthy of becoming a suitable wife for her husband.

At the end of her quest, the heroine regains her marital condition. Like Psyche, she may be rewarded, as Bacchilega puts it, with “the elevated social position of minor goddess” (Ch. 4), but there is no sense of any kind of inner transformation, awareness or autonomy. Katz, for example, disputes Eric Neumann’s famous analysis of Psyche’s story as a mythical representation of “the psychic development of the feminine.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of “symbolizing the intellectual awakening of the female,” Katz asserts,

self-recognition for the female here only leads to an intellectual acceptance of her dependence on the male...

The myth reveals not how the female transcends herself as an individual through love of the male but how the female is prepared for marriage with the male. (117-18)

For Bacchilega, notwithstanding the agency and courage shown by the heroine throughout



Psyche's father consulting the oracle, from 'The Fable of Psyche', print, Master of the Die, after Michiel Coxie (I) (MET, 62.635.907)

and violence along the way...” (Ch. 4). According to Katz, the theme of all versions of the Cupid and Psyche pattern is “the trial before marriage,” which involves the trial or testing of the female through conflict with the male or his agents in preparation for marriage. The arrangement of the motifs is not unlike the pattern for hero tales - but with a critical difference: the heroic task to be

<sup>4</sup> Neumann, *Amor and Psyche*. See Doherty for a blistering analysis of Neumann’s theory, which, in her words, “reveals the worst antifeminist tendencies” of the Jungian approach to Apuleius’ tale (71-2).

her journey, the conjugal qualities she espouses in order to earn back her husband are, in the end, self-sacrifice and obedience. Expressing doubts about the heroine's evolution, she remarks: "Psyche's journey would not have succeeded if Cupid had not saved her from her unredeemed curiosity: her psychological growth remains somewhat questionable" (Ch. 4).

In sum, feminist analyses that investigate Psyche's journey from the intertextual perspective of the AT 425 tale type foreground the "patriarchal script" embedded in the story. In seeking to mend the shattered marriage plot, the heroine's quest functions to reconfirm gender hierarchies and masculine prerogatives through the matrimonial exchange of women. According to this perspective, Psyche acts—somewhat perfidiously—as a heroine for the patriarchy.

### III. Reading Gender and Power from a Spatial Perspective

Thus far, we have examined two antithetical feminist interpretations of Apuleius' tale: a celebratory reading and a critical reading. Let me now bring a third reading into play by revisiting the tale from a spatial perspective. As described by Skempis and Ziogas, a spatial approach to narrative

"inquir[es] into the way space is represented within diverse contexts of literary narration" (2). My investigation focuses on the ways in which the spatial dynamics of the narrative articulate issues of power and gender. Psyche's story is divided into four separate territories or narrative spaces. Each territory is coterminous with a single episode or narrative segment in the heroine's journey. Each of the four spaces is dominated by a specific gender. The first space is her father's earthly realm, the second is Cupid's enchanted realm, the fourth and last is Jupiter's heavenly realm. These three spaces are subject to masculine rule. The third space, on the other hand, has no single sovereign ruler and no geographical center. It contains a variety of subregions, but they all belong to the same narrative segment and thus to the same diegetic space. This decentralized space is dominated by the presence of powerful goddesses.

*First Space: The Paternal Palace.* As the unmarried daughter of a king, Psyche's story inevitably begins in her father's house, an earthly palace "in a certain city" (Apuleius 85) in the paternal kingdom. Her lack of suitors makes her father "excessively unhappy" (88) and he beseeches Apollo's oracle to find a husband for his "depreciated daughter" (89).



Plate 9: Cupid and Psyche on a bed, from the *Story of Cupid and Psyche* as told by Apuleius, print, Master of the Die, after Michiel Coxie (I) (MET, 41.71.3(9))



Apollo's answer is: "Array her for her wedding—and to die, O king" (89). Psyche's marriage to a fearsome snake-like monster is thus arranged between her royal father and a god, two figures of masculine authority. Psyche herself has no say in the matter but valiantly submits to this gruesome nuptial fate. Venus makes a behind-the-scenes appearance in this first space only, however, to have her divine authority undercut. Her attempt at a power play (ordering Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with the most abhorrent of men) will be foiled by her own son. The power in this first space is unequivocally masculine.

*Second Space: The Love God's Boudoir.* From her father's realm, Psyche is transported by the wind down to Cupid's "royal mansion" (Apuleius 92). Sequestered away in an uncharted vale, this enchanted boudoir is the Love God's private domain. Cupid reigns unrivaled, taking Psyche as his wife, sleeping with her nightly, but prohibiting her from seeing him or knowing his identity. Emphatically domestic, furtively monotheistic, this second territory is governed by a single, invisible, all-powerful male god. And yet, Psyche and her sisters—simple human women—will succeed in unmasking if not emasculating this power. A soupçon of female power is allowed to erupt into this perfectly male-controlled space. In contrast to her impotence and submissiveness in the first space under her father's

roof, in this second space under Cupid's roof, she rejects her unsatisfactory fate. Denouncing the place as a "rich jail" (Apuleius 94), she stands up for herself and persuades her (at the time) nameless husband to let her see her sisters. She then goes even further and disobeys his orders. Cupid immediately punishes her by abandoning her (and the space).

*Third Space: Heterotopia of the Goddesses.* From Cupid's realm, Psyche is then taken to a riverbank that marks the threshold between the second and third spaces. The third territory is the largest of the four and, in the wide-ranging topographies it covers, the most diverse. It is coextensive with the shifting landscapes of Psyche's quest, encompassing all of the places she visits as she seeks to recover her vanished husband. She starts off by going to see her sisters and sending them to their deaths. Then she embarks on "an international tour" (Apuleius 110), eventually seeking help from



Plate 23: Psyche on the order of Venus departing to find the golden fleece, from the Story of Cupid and Psyche as told by Apuleius, print, Master of the Die, after Michiel Coxie (I) (MET, 41.71.3(23))



two goddesses, Ceres in her temple on top of "a far, steep mountain" (115) and Juno in her shrine "in a grove lying below... in a dale" (117). She finally arrives at Venus' abode, where she is given her first task of sorting the seeds. The second task takes her out to the woods, the third to a mountain peak, and the fourth down to Proserpina's "murky mansion" (126) in the underworld. On her way back from Tartarus, having deftly negotiated her katabatic expedition, Psyche is once again led by "her rash curiosity" (128) to disobey orders. She opens Proserpina's box and falls into a deathly slumber.

Unlike the other three spaces centered around sites of masculine power (the paternal house and kingdom, Cupid's mansion, the Jovian halls of the gods), this third space foregrounds no particular center. It is a patchwork of heterogeneous sites that create a protean, multi-layered cosmos in which the earthbound world intersects with, in the words of Skempis and Ziogas, "transcendent topographies pertinent to the divine or the dead" (3). The only common thread between all of these sites is their association with female figures, specifically, the two hapless sisters and the four great goddesses. In this nebulous, hybrid, polymorphous landscape, the female deities are shown to be at home and alone, away from their male counterparts. Indeed, when Venus seeks the help of Jupiter and Mercury, she drives her chariot up and out "to Jove's regal citadel" located in the Ether beyond the clouds (Apuleius 118). While the gendering

of this third space is essentially feminine,<sup>5</sup> it does not belong to any singular figure of authority. The territory belongs instead, in its entirety, to Psyche's quest.

This anomalous feminine space in the midst of three relatively homogenous masculine spaces can be compared to a heterotopia, the term coined by Michel Foucault to refer to certain types of spaces in a society that are "entirely other" (15). These spaces of differentiation and difference are isolated from the surrounding environment yet concretely situated within it: places such as sacred sites, cemeteries, prisons, brothels, museums, fairgrounds (Foucault 15-17). If we transpose this concept from an architectural to a literary context, we might describe the third space as a narrative heterotopia: within the architectonics of Apuleius' tale, it is a story space that is "entirely other," situated in, but isolated from, the surrounding narrative space(s).<sup>6</sup>

*Fourth Space: Jove's Heavenly Halls.* Psyche's journey comes to an end in the "celestial conclave" (Apuleius 129) of the gods in the "lofty pinnacle of heaven" (128). In this fourth and final space, however, it is not Psyche who is

---

<sup>5</sup> Although it is female-dominated, there are hints of covert masculine "oversight." Right inside its borders, Psyche encounters Pan, the "he-goat divinity" who is supervising (as he himself says) his capering she-goats (108). Further inside the space, the animals who help Psyche are affiliated with Cupid and Jove. Finally, on the other border, it is the liberated Love God himself who, like a *deus ex machina*, sweeps in to reassert his authority.

<sup>6</sup> As a narrative micro-space that is built into, but set apart from, the englobing macro-space of the *Metamorphoses*, the story of Cupid and Psyche could also be compared to a heterotopia. It is, in more ways than one, "entirely other" with regard to the rest of the novel. This heterotopic inside-yet-outside position is indeed the reason why it is so often taken as a freestanding narrative.

the focalizer, but Jupiter. This space is dominated by the Father God's imperial and paternalistic maneuverings. We witness him negotiating Psyche's connubial fate with his son Cupid, summoning the gods to a senatorial "auditorium of the immortals" in order to make the marriage "binding and compliant with civil law" (129), ordering (his son) Mercury to fetch Psyche, and enjoining (his daughter) Venus to accept the marriage. Jupiter officializes

Cupid's marriage and deifies Psyche only because it benefits *him* in several ways. By "reining in" the unruly Love God, he seeks to reestablish order, restore his authority, and regain his dignity. As an added bonus, he charges Cupid to

procure for him "a lass of particularly powerful loveliness" (129). He then brings Psyche up into *his* heaven with these words, "Let [Cupid] have, hold, and wrap himself around Psyche, and enjoy her as his beloved for all time" (129).

For most of this segment, Psyche herself is absent. We are given a fleeting glimpse of her at the very end, during the wedding festivities in the celestial banquet hall. From a distance, we see the bridegroom lying on a

couch "holding Psyche in his bosom" (130). After that, we are simply told: "Thus with all due ceremony Psyche came into Cupid's possession..." (130). In this fourth space, power is imperiously masculine, paternal and divine.

A comparative spatial analysis of Apuleius' tale reveals the single gynocentric space to be, in almost every way, antipodal to the other three relatively homogenous spaces. The latter are characterized by conventional

"man-made" architectures such as residences and palaces or (celestial) citadels, auditoriums, banquet halls. These are enclosed structures, interior spaces, presided over by men. Conversely, the

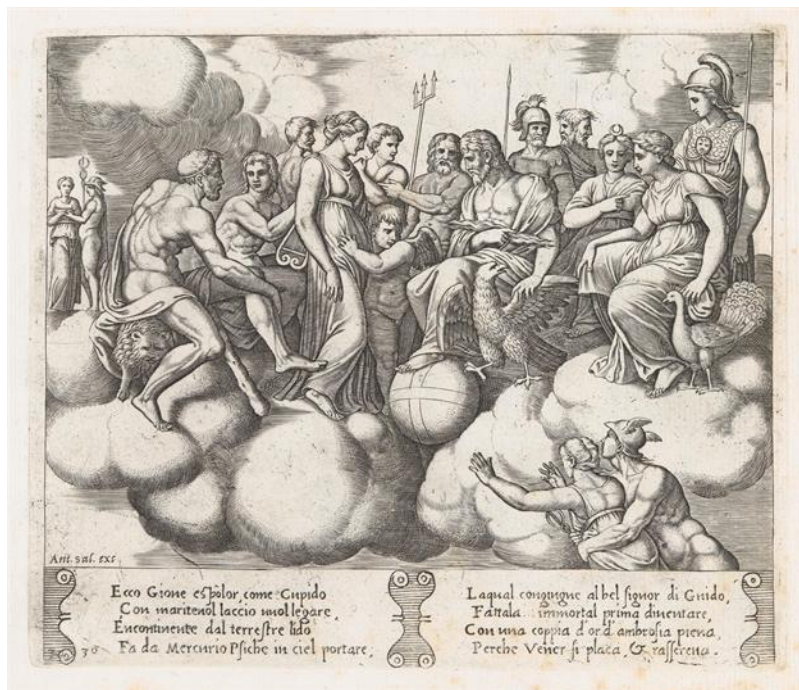


Plate 30: Venus and Cupid pleading their case before Jupiter and other Gods with Mercury transporting Psyche to the heavens at lower right, print, Master of the Die, after Michiel Coxie (I) (MET, 41.71.3(30))

gynocentric space is composed primarily of outdoor or natural settings: rivers, fields, dales, woods, mountains. Even the trip to Tartarus is mainly an outdoor (if at times underground) river-crossing trek.

In the enclosed androcentric spaces Psyche is essentially immobile. Confined to waiting in the first two (for a suitor, for her father to give her away, for her monstrous husband and then her invisible husband), confined to her bridegroom's possessive arms

in the fourth, she is dependent on and indeed the property of the males in those spaces. By contrast, during her journey through the polymorphous gynocentric landscape, her body is not in the possession of any male, and she is actively on the move the entire time. In fact, within this heterotopia, the roles are reversed. In this female-dominated space, it is the husband who is immobilized inside his mother's abode: "Cupid was kept locked up and fiercely guarded, incarcerated in a solitary cell of a bedroom at the palace's center" (Apuleius 122). From a spatial perspective, then, the masculine architectures associated with "culture" are places of confinement and immobility for the heroine, while the feminine territory associated with "nature" offers her agency and freedom of movement, not only "internationally," but between earthly and transcendent realms.

This gender-focused spatial reading of Apuleius' tale overlaps in significant ways with the critical feminist reading of Psyche's journey. As the tale unfolds across the four consecutive narrative spaces, we see that the only instances of female emancipation or empowerment are to be found in the second and third spaces. These two spaces are situated in the middle of—and thus bounded by—the first and fourth spaces of absolute masculine power. In other words, the narrative gives feminine agency a certain amount of "space" as long as it is safely contained. The narrative takes Psyche from her father's residence in an earthly city to her father-in-law's residence in a heavenly citadel. In both of these spaces, her nuptial fate is arranged in her absence by masculine authorities—paternal and divine. In both spaces, she is delivered by one male to another male, with the latter turning out to be the same male: Cupid. Marriage in the first as well as the

fourth space is presented as an institution that endorses the social exchange of women. As the narrative itself explicitly shows us both in words and in the final image, Cupid, the bridegroom, finally comes to possess Psyche, the bride. Indeed, as if to reinforce the fact that she is little more than an object of exchange, the narrative all but erases her from the final space. If, in the first three spaces she is the subject of the quest, in the last she becomes the object of the quest—Cupid's quest—and Jupiter replaces her as the focalizer. Not only does Psyche not have any say in the first and last spaces, but in the last, she has no voice at all. In other words, while she may have risen to the position of "minor goddess," she has at the same time been reduced, in the narrative space of the heavenly halls, to the position of voiceless wife.

This analysis of the spatial dynamics of Apuleius' tale with regard to issues of power and gender leads to conclusions that concur unambiguously with those of the critical feminist reading. In the celebratory reading, Psyche's journey takes her from a situation of submission, subjugation and inequality to one of emancipation, empowerment and equality. In the critical reading, on the other hand, her journey takes her from a situation of submission, subjugation and inequality to one of renewed submission, subjugation and inequality. In spite of her accomplishments, she shows little evidence of personal development. Rather than leading to an emancipatory rebirth, her "death" ultimately disempowers her and neutralizes her presence in the final narrative space. While she can be said to "challenge the myth of male supremacy," her doubly arranged marriage serves to reaffirm her dependence on masculine authority and her "collusion" with patriarchal ideologies. The



celebratory readings proposed by Murdock and Frankel might be described as “wishful” readings of Psyche’s journey that are not borne out by a faithful reading of Apuleius’ text.<sup>7</sup> In both cases, they are readings that, except for the birth of the child in the end, completely ignore the fourth narrative space and the matrimonial wheeling-and-dealing that takes place between Cupid and Jove.

In this analysis of Apuleius’ tale, I have examined Psyche’s journey from three different perspectives, viewing it through the lenses of a celebratory feminist reading, a critical feminist reading, and a gender-focused spatial reading. The celebratory and critical readings arrive at surprisingly antithetical conclusions as to the feminist implications of the journey. The critical and spatial readings, although they approach the tale from two seemingly unrelated angles, overlap in significant ways. The latter two are essentially deconstructive readings, seeking to demythify the text by disclosing the subtly prescriptive patriarchal ideologies that drive the heroine’s quest. To this end, Tatar argues that it is “important to understand the culturally scripted performances and inflexible binary codes enacted in the myths, legends, and fairy tales from times past” (*Heroine* 8). The celebratory reading, on the other hand, can be understood as essentially reconstructive. Certain elements are selected, omitted or altered to recreate as well as remythify the story, while steering the journey toward other horizons. Critical or celebratory, deconstructive or reconstructive, demythifying or remythifying, all three approaches explored here contribute to the continued remapping of Psyche’s journey as a

matchless example of the mythical quest undertaken, for once, by a heroine.

---

<sup>7</sup> Murdock in fact bases her retelling of the story on Robert A. Johnson’s version in his book *She: Understanding Feminine Psychology*.

Works Cited

- Apuleius. *The Golden Ass*. Translated by Sarah Ruden. Kindle ed., Yale University Press, 2012.
- Bacchilega, Cristina. *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*. Apple Books ed., University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.
- Bamford, Karen. "Quest for the Vanished Husband/Lover: Motifs H1385.4 and H1385.5." In *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, edited by Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy, M.E. Sharpe, 2005, pp. 253–59. [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2899500055/GVRL?sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=2209ef54](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2899500055/GVRL?sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=2209ef54).
- Doherty, Lillian. *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2003. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, [ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1936304](http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1936304).
- Foucault, Michel. "Des espaces autres." *Empan* 54, no. 2, 2004, pp. 12–19.
- Frankel, Valerie Estelle. *From Girl to Goddess: The Heroine's Journey through Myth and Legend*. Kindle ed., McFarland, 2014.
- Gaisser, Julia Haig. "Cupid and Psyche." A Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology, edited by Vanda Zajko and Helena Hoyle, John Wiley & Sons, 2017, pp. 337–51. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, [ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4826763](http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4826763).
- Haskins, Susan L. "A Gendered Reading for the Character of Psyche in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*." *Mnemosyne* 67, no. 2, 2014, pp. 247–69. [doi.org/10.1163/1568525X-12341201](https://doi.org/10.1163/1568525X-12341201).
- Katz, Phyllis B. "The Myth of Psyche: A Definition of the Nature of the Feminine?" *Arethusa* 9, no. 1, 1976, pp. 111–18. [www.jstor.org/stable/26307539](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26307539).
- May, Regine, and Stephen J. Harrison, editors. *Cupid and Psyche: The Reception of Apuleius' Love Story since 1600*. Google, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2020. *Google Books*, [www.google.com/books/edition/Cupid\\_and\\_Psyche/U-m1zgEACAAJ?hl=en](http://www.google.com/books/edition/Cupid_and_Psyche/U-m1zgEACAAJ?hl=en).
- Murdock, Maureen. "Articles: The Heroine's Journey." *Maureen Murdock* (blog), June 7, 2016. [maureenmurdock.com/articles/articles-the-heroines-journey/](http://maureenmurdock.com/articles/articles-the-heroines-journey/).
- . *The Heroine's Journey: Woman's Quest for Wholeness*. Kindle ed., Shambhala, 2020.
- Neumann, Erich. *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine, A Commentary on the Tale by Apuleius*. Apple Books ed., Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Skempis, Marios, and Ioannis Ziogas, editors. *Geography, Topography, Landscape: Configurations of Space in Greek and Roman Epic*. De Gruyter, Inc., 2013. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, [ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1121635](http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1121635).
- Tatar, Maria. *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*. Kindle ed., Liveright, 2021.
- . *Off with Their Heads!: Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood*. Kindle ed., Princeton University Press, 2020.
- Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*. Kindle ed., The University Press of Kentucky, 2013.



Rotting Peach and Sap / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull



# *And Darkness Covered His Eyes:* The Nature of Dying in the *Iliad*

Elizabeth Andres

Keywords: Death, Dying, War, Warriors, Nature

Content Warning: War, Violence, Graphic Descriptions of Death

A red-figure kylix (500 BCE) in the Antikensammlung Berlin famously shows Achilles tending to Patroclus' wounds (fig. 1). It is an incredibly tender moment, especially knowing that both men will suffer tragic fates during the Trojan War. There are many scenes of battle on Athenian vases of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, but none capture the violence and gore that Homer describes so graphically and eloquently throughout the *Iliad*. In addition to the most well-known and consequential deaths of Patroclus and Hector (Achilles' nemesis), nearly three hundred other individuals—both Greeks and Trojans—meet their end on the dusty plains of Troy. To view the *Iliad* through the lens of death and dying is therefore not unreasonable, and it is not surprising that Homer devotes so much time and energy to describing these numerous heroic deaths in graphic and beautiful detail.



Fig. 1. Achilles Bandaging Patroclus' wounded Arm

Through a close reading of passages describing dying warriors in the *Iliad*, this essay explores how Homer uses poetic juxtapositions and Homeric simile to arouse pathos in his listeners (or readers), and to contextualize war and death as part of the larger cycles of nature. Because I am relying on a written translation of the *Iliad* (by Caroline Alexander), I will refer to “readers” of the text as opposed to “listeners” of an oral storytelling tradition. By necessity I have focused on only a handful of the many deaths described in the *Iliad*, selecting passages that I feel most vividly illustrate the Homeric nature of death and dying.

Following a brief definition of Homeric simile, this essay is divided into three

main sections. Starting with the ancient Greek concept of a “beautiful death,” the first section highlights passages of explicit bodily violence that are paired with tender descriptions of the moment of death that immediately follows. The subsequent two sections illustrate Homer’s use of simile to create connections between dying warriors and natural elements like wild animals and trees, and to represent warriors in the act of killing as embodiments of natural phenomena. As Emily Vermeule explains in her book *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*, “the goal of a good epic poet, in a battle song, is to kill people with picturesque detail, power, and high spirits” (94). Homer achieves this with flair and flourish as the reader will see below.

The use of epic simile is one of the most distinguishing features of the Homeric style. Indeed, Classical scholars often refer to it simply as “Homeric simile” because of its prevalence throughout the *Iliad*. Classicist Samuel Bassett defines it as not simply a comparison of things, but the painting of “a poetic picture which grows out of comparison” (Bassett 133). These poetic pictures that Homer paints serve to heighten the emotions of his readers, while also adding depth and nuance to the stories he tells. Similes often take the reader away from the immediacy of battle by introducing images of nature. For a moment the reader is no longer surrounded by dust and death, but is whisked away in their imagination to a vision of a tree on a hillside or wild animals in a forest. Contrasts of place, time, and theme bounce the reader out of the action and offer a short respite from the intensity and violence (Bassett 136). Even when Homer transposes scenes of violence between men with scenes of violence between non-human animals, the literal change in scenery contextualizes violence

within the natural world, thus providing a buffer from the more immediate drama of war. Notably, humans usually play a small or nonexistent role in these escapist similes, providing perspective on the struggles of men within the wider context of the natural world and its rhythms.

In *The Dream and the Underworld*, psychologist James Hillman notes that the ancient Greek hero is an underworld figure, and that by definition to be a hero is to die and be inextricably linked with death (110). The idea of the “beautiful death” (*kalos thanatos*) in ancient Greece refers to the glory of heroes who die on the battlefield, at the peak of their youth and masculinity (Vernant 50). Rather than see their strength wither away with old age and illness over time, these heroes are forever remembered in the luster of youth (Vernant 60). There is a kind of perfection appreciated in the corpse itself, frozen in time, incorruptible, a tribute to a man’s heroism. The bloodied body is beautiful because it signifies a warrior’s willingness to die for his cause or his people (Saunders 162). Although most cultures object to any form of corpse desecration, the Greek urgency to protect the corpse of their fallen comrades takes on additional significance when seen in this light (Vernant 67). This idea is perhaps especially poignant for a culture who regularly experienced the loss of young men through warfare. A beautiful death offers a path toward acceptance of such a loss.

Throughout the *Iliad* Homer offers striking juxtapositions of extreme and graphic violence coupled with beautiful imagery of a gentle death. Warriors’ brains and bladders are pierced through by bronze spears; eyeballs, livers, and lungs are extracted from their owners’ bodies; and bowels and blood are

spilled out upon the earth. Yet Homer pairs—and perhaps even balances—these gruesome descriptions of death and dying with soothing phrases such as, “and darkness covered his eyes,” “death embraced him,” he was “brought low to the nourishing earth,” “his spirit left his bones,” or “the black cloud of death folded around him.” By pairing gore with beauty and mortality with eternity, Homer increases the drama and emotion in his story, and suggests that there is beauty in death if death is understood as a fundamental part of nature.

Homer seems to relish the graphic gore of battle. “For Homer the human body is a marvelous network of connecting parts he can pierce or sever or use for pictorial and emotional effects” (Vermeule 97). In Book 4, for example, Dioces is

struck beside the ankle by a jagged  
stone  
. . . bone and both tendons the ruthless  
stone  
utterly crushed; and he fell on his back  
in the dust,  
stretching out his hands to his beloved  
companions,  
breathing out his soul. (4.517-524)

Peiros then rushes up “and with his spear struck Dioces beside his navel; all his/ bowels were poured out upon the ground, and darkness covered his eyes” (4.525-526). A gruesome death involving shattered leg bones and disembowelment is combined with the touching image of a desperate Dioces reaching out to his friends before succumbing to death. And death itself is given a sense of personhood and sympathy in the way the darkness covers his eyes, as if to shield him from his own mortality, of which he is horrifically, momentarily aware.

Two examples from Book 5 continue the idea of death as a sympathetic force. Meriones strips the life of Phereklos by striking him “down through the right buttock; straight through/ into the bladder under the bone;” Phereklos then drops “to his knees screaming, and death embraced him” (5.59-68). Homer’s anatomical specificity is disturbingly realistic, but perhaps Phereklos finds comfort in death’s embrace. Similarly, Eurypylos shears away Hypsenor’s arm, which “covered with gore” falls to the ground, and “over his eyes crimson death and powerful destiny seized him” (5.76-82). Here, Homer pairs explicit dismemberment with the idea of the warrior being seized by destiny in the moment of his death. Violence is a pathway to a beautiful death if that death is part of a grander destiny.

One particularly gory example from Book 16 rounds out this section, further illustrating the range of bodily injuries a warrior might sustain, as well as the metaphors for death that may soothe those wounds. Idomeneus stabs Erymas

in his mouth with the pitiless bronze;  
the bronze spearhead made its way  
right on through  
below the brain, then shivered the  
white bones,  
and his teeth were shaken out; both his  
eyes  
filled with blood, so through his mouth  
and down through his nose  
he spouted blood as he gasped for  
breath, and the black cloud of  
death  
folded around him. (16.344-350)

One can only imagine the incredible pain Erymas suffers as his entire head and face are decimated by the spear. To have a cloud of death folded around him like a blanket is surely



a welcome comfort. The ancient Greeks generally believed that people existed as shades of their former selves in the afterlife, forgetful of their life and identity on earth (Vermeule 5). Forgetful as well of the horrible suffering of their final moments.

These are but a few instances of the dozens of similar images that Homer paints through his poetry. Images of warriors and battle are common in other artforms

as well, especially Athenian pottery (Saunders 162). The Euphronios Krater is a superlative example that captures the violence and empathy of Homer's storytelling (fig. 2). This red-figure vase (515 BCE) currently in the collection of the Archaeological Museum of Cerveteri, depicts the dead body of the Trojan hero and demi-god Sarpedon being carried away by winged figures representing Hypnos (sleep) and Thanatos (death). Sarpedon is shown nude with blood pouring from multiple wounds in his chest, abdomen, and thigh in added red paint. The excessive bleeding combined with the tenderness with which his body is carried away exemplifies the beautiful death. The blood is not gratuitous but is included to elicit depth of emotion in the viewers, just as Homer has done for his readers (Spivey 121).

Homer frequently uses simile to compare dying warriors to specific elements of

nature, including wild animals and different species of trees and flowers. In the moment of the warrior's death, Homer presents us with an alternative image, equating both the man and his situation with scenes from the natural world.

As mentioned earlier, this narratological and stylistic technique can heighten the emotional impact for the reader. It also recontextualizes the dying warrior within the cycles of



Fig. 2 Euphronios Krater

nature.

Animals in combat were popular subjects in ancient Greek art and can be interpreted as a metaphor for men in battle. When Homer presents us with detailed and seemingly “decorative” vignettes describing animals in the forest or mountains, it is not meaningless, but is one of his methods of “leavening” or lightening the extended scenes of killing and bringing a moment of significance to each death (Vermeule 85). There are examples of men being compared to lions, jackals, and other predators, but when depicted in a scene that ends in their death or defeat, they are most often compared to prey. In Book 13, for example, Homer says that Idomeneus remained like a wild boar in the mountains, confident in his courage,  
who awaits a great approaching band of men

in a desolate place, and his back bristles  
 above,  
 and his eyes glitter with fire; then he  
 sharpens his tusks,  
 straining to defend himself against  
 both dogs and men. (13.471-476)

In moments of fear, men perhaps have more in common with their animal brethren. A black-figure krater (530 BCE) in the National Archaeological Museum of Athens provides us with a visual comparison (fig. 3). In the main register, Hector and Ajax fight over the body of



Fig. 3 Black Figure Krater

Patroclus. The warriors brandish their spears and shields while other men come up behind them to join in the fight. Patroclus lies beneath their feet in the typical death pose, naked, with his legs pulled up, and an arm thrown back over his head (Saunders 167). In the lower register, two lions viciously attack a bull. The parallel between predator and prey, warrior and victim, is clear.

In Books 13 and 16 men are described behaving like wild oxen, earthworms, and fish. When Meriones strikes Adamas between the genitals and navel, Homer explains that “with the spear inside him/ he gasped his last, like a wild ox that in the mountains herdsmen/ have hobbled with twisted rope and drive by force against its will” (13.567-570). Homer stirs empathy in us for Adamas and the wild ox by comparing them to each other. Meriones also strikes Harpalion, puncturing his bladder, and “like a worm he lay outstretched/ upon the ground; and the dark blood flowed forth and soaked the earth” (13.653-655). Even the humble worm is used for emotional effect, and the reader feels Harpalion’s vulnerability as his life ebbs away into the dust. When Patroclus kills Thestor in Book 16, he catches him by the spear and drags him over the chariot rail, “as when a man/ sitting on a jutting rock hauls a lively fish/ out from the sea . . ./ so he hauled Thestor out of his chariot gaping on his shining spear” (16.404-409). As fish are innocently speared by fishermen, so are men caught and killed by other men. The warfare they engage in is a force of nature, and like nature, larger than any one man’s individual experience.

Another nature image Homer frequently uses is comparing heroes to trees, often to underscore qualities such as strength, stability, and resilience (Brockliss 76). When employed as similes for dying warriors, these same qualities may still be in play, but with additional nuances that tie their deaths back into the cycles of nature. The oak tree was known for its strength as well as for its sacred and oracular properties. The poplar and different types of pine were popular for building homes, while the ash tree was frequently used for crafting the shafts of spears.

Olive trees were famously important to the Greeks and olive groves were often considered sacred (Forster 98-100). The reader can imagine these different associations with trees coming to mind for ancient audiences when they heard these Homeric similes. In Book 4, for example, Homer compares Simoeisios to a poplar tree when killed by Ajax. After being struck on the chest beside his right nipple,

he fell to the ground in the dust like a poplar,  
which in the lowland of a great marsh-meadow had grown smooth-trunked, and yet branches are brought forth on its topmost part; and these a man, a chariot maker, with gleaming iron axe cuts away, so that he may bend from them a wheel rim for a splendid chariot; and the poplar lies drying by the banks of the river. (4.480-488)

Not only is he compared to a poplar, but Homer describes how that poplar dies and “lives” again in the form of a chariot wheel. As a man dies in war, so he is resurrected as a tool of war.

In Book 8 Gorgythion is struck in the chest by Teucer’s arrow, and “his head hung to one side like a garden poppy/ made heavy with seed and the showers of spring; so his head drooped, weighed down by his helmet” (8.302-308). Amid all the bloodshed, Homer gifts us with this unexpected image of a flower full of seed and freshly watered: the very image of fertility. He replaces death with life, while intentionally choosing the poppy—a flower frequently associated with sleep and death—for his nuanced simile.

Sarpedon’s death at the hands of Patroclus in Book 16 is particularly rich with tree similes. Struck in the chest, he

fell as when an oak falls, or white poplar,  
or stately pine that in the mountains timbering men  
fell with fresh-whetted axes to make a ship . . .

Patroclus stepping with his heel upon his chest  
yanked his spear from the flesh, and the lungs followed with it;  
so he drew forth the man’s soul and his spear-point together. (16.479-504)

As with Simoeisios’ death in Book 4, Homer transports the reader to a scene of a tree in nature, far from the battlefield yet still connected to it through simile and the utility of the tree as a natural resource. He offers an escape from the violence, and also a reminder of the utility of both trees and warriors:

When Euphorbos is killed by Menelaos in Book 17, he is

like a flourishing young olive tree that a man nurtures  
in a sequestered place, where abundant water soaks it,  
conspicuous in beauty, and which the breath of winds from all directions sets aquiver, and it is thick with white flowers,  
and all of a sudden the wind coming with a great storm-blast  
uproots it from its hollow and lays it out upon the earth,  
such was Euphorbos. (17.48-60)

A black-figure amphora (520 BCE) from the British Museum showing men harvesting olives provides a glimpse into the care these trees received in antiquity (fig. 4). Two men gently



brush the tree with slender sticks, while one man perches up in the branches and another collects the fallen olives from the ground. Like the olives, human life is sacred, and the death of a young man, while "beautiful," is still a tragic loss.



Fig. 4. Black Figure Amphora

Homer uses tree similes to contrast the mortality of men with the permanence and power of nature (Stein 67). As the battle intensifies, he uses simile to compare some of the mightiest warriors to forces of nature or natural phenomena. This is especially evident in Book 11, with Agamemnon, Hector, and Ajax all embarking on large killing sprees, cutting men down on a scale usually reserved for natural disasters. Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks, is fire:

As when obliterating fire falls on a thick-wooded forest,  
and the wind carries it barreling along  
in every direction, and the small trees  
fall uprooted, assailed by the blast of fire,  
so then at the hands of Atreus' son  
Agamemnon the heads fell  
of fleeing Trojans. (11.153-160)

The King of the Argives ravages the battlefield like a fire roaring through a forest, destroying everything in its path. Hector, pride of the Trojans, is a storm:

As when the West Wind drives shining clouds  
that the South Wind carried, battering  
them in a towering storm,  
and wave after swollen wave is rolled  
before it, and the foam  
is scattered high by the blast of veering  
wind;  
so the massed ranks of men were  
routed by Hector. (11.305-309)

The prince is relentless in his battle fury like a howling storm. The mighty Greek warrior Ajax is a flood:

As when a river in flood descends to the plain,  
winter-flowing down the mountains,  
driven hard by the rain from Zeus,  
and draws into itself and carries along  
dry oaks in multitude, pines  
in multitude, and hurls the mass of  
flotsam into the salt sea,  
so glorious Ajax swept the plain,  
wreaking havoc,  
slaying men and horses. (11.492-497)

No one escapes the power of a flood, and everyone is caught up in the chaos of frenzied

battle. In Book 20, Homer describes Achilles as fire:

And as demonic fire rages through  
    deep valleys  
of a sun-parched mountain, and the  
    dense forest is consumed,  
and everywhere the careening wind  
    rolls the flames along,  
so Achilles swept everywhere with his  
    spear like something more than  
    human,  
driving before him those whom he  
    killed; and the earth ran black with  
    blood. (20.490-494)

At this stage in the story, Achilles burns with rage over the death of Patroclus and is an insatiable killing machine.

In each of these examples Homer's greatest heroes transcend human or even heroic stature and become elemental forces of nature. They are no longer sentient individuals but the embodiment of war and its power of destruction. Like the many fallen warriors before them, they are swept up in the natural cycles of life and death, and Homer's use of poetic juxtaposition and epic simile solidifies that connection. Unlike those individual warriors however, Agamemnon, Hector, Ajax, and Achilles ravage the landscape on a scale and at a pace that defies human understanding.

Emily Vermeule observes that the *Iliad* "puts dying, though not death itself, in stage center . . . death is not the enemy of achievement or creativity but its cause, since the contemplation of death is the single factor which makes us long for immortality" (Vermeule 94). In other words, the knowledge and anticipation of death make life worth living. But the act of dying is when we are made most stunningly aware of the inevitably of death, and it is in that awareness—however

brief—that we find the deepest moments of empathy and pathos.

Each death in the *Iliad* is compelling because Homer shows us not only the horror and the beauty experienced by each individual, but also reminds us that each death is part of a larger natural rhythm that people have been contemplating and experiencing for millennia. Death also marks new beginnings, as Homer illustrates through his many similes connecting fallen warriors to trees—trees that may be used to create the next chariot wheel—and so the cycle of birth, death, creation, and destruction continues eternally.

Works Cited

- "Achilles Bandaging Patroclus's Wounded Arm." Ink drawing after an Attic cup by the potter Sosias, c. 500 B.C. by Sosias - Wellcome Collection, United Kingdom
- Alexander, Caroline. *The Iliad: A New Translation*. Ecco, 2015.
- Bassett, Samuel E. "The Function of the Homeric Simile." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol, 52. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1921, pp. 132-147.
- "Black Figure Amphora." Antimenes Painter, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
- "Black Figure Krater." George E. Koronaios, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons
- Brockliss, William. *Homeric Imagery and the Natural Environment*. Center for Hellenic Studies, 2019.
- Forster, Edward S. "Trees and Plants in Homer." *The Classical Review*, vol. 50, no. 3. Cambridge University Press, 1936, pp. 97-104.
- Hillman, James. *The Dream and the Underworld*. New York: Harper, 1979.
- "Euphronios Krater." Jaime Ardiles-Arce (photographer). Krater by Euphronios (painter) and Euxitheos (potter)., Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons
- Saunders, David. "Mourning Glory: The Depiction of Fallen Warriors in Athenian Black-figure Vases." *Beyond the Battlefields*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 161-183.
- Spivey, Nigel. *The Sarpedon Krater: The Life and Afterlife of a Greek Vase*. The University of Chicago Press, 2019.
- Stein, Charles David. *Beyond the Generation of Leaves: The Imagery of Trees and Human Life in Homer*. University of California, Los Angeles, doctoral thesis, 2013.
- Vermeule, Emily. *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry*. University of California Press, 1979.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*. Edited by Froma I. Zeitlin. Princeton University Press, 1991.





Through the Eucalyptus / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull



# The Wisdom in Zeus' Head Splitting Migraine

---

Heather A. Taylor, MA

Keywords: Migraine, Athena, Zeus, Health, Mythology

Content Warning: Discussion and Description of Gendered Medical Trauma

Held captive for three days at a time, or more, I find myself descending further into Hell. Darkness and stillness are the only environments I can endure. Blinking is painful. Smells nauseate. Movement is excruciating. Light is unbearable. Small translucent circles float across my field of vision signifying the early stages of a migraine. There is a blurred focus, brain fog, searching for common words that momentarily escape me, and the struggle to speak once words are found. A dull ache moves inside my head as if it's looking for a place to land before taking root and intensifying. I try to ignore the familiar feeling, thinking this time will be different. The pain varies each episode. Sometimes it seems like a sharp, piercing sword is emanating from my temple. Other times it feels like an incessant throbbing pounding inside my skull. This pain is not new. I have suffered some form of migraine nearly half of every month for the majority of my life. They come in categories: nagging headache, strong headache, functional migraine, debilitating migraine, and attacks that take over my entire body with waves of agony building like contractions that give birth to an ugly monster. The crescendo often culminates with violent vomiting before the waves abate, leaving me depleted like a man who falls overboard, is tossed around in the ocean, and eventually washes up on the shore splayed out on the sandy beach.

In Greek Mythology, the god Zeus suffers pains in his head so intense that he asks Hephaestus to split his skull open with an axe. This image resonates as I, like so many other migraineurs, have prayed for some divine intervention, even if it meant drastic measures. The wound from Hephaestus results in the birth of Zeus's daughter, Athena, who emerges from Zeus's head fully-grown and armored. Pindar, a poet from the 5<sup>th</sup> century writes, "When by Hephaestus' art and a stroke of his bronze-forged axe / Athene sprang from the

top of her father's head, yelling her / monstrous war-cry, and Heaven shuddered at her, and mother Earth" (21). Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is ready for battle.

The split of the patriarchal figure birthing the feminine form seems an obvious interpretation of the myth as I identify with the fierce war-cry of Athena. Yet it is Zeus's skull that is split in two, an accurate representation of the pain many migraine sufferers feel. Psychologist James Hillman emphasizes, no god or goddess in mythology

acts alone or in isolation. He explains that “the Greek and Renaissance solution to identification with any single god was the profound realization that never does one god appear alone... The myths place the gods always in a *complicatio*, that is, internally necessary to one another, often expressed as trinities” (*Mythic* 273). Thus, the myth of Athena’s birth is not about Zeus *or* Athena, but about Zeus (father) *and* Athena (daughter) together.

For the past two thousand years, our western culture has historically been one-sided, favoring the head over the body and perceived masculine traits over the so-called feminine ones. There is a tendency to split the masculine from the feminine, the good from the bad, the top from the bottom, and the head from the body. These binary views serve their purpose at times, but when out of balance, they can become blindly discriminatory. Today, the archetypal energy, as represented by Zeus, is out of balance. There is a need for the feminine wisdom to violently break through the head, where linear, logical ways of thinking occur, to bring transformation and healing. Woodman writes:

For me, *perfection* is a patriarchal word that splits everything into contraries: black or white. You are then living in constant conflict, and integration is not possible. Gradually you become conscious of the emotions in the body supporting what you are saying, and you experience them as having substance. Instead of just speaking from the neck up, you discover what’s in the body. It seems a lot of people are cut off at the neck, so that they talk from the head. Meanwhile, something completely different can be going on

below the neck. There’s a real split inside. (Kisly)

The language of the body, and the psyche, is not linear or one sided. They work in images that have the power to transcend binary splits that so often trap us in stereotypes. The subtle body allows for integration of seemingly opposing dichotomies. Jungian analyst Marion Woodman explains that “[t]he images are pictures of the soul and we use those as the bridge between psyche and body” (“Meeting” 118). These images are often presented as metaphors that have power to heal. In the myth of Zeus and Athena, the image of the god’s head being split open is pertinent for the next generation of wisdom to emerge. Cracking Zeus’s skull exposes the area where knowledge and imagination are formed. It is a painful, but necessary, process for Zeus when this armored feminine warrior emerges with a strong voice. Unfortunately, I have often felt that I must do something drastic to get the attention of those in the medical system who appear to have only one way of listening or processing information. Most physicians rely purely on scientific data and cognitive rationalization to treat patients instead of combining it with a more embodied and intuitive approach. The archetypal patterns represented by both the god and goddess are necessary for balancing out the full story. Scholar Wendy Doniger writes, many myths split the body away from the mind and/or the soul – or from something else. In European mythology, the severing of head from body raises questions of the link between mind and body: Which is real? Which holds one’s identity? But some myths go beyond this coarse Cartesian paradigm to pose more subtle questions. Where Descartes, that

protostructuralist, divided us into two, other cultures (and other parts of our own culture) divide us into several different sorts of entities: body and soul and heart and mind and memory and morals and affections. (258)

Migraine derives from the Greek word *hemikrania*, which literally means half skull. One of the most common symptoms of migraines is intense pain on one side of the head, often alternating between hemispheres over a period of days. These symptoms lend themselves to metaphor, especially in a polarized society, constantly fighting the balance of extremes. Woodman writes, "If we dare to travel down the bridge from head to body, we may find our soul, in the darkness and we may find the questions which will quicken her, opening every cell as we bring her into consciousness. Body becomes embodiment, sight becomes insight. Sophia, wisdom in the body, begins to move through soul" (*Ravaged* 177). Unfortunately, too many doctors are deaf to this bridge between body, mind, and soul, favoring the model represented by an all-knowing and all-powerful god and not recognizing the need to birth the wisdom represented by the feminine principle in the form of a goddess.

Most women can relate to the necessity of Athena's dramatic entrance into the world and the need to break through the dominating attitude of the father to allow their own innate wisdom to emerge. This plays out in the physician's room as women, in particular, struggle to be heard or have their pain acknowledged and legitimized. Instead, doctors tend to minimize pain or symptoms and compartmentalize body parts by specific functions instead of recognizing their integral importance within the whole body.

My migraines began around age six or seven. The pediatrician never took them seriously. By the time I was in high school, the migraines increased steadily. After college, strong, violent migraines began occurring daily. One doctor suggested pregnancy as a temporary cure. Other words of non-wisdom included telling me to seek counseling, avoid stress, drink more water, and any number of suggestions the doctors (male and female) were not qualified to give.

The medical community has regarded my pain with patronizing attitudes and mistreatment while they lack empathy and any critical thinking outside the textbook or prescription pad. Doctors lose patience when my head doesn't respond "the way it should" after initially promising they knew how to help. Their ego bruised, they assert that I must be too emotional, need to manage stress, or perhaps I really don't want to get better. After seeing my notes, headache diaries, and passages underlined in his book specifically on migraines, the renowned neurologist Oliver Sacks declared that I created my migraines as a project to occupy my time and needed to get more of a social life, thus adding shame to the pain and a feeling that somehow these migraines are of my own doing and thus my fault.

As Woodman and Dickson write, "Our culture has made us deaf and blind to feminine anguish" (*Dancing* 27). In addition to the physical pain so often dismissed by doctors or covered up with prescribed medicine, the stigma of migraines can lead to isolation. Frequently, a feeling of shame in the workplace, school, community, among friends, or even in the family occurs due to the perception of weakness. One needs to be a warrior like Athena just to survive.

The way I have been treated by the medical establishment is not uncommon. It underscores the need for women's bodies, and indeed any ailment, to be viewed from a more related perspective instead of quantifying and compartmentalizing body parts. Greg Mogenson writes, "In our culture, in most cultures, women have been associated with what Jung called 'earth, darkness, the abysmal side of the bodily man with his animal passions and instinctual nature and to 'mater' in general.' While men have tended to be regarded as rational spirits, women have tended to be seen as irrational, inferior, and weak" (52). My search for relief from those in the medical field is representative of the bigger picture in a society that prioritizes the masculine.

The World Health Organization lists migraines as a neurological disorder, ranking them as the sixth most debilitating condition in the world. A conservative estimate reports that forty million Americans experience migraines, afflicting three times as many women as men. Because research has been severely underfunded, the root cause of migraines is not known. Nor is the reason understood why women suffer more: "We don't have the answer for why migraines are more common in women than in men, but women are more susceptible to every pain condition than men," says Janine Clayton, who directs the Office of Research on Women's Health at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (Cimons). The prevailing *perception* is that migraines are stress-related or an emotional issue. Only recently has this perception been challenged.

The medical community has long considered women's health as secondary. In an article on gender bias in the health field, the author writes, "There is no shortage of ways in which women are discriminated against in

medicine. This is evident throughout history, from Aristotle's distinction between the superior male 'form' and inferior female 'mater,' to the medieval idea that women, "leaky vessels," were unbalanced due to their wombs" (Schopen). Sigmund Freud, father of psychoanalysis, a neurologist, and a migraine sufferer, also reduces the physiological aspect of migraines to hysteria. He hypothesizes that "migraine represents a toxic effect produced by a sexual stimulating substance when this cannot find sufficient discharge" (qtd. in Karwautz). Freud further explains that these sexually toxic headaches "might be transformed to a 'hysterical headache'" and although the headache was real at one point, it then becomes "the somatic expression of a libidinal excitation" (qtd. in Karwautz). For women with hysteria, Freud theorizes that, "in place of the mental pains which she avoided, physical pains made their appearance" (qtd. in Karwautz). This stigma projected upon women meant those suffering migraines not only had to endure unimaginable physical pain, but they were also ridiculed, dismissed, and mocked by the medical community and society at large. As a result, there was no funding allocated toward finding treatment for migraines, much less a cure.

Fast-forward over a hundred years, and neither the treatment, nor the hypothesis behind migraines has evolved much beyond Freud's interpretation. In an article exploring why women's pain is treated differently than men's, Diane Hoffman writes, "Unlike the 'Cartesian' approach that views pain as a product of either biology (body) or psychology (mind), a more informed approach is to acknowledge the interdependence of the two, in addition to culture influences" (Hoffman). Only in the past thirty years have issues



surrounding gender in medicine been raised, though not much has changed in practice.

It wasn't until the early 1990s in the United States (2009 in Canada), that government guidelines recommended including *a few* women in the research and clinical trials to see if their bodies reacted differently to medicines and pain than male bodies. Before that, all tests were conducted on men. Even today, "research subjects still skew male, and women of child-bearing years are often left out of trials due to those pesky hormones" (Deziel). The Greek physician Soranus, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, "says that because apart from their reproductive system women are just like men, they don't require a specialized form of medicine" (Downing, "Gynecological" 5). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the medical community finally realized that women's bodies did indeed need to be treated differently.

A new field of medicine labeled women's health emerged, though it was mostly associated with reproductive organs and sometimes dubbed "bikini" medicine. Women were seen as an addendum to the normal practice, where "medicine had long worked on the assumption that women are essentially men with boobs and tubes" (Crompton). Downing writes, "Men had been seen as not gendered – they were the universal subject – the feminine was object not subject – women were defined by their bodies... all this seemed to proceed from Cartesian assumptions about subject/object knowing, about the mind / body split" ("Lecture 1"). Psychologist Carol Gilligan expands upon this, writing: "We address recent discoveries in developmental psychology and neurobiology that have called into question the splitting of reason from emotion, mind from body, and self from

relationship, revealing these splits to be falsely gendered and to reflect not only a distortion of human nature but also a manifestation of physical or psychological trauma" (4). In essence, the masculine body and mind has remained the medical standard from which all others are measured.

This prejudice continues to appear in a physician's education, where "women are portrayed as hysterical or emotional in much of the medical and other literature" (Hoffman 20). In addition, the attitude toward female patients is still problematic: "While men may be seen as forceful or aggressive, women are perceived as hysterical for the same behavior. Physicians have found women to have more 'psychosomatic illnesses, more emotional lability and more complaints due to emotional factors' than men" (Hoffman 20). The reason, in part, is "the medical model overemphasizes objective, biological indicators of pain and underacknowledges women's subjective, experiential reports. Johansson and colleagues state, 'medical models often end up in reductionism and medico-centrism, since they look for expert explanations in biological facts'" (Hoffman 20). This view gained prominence by early philosophers including Aristotle, Socrates, and Descartes, who began emphasizing the profane over the sacred and the objective over the subjective.

When the scientific method took the forefront, mythological gods started fading into the background. At the same time, separation of mind and body and a detachment from the soul became prevalent. Everything became intellectualized, measurable, and quantifiable. Jung writes, "The gods have become diseases; Zeus no longer rules Olympus but rather the solar plexus, and produces curious specimens for the doctor's consulting room, or disorders

the brains of politicians and journalists who unwittingly let loose psychic epidemics on the world” (para 54). Despite the gods fading in the background, their archetypal images continue to resonate with those struggling to find adequate data driven language to describe a condition.

Metaphor, images, and symbolic language are often used to express sensations in the body. This is one reason why mythological stories have the potential to add important information, insight, and understanding toward healing. The stories and images can capture the subjective experience, which is often ignored in medical fields. Woodman and Elinor Dickson write:

We now know that a highly charged image can create a correlative shift that stimulates changes in the body’s chemistry, much as changes in body chemistry can alter moods and stimulate the imagination. As psychoneuroimmunologists and analysts work together to correlate the workings of the body with the imagery of dreams, the gap and nongap that Jung saw between psyche and soma will rapidly narrow and, I believe, eventually close. (*Dancing* 185)

Migraine sufferers notoriously use metaphors to describe their attacks. Often there are descriptions like the mythical sword Excalibur being stuck in one’s head, an ice pick constantly poking the inside of the skull, an internal throbbing of veins that pulsate like a drum solo direct from the brain, or a butcher knife partially protruding from one’s temple as seen in campy horror films. These images help paint the picture of pain. Hillman writes, “The psyche is using a particular metaphorical language system which is very detailed and

concrete and seems to accomplish a specific end” (*Re-Visioning* 82-83). Interestingly, swords and other sharp objects are frequently mentioned in association with migraines. Thus, the action of Hephaestus using an axe to split Zeus’s head open is a strong metaphorical image. When the armored Athena jumps out of Zeus’s head, she is also wielding a sword. While the sword can be a weapon, it also can be a way of cutting off that which is no longer needed or cutting through to something that is desired. Psychologist Peter Levine writes, “The sword symbolizes absolute truth, the mythic heroes ultimate weapon of defense. It conveys a sense of clarity and triumph, of rising to meet extraordinary challenges, and of ultimate resourcefulness” (*Walking* 63). A sword of discernment can bring about transformation.

The sword, armor, and a split involving the head are themes prevalent in the myth of Medusa, the gorgon with snakes for hair. Athena appears in the gorgon’s story facilitating aspects of destruction and rebirth. The goddess helps guide the young hero-to-be, Perseus, to decapitate Medusa, separating the gorgon’s head from her body. The winged horse Pegasus, and his brother, Chrysaor, emerge out of their mother’s neck. Like Athena, Chrysaor, whose name means the golden sword, is born as a fully grown warrior. The ancient Greek poet Hesoid, referencing Medusa and Poseidon, writes, “With her lay the Dark-haired One in a soft meadow amid spring flowers. And when Perseus cut off her head, there spring forth great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus who is so called because he was born near the springs (pegae) of Ocean; and that other, because he held a golden blade (aor) in his hands” (8). This presents an interesting juxtaposition of the masculine emerging from the wounded feminine in contrast to Athena,

goddess of wisdom, emerging out of her father's head, or the wounded masculine.

A necessary component when working with a mythological image for healing or insight requires reflection and integration, not translation. James Hillman references patients at the Asklepiian Temple of healing in Ancient Greece, writing: "The cure was the God's presence in person, and healing did not require translation of images into concepts" (*Re-Visioning* 34). This is something important for physicians today to consider. Indeed, the physician often misses the point, thinking they are god-like, instead of seeing the divine spark or sacredness and wisdom of the images provided by mind, body, and psyche. Seeing the entire picture can lead toward integrated healing.

With all the focus on the head, the rest of the body is often forgotten. In fact, migraine sufferers report a myriad of complaints in the entire body including nausea, bloating, visual disturbances, sensitivity to light, sound, smell, and a litany of seemingly unrelated issues. Since the pain in the head is so intense, however, it receives the most attention. Current research is exploring the connection between the mind and the gut, with some hypotheses that an imbalance in the microbiome can cause migraines. Perhaps a significant detail in the myth of Athena sheds some insight on this as well. In *Theogony*, Hesiod writes, "Now Zeus, king of the gods, made Metis his wife first, and she was wisest among gods and mortal men. But when she was about to bring forth the goddess bright-eyed Athene, Zeus craftily deceived her with cunning words and put her in his own belly ... " (23). By swallowing the pregnant Metis, Athena's gestation is completed in the gut of Zeus. Thus, the generational wisdom of the feminine is housed

deep in the belly before Athena breaks through the wounded masculine, fully formed.

Transformations can be healing but there is often an underworld journey that is taken before balance is restored. Like many migraine sufferers, I have felt like I was in the underworld in a literal sense, as I lay in a dark room suffering until the pain passed. I have wished my head could be temporarily removed during a migraine attack and reattached when the pain is over. Instead, I cannot venture into the light until the entire cycle is complete.

After Medusa is beheaded, Athena presents Asclepius, one of the most renowned healers from ancient times, with two vials of blood from the gorgon. One vial is poison, while the other has the ability to bring the dead back to life, or rebirth. Unfortunately, the medical community today is more likely to prescribe the vial of poison, whether it is through their words, lack of action, or insincerity. Well-meaning empathetic doctors are often undercut by insurance companies and bureaucratic red tape. There is no cure for migraines and treatments have been ineffective for a large percentage of sufferers.

I have seen dozens of experts and spent tens of thousands of dollars exploring both holistic and allopathic approaches from Native American healing rituals to the Mayo Clinic's expansive bounty of tests. Prescription drugs, herbal remedies, and supplements all create new symptoms, never treating the underlying issues (I have not tried cocaine, the drug of choice for Freud). There is hope on the horizon, however, as studies about the brain and the body evolve. In addition, more women are speaking up, both as doctors and as patients. In 2017, new drugs were released that specifically targeted migraines for the first time. On November 13th, 2023, the White House

“launched an initiative to improve research on women’s health” and First Lady Jill Biden recognized that “research on women’s health has been underfunded for decades” (Karanth). Citing many examples, Biden said:

If you ask any woman in America about her health care, she probably has a story to tell... You know her. She’s the woman who gets debilitating migraines, but doesn’t know why and can’t find treatment options that work for her... She’s the woman whose heart disease isn’t recognized because her symptoms are considered non-cardiac, and the traditional testing used to diagnose a heart attack was developed based on men ... She’s the woman going through menopause, who visits with her doctor and leaves with more questions than answers” (Karanth).

The all-knowing god aspect of Zeus has its place in today’s world and has brought civilization far. However, it has dominated for so long that other voices and ways of being have been ignored, or even killed, as we see the devastation of climate change affect our health and the health of every being on the planet. The feminine principle, as symbolized by Athena, who also aids humanity in civilization, dismembers Zeus temporarily, creating a wounded masculine. To enter the world, the goddess must travel from the gut of her father and erupt through his head. This wounding of the masculine is a necessary component for birth as a crack in linear thinking allows for embodied feminine wisdom to emerge. This is an essential metaphor for healing ourselves and our world now.

Returning to stories from antiquity while using a modern framework is a powerful prescription for the medical community.

Transforming how we interpret the old images and stories is a key to finding antidotes that impact mind, soul, and body. While pain in the head can be absolutely debilitating, there is wisdom in working with the images the body creates, especially if these images are explored in conjunction with patient and practitioner. Through metaphor, there is an opportunity to see what archetypal patterns are resonating, both individually and collectively. By working to restore balance, there is potential for healing, transformation, validation, and wisdom to emerge from our pain and wounds.



## Works Cited

- Cimons, Marlene. "Women Suffer Vastly More Migraines Than Men, Here's Why." *The Washington Post*. Posted online 15 October 2018 on Science Alert: [sciencealert.com/women-suffer-far-more-migraines-than-men-here-s-why](http://sciencealert.com/women-suffer-far-more-migraines-than-men-here-s-why).
- Crompton, Simon. "Should medicine be gendered?" *Science Focus*. [Sceincefocus.com/the-human-body/should-medicine-be-gendered](http://Sceincefocus.com/the-human-body/should-medicine-be-gendered). 1 May 2019.
- Deziel, Shanda. "How medical research has failed women." *Chatelaine*. [chatelaine.com/health/women-medical-research-bias](http://chatelaine.com/health/women-medical-research-bias). Updated 31 May 2016.
- Doniger, Wendy. *Splitting the Difference. Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*. U of Chicago, 1999.
- Downing, Christine. "Gynecological Fantasies. Women's Bodies and Women's Souls As Imagined in Hippocratic Medicine." Typescript, 2014.
- . "Lecture 1." MS 609 Sex and Gender. Mythologies II. Pacifica. Graduate Institute.
- Received 18 Jan., 2020. Class Lecture Notes Handout.
- Gilligan, Carol and David A.J. Richards. *The Deepening Darkness Patriarchy, Resistance, & Democracy's Future*. Cambridge UP. 2009.
- Hesiod. *Theogony*. Classic Books, 2010.
- Hillman, James. *Mythic Figures*. Spring Publications. 2016.
- . *Re-Visioning Psychology*. Harper & Row. 1975.
- Hoffman, Diane E., Anita J. Tarzian. "The Girl Who Cried Pain: A Bias Against Women in the Treatment of Pain." University of Maryland School of Law. *The Social Science Research Network Electronic Paper Collection*. [papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=383803](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=383803).
- Jung, C. G. "Commentary on "The Secret of the Golden Flower." *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, translated by R.F.C., Hull, edited by H. Read et al, Vol. 13, Princeton UP, 1970, pp. 15-65.
- Karant, Sanjana. "White House Launches Initiative To Improve Research on Women's Health." HuffPost. 13 Nov 2023. [huffpost.com/entry/white-house-initiative-womens-health-research\\_n\\_655269ece4b0373d70b320a8](http://huffpost.com/entry/white-house-initiative-womens-health-research_n_655269ece4b0373d70b320a8)
- Karwautz, Andreas F K., C Wöber-Bingöl, Christian Wöber. "Freud and Migraine: the Beginning of a Psychodynamically Oriented View of Headache A Hundred Years Ago." *Cephalalgia*. 1996; 16-22-6. Researchgate.net.
- Kisly, Lorrain. "Worshipping Illusions: An Interview With Marion Woodman." Interviewed by Lorraine Kisly. *Parabola*. Vol. 12, No. 2, "Addiction." Summer 1987. [parabola.org/2019/04/13/worshipping-illusions-an-interview-with-marion-woodman](http://parabola.org/2019/04/13/worshipping-illusions-an-interview-with-marion-woodman). Posted online 13 April, 2019.
- Levine, Peter. *Walking the Tiger. Healing Trauma*. Peter A. Levine with Ann Frederick. North Atlantic Books, 1997.
- Mogenson, Greg. *God Is A Trauma. Vicarious Religion and Soul-Making*. Spring Publications, 1989.
- Pindar. "Olympian 7." *The Complete Odes*. A new translation by Anthony Verity, Oxford World's Classic, Oxford UP, 2008, pp 20 – 23.
- Schopen, Fay. "The healthcare gender bias: do men get better medical treatment?" *The Guardian*. 20 Nov 2017.

Woodman, Marion and Elinor Dickson.  
*Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess  
in the Transformation of Consciousness.*  
Shambhala, 1997.

Woodman, Marion. "A Meeting with Marion  
Woodman." *Conscious Femininity.*

*Interviews With Marion Woodman.* Inner  
City Books, 1993, pp 110-128.  
—. *The Ravaged Bridegroom: Masculinity in  
Women.* Inner City Books, 1990.





Trees In Golden Hour / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull



# Pheidippides' Sacred Journey: *Exploring Inner and Outer Landscapes in the Mythos of Running*

---

Paul R. Harvey, MA

Keywords: Pheidippides, Endurance Athletics, Transcendence, Depth Psychology, Inner/Outer

The story of Pheidippides, the legendary runner who delivered the news of the Greek victory at the Battle of Marathon, has been retold and embellished over the centuries. The earliest account comes from Herodotus, in his "Histories" (445 BC), who portrays Pheidippides as a professional long-distance runner and loyal messenger, yet Herodotus provides little insight into Pheidippides' experience along his arduous journey (Herodotus, Book 6, 105). Pheidippides' escapades gained further notoriety over the centuries, featuring in later adaptations of Plutarch's "On the Glory of Athens" (46–120 AD) and Lucian's "A Slip of the Tongue in Greeting" (2nd century AD), but it was not until Robert Browning's poem "Pheidippides," written in the nineteenth century, that Pheidippides' inner journey became illuminated. Browning's poetic interpretation paints a vivid description of Pheidippides' torment and anguish, providing a window into his inner journey that is absent from Herodotus' more factual and detached portrayal. Petros Pourliakas, a Greek historian and ultramarathon runner, shares a modern retelling "Nenikekamen," emphasizing the emotional climate of the geo-political world surrounding Pheidippides' journey.

In the world of contemporary marathon running, the enduring myth of Pheidippides continues to inspire and resonate with athletes as they undertake the ultimate test of endurance. The myth's resonance transcends time, infusing today's races with a profound reminder that the human spirit can triumph over adversity and seemingly insurmountable distances. In 2022, approximately one million people globally completed a marathon (Livestrong). Ultramarathons, meaning distances ranging from thirty-one miles to two hundred miles,

have also gained popularity over recent years, with over six hundred thousand enthusiasts competing each year seeking to push their physical and mental limits (Dawson). One such race, known as the Spartathlon, revives the footsteps of Pheidippides, recreating the challenging and historic two-hundred forty-five-kilometer ultra-distance race.

Pheidippides and the mythos of running captured my attention from an early age. As a member of the running community, I have competed in hundreds of half-marathons, marathons, and ultramarathons around the



world. In 2016, I joined a select group of runners who have completed marathons on all seven continents, completing races in epic landscapes such as the Arctic Circle, Antarctica, the Sahara Desert, Death Valley, and Uluru in the central Australian desert. The reasons for running marathons and ultramarathons are diverse, ranging from physical fitness, mental resilience, a sense of adventure, expressing competitive spirit, and connection with nature. Beyond these factors, little has been written about marathon and ultramarathon running from a depth psychological perspective. Each author of the Pheidippides myth throughout history has highlighted and embroidered different aspects of Pheidippides' character and journey; however, the interrelatedness between Pheidippides' state of mind and the geographical spaces he encounters on his arduous journey related to the War of Marathon remains unexplored.

This paper elaborates on the descriptions of Pheidippides' journey by Herodotus, Browning, and Pourliakas, interspersed with the author's personal experiences as an ultra-marathon runner, to explore how the narratological category of space influences the connection between Pheidippides' inner and outer journeys. This paper suggests that the interplay between inner and outer space and place during acts of endurance such as ultramarathons enables ultra-endurance athletes to enter a transcendent space and altered state of mind wherein they can navigate multiple worlds—human, divine, and otherworldly—opening access to a sacred center within themselves. Furthermore, this paper suggests that Pheidippides' legacy lives on not only in the historical accounts but also

in the hearts and souls of modern runners who, through their own journeys, explore the depths of human potential and the mysteries of existence. Herodotus says that Pheidippides was a professional runner who was sent to tell King Lacedemonian of Sparta that the Persians were preparing to invade Greece at Marathon. Pheidippides' task was of crucial importance; however, Herodotus covers Pheidippides' entire journey in two short stanzas, leaving many gaps in detail regarding his physical and psychological journey. Herodotus states that Pheidippides "was in Sparta on the next day" (Herodotus, 106) after leaving Athens, suggesting he completed the approximately one hundred fifty-five mile run in less than two days. On his way, Pheidippides encounters the god Pan on Mount Parthenion. Calling out to Pheidippides, Pan lamented, "for what reason they had no care of him, though he was well disposed to the Athenians" (Herodotus, 105). Herodotus does not elaborate on the impact on Pheidippides of his encounter with Pan; therefore, we are left to wonder how a late-night encounter with the goat-footed god high on the mountain impacted Pheidippides' state of mind.

The absence of a detailed description by Herodotus leaves space for an interpretation of the symbolic meaning of Pheidippides' encounter with Pan. Irene J. F. de Jong suggests that symbolism is an important narrative function that acts to anchor space in stories (Skempis and Ziogas 3). By placing Pheidippides' encounter with Pan high on Mount Parthenion, Herodotus invites us to examine the symbolic meeting of two different worlds. Pheidippides has run to the edge of the human world, at the boundary of the gods, and likewise, Pan has descended to the boundary of the human realm to lament being forsaken by

the citizens of Athens. Pheidippides' encounter with Pan adds a new dimension to his task as a herald. He carries an important message concerning human despair regarding the impending war and a divine message from the gods to the citizens of Athens not to forsake their gods.

Upon arriving in Sparta and relaying his message, Pheidippides is informed that it is an inauspicious time for Sparta to join the battle. The Spartan army will not join the fight "until the circle of the moon should be full" (Herodotus 106). Here, too, Herodotus does not illuminate how this news affects the exhausted Pheidippides. However, Marie-Laure Ryan helps to lift the veil cast by Herodotus and enables us to peer into a potential hidden meaning of Sparta's decision by applying the "narrative universe" lens of her taxonomy, as presented in the work of Skempis and Ziogas. Ryan describes the "narrative universe" as "the spatio-temporal world and all the counterfactual worlds constructed by the characters as beliefs, wishes, and fears" (Skempis and Ziogas 2). In choosing to honor Spartan custom, Herodotus sets Spartan society apart as one that honors their ancient gods and the cycle of the cosmos. Whereas Athenian society, which has neglected Pan, instead seeks human alliances over divine intervention. Herodotus' description of King Lacedemonian's decision lays bare the Spartan belief in their ancient gods and a fear of divine retribution had Sparta joined the fight before the full moon cycle. Herodotus makes no further reference to Pheidippides' return journey to Athens or his subsequent role in announcing Greece's victory over the Persian invaders. We know that Pheidippides did manage to return to Athens and inform the generals of Sparta's decision and his encounter

with Pan. Upon retelling his encounter with Pan to the Generals of Athens, Pheidippides convinced the Generals of its validity, resulting in the Athenians establishing "under the Acropolis a temple of Pan" upon the conclusion of the War of Marathon (Herodotus, 105). Herodotus leaves us bereft of insight into Pheidippides' trials and struggles in overcoming the arduous terrain and his battles with himself in achieving such a feat of endurance. Hence, we must turn to Robert Browning for clues and new insights.

Robert Browning's poetic adaptation "Pheidippides" (1879) creates a window through which we can gaze into Pheidippides' inner journey as he traverses the landscape between the cities of Athens, Sparta, and Marathon. Browning instantly establishes a connection between Pheidippides and the land, identifying him as a Greek, an Athenian, and a man humbled by nature. "First I salute this soil of the blessed, river and rock! / Gods of my birthplace, dæmons and heroes, honour to all!" (Browning 1-2). Browning's introduction illuminates Pheidippides' motives for taking on this epic journey. While undoubtedly Hoplites in the Athenian army could not choose their assignments, Browning's description adds a sense of duty, responsibility, and agency beyond merely following an order. At this moment, Pheidippides appears unaware of the fact that his descent into the underworld and his journey to meet with the fates have already begun.

Skempis and Ziogas suggest that the interaction of human experience and agency are critical factors that "turn space into place" and justify the use of a multitude of lenses to fully explore the meaning and function of space and place within narrative (Skempis and Ziogas 1). On account of Pheidippides'

expression of agency regarding his mission, his journey becomes a place for personal transformation as well as duty for the *polis*. My journey as a runner from five-kilometer runs to two-hundred fifty-kilometer ultramarathons became an odyssey of self-discovery and transformation. Entering a five-kilometer run as a teenager served as a tentative step into the realm of distance running; however, beneath the surface, a deeper psychological process was already set in motion. As I gradually increased my distances, moving from ten to twenty or thirty miles and eventually embracing the realm of ultramarathons, I began to traverse the landscape of my psyche with the same determination as needed to sustain endless training runs throughout every season and climate. My body's limits become malleable, encouraging the mind to delve into uncharted territories as well. Training runs become longer and more frequent, fostering a daily practice of solitude and introspection. It was in these solitary strides that I started to confront aspects of my psyche that had remained obscured during the hustle of daily life. Running became a space to metabolize unprocessed emotions and make sense of childhood experiences that shaped me and my beliefs about the world.

The repetitive cycle of exertion, fatigue, and recovery seemed to symbolically represent a process of birth, death, and rebirth. The person I was when I started each marathon was never

exactly the same person who finished them. I left a part of myself in each of the spaces I ran, and in exchange, I found a deeper part of myself within. However, it wasn't until I stood at the starting line of the Arctic Circle Marathon in sub-zero temperatures that a deeper part of myself that had been fueling my search for increasingly perilous adventures revealed itself. As the race began and the conditions worsened, the path ventured inward, into the labyrinthine corridors of my unconscious mind. In the midst of each race come instances of extreme exhaustion—a moment when the ego's defenses weaken,



Albatros Adventure Marathons

allowing access to the abyss of the human psyche and engagement with the deepest parts of ourselves.

On the barren yet mesmerizing Arctic Ice, I met my death drive, that enigmatic, secretive, and potentially malevolent power that operates behind the scenes of our psyche. Sigmund Freud's concept of the death drive, or "Thanatos," posits that humans have an innate and unconscious instinctual urge toward

self-destruction and the return to a state of non-existence (Freud 18-37). This drive is seen as a counterforce to the life instincts (Eros) and can manifest in destructive behaviors and a fascination with death and aggression. However, what emerged in that unexpected meeting was a realization that my death drive encompasses more than a straightforward desire for self-destruction; it also contains the elixir for breaking boundaries, embracing novelty, and the love of the unknown. In a similar vein, as I delved deeper into the intricacies of my own psyche, Pheidippides must have summoned the deepest reserves of his own psyche to propel himself forward on his harrowing journey. By doing so, Pheidippides opened himself up to a layer of his psyche typically hidden during everyday life, revealing the primal, untamed, and riotous forces within his deep psyche.

Herodotus stated that Pheidippides had to run to Sparta within two days. Browning's Pheidippides does the same, but we learn a lot more about the landscape he runs through and his torment and anguish along the way. "Was the space between city and city: two days, two nights did I burn/ Over the hills, under the dales, down pits and up peaks. / Into their midst I broke: breath served but for 'Persia has come!'" (Browning 15-17). We can feel the sense of urgency and the pressure Pheidippides felt in traversing the pits and peaks, saving only enough breath to tell the Spartans of Persia's arrival. Upon arriving in Sparta, Browning leaves no doubt as to how Pheidippides received the news of Sparta's decision to wait for the full moon to join the battle:

That sent a blaze thro' my blood; off,  
off and away was I back,  
—Not one word to waste, one

look to lose on the false and the vile!

Yet "O Gods of my land!" I cried, as  
each hillock and plain,

Wood and stream, I knew, I named,  
rushing past them again,

"Have ye kept faith, proved  
mindful of honours we paid you  
erewhile?"

(Browning 41-46)

As Pheidippides traverses the same terrain on his return to Athens, Browning sets up an opportunity to examine how space and place are in a constant state of change, dynamically being "negotiated and reconstructed" by a character's state of mind (Skempis and Ziogas 1). Whereas Herodotus places Pheidippides' encounter with Pan en route to Sparta, Browning locates the encounter on Pheidippides' return journey from Sparta to Athens: "There, in the cool of a cleft, sat he—majestical Pan! Ivy drooped wanton, kissed his head, moss cushioned his hoof" (Browning 65-66). By this time, Pheidippides would have run approximately two hundred and fifty miles in three days and would undoubtedly be suffering from the mental, physical, and emotional pain of his exertions. He was already engaged in an intense battle between his mind, body, soul, and terrain; therefore, his direct encounter with Pan would have only further strained his fragile state. His senses were likely in a state of hyperfunction, working overtime to maintain a grip on reality and navigate his safe passage back to Athens. These exertions would have left him prone to hallucinations that could have contributed to his experience of distorting worlds, locating Pan in the human realm, and symbolically fusing the goat-footed Pan with nature through his "moss cushioned hoof" (Browning, 66).



Could Pheidippides' encounter with Pan on Mount Parthenium have been an antiquarian version of a runner's high? The sensation of "runner's high" is frequently encountered by endurance athletes either during or following extended periods of exercise. It refers to a state of euphoria, detachment from the feeling of pain, and even a mild sense of transcendence that occurs due to the release of endorphins and other neurotransmitters in the brain. However, recent research suggests other neurotransmitters such as anandamide, which is similar in structure to THC (the active compound in cannabis), might also contribute to the sensation of a runner's high (Siebers, Biedermann, Fuss). Anandamide levels have been shown to increase during intense aerobic exercise, and given the great distances Pheidippides covered, he would undoubtedly have experienced feelings of euphoria, detachment from his pain, and possibly an experience of transcendence. As an illustration, take Karel Sabbe, an accomplished ultramarathon runner who became profoundly disoriented due to exhaustion and the euphoria of a runner's high during the infamous Barkley Marathons in 2022. This disorientation caused him to experience hallucinations of ghosts and even engage in conversations with trash cans before being picked up by police miles off course (Dickinson).

Pheidippides' state of mind and engagement with Pan resemble similar states of mind experienced by shamans, who are believed to have the ability to enter altered states of consciousness to communicate with the spirit world, heal, and provide guidance to their communities. Shamans often induce altered states of consciousness through various methods, such as drumming, chanting,

dancing, fasting, or the use of psychoactive substances. These altered states are believed to allow shamans to connect with spirits, ancestors, and other supernatural entities for guidance, healing, and divination. After running two hundred miles in three days, Pheidippides' mind would have been flooded with anandamide and endorphins that induced an altered state that would mirror a shamanic experience. Did Pheidippides in fact enter a celestial liminal space high on Mount Parthenium, enabling communication with Pan that provided guidance and healing to the Athenian people?

As in Herodotus, Pan similarly laments why the Athenians have forsaken him, yet Browning adds a symbolic element to his message, with Pan passing a fennel branch to Pheidippides to carry back to Athens: "Gay, the liberal hand held out this herbage I bear—Fennel,—I grasped it a-tremble with dew—whatever it bode" (Browning 82–83). In placing the encounter with Pan on Pheidippides' return to Athens, Browning clearly indicates that Pan's message was only for the Athenians and not Sparta, establishing a strong link between Pan's divine power and Athens and their eventual victory over the Persians. By doing so, Browning builds the structure for Pheidippides' transformation from skilled Hoplite messenger to messenger of a god and then to hero of Greece, all within the container of the places he travels.

Browning also adds new spatial dimensions that Herodotus omitted: "Athens to aid? Tho' the dive were thro' Erebos, thus I obey" (Browning 62). Erebos represented the underworld, the night, and the dead in ancient Greece, meaning that Pheidippides was becoming aware that he must journey through his own hell to achieve his epic feat. Within the

space of twenty poetic lines, Browning locates Pheidippides in heaven, earth, and hell, establishing a sacred center as a container for his journey and transformation. Historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade devoted much of his life to the study of what he conceived as the sacred center—a pursuit that integrated his views surrounding the paradoxical language of the sacred with the role of mythic and symbolic structures as pertinent purveyors of meaning, community, and identity. In Eliade's eyes, the sacred center was both a geographic center point and a realm of absolute reality, or the meeting point of heaven, earth, and hell. Eliade notes that this axis symbolizes “an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible,” traversing between the celestial realm and the earthly domain, and from the terrestrial realm to the depths of the underworld, and vice versa; a journey that can invoke profound transformation and soul resonance on an individual and collective level (Eliade 276).

Eliade also understood the road to the center to be a uniquely difficult one. Playing out perilously in both literal and figurative ways, the path to the divine center, or the center of oneself, was an initiatory journey from the profane to the sacred in and of itself. In this regard, we can view Pheidippides' external physical journey as a feat of great endurance and his internal journey as an epic journey to his own sacred center. Traversing earthly cities, touching the boundary of the gods on Mount Parthenium, and struggling with his personal Erebos, represented by his physical and emotional pain, Pheidippides' entire journey can be seen as one connected *axis mundi*. For Eliade, myth provided the underlying substance from which ritual emerges, particularly as the reenactment of

myths that recount origin stories, communicate vital lessons, and grapple with the existential mysteries of being. Ritual therefore provides humankind with the context and container whereby we can better understand ourselves and draw closer to one another and the sacred. Perhaps many of the one million runners who complete a marathon each year are unconsciously expressing a desire to experience a trial that puts them in touch with their own sacred center, suggesting that access to the *axis mundi* is through the body rather than a journey to an external imaginary place.

Browning depicts Pheidippides' remaining journey through the landscape and his psychological state of mind with eloquent detail. Returning to the symbol of the fennel, Browning links Athens' victory to Pan, nature, and the glory of Greek civilization: “Athens is saved, thank Pan, go shout!” He flung down his shield, / Ran like fire once more: and the space 'twixt the Fennel-field” (Browning 108–109). The Greek name for fennel was 'ο Μαραθών, meaning “marathon,” so, Pan's gift to the runner earlier in the journey had a prophetic meaning (Project Gutenberg 109).

Fennel shares an intriguing historical association with the cult of Dionysos, the ancient Greek god of wine, fertility, and revelry. In the mystic rites and celebrations dedicated to Dionysos, fennel held a significant symbolic role. The plant's tall, feathery fronds were often used as decorative elements in Dionysian rituals, adorning altars and sanctuaries. Fennel's aromatic and vibrant nature seemed to resonate with the spirit of Dionysos, capturing the essence of vitality and intoxication that characterized the god's worship. Additionally, fennel's edible parts were believed to possess properties that could enhance the enjoyment of

wine and festivities, further solidifying its connection to the Dionysian cult. Was Browning suggesting another connection between long-distance running and euphoric altered states of mind known today as runner's high?

In "Nenikekamen: The Story of Pheidippides," Petros Pourliakas combines the Pheidippides myth with his own experiences as a Greek historian and ultramarathon runner to create a richly storied world. Pourliakas' narrative imagines Pheidippides' origin story leading up to his joining the Hoplite Corps of Messengers and to his eventual death in Athens. Where Herodotus focuses on the events surrounding Pheidippides' journey and Browning shares insight into his inner journey and surrounding landscape, Pourliakas adds insight into the emotional climate of the geo-political world surrounding his journey. As Pheidippides leaves Athens behind him, Pourliakas describes "a city rejoicing in hope of a victory but also contemplating the possible ravages of war" (Pourliakas, 249). Marie-Laure Ryan identifies "setting" as one of the five categories of narrated space. Ryan suggests that the "general socio-historico-geographical environment in which the action takes place" shapes the character's relationship with place (Ryan 421-22). In the case of Pheidippides, he was constantly aware of the backdrop of war and carried the anxiety of an entire city on his shoulders as he traversed the landscape. As Pheidippides ran north-east towards Sparta, eleven thousand Hoplites were marching in the opposite direction towards Marathon (Pourliakas 249). This scene sets Pheidippides apart from the rest of his company and acts to emphasize the loneliness of his epic journey ahead. As the Hoplite army marches south-west, Pheidippides leaves the city and

enters the *locus amoenus*, or unwalled or idyllic space, of the natural world (Lord-Kambitsch 43). Had Pheidippides not had such an arduous task ahead of him, he surely would have appreciated the beauty and serenity of the Athenian countryside. However, with his mind clouded by the enormity of his task, Pheidippides would have known that the journey he was embarking on was greater than any he had taken before.

Pourliakas portrays a man who could not allow himself a moment's doubt about whether he would make it or not. Failure was not an option, and in those moments, Pheidippides would have had to export his doubts or feelings that the journey was beyond his capabilities. The most likely target for his projected feelings was the landscape around him; the depressed valleys and insurmountable peaks all represented parts of himself that he could not allow himself to feel. Thus, in Pheidippides' mind, the *locus amoenus* would have turned into a *locus horribilis*, or "hellish place" (Abad 1). Skempis and Ziogas put it succinctly when they state, "Epic heroes transform the landscape, while the landscape defines their characters and destinies" (Skempis and Ziogas 7).

Pourliakas goes further than Herodotus and Browning in describing Pheidippides' journey once he had delivered Sparta's decision to Athens and his onward journey back and forth to Marathon. Approaching Athens on the fourth day and nearing three hundred miles traveled, Pheidippides encounters Athens as a relative ghost town. Men of fighting age have marched to Marathon, leaving women, children, and the elderly to imagine the fate that awaits the city. The city does not feel like the same place that Pheidippides left only four days prior. Athens

as a setting has changed completely; it now represents a place gripped by fear, unsure of the fate that awaits it. Similarly, Pheidippides must also have had fears and a sense of uncertainty about what awaited him in Marathon. How would General Milpitas receive the message he carried from Sparta? Had the battle already begun? Were the Persians already marching toward him on the road? These were likely fears that Pheidippides could not allow himself to feel, and thus the citizens of Athens became the container for Pheidippides' fears and he for theirs.

Upon discovering that the generals were already in Marathon, Pheidippides' hopes of ending his journey in Athens were shattered. Realizing he must push on for a further twenty-six miles, Pheidippides searched deep inside himself to find the strength to go on. Upon eventually arriving in Marathon completely exhausted, Pheidippides informs the generals of Sparta's decision and his

encounter with Pan. Pourliakas suggests that the encounter with Pan would have drawn particular interest, and the experience would have been relayed to "the teratoskopos" (Pourliakas 275). The *teratoskopos* were the interpreters of "strange" phenomena and celestial signs, and in many ways, the *teratoskopos* represent early experts in meaning-making from the interplay of space, place, and the reception of myth. The ancient Greeks paid particular attention to what they said, and Pheidippides' encounter with Pan would have been taken seriously as a sign of the gods favor towards Athens. Pheidippides' shattered body and mind must have sunk upon hearing that the generals required him to join in battle the next morning. As the Generals said, "Athens needs all of its children" (Pourliakas 275). How could Pheidippides awaken the next morning to fight after five days on the road and over three hundred thirty miles run? Perhaps the encounter with Pan and the



Albatros Adventure Marathons



indication of Athens' victory enabled Pheidippides to find divine motivation to lift his broken body once more.

Pourliakas paints a picture of a horrific battlefield, where fighting took place near the coast in a wet, muddy marsh (Pourliakas 293). As the battle rages, the landscape becomes littered with slaughtered bodies, and the sea around Marathon becomes red with the "blood that flows into the sea from the beach, forming rivulets in the sand" (Pourliakas 298). Once again, the landscape likely mirrored the deep emotions and fears of Pheidippides as his lifeforce steadily drained from his body with every thrust of his spear in battle. As the battle waned and the Athenian Hoplites began to celebrate their victory, treat the wounded, and count the dead, General Miltiades called upon Pheidippides. He had one final mission to complete: to carry the news of victory back to Athens. Deep within, Pheidippides knows he is going to die, yet duty and glory push him onward. Beginning his final leg, Pheidippides is in such an awful state that "there are moments he believes he is dead, and his soul is wandering in the battlefield" (Pourliakas 303). Pourliakas changes Browning's symbolism by placing an olive branch, the symbol of peace, in one hand and a bloody spear, the symbol of war, in the other. Pheidippides symbolically holds two opposing forces in his hands, forces needed to create a great civilization: the love of peace and freedom (Eros) and the need for battle to win it (Thanatos).

With each step closer to Athens, Pheidippides' hallucinations grow. His consciousness can hardly bear the pain of being in his body; he disassociates as the pain becomes unbearable, and his reality and dream state become one. With every step he takes, he is closer to death, yet he carries a message that

Athens will live. The messenger is destroyed, yet Athens and the *polis* survive. His personal transformation is complete; he has arrived at his fate after traveling through his sacred center. Such a glorious death in such a glorious land, his place in the Elysian Fields assured, Pheidippides surrenders his broken body so that his soul and *kleos* may soar. In the aftermath of completing my marathon on each of the seven continents, I reflected on the journey through a depth psychological lens and realized that the external feat was merely a reflection of the internal conquest—learning how to prepare for the ultimate journey of human existence—death. The marathon had not just tested my physical endurance; I had journeyed to the depths of my own soul, unveiling layers of understanding and self-discovery that continue to resonate long after the race has ended.

Works Cited

- Abad, Katrina. "From Locus Amoenus to Locus Horribilis" *Scholars Archive*, University at Albany, State University of New York, 2017, <https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/>.
- Browning, Robert. "PHEIDIPPIDES." *BROWNING'S SHORTER POEMS*, Project Gutenberg, 7 Feb. 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/16376/pg16376-images.html#page30>.
- Dawson, Andrew. "More People Are Running Ultras than Ever Before." *Runner's World*, *Runner's World*, 2 Nov. 2021, [www.runnersworld.com/news/a30430651/more-people-are-running-ultras-study/](http://www.runnersworld.com/news/a30430651/more-people-are-running-ultras-study/).
- de Jong, Irene J.F. *Space in Ancient Greek Literature: Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*. Brill, 2012.
- Dickinson, Marley. "Karel Sabbe Recaps His Wild Fourth-Loop Experience at Barkley Marathons." *Canadian Running Magazine*, 26 Apr. 2022, [runningmagazine.ca/trail-running/karl-sabbe-recaps-his-wild-fourth-loop-experience-at-barkley-marathons/](http://runningmagazine.ca/trail-running/karl-sabbe-recaps-his-wild-fourth-loop-experience-at-barkley-marathons/).
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Dover Publications, 2015.
- Grimes, Ronald L., and Mircea Eliade. "Ritual and Myth." *Readings in Ritual Studies*, Prentice-Hall, 1996, pp. 194–201.
- Geography, Topography, Landscape : Configurations of Space in Greek and Roman Epic*, edited by Marios Skempis, and Ioannis Ziogas, De Gruyter, Inc., 2013.
- Herodotus. *The Histories*. E-book ed., Rediscovered Books, 2015.
- Livestrong. "126 Running Statistics You Need to Know in 2023" *LIVESTRONG.COM*, Leaf Group, <https://www.livestrong.com/article/13730338-running-statistics/>.
- Lord-Kambitsch, Emily. "locus amoenus in Greek and Roman Mythology II." Session 3. Greek and Roman Mythology II: Session 3, 25 Mar. 2023, Pacifica Graduate Institute, CA.
- Pourliakas, Petros. *Nenikekamen: The Story of Pheidippides, the First Marathon Runner*. United P C, 2021.
- Ryan, M.-L. (2003), "Cognitive Maps and the Construction of Narrative Space," in: D. Herman (ed.), *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, Stanford, 214 – 42.
- Siebers M, Biedermann SV, Fuss J. "Do Endocannabinoids Cause the Runner's High? Evidence and Open Questions." *The Neuroscientist*. 2023;29(3):352-369. doi:10.1177/10738584211069981
- Skempis, Marios and Ziogas, Ioannis. "Introduction: Putting Epic Space in Context". *Geography, Topography, Landscape: Configurations of Space in Greek and Roman Epic*, edited by Marios Skempis, and Ioannis Ziogas, De Gruyter, Inc., 2013.



Peeking Through Leaves / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

# YHWH as Primus Alchemist

---

Paul Woolsey Davison, MA

Keywords: Alchemy, Genesis, Judeo-Christian

Countless works of literature, artwork, and other historical artifacts contain a staggering spectrum of images and themes illustrating the alchemical journey. Of these numerous works, the Old Testament of the Holy Bible stands out as an intriguing exemplar. Noted ethnographer Raphael Patai describes how in medieval and Renaissance Europe it became *en vogue* for figures like Gerard Dorn and Michael Meier “to write alchemical commentaries to the first verses of Genesis, and derive alchemy from them” (195). Many alchemists of the era saw Genesis as something not simply worthy of observation and interpretation, but rather “as a guide to the work they were to undertake” (196). While some have considered Adam to be the “first teacher of alchemy,” perhaps a better designation for Adam might be the first *student* of alchemy. According to Patai, “the process of creation willed by the alchemist in his curcurbit was compared to the creation of the world as described in Genesis” (196). In other words, since Adam is not the creator of the world, it follows that it is not the first man, but rather his Creator, the Hebrew God YHWH, who displays mastery of alchemy through His various creations, machinations, and intermediations into the vast universe of His design.

As the first, or *primus* alchemist, YHWH did not just make humanity; He *needs* humanity to express and reflect His design, for it is said that alchemy requires “human transmission in order for its magic to be fully grasped” (Martin 24-25). In this way, through demonstrations of various alchemical phenomena marked by God’s manipulation of fire, floods, clouds, and the Earth itself, the books of Genesis and Exodus tell the story of God as primus alchemist on a journey of self-realization to manifest His version of the Philosopher’s Stone: the Nation of Israel.

“Part primitive science, part impossible magic,” the ancient art of alchemy is more than merely an antiquated form of proto-chemistry

or the unattainable goal of mercurial and misguided flights of fancy (Nicholl 2). C.G. Jung argues that alchemy is concerned with not just employing various material processes to literally transform base metals into “noble” ones like gold and silver, but also with engaging these same material processes, albeit metaphorically, to transform the alchemical practitioner *himself* through the process of “individuation.” Through this process “individual beings are formed and differentiated ... as a being distinct, [yet] ... an extension of the sphere of consciousness” (Jung *CW: VI* 448-450). Jung further describes individuation as an expression of “self-realization,” implying the attainment of a



liberating end-state of one's personal transformation. In this way, a person's potential, married with the gift of that individual's continuously penetrating self-awareness, ushers in the transformation of individuation (Jung *CW*: 6 157). This way perceives the desired "end-state" of alchemy, otherwise known as the "Philosopher's Stone," as the image of a material analogue or symbol of an individual's journey to achieve inner fulfillment. Viewed through an alchemical lens, the scripture then encapsulates the startlingly heretical idea of YHWH serving in the role of primus alchemist as *an imperfect being* in need of personal transformation.

This notion of the Hebrew God YHWH presenting himself as a flawed deity, a viewpoint that stands in direct contrast to much of the corpus of Western thought, which of course portrays YHWH as omniscient and omnipotent, hearkens back to the Gnostic concept of the "Demiurge." Evocatively described by comparative mythologist John Lamb Lash in his seminal work, *Not in His Image*, as the "false creator god," or the "demented imposter," the Demiurge "falsely believes he is creator of all he beholds" and masquerades before the Judeo-Christian faithful as their almighty being strictly to serve his own needs (Lash 113, 160). While Gnostic thought does not necessarily allow for the redemption of the Demiurge, the alchemical "imperfect" creator deity construct described above does present the possibility of deliverance through alchemical means. We will revisit this interconnected alchemical-Gnostic axis with respect to the relationship between the alchemical operation of *solutio* and the Gnostic idea of the "womb of creation" below, but before that it is vital to summarize the key tenets of the "primitive science" and

"impossible magic" that are germane to examining the Old Testament through an alchemical lens.

Engaging with alchemical material as a 21<sup>st</sup> century scholar can be a beguiling activity, often a baffling one, even to those familiar with the arcane symbology. At the same time, the Bible is replete with its own array of allegorical, metaphorical, lyrical, and quasi-historical content that in and of itself can prove impenetrable to the casual reader without some kind of reference or assistance. In his book, *Anatomy of the Psyche*, Edward Edinger identifies three fundamental alchemical concepts, consisting of the *opus*, the *prima materia*, and the alchemical "operations." With a basic understanding of these organizing principles as outlined by Edinger, the Bible's rich alchemical themes quite readily appear within the opening chapters of Genesis.

"The idea of the opus," according to Edinger, is "the central image of alchemy" (4). Etymologically, opus refers to a great "work [or] composition ... produce[d] in abundance" (Opus). Notably, the Latin term *opus*, from which words like "opera" descend, also points to a notion of "work, labor, exertion" in the service of artistic creation, implying not only the expansive and creative scope of the alchemist's undertaking but also the arduous nature of his journey. These ideas of a great undertaking marked by exertion correspond quite interestingly to the narrative of Genesis 1 through Genesis 2:3, in which God performs the bulk of his creative art to fashion the world, the heavens, and all life on Earth. This sequence comprises a "mini-opus" within YHWH's broader opus that covers the events of Genesis and Exodus. Viewing these first two books of the Bible strictly as a mythic narrative, it can be said that YHWH's opus is comprised

of His endeavors to obtain the Philosopher's Stone, which in YHWH's case is the Nation of Israel itself. His opus commences with the creation of the world and culminates with YHWH residing within the holy tabernacle His chosen people have built for Him at the conclusion of Exodus. This broad opus can be divided into several "smaller" endeavors, or "mini-opuses," beginning in Genesis 1 with God's creation of the world, and concluding in Genesis 2:3 with His establishment of a day of rest.

God goes out of His way to repeat the statement about "work that he had done" (*Revised Standard Version*, Gen. 2.1-3) three separate times within the first three verses of Genesis 2 to justify a well-deserved respite for Him and His people every seventh day, a practice still carried out by observant Jews today. Interestingly, this triplicate replication mirrors the ternary construct of the alchemical process, described above as encompassing the *opus*, the *prima materia*, and the alchemical operations. Further, from an alchemical perspective, YHWH's thrice-repetition of that fact serves to demonstrate the magnitude of the effort required to manifest the initial opus of His creation: "miraculous, transcendent *substance*" (Edinger 9). And yet, the opus of the human alchemist, conducted with rudimentary tools in hidden-away laboratories, cannot commence and achieve that transcendent, miraculous substance without an element, a starter material, with which the alchemist can initiate a "series of operations" resembling an ancient and often haphazard form of chemistry (9). Similarly, primus alchemist YHWH's opus to bring all creation into being also entirely hinges upon the presence of a starter material. This material is known as the *prima materia*.

In the case of the Biblical creation story, evidence of a *prima materia* proves somewhat elusive without broader context. All we are presented with in Genesis is that "[i]n the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1.1). The scripture says little about what material or substance existed prior to creation. It hints at a dim, formless era in which "[t]he earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters," but says nothing about whence creation emanated (Gen. 1.1-2). With these lines of scripture, we are left to assume that God alone pre-existed creation as the prime mover of the universe, but when viewed alchemically, it follows that God was in relationship with a separate, dissociated substance or entity to act upon through the alchemical operations to bring about creation. What substance, or *prima materia*, did God act upon? The scripture seems to imply that God creates the heavens and the earth out of nothing, but an alchemist knows otherwise.

Like His human counterparts, the primus alchemist requires starter material for the creation process to ensue, so from an alchemical perspective it's impossible for God to create the heavens and the earth from nothing. Though not explicitly so, the scripture hints at an indication as to the substance or entity that could serve as a possible substrate, or *prima materia*, for God's alchemical operations. In his essay "Adam and Eve," Jung makes the case for a different being earning the designation of *prima materia*, arguing that "Adam should have been selected as a symbol for the *prima materia* or transformative substance" (*CW: 14* 385). Yet it is self-evident that God's creation begins *before* the appearance of man, so He would need the

presence of a transformative substance *prior* to the creation of Adam, and even before the creation of the earth and the heavens as well. For this reason, it follows that a separate essence must have pre-dated creation alongside God, and this essence is none other than the "the Spirit of God."

To be clear, the Hebrew concept of the "Spirit of God" and the Christian Holy Spirit are not necessarily synonymous, but there exists substantial extra-Biblical literature that asserts that the Spirit of God is in fact an "essence" that is differentiated from God. In his book, *Tree of Souls*, Howard Schwartz presents a Jewish myth informed by the Talmud, Midrash, Pseudepigrapha, Hasidic texts, and medieval folklore that provides a striking image of *tohuwabohu* (תהו), or the state of pre-existence:

Before the celestial world was revealed, before there were the Throne of Glory and the Pargod, the heavenly curtain, before there were angels, seraphs, constellations or stars, before all this was an ether, an essence from which sprang a primordial light. This light is called the Holy Spirit. (18)

While this evocative passage points to the pre-existence of the Holy Spirit, or Spirit of God, it merely confirms the *presence* of the Holy Spirit before creation in addition to its physical property, light, but not its function. Nor does it explicitly designate the Holy Spirit as anything resembling the alchemical *prima materia*. With the thesis of YHWH as primus alchemist at risk of disintegrating, an intriguing passage found in the Zohar, the central text of Kabbalah presented as a mystical commentary on the Torah, appears to support the thesis. This particular passage bolsters the idea of the presence of a differentiated essence in the realm

of pre-existence, that together in concert with God is an undeniably active participant in the alchemical process of creation that is to follow.

The Zohar passage in question is one of the several commentaries on the Genesis creation story. This one takes the form of a conversation between Rabbis Yudai, Hiyya, and Yose. The dialogue begins with a question about the nature of the word *Be-reshit* (בְּרֵאשִׁית), which in Hebrew means "in the beginning":

Rabbi Yudai said, "What is Be-reshit? With Wisdom. This is the Wisdom on which the world stands – through which one enters hidden, high mysteries. Here were engraved six vast, supernal dimensions, from which everything emerges, from which issued six springs and streams, flowing into the immense ocean." (1:15a)

This passage reveals the possible identity of God's accomplice in creation: *Wisdom*. Very clearly the passage states that Wisdom is "with" *Be-reshit*. Put another way, these opening lines of the Bible could be translated as, "with *Wisdom* God created" the earth and heavens (Matt 17n112).

Wisdom as *prima materia*, or perceived through the lens of the Zohar, as an aspect of co-creation, is not an outlandish characterization as it directly corresponds to the notion of Wisdom already existing before creation found elsewhere in the scripture, particularly in the books of *Proverbs*, *Wisdom of Solomon*, and *Sirach*, a Jewish work also known as *Ecclesiasticus*. Here is Wisdom speaking in the first person in *Proverbs*, confirming her existence prior to the Earth's:

Ages ago I was set up,  
At the first, before the beginning of the Earth...

When there were no depths I was  
brought Forth...  
When he established the heavens, I was  
there,  
When he drew a circle on the face of  
the Deep...  
Then I was beside him, like a master  
Workman;  
And I was daily his delight,  
Rejoicing before him always. (Prov.  
8.23-31)

Gnostic cosmology corroborates the idea of Wisdom existing before creation. According to John Lamb Lash, the Gnostic concept of *Sophia* (σοφία), Greek for “wisdom,” which is “the mythological name of the goddess Gaia *before she became the earth*,” reveals a Gnostic belief of a transfiguration that renders a nonphysical essence, Sophia/Wisdom, into a tangible solid, the Earth (158). This means that prior to existence, in the field of the Gnostic “pleroma,” God, serving in his role as primus alchemist, brings about creation by conducting at least one of several specific alchemical processes, known as “operations,” which comprise the third fundamental concept of alchemy. With an understanding of the concepts of the opus and the *prima materia* in mind, this examination will conclude with a brief discussion of several of the major alchemical operations as well as a deeper exploration of one primary operation and its expression in the Old Testament as a function of YHWH’s “Great Work” to bring into being the Nation of Israel.

Within the first nine verses of Genesis, God as primus alchemist conducts at least three different alchemical operations to bring about

creation: *solutio*, *separatio*, and *coagulatio*.<sup>1</sup> Edinger references several alchemical adages to attest to the idea that of all the operations, *solutio* is preeminent as the primary operation (“*Solutio* is the root of alchemy,” or “Until all be made water, perform no operation”), so it is reasonable that God’s first alchemical act is the *solutio* operation (47). The term *solutio* refers to the idea of turning a solid into a liquid or water, but through an archetypal-alchemical lens, this term can also describe a kind of an encounter with water, like a global flood, the image of a mere babe floating down the Nile River, or the surging walls of water formed by the parting of the Red Sea.

Arguably, anything created requires a gestation womb of some kind, whether figuratively or literally. Interestingly, in his book on the origins of alchemy, *The Forge and the Crucible*, Mercea Eliade notes that human language and image associated “with the growth of the embryo inside the mother” is found in European metallurgical terminology, suggesting a connection between the womb of creation and the tools of creation (38-39). Edinger reflects this idea, stating that “water was thought of as the womb and *solutio* as a return to the womb” (47). It follows that the womb of creation, the realm of pre-existence, is a cause and agent of *solutio*. This primordial alchemical “womb” of course invokes the Gnostic “fallen goddess” Sophia, incarnated within the womb-like pleroma and later “embodied in the earth ... an ecological myth that resonates deeply with our growing intuition of Gaia, the living planet” (Lash 13). According to Lash, this dynamic upends the

---

<sup>1</sup> These terms are referred to by their Latin names to designate them as strictly alchemical terms and differentiate them from modern-day chemical operations of a similar nature (Edinger 14-15).



idea of a generative masculine principle in favor of divine feminine presence who is responsible for the creation of our world. Arne Naess, the founder of "deep ecology," coined the term, "eco-sophy" to describe the "human wisdom that complements the intelligence of the living earth," invoking the Wisdom goddess herself by her name Sophia (qtd. in Lash 13). Profoundly reflected in the scripture is this Gnostic notion of *depth* with respect to Sophia. As God begins his Great Work moments into creation, the first "physical presence" that Torah names is "the deep" (Gen. 1.2). To be clear, "the earth" is referenced *prior* to the deep, but the scripture clarifies that at this point in the timeline the earth is "without form" (Gen. 1.1). Conversely, the deep definitively possesses a physical form, for it even has a "face," over which God moves (Gen. 1.1).

In the "second" account of creation found in Genesis 2:6, there is another curious reference to the *solutio* operation, which commences upon acknowledgement that vegetation has yet to grow on the newly-created Earth on account of no rain. To remedy this, "a mist" seems to spring forth unilaterally, without God's command or intervention, "from the earth and water the whole face of the ground" (Gen. 2.6). This indicates a demonstration of the Hermetic principle "as above, so below," in which divine water doesn't merely fall from the sky onto the Earth but rather originates from the Earth, then turns to mist, or perhaps even vapor (*sublimato*) as it engages in a cycle of bidirectional verticality, up

and down, misting and raining.<sup>2</sup> This binary dynamic is reminiscent of Genesis 28:12, which describes the dream of Jacob. Here angels both ascend and descend a glorious ladder to heaven, demonstrating both the above/below Hermetic principle and humanity's potential for redemption in one stunning image. It is apt, then, that Jacob is a participant in another alchemical sequence in which his father, Isaac, blesses him, his younger son, over his older son, Esau, thanks to Jacob's subterfuge (and his mother's prodding). "May God give you the dew of heaven," Isaac says, ensuring his son's future renown by blessing him with "the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine," delineating a direct causal relationship between *solutio* and worldly riches (Gen. 27.28). Viewed a different way, Jacob receives the blessing, or the "solution" to the problems Esau creates by making "life bitter" for his father Isaac and his mother, Rebekah, which ultimately leads to a chain of events that cement his legacy as one of the preeminent Hebrew patriarchs and the physical manifestation of the Nation of Israel (Gen. 26.35).

Several quite dramatic representations of the *solutio* operation feature prominently in Exodus. Immediately following the birth of Moses, in a kind of "second birth," he is borne by the *solutio* of the River Nile to escape the brutal decrees of Pharaoh. Moses' immersion into the river and his sheer survival in the

---

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, as a stark demonstration of the interconnectedness between alchemy and Hermeticism with both Kabbalah *and* mainstream Judaism, it is significant that the Hermetic principle of "as above, so below" can be perceived as being literally exemplified within the symbol for Israel, the Star of David, with one triangle of the interlocked triangles representing up, or above, and the other representing down, or below.

watery wilds represents a miraculous birth ubiquitous in world mythology, “symboliz[ing] a return to the pre-formal, a total regeneration, a new birth, for the immersion means a dissolution of forms, a reintegration into the formlessness of pre-existence; and emerging from the water is a repetition of the act of creation in which form was first expressed” (Eliade 88). This connection between *solutio* and the very act of creation, the “inciting incident” of the entire Bible, which is now embodied in Moses, denotes his status as a *solutio*-mythic figure, which is epically reinforced in the spectacular sequence at the Red Sea.

Although the images of Moses turning a rod into a snake (*coagulatio*) or parting the Red Sea (*separatio*), have been emblazoned upon the modern consciousness regardless of one’s religious predilections, no doubt in part thanks to films like *The Ten Commandments*, it is vital to remember that it is not Moses who is the prime mover of these miracles. Indeed, Moses is not the alchemist at work, it is instead YHWH, the primus alchemist operating *through* his human intermediary Moses. In order to bring about the birth of the Nation of Israel, YHWH must intervene into the affairs of humans like Moses, Jacob, Abraham, Noah, and dozens of other patriarchs through a series of alchemical operations. Viewed alchemically, YHWH’s interventions into the affairs of humanity are not meant to benefit humanity or any other external cause, but instead these intercessions are solely in service of YHWH’s “personal” process of individuation. Key in this perspective is the acknowledgment that alchemy is not merely focused on the tangible conversion of inferior metals into precious ones; it also aims to metaphorically refine the person carrying out these alchemical practices.

This personal transformation is achieved through a journey of “individuation,” a term Carl Jung used to illuminate the process by which individual entities develop unique identities while also expanding their awareness (CW: 11 448-450). Further, Jung portrays individuation as a form of “self-actualization,” which suggests reaching a final, emancipatory phase of personal growth.

In pursuit of his growth, The Lord gives direction to Moses like a self-assured military commander, and even pulls the strings of the enemy by “harden[ing] Pharaoh’s heart” in order to force his hand to command his armies to pursue Moses to oblivion (Ex. 14.4). In one of the great *solutio* operations of the Bible, YHWH parts the Red Sea for Moses and the Israelites to escape, but soon after collapses the waters upon Pharaoh’s pursuing armies, drowning them all purely out of spite in a watery hell. In *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, Carl Jung expounds upon the archetypal significance of this ordeal, acknowledging that “the Red Sea was of special significance to the alchemists” (CW: 14 201). He describes “the other side of the Red Sea [as] the other side of creation,” with the arrival in the desert [beyond the Red Sea] a “genesis beyond generation,” meaning a spiritual rebirth beyond the boundaries of time (CW: 14 199). In this way, the entire book of Exodus joins Genesis as expressions of creation. In addition to representing the act of creation, the *solutio* of the Red Sea “is a water of death [*mortificatio*] for those that are ‘unconscious,’ but for those that are ‘conscious’ it is a baptismal water of rebirth and transcendence,” and it is this transcendence that is the principle aim of the alchemist’s “Great Work,” or opus, symbolically embodied in the Philosopher’s Stone (CW: 14 199).

It is fitting that the acts of creation examined here, including the formation of the earth and the heavens and the establishment of Israel, are associated with the *solutio* operation and signify the span and culmination of YHWH's opus. That the miracle at the Red Sea serves to represent a physical pathway through which to usher in the realization of the goal of the opus, demonstrates the importance of the sequence not just from a religious standpoint, but also from an alchemical point of view. In *Anatomy of the Psyche*, Edward Edinger illuminates the alchemical potency of the Red Sea imagery as an archetypal medium of transcendence, stating, "that which has passed through the *solutio* of the Red Sea is the goal of the *opus*, the Self" (72). Through this lens, a fascinating picture emerges. All along, it is in fact *not* the Nation of Israel that is YHWH's Philosopher's Stone. Given our understanding that the alchemical process is one of individuation, or self-realization, it is clear that YHWH's true aim is not to know Israel but rather to know Himself.

## Works Cited

- The Bible*. Revised Standard Version. 1965.  
Ignatius Press, 2006.
- Edinger, Edward F. *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy*. 1985. Open Court, 1994.
- Eliade, Mircea. *The Forge and the Crucible*. 1962. The University of Chicago Press, 1978.=
- Jung, Carl G. "Adam and Eve." *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 14: Mysterium Coniunctionis*, edited by Gerhard Adler and R.F. C. Hull, Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 382-456.
- . "Definitions." *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 6: Psychological Types*, edited by Gerhard Adler and R.F. C. Hull, Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 408-486.
- Lash, John Lamb. *Not in His Image: Gnostic Vision, Sacred Ecology, and the future of Belief*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006.
- Martin, Sean. *Alchemy & Alchemists*. Oldcastle Books, 2011.
- Nicholl, Charles. *The Chemical Theater*. 1980. The Akadine Press, 1997.
- "Opus." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 14 Sept. 2019,  
<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=opus>.
- Patai, Raphael. "Biblical Figures as Alchemists." *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1983, Vol. 54 (1983), pp. 195-229.
- Schwartz, Howard. *Tree of Souls*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- The Zohar Pritzker Edition: Volume One*. Translated by Daniel C. Matt. Stanford University Press, 2004.





Fountain Glistens in Sunlight / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull



# The Contested Soul of the Ophidian Feminine

---

Charlotte Moroz, MA

Keywords: Ophidian, Mermaid, Feminine, Ascension, Comparative Mythology  
Content Warning: Bodily Violence

My childhood was populated with images and icons of women with fish-finned lower halves: Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, ship figureheads in the shape of finned women, the *Starbucks* logo, and a certain third grade mermaid-themed birthday party, to name a few. So ubiquitous and unexamined was this iconographic link between the feminine and the ophidian that it was only the work of Dr. Gillian Alban who brought the mythological elements and potentially ancient roots of the fish/snake-woman mythic figure to my attention and opened my eyes to the deeper layers of meaning therein. Exploring divergent receptions of the ophidian feminine mythological figure, I will examine European mermaid folklore by way of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, comparing and contrasting against an alternative reception via the folkloric figure of Melusine in Breton lore as exemplified in Jean d'Arras' *Roman de Melusine*.

Dr. Gillian Alban's scholarship serves as an apt gateway into our exploration. In *The Survival of Myth's* "The Serpent Goddess Melusine: From Cursed Snake to Mary's Shield," Alban suggests that the expression of ancient "female ophidian figures" can be found in numerous traditions, including mermaid folklore, as well as within the Bretonian folklore of Melusine, epitomized in Jean d'Arras' *Roman de Melusine*, the 14<sup>th</sup> century half-serpent, half-human founding Queen of the House of Lusignan (23). Serpentine, fish and dragon-like physicality, categorized by Alban as "ophidian," was viewed as interlinked in many traditions and "represents the life force women possessed in pagan times" (23). Indeed,

the snake-like attribute of "slough[ing] their skin in self-renewal" is encoded widely in serpent, fish and dragon iconography, all of which expresses the metaphor of "women renew[ing] the race in giving birth" (Alban 23). The serpentine attributes are engaged opposingly by Christian and Pagan perspectives: "The Christian view regarded [a] snake tail as a curse... but pagan thinking regards [a] tail as the source of [a] divine strength... an empowering 'gift' placing her beyond the limits of mortal power" (Alban 32). I shall return to this divergence of reception in later passages.

I wish to briefly discuss reception studies and theories as useful tools applicable to

our discussion. Emily Greenwood, in "Reception Studies: The Cultural Mobility of Classics," introduces the paradigm of the "omni-local" aspect of classics as a means to explore the "translatability, adaptability, and relationality of classics in different contemporary cultures" (43). I will apply this "horizontal, two-way relationship" between the teller and the hearer of the ophidian folklore in its receptions through *The Little Mermaid* and Jean d'Arras' *Roman de Melusine*, exploring how these "classics" represent convergences of various mythological, sacred, and folkloric traditions (43). This reception theory interweaves throughout our exploration to presume that narratives, and their various iterations, are not objective but highly subjective, contextualized expressions of an ever-localized expression of mythic themes and figures, with the potential to communicate specific cultural and historical contexts.

Before venturing into the somewhat more familiar tale of *The Little Mermaid*—thanks especially to the Disney animation and newly-released live action versions—I will offer a summarization of the Melusinian folktale, anchored in Jean d'Arras' *Roman de Melusine* iteration. Melusine is one of three daughters begat by the Scottish King Elinas and a fairy or sprite, Presine, who weds the king under the agreement that "he will never see her in childbirth" (d'Arras 4). Melusine and her sisters are spiteful of their father for breaking this code—spying on his wife during childbirth—and conspire to lock him, along with his court, inside a mountain by use of their non-human fairy magic. Upon discovering the deeds of her daughters, Presine dolefully doles out curses upon her daughters, awarding Melusine with the plight of turning into a half-serpent every Saturday. Melusine is

courted by Raimondin and agrees to marry him under the condition that he "obey an interdiction against seeing her" on Saturdays and, in return, she will provide many gifts and riches to the kingdom, "found[ing] a noble and illustrious lineage" (d'Arras 4). Provoked to break his promise by his brother, who insinuates that Melusine's sabbath privacy is a cover for deceit and adultery, Raimondin spies on his wife and sees her ophidian state. Melusine would have forgiven the simple transgression of her husband's voyeurism, but he reveals her secret publicly and declares her to be a monster to the entire kingdom, which clinches her departure. The story culminates in Melusine's dramatic transformation from half-serpent to full dragon and she is witnessed "circl[ing] the town three times, crying out pathetically and shrieking her wild laments with a shrill female voice. Everyone up in the fortress and the townsfolk below were utterly confused to hear a lady's voice issuing from the mouth of a dragon" (d'Arras 8). In years following, Melusine is seen high in the skies and—a devout mother—is said to visit her children under the cover of night, never to be seen by her grieved husband again.

I will now dive, pun intended, into *The Little Mermaid*, as penned by Hans Christian Andersen, utilizing editions by J. H. Stickney and Maria Tatar. Andersen opens his tale by describing the inverted world of the "very, very deep" kingdom of the Sea King and retinue, including his youngest daughter, the Little Mermaid (Andersen 269). The eponymous main character aches to know the above-world, and her decision to join the humans above is settled when she rescues the dashing drowning prince from demise. Paying for a special potion with her voice, the Sea Witch transforms the Little Mermaid's fins into legs, and she sets out

to meet the prince with the hope that he would fall in love with her, lest she lose her life. But the prince marries the girl who is mistaken by the prince as his savior and—having failed her mission—the Little Mermaid now transforms to foam, becoming a member of the “daughters of the air” who “too can earn an immortal soul” after performing “good deeds” (Tatar 300). These significant mythic themes will resurface for exploration in subsequent sections.

In what ways does Alban’s assessment of the Melusinian expression of ancient goddess mythology apply to our exploration of Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*? Let us begin with the interlaced themes of transformation and regeneration. Just as Alban points to the multivalent significance of Melusine possessing an ophidian lower half, I would suggest that the Little Mermaid’s fin is both gift and curse—in Andersen’s tale, the finned people have a beautiful, peaceful, and harmonious world but are, in a sense, cursed to dissolve into nothingness (sea foam) after 300 years, while humans possess an “immortal soul” (Tatar 291). From the Little Mermaid’s perspective, her fin is a symbolic curse to be kept forever apart from her love and his world, as well as exclusion from the promise of eternal life by way of a human soul. But her fin is the gateway to a world filled with its own mystical wonders, one that the prince could visit only “as a dead man” (Tatar 288). The fin, as well, represents an opportunity or vehicle by which the Little Mermaid expands her consciousness, propelling her symbolically and physically to the above-waters world and to the Sea Witch, their combined ophidian characteristics facilitating her entry into the human world as a leg-having creature.

The parallels between the Melusinian and Little Mermaid ophidian receptions are myriad. In both versions, the image of the half-woman, half-fish or snake tale is present at some point, though timing and movement from one state to another diverge between the stories. The iconography of the mermaid is precisely this half-half composite, paralleled etymologically as mer (fish)-maid (woman). This half-half composition is expressed differently in Melusine’s case: her parentage is half-faery, half-human, appearing as a “full” woman save for her half-serpent state on Saturdays. Both tales rely upon a foundational theme of transformation: the Little Mermaid begins as half-fish/half-human woman (visually) and seeks transformation into a full human woman, and then into a daughter of the air, while Melusine is cursed to transform into half-serpent weekly, and then transforms into a full flying dragon by story’s end. Both stories feature a singular woman who seeks or is sought after for union with a royal man, with the Little Mermaid seeking out her union with the prince while Melusine is courted by Raimondin. Both stories deal with the double theme of curse or punishment and gift or reward, the similarities and differences of which I will explore in the following passage.

While Melusine lives out an externally enforced punishment, the Little Mermaid internalizes punishment and suffering. Melusine is punished by her “fairy mother,” Pressine (or Presine) to “become a serpent from your navel down every Saturday,” all for using their powers of sorcery to bury their father inside a towering mountain (Brownlee 20-21). Given this paradoxical punishment and “gift” from her mother, Melusine must navigate living her newly ophidian-ized life,

which prompts a main feature of the Breton and Celtic versions of the Melusine narrative: prohibitions. To ensure the safety and separation of her two identities, Melusine stipulates to her husband-to-be that she will need complete independence and privacy on Saturdays. Melusine, half-serpentine due to her own "transgression" against her father—himself rendered half-man, half-mountain—then suffers transgression against her own privacy, catalyzing her transformation from half to full ophidian—a full dragoness (Brownlee 20). The Little Mermaid, in contrast, is born fully half-and-half, a mer-maid, and we meet her in a completely "natural" and harmonious environment, in a royal family living in a glorious castle amongst the "most wonderous trees and plants ... at the bottom of the sea" (Tatar 283). The narrator introduces the Little Mermaid as "a curious child, quiet and thoughtful" and we see her almost exclusively in a state of longing, represented in the weeping willow she plants next to the statue of the prince, a "pretty little mermaid ... waiting below, stretching her white arms up toward the keel of the ship" of the human world (Tatar 284). From her own individual will, not that of her mermaid kin, she embarks upon a quest marred by suffering and castigation, first at being unrecognized by the prince, then "forsakes her family and her home" to inhabit his world and, after "suffer[ing] hours of agony," spares the life of the prince, accelerating her own death of turning to sea foam (Tatar 289, 298). In her "death," having now transformed into a "daughter of the air," she must now endeavor a new 300-year "time of trial" (Tatar 300). Indeed, we will further explore how the locus of punishment and

suffering differs between both receptions in future passages.

To examine the significance of these differing receptions, I will delve into the related theme of regeneration in both *The Little Mermaid* and *Roman de Melusine*. Alban highlights the ancient association of snakes with regeneration due to the molting of snakeskin as well as the iconographic symbol of kundalini-like energy responsible for creation on cellular and cosmic levels, suggesting that serpent or fish-halved women hold this amplified power as well as serve as emblems for the divine feminine regenerative force (23). It seems apparent that the regenerative feminine force symbolized in the ophidian is expressed in transformations, transmutations, and ascensions, aspects which naturally point to alchemical undertones inherent to this mythic figure. Indeed, the symbols of dragons, snakes and fish tails as well as symbols of the womb are common iconography in historical alchemical texts (Campbell 278-279). Alchemical processes, whether literal or metaphorical, function upon the "premise that it is possible to change fundamentally one form into another" (Linden 13). Perhaps Melusine and the Little Mermaid are both ophidian-alchemical figures, signaling a transformation that will be shared by all characters in the story, as well as a character that literally undergoes alchemical change.

It is interesting to consider that the alchemical process unifies opposites—the "distillation and union of the male and female energies" in a sacred *coniunctio*—as both Melusine and the Little Mermaid are part of *coniunctios* that fall apart or fail with a male counterpart (Campbell 272). In both narratives, we find the theme of half-serpent or half-fish drawn to the fully human man: the



Little Mermaid longs to be with humans to the point of initiating a complete transformation and loss of her mermaid-fish lineage, while Melusine's mother explains to her daughter that "the power of your father's seed would have attracted you and your sisters to its human nature" and would have "detached" Melusine "from the world of nymphs and fairie," warranting her mother's punishment that her daughter become serpentine from "the navel down every Saturday" (Brownlee 20, 21). Both the Little Mermaid and Melusine become something new and transformed, no longer one nor the other thing exclusively but a transformed "other": the mermaid becomes human-looking but lacks an eternal soul and then transmutes to a daughter of the air, and Melusine begins her story not fully human nor serpentine or dragon and then undergoes a complete transformation into dragon when she is betrayed fully by Raimondine. As C.G. Jung suggests that alchemy signifies a psychological process towards integration, perhaps the ophidian serves as a symbol of the divine feminine which is not only transforming and transformative but innately integrated and energetically whole, symbolizing the harmonious union between opposites in one figure (Jung qtd. in Campbell 289).

Given this numinous, plural significance as alchemical, transformative, whole-making symbol, I will consider the implications of the ophidian figure's differing receptions next. While Melusine appears to encompass wholeness in completing a cycle of becoming serpentine on Saturday and human woman again on Sunday and then becoming a whole dragon, Andersen's narrative splices the ophidian into two at-odds mythic figures: the Little Mermaid (and her sisters and family) and

the Sea Witch. While Melusine's mother is the author of her daughter's metamorphosis, a related extension of herself, the Little Mermaid must visit the geographically separated Sea Witch whose lair is dangerous to visit and crawling with "large, fat water snakes ... rolling in the mire and showing their ugly, drab colored bodies" (Andersen 282). In Andersen's reception, the ophidian is parsed into two dual sides: the beautiful, "prettiest of them all" Little Mermaid (flanked by her beautiful, loving sisters and wise and proud grandmother) as one side of the ophidian, and the monstrous, powerful Sea Witch as the opposite side, whose house is "built of the bones of shipwrecked human beings" (not unlike the mythic figure of Baba Yaga) and is an underworld feminine figure and potential symbol of shamanic practice (270, 282). The cultural and historical implications of each ophidian reception are myriad, and demand deepened explorations in the following passages.

Both stories reflect thematic aspects of genetic mutation and transformation, as both mythic figures undergo physical transformations that would certainly find expression in alterations to what we would now call genetics and DNA. Alban highlights the association with architecture and building infrastructure and ophidian feminine divine figures, noting that Melusine is credited with "building magnificent castles and churches and developing agricultural and infrastructural projects" (24). Mermaid iconography has long linked the mermaid tail to an elongated "apron" covering or symbolizing the vagina, and the "apron" or tail imagery "linked to the building and prosperity function of mermaids, allowing the transport of stones... proliferated

in architectural programs as well as in objects of daily use and manuscript illustration" (Sautman 1005). Our DNA, in the form of double-helix genetic codes within each cell, is arguably the infrastructure that "transports" the "stones" of our amino acids, the "building blocks" of our bodies, which offers an interesting link with the imagery found in both receptions of the female finned figure.

As Alban suggests that the ancient ophidian divine feminine figure was venerated in a time when the role of the sperm was not understood in reproduction, I wonder additionally if this female ophidian goddess tradition might reveal a fuller understanding of the biological process of human procreation: in d'Arras' reception, Pressine, Melusine's mother, speaks of the innate pull or sway of the "father's seed" and the Little Mermaid, though hybridized to be human-looking still lacks an immortal soul, similar to hybrid species who are sterile and unable to progenerate (Brownlee 20). The narrative structure of d'Arras' Melusine text displays a "tripling" (the three sisters of which Melusine is a part) and "doubling" (as evidenced in the parallel between Presine and Melusine's stories, both having set stipulations of not being seen in their marriage contracts) found in Celtic myth as well, which, in Alban's words, "expresses the ancient symbolism of increasing the strength of life through multiplication," all genetically loaded themes (Alban 25). *The Little Mermaid* is riddled with helical imagery: the mermaid sisters "linking" or "twining" arms and rising to the surface multiple times and the lair of the Sea Witch described in helical shapes, her swamp lying beyond "churning whirlpools" seen "swirling around like roaring mill wheels" (Tatar 286, 292). The Sea Witch tends genetically hybridized creatures, half-plant and

half-animal polyps, and must blend her own blood (her genetics) to "make sure that the drink will be as sharp as a double-edged sword" (Andersen 281). This genetic theme coils and unfurls and beckons us to contemplate the symbolic implications of what, in bio-medical terminology, we might call knowledge of human genetics.

Following this helical volution, Alban notes that the ophidian-feminine is linguistically connected to the Vedic concept of kundalini, "the primordial life form of psycho-sexual energy referred to as the goddess Shakti, the female serpent coiled at the base of the spine," which has equally degenerative or regenerative potential, as it is "like poison' when dormant in the lower body and 'like nectar' when uncoiled and raised to the top of the skull" (Alban 27; Urban 5266). Melusine, as described by Kevin Brownlee in "Mélusine's Hybrid Body and the Poetics of Metamorphosis," is a "genealogical hybrid, born of a fairy mother and a human father," and takes care to tend to her serpentine needs on Saturdays in solitude (19). Melusine is, in a sense, able to balance the poison and nectar potentials within her by way of the balance implied in the agreement she makes with her husband-to-be, a mutual covenant where she "promises her human partner love and prosperity as long as he respects the one taboo she prescribes; if he ever violates it, both she and the benefits she bestows on him are forever lost," which include infrastructure and bounteous harvests (d'Arras et al. 5). The mystical force of kundalini seems also to be expressed in Melusine's ability to direct her "gift," as labeled by her mother, into healing powers, underlined by Raimondine's own exhalation at his wife's presence: "By my faith, my friend and my lady, I feel entirely healed by

your arrival” (d’Arras qtd. in Brownlee 27). The delicate agreement is broken first by Raimondine’s jealousy and then by his perception that Melusine is, in fact, more poisonous than a gift to their kingdom, suddenly categorizing her kundalini (gift and poison) plurality as unilateral “evil” in nature (Brownlee 29). In the Melusinian tradition, the feminine is plural, trans, multiple and complex.

Turning to the resonances with kundalini themes in *The Little Mermaid’s* ophidian reception, it is interesting to note that this coiled energy is often described as a “fiery energy” once awakened, mirrored in the Little Mermaid’s garden plot fashioned “perfectly round like the sun” with “flowers that shone just as red as it was,” finished with a “crimson weeping willow” (Urban 5266; Tatar 284). If we track the Little Mermaid’s motion through the story, she appears first as a fiery, awakening being, wishing to but unable to go upward to the water’s surface until her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, and then goes closer to the shore, then, with the aid of the Sea Witch, gains legs to access higher levels above the surface, even riding horseback with the prince to “high mountains” (Tatar 296). Kundalini is said to climb, too, “successively pierc[ing] a series of vital energy centers (*cakras*), awakening the various powers associated with each one, until she reaches the top of the head,” which may track with the youngest mermaid’s process, reaching the “top of the head” in her transmutation into a “daughter of the air,” now ascended above and outside of a body and “carry[ing] the fragrance of flowers through the air and send[ing] relief and healing” (Urban 5266; Tatar 300). In Andersen’s reception of the ophidian kundalini, the Sea Witch seems to possess the “poison,” which is offered as ambivalent

gift-poison, a “double-edged sword” (causing the Little Mermaid to feel pain like daggers and carrying the price of her voice, as well as estrangement from her family and homeland, yet initiating the arguable gift of ascension which offers an “immortal soul”), while the eponymous protagonist symbolizes the “nectar” potential of the feminine kundalini life force (Urban 5266; Tatar 294, 300).

Swimming in the waters of hereditary context, it is equally important to acknowledge the additional parentage of both ophidian receptions: the particular authors within their reception context. Jean d’Arras’ *Roman de Melusine* was penned in 1393 and is centered upon the “founding mother of the House of Lusignan” who inhabits a “hybrid status” that mirrors and “legitimizes” the hybridization of the kingdom through the “appropriation (by military conquest in 1374) of the fortress of Lusignan” (Brownlee 18). D’Arras writes his patron, Jean de Berry, into the story as a way to both honor his patron and further hybridize the story, including historically known details “as ‘proof’ of [Melusine’s] historicity” (Brownlee 37). *Roman de Melusine* serves as a pluralistic allegorical-historical founding myth of the House of Lusignan which underlines the kingdom’s “prestige and authority” and supernatural origins (Brownlee 18). I believe that d’Arras employs this reception of the numinous “ophidian” as plural yet whole to express the wholeness of and plurality within this ruling house. These pluralities are myriad: Melusine as half-woman and half-serpent, symbolically Pagan (in nature and behavior) and Christian (in social norms), as both poison and gift to the kingdom, as good mother and as mother of monsters, and Raimondine as faithful and betraying partner, as both poison

and gift to his wife, as strong (in penetrating her privacy to find her secret) and weak (in allowing himself to fall prey to his brother's fear), as human (his body) and supernatural (his lineage), to name a few (Alban 23). This fullness, I would suggest, offers the House of Lusignan a numinous aura of authority, equally rational and mysterious, human, non-human and inhumane.

Hans Christian Andersen authored *The Little Mermaid* in 1837, very much a reception of not only ophidian divine feminine mythology but mermaid-specific folklore of Western Europe (Wullschlager 60). Indeed, Gregory Darwin's survey of related narratives of aquatic hybrid mythic figures link Seal Woman and Mermaid stories together, noting variations which follow proximity to coastal geography, as well as patterns of unions between human men and hybrid creatures with earliest expressions in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, if not before (128). The Christian text "Honorius of Autun," composed in 1150, used mermaids to describe worldly temptation, deploying the term "siren" additionally, both aquatic and aerial in nature, and the Victorian era saw a rising fascination with the mermaid as "seductress," finding expression in "exhibition[s] of monsters and morphological oddities in side shows" (Sautman 1004-1005). I would suggest that Andersen's reception of the variously inherited mermaid folklore and ophidian mythic figures expresses the historical and cultural context of his day, as well as his individual artistic expression. This narrative splices what is plural and paradoxical in the whole ophidian mythic figure into two opposing ophidian figures: the pure, beautiful, as-yet-uninitiated and then voiceless Little Mermaid and the filthy, ugly, and powerfully initiated Sea Witch, the former only able to

exert change in her life by way of pagan forces (the Sea Witch) and Christian forces (by "walking" the path of Christ-like suffering and thusly being touched by the grace of "God's sun," which delivers her to her ascended incarnation as a "daughter of the air") (Tatar 300).

Ironically, this splicing does not diminish but only exponentially increases the multivalent and ambivalent aspects of the ophidian feminine archetype in Andersen's reception, as the Little Mermaid transcends but suffers greatly, failing to achieve the divine union with the prince (which the Sea Witch stipulates would need to be blessed and legitimized by a Christian priest) but achieves a grace-filled second chance to attain an immortal soul as seafoam, beyond the bounds of a corporeal body (Tatar 294). Andersen's reception holds the human body as an exemplary vessel to hold an immortal soul yet portrays the ascension of the Little Mermaid as needing to be higher or outside of any body, now a "daughter of the air," which seems to express an ambivalence towards the potential for the human body and the feminine, kundalini, to contain or facilitate ascension. As the Little Mermaid leaves her tail behind, then leaves her human form behind, does the serpentine kundalini force travel with her and exist in the highest, ascended realms of spirit? Andersen's story delivers more questions than answers in this arena.

As we close this exploration, we must now delve into the theme of sexuality as pertains to sexual initiation and male and gender-coded gaze in sexual union in *The Little Mermaid*, as compared to the Melusine narrative. It is important to acknowledge the patriarchal contexts, though differing, within which both the Melusine and mermaid

folktales found reception, as I suspect that both stories' narration are expressions of androcentric, male privileged perspectives. In both stories, the question of the feminine tail evokes androcentric anxieties over the "use" of and access to the female and feminine, as the serpent or fish tail might symbolically obfuscate the vaginal opening, the symbolic mode in which the male society and male body might penetrate the female and feminine. It is interesting to note that both narratives are rooted in the female protagonist's story of transformation, with *The Little Mermaid's* prince being left in "deep sorrow" when the transformed mermaid vanishes but never learns of her true essence, and Melusine's Raimondine is left pining for his lost wife, letting out a "courtly erotic lament" for this loss of his wife (Tatar 300; Brownlee 25). Here we encounter a contrast between passive and active counterparts, between who is voyeur and who is viewed: Raimondine's gaze is "piercing" and seeking as he pierces Melusine's privacy by peeping at her bathing, and his consciousness now must struggle with the complexity of what he has seen—that his wife is half-serpent, half-human (Brownlee 21-22). The prince is not the piercer in *The Little Mermaid*, but a passive and ignorant presence to the Little Mermaid's piercing gaze, repeatedly spying on the prince while he "believed he was completely alone" and has "seen" both her world and his world, while the prince only knows the above world (Tatar 290). The Little Mermaid undergoes self-piercing (via the potion and transformation) and heart-piercing, in her heartbreak when the prince marries the temple girl, and he remains ignorant and unseeing throughout the narrative, never seeing the Little Mermaid for who she is, his savior and a

visitor from another world (Tatar 298). In both receptions, the focus and locus of change falls on the female ophidian "avatar," the Little Mermaid and Melusine, but the Little Mermaid moves to bodily obliteration as molecules of air while Melusine transforms towards embodied wholeness as a dragon.

The expression of female reproductive and sexual initiation both take place in necessary privacy and secrecy, away from the male gaze: the Little Mermaid initiates her bodily transformation, so as to unite with the prince, by stealing away to the Sea Witch, the wizened older feminine, who teaches her about changes to her body that will bring pain and bleeding (resonant with menstruation and childbirth), all by way of a potion that enacts and repeats the sensation of a "sharp sword passing through you" which parses her closed fin into opened legs (Tatar 292-293). Melusine's mother bestows this gift-punishment upon her daughter that will come to her in a weekly cycle, one for which Melusine is instructed to tend to through bathing on Saturdays when she is serpentine, a potential allusion to the experiences and rites of menstruation, as well (Brownlee 25). As a feminine symbol of transformation, the life-giving aspect of menstruation may signify the ophidian figure's potential to create life and bring destruction.

Returning to consider the interplay of bodily wholeness and fragmentation as pertains to sexual contact and "union," it is interesting to note how the Little Mermaid's journey surrounds the opening of her legs as she moves towards a hoped-for union, while Melusine's journey entails her weekly transformation from parsed legs to unified serpent tail as she navigates an already-consecrated union.



Melusine is an emblem of wholeness as a fully embodied dragon with her human partner catalyzing her transformation and relinquishing of gifts and talents from the kingdom by way of betrayal, while Andersen's mermaid undertakes a betrayal through the Sea Witch's potion to surreptitiously exchange fin for legs and is obliterated into disembodied air particles and conscripted to serve the humans by supplying "cool breezes" (Tatar 300). Perhaps the ophidian direction of change, whether from legs to tail or tail to legs, is in relationship to the degree to which the ophidian character has attained *coniunctio* with her counterpart: Melusine completes sexual union with Raimondine to give birth to multiple offspring—a continuation of her blended line of faery and human—while the Little Mermaid does not have a "successful" union with the prince and only finds a soul through commitment to service and disembodiment. In both stories, the failures of the male counterpart seem significant: the Little Mermaid's prince fails to recognize the mermaid's magical redemptive essence. Melusine's consort fails to honor their agreement and fails to treat his wife with respect, peeping on her and then revealing her secret to the public.

What can we understand about the historical, social and cultural contexts within which both versions emerged? I would suggest that the contrast between how both receptions handle the question of soul can serve as our point of departure. At no point in *Roman de Melusine* is Melusine's soul in question, as she possesses magical gifts from her fairy heritage. Melusine appears in Raimondine's kingdom and agrees to bestow her gifts upon the House of Lusignon if he agrees to her prohibition, and then is bound to the laws of the fairy kingdom

to recuse herself when Raimondine breaks his promise, leaving no longer half-serpent but as a whole dragon. In contrast, the Little Mermaid is assumed to be soulless, first seeking to gain a soul through joining with a human man, then must serve as a "daughter of the air" for 300 years to gain an eternal soul. Melusine remains a proud figure, a founding mother of the House of Melusine, and the focus upon shortcomings falls upon Raimondine and his human kingdom, having been left bereft and aware of his sins after his dear wife's magical transformation and departure. I would suggest that *Roman de Melusine* expresses a cautionary tale of human kingdoms and patriarchal societies that do not propitiate the divine feminine adequately and thus lose access to the gifts and treasures of this divine force, charging Melusine as a 14<sup>th</sup> century call to action for the House of Lusignon to never again deny the wishes of the numinous ophidian mother. In contrast, the aftereffects of the Industrial Revolution through which *The Little Mermaid* was penned seems to loom within Andersen's reception, expressing doubts and limitations for the divine feminine's place in human society ruled by the dominating industries and wants of modern constructions of masculinity and masculine culture. While Melusine's mystery is meant to be respected, Andersen's ophidian character's plight is dependent upon the degree to which the human man can understand or use her, a complex and androcentric text questioning the soul of the feminine and valorizing voiceless beauty and feminine suffering (Tatar 281; Sautman 1005).

True, the magical, ophidian feminine is relegated and separated in both receptions but I believe we understand a deeper level about each reception's context by recognizing how this

relegation takes place. In Melusine's story, her relegation is divinely bound and self-imposed, her departure signifying a loss to the human kingdom. In the Little Mermaid's story, the relegation is imposed upon the soulless mermaid by a Christian divinity that cannot bestow upon her a soul until she has further refined her essence and sacrificed herself in service. Melusine's story leaves little doubt that humanity must be refined to deserve the presence of the divine feminine. In Andersen's story, the feminine symbolized in the half-finned mermaid must refine to win a soul and a place in the human world. I encounter both narratives as an undeniably complex and plural expression of gender and sexuality within contrasting 14<sup>th</sup> century and 19<sup>th</sup> century contexts and a fascinating narrative of the feminine. Like the ancient ophidian divine feminine, the half-tailed protagonists self-actualize and self-alchemy in limiting and expansive ways, revealing deep insights into the symbolic landscape of both reception contexts.

## Works Cited

- Alban, Gillian M. E.. "The Serpent Goddess Melusine: From Cursed Snake to Mary's Shield." *The Survival of Myth: Innovation, Singularity and Alterity*. Edited by Paul Hardwick and David Kennedy, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.
- Andersen, Hans Christian. *Hans Christian Andersen's Fairy Tales: The Ugly Duckling, Thumbelina, and Other Stories*, edited by J. H. Stickney. Lerner Publishing Group, 2017. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5444072>.
- Brownlee, Kevin. "Mélusine's Hybrid Body and the Poetics of Metamorphosis." *Yale French Studies*, no. 86, 1994, pp. 18–38. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930274>.
- d'Arras, Jean, Donald Maddox, et. al. *Melusine; or the Noble History of Lusignan*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6224163>.
- Campbell, Joseph. *Creative Mythology: The Masks of God, Volume IV*. Penguin Books, 1991.
- Darwin, Gregory. "On Mermaids, Meroveus, and Mélusine: Reading the Irish Seal Woman and Mélusine as Origin Legend." *Folklore*, vol. 126, no. 2, 2015, pp. 123–41. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24774306>.
- Greenwood, Emily. "Reception Studies: The Cultural Mobility of Classics." *Daedalus*, vol. 145, no. 2, 2016, pp. 41–49. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24711574>.
- Linden, Stanton. *The Alchemy Reader: From Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton*. Illustrated, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Sautman, Francesca Canadé. "Mermaid." *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, edited by Fedwa Malti-Douglas, vol. 3, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, pp. 1003-1006. *Gale eBooks*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2896200421/GVRL?u=carp39441&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=a607c1d4](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2896200421/GVRL?u=carp39441&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=a607c1d4).
- Tatar, Maria. *The Classic Fairy Tales: Texts, Criticism*. W. W. Norton, 2017.
- Urban, Hugh B. "Kuṇḍalīnī." *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 8, Macmillan Reference USA, 2005, pp. 5266-5267. *Gale eBooks*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3424501766/GVRL?u=carp39441&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=7d885c1e](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3424501766/GVRL?u=carp39441&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=7d885c1e).
- Wullschlager, Jackie. "Andersen, Hans Christian (1805-1875)." *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood: In History and Society*, edited by Paula S. Fass, vol. 1, Macmillan Reference USA, 2004, pp. 59-60. *Gale eBooks*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3402800034/GVRL?u=carp39441&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=410bbe95](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3402800034/GVRL?u=carp39441&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=410bbe95).



Half-Eaten Fig in Hand / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

# Alchemical Descent in Leonora Carrington's *Down Below*

---

Madison Stevens, MFA, MA

Keywords: Alchemy, Underworld, Surrealism, Leonora Carrington  
Content Warning: Eating Disorder Discourse, Descriptions of Sexual Assault and Violence, Holocaust

*Armed with madness, I go on a long voyage.*

— Mary Butts

Alexander Roob's *Alchemy & Mysticism* predicts that "anyone who attempts a literal understanding of the writings of the hermetic philosophers will lose [themselves] in the twists and turns of a labyrinth from which [they] will never find the way out" (36). In a similar spirit, when setting forth to write this piece, I intended to trace in numerical order the seven primary stages of alchemical transmutation outlined by Edward Edinger in *Anatomy of the Psyche* as rendered in Leonora Carrington's *Down Below*. However, despite my greatest wish for a smooth and straightforward distillation of Carrington's work, I soon discovered that *Down Below*—perhaps like Carrington herself—didn't move in such a linear way. And of course it didn't, I later thought, for her very nature and the nature of her story by essence rebels against such straight lines and rationalist confines. Thus, this paper surrenders to Carrington's labyrinthian twists, turns, blending, blurring, upside downs and right side ups to explore how *Down Below* weaves alchemical imagery, themes and braided stages of transmutation in order to map out the psychic underworld journey inherent within the individuation process. I will employ a comparative mythological framework and Depth Psychological tool of amplification to explore Carrington's transformation as rendered throughout the story and the alchemical implications therein.

Leonora Carrington's mother gave her a copy of Herbert Read's *Surrealism* in 1936, within which a young Carrington first encountered Max Ernst's painting, *Two Children Threatened by a Nightingale* (1924) (Aberth 25). The following year, the two would become entangled in each other's lives. Carrington recalls her feelings about Ernst as a "burning,

inside; you know how when something really touches you, it feels like burning" (qtd. in Aberth 25). This burning calls to mind the process of *calcinatio*, described by Edinger as the first stage of alchemical transmutation (17), begging the question: is there—even if unconsciously—a pull towards engaging in the *calcinatio* of one's own being? A movement of



eros—libido, creative life-force energy—towards disintegration because it is the necessary—albeit painful—process needed to birth wholeness within oneself? Edinger recounts Jung’s belief that “fire symbolizes libido” (18) and that “each of the four elements has its own particular operation. *Calcinatio* is the fire operation (the others: *solutio*, water; *coagulatio*, earth; *sublimatio*, air)” therefore, any image which incorporates fire or burning corresponds with *calcinatio* (18). Symbolically, Carrington’s experience with Ernst’s art highlights the notion that the burning down somehow brings us into closer contact with our libido, or life force energy. As Roob describes in *Alchemy & Mysticism*, “just as there is an inner fire which is set in motion by the outer fire, and which then unfolds its diverse effects” (392). Perhaps, then, it is apropos that Carrington’s story begins within the vessel of fiery war-torn Europe and the metaphoric fires that are ignited by both Max Ernst’s presence in her life—the fire of eros—as well as the agonizing fire that is further stoked by his arrest at the hands of the Nazi Gestapo.

Following this *calcinatio* thread further, let us turn towards the commencement of Carrington’s memoir *Down Below* and her own alchemical journey. In *Practical Alchemy: A Guide to the Great Work*, Cotnoir suggests that “calcination is the burning of anything to ashes. It is the burning off of all combustible impurities” (48). Edinger elaborates upon this chemical process, adding that this “intense heating” drives off “water and all other constituents that will volatilize. What remains is a fine, dry powder,” thus breaking down what was once a solid into ash which eventually becomes transformed into a renewed whole (17). As Ernst and Carrington had been living together in

Saint-Martin-d’Ardèche, Carrington began a period of “voluntary vomitings” after officers arrested and imprisoned Ernst in a concentration camp (Carrington 4). She described how she “hoped that my sorrow would be diminished by these spasms, which tore at my stomach like earthquakes” (4). Acknowledging the ways in which Carrington’s experience illuminates the severity and seriousness of patterns of disordered eating and eating disorders, we may simultaneously interpret it metaphorically. Perhaps, to Carrington, her stomach acid was felt as the fire in *calcinatio* as it heats the alchemical vessel of her own body. Like Hades erupting through the earth before pulling Persephone into the underworld, the vomiting “tore at [her] stomach like earthquakes” (4). In reflecting further on her self-induced vomitings, Carrington shares how she “had realized the injustice of society, I wanted first of all to cleanse myself, then go beyond its brutal ineptitude. My stomach was the seat of that society...it was the *mirror* of the earth” (4). The parallels Carrington draws between her stomach, society and earth—each as mirrors of the other—evokes the Hermetic principle that the macrocosm mirrors the microcosm and vice versa, or “the below is as the above, and the above as the below” (qtd. in Roob 8). Carrington continues on in her self reflection: “the mirror—my stomach—had to be rid of the thick layer of filth [the accepted formulas] in order properly, clearly, and faithfully to reflect the earth...all the earths, stars, suns, and earths of the microbes’ solar system” (4). Carrington speaks to the concealed macrocosm held within the microcosm of her being, revealed as she encounters and transmutes her depths.

This clearing process speaks to the alchemical burning and stripping away in order to reach the *prima materia*, or the "first matter," the archetypal image from which everything in the world derives (Edinger 10). Edinger defines the "basic scheme of the [alchemical] *opus*" as creating, "a transcendent, miraculous substance, which is variously symbolized as the Philosopher's Stone, The Elixir of Life, or the universal medicine. The procedure is first to find the suitable material, the so-called *prima materia*, then to subject it to a series of operations that will turn it into the Philosopher's Stone" (Edinger 9). Carrington's journey does exactly that, over the course of which she is continuously stripped down to her base elements and subjected to a 'series of operations' that ultimately result in her own psychic transformation—the rearranging of *prima materia* into a new whole. Carrington begins to be undone when Max is taken to the concentration camp. This stripping away continues as she encounters corpses and dismembered body parts while escaping France en route to Spain (Carrington 8) and again when she is gang raped by officers in Madrid (Carrington 14). She writes of this experience, of how the men pushed her into a car, tore off her clothes and forced themselves on her "one after the other" (14). Each traumatic and visceral instance was thrust upon Carrington, tearing her—both physically and psychically—down to her *prima materia* while eliciting psychic disintegration.

Throughout *Down Below*, Carrington continues recounting her deepening descent into psychosis, which leads her to a Spanish sanatorium where violent episodes and the metaphoric "burning impurities to ashes" continued. She recalls how, "they tore my clothes off brutally and strapped me naked to

the bed. Don Luis came into my room to gaze upon me. I wept copiously and asked him why I was kept a prisoner and treated so badly" (28). Of such episodes, the Cardiazol shots were perhaps the most notable. In *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, Aberth describes how while at the sanatorium, Carrington was "treated and cured with three doses of the drug Cardiazol, which chemically induced convulsive spasms similar to electric shock therapy" (46). Similarly, Edinger suggests that the alchemical "purification of gold" is obtained by "melting it three times with antimony" (19) and that "the fantasy images that are projected onto [this] chemical process ... represent the psychic component of alchemy that is the chief interest of the psychotherapist" (19). Aberth echoes Edinger, postulating that "for Carrington the Cardiazol treatments were agonizing psychological torture that caused her to experience a dissolution of the ego" (49). Carrington's experience with Cardiazol reflects the threefold melting of gold to yield the Philosopher's Stone. In both instances, whether gold or Carrington's psyche, they are melted—or subjected to Cardiazol—three times in order to reach the complete breaking down—or symbolic death—needed to then alchemically wash away impurities and reassemble the *prima materia* into the metaphoric Philosopher's Stone. Psychically, the Philosopher's Stone evokes the internal movement towards wholeness that is birthed through the wrenching trials of one's individuation journey.

Carrington elaborates upon her experience reassembling this *prima materia*, or the base elements and broken down building blocks, of her being and psyche. When she received her returned personal objects (coins, perfume, pencil, box of powder, two jars of

face cream, nail buff, little mirror and lipstick) that had been confiscated upon arriving at the sanatorium (Carrington 46), she began to rearrange and assign new meaning to them. Among the two jars of face cream, for instance, the black-lidded jar “was night, the left side, the moon, woman, destruction” while the other green-lidded jar “was man, the brother, green eyes, the Sun, construction” (46). Moreover, the nail buff, “shaped like a boat, evoked for me a journey into the unknown” (46), which resonates with the archetypal night sea journey and underworld descent. Carrington describes how she was pleased with her discovery and would “group these objects around each other; they wandered together on the celestial path, helping each other along and forming a complete rhythm,” creating a “complete new whole” and giving “alchemical life to the objects” (46-47). In reassembling the jars and assigning them new meaning, Carrington creates a new mode of understanding, or a new psychic landscape. Assigning the moon/woman and the sun/man to each of her two creams also depicts the union of opposites in *coniunctio*, or “culmination of the opus,” in which, “two substances come together to create a third substance with different properties” (Edinger 211). Working with “feminine” products such as lipstick, face cream, perfume, powder and the nail buff also suggests Carrington’s interaction with the Divine Feminine, perhaps this energy’s return or reintegration and Carrington’s efforts to balance what had been dominant masculine aspects as expressed by her domineering father and the oppressive Nazi regime. This breaking down to base elements, rearranging of archetypal building blocks, weaving the feminine aspects back into her psyche, and the union of opposites depicts the *opus magnum*,

or the ways in which alchemists first “bring together, then we putrefy, we break down what has been putrefied, we purify the divided, we unite the purified and harden it. In this way is One made from man and woman” (Hermes Trismegistus qtd. in Roob 111). Carrington’s personal belongings represent her internal rearranging, reassembling and uniting as she begins gaining lucidity. Although much transformation remains along her journey, this marks a significant turning point towards re-emerging from her archetypal psychic descent.

In addition to its depiction of alchemical stages of transmutation, *Down Below* also incorporates such alchemical concepts as the vessel and the fortress. In *Psychic Energy: Its Source and Its Transformation*, M. Esther Harding observes how the “hermetic vessel is oneself. In it the many pieces of psychic stuff scattered throughout one’s world must be collected and fused into one, so making a new creation. In it must occur the union of the opposites called by the alchemists the *coniunctio* or marriage” (431). In this way, Carrington herself is the vessel within which her psychic transformation unfolds and the union of opposites occurs. Harding adds: “[T]he hermetic vessel of the alchemists is indeed analogous to the circle of the psyche and to the mandala, for each of the three in its own way represents the individual (hu)man” (431). Like this psychic circle and mandala, the alchemical vessel must remain sealed for the transmutation process to unfold. For alchemists this occurred within “the retort,” whereby “one of the strictest requirements of the art was that during the process of transformation nothing must escape and nothing must be allowed to enter” (Harding 430). Harding observes how “this is a

symbol representing a similar process taking place within the psyche" (430). Therefore, "it is said that a wall must be securely built about the psyche before the reconciliation of opposites can take place within it, and before a new centre of the individual can be created" (Harding 430). Carrington's mythologized/archetypalized self-account in *Down Below* depicts various examples of the "wall around the psyche" including the literal wall which encloses the sanatorium, ensuring Carrington is kept inside while undergoing alchemical transmutation's severity. Both Carrington's psychic wall and the sanatorium's walled fortress act as enclosures sealing her metaphoric vessel for alchemical transformation. They are the labyrinthian maze through which she encounters and undergoes significant challenges in order to reach her psychic center held within.

The wall and fortress motif also corresponds to Carrington's "preoccupation with maps" and mapping, or systems of symbolic sense-making rich with alchemical imagery (Carrington qtd. in Aberth 50). Aberth highlights how Carrington depicts "suns, crescent moons and other planetary symbols...gates, caves, spirals, orchards, crosses, snakes and coffin-like shapes" in the map she creates of the sanatorium and its surrounding grounds, and how these are "all the stuff of antique alchemical illustrations" (49). Furthermore, the map visually portrays Carrington's psychic boundaries where the enclosed asylum corresponds to her psyche and everything beyond it corresponds to the world outside of her inner sphere (Aberth 10). Aberth describes how "its perimeters circumscribing the physical space of her internment, the internal pictographic elements also act as a diagram outlining the various

components of her mental state. It is a liminal space, as is the text itself, where Carrington is painfully aware of vacillating between sanity and madness" (50). Echoing Ariadne's narrative arc in the labyrinth, "this preoccupation with maps, with their precision, and with borders and liminal space betrays the healthy wish on Carrington's part to keep in mind the way back" (Conley qtd. in Aberth 50), or to return through the labyrinth from the descent into her own psychic underworld.

In addition to the labyrinthian fortress around one's own psyche and the transformation undergone therein, *Down Below* speaks also of ruling aspects within the psyche that are expressed through psychic invasion. Carrington speaks of how "the World War was being waged hypnotically by a group of people—Hitler and Co.—who were represented in Spain by Van Ghent; that to vanquish him it would suffice to understand this hypnotic power," which would then "stop the war and liberate the world," for "instead of wandering aimlessly in political and economic labyrinths, it was essential to believe in our metaphysical force and divide it among all human beings, who would thus be liberated" (16). Throughout her story, Carrington also emphasizes the need to escape from Queen Elizabeth and her father. She writes of "the determination to expel (Queen) Elizabeth was the only need that remained with me...I had to...cast out these personalities, and thus begin my liberation" (56), as well as "liberate (herself) from the *fathers*" (17). All of which—Hitler, the Queen, her father and the *fathers* as symbolic of the patriarchal force field—embody dominating principles within her personal consciousness as well as the collective unconscious. Edinger speaks to this pattern, recognizing how the death of the king

represents “a time of crisis and transition” (19). Psychologically, this signifies “the death of the ruling principle of consciousness, the highest authority in the hierarchical structure of the ego. Death of the king would thus be accompanied by a regressive dissolution of the conscious personality” (Edinger 19). Carrington’s healing and transmutation required such imbalanced ruling bodies within her psyche to be stripped or burned away, yet, as Edinger suggests, this is first preceded by her “regressive dissolution of conscious personality” as it unfolds within the sanatorium (19). However, after this “descent into hell, the ego (king) is reborn, phoenixlike, in a purified state,” which reflects the alchemical process of disintegration into base elements, or “descent into hell” for Carrington to then reassemble her psychic pieces into a new integrated whole within herself (Edinger 19).

Carrington also writes of psychic invasion from those at the sanatorium. She shares how she “would never sleep and would protect my consciousness” (28) and felt as though she “was being possessed by Don Luis’s mind, that his domination was swelling within me like a giant automobile tyre” (33). She also describes how she “demanded the freedom of my own will” and yelled at Don Luis: “I don’t accept your force, the power of any of you, against me; I want my freedom to act and think; I hate and reject your hypnotic forces” (60). Perhaps she is speaking here to the tension inherent within the alchemical process which, while expressed symbolically in the physical realm, transpires within the psyche. Therefore this breach, this psychic invasion, occurs because the internal psyche—not the external physical world—is the domain of this alchemical transmutation. In proclaiming how

she wants her “freedom to act and think” and rejecting their “hypnotic forces,” Carrington also speaks to the individuation process and the desire to rid herself “of the accepted formulas” (4). She wrestles with and seeks liberation from the energies within her psyche that have been imposed upon her from powerful external figures such as her father, the Queen, Hitler and the sanatorium superiors. Collectively, they operate within her psyche as if they were inflicting an invasion or wielding hypnotic forces. By detangling her mind from these energies, or by demanding her “freedom to act and think” and rejecting their “hypnotic forces,” Carrington sets forth on an individuation process and the “liberation” achieved therein.

When reflecting upon the alchemical stages, Edinger notes that “each of these operations [...] provide the basic categories by which to understand the life of the psyche, and they illustrate almost the full range of experiences that constitute individuation” (15). Moreover, they, like Carrington’s psychic descent, reflect the life/death/rebirth journey that is inherent to the individuation process. As the title *Down Below* suggests, Carrington’s underworld journey into realms below illuminates how individuation activates the psyche’s deepest energies. The process often feels like a psychic disintegration akin to the steps of *calcinatio* and *putrefactio* undergone before one is able to reassemble into a renewed whole. It is a cycle that continues in various iterations throughout life, winding like the labyrinth as we move ever closer to the mysteries held within ourselves. In *The Mystical Exodus in the Jungian Perspective*, Shoshana Fershtman suggests that “the chariot’s descent into the depths of the soul offers a pathway for an ascent into the highest



realms of spiritual understanding" (14), and "the deeply inward turn of mystics to connect with spiritual guidance in the face of catastrophic outer circumstances" (15), though painful or non-rational, is a vital process. From the time Ernst is arrested, Carrington descends further into her psyche's underworld, into her unconscious. It is there that the alchemical work transpires and from this underworld that she gains renewed lucidity—and with it, revelation.

A kaleidoscope of alchemical symbols, themes and stages weave throughout Carrington's underworld journey as retold in *Down Below*. Though much remains to be uncovered and explored, for now we will conclude here, similarly transformed from having joined Carrington on her story's tortured, mad and mystical path. Perhaps Carrington's *Philosopher's Stone* is threefold: individuation born through uniting opposites within her psyche, the book itself, and the sovereignty she finally gains by her ultimate escape to Mexico—far from the dominating reaches of the Sanatorium, Europe and the shadow of her aristocratic upbringing. A poetic nod to the *opus*, I find Carrington's most significant art and life's work emerges from this place. Moreover, Chadwick recognizes that "Carrington also suggests a redefinition of the image of the *femme-enfant* from that of innocence, seduction, and dependence on man, to a being who through her intimate relationship with the childhood worlds of fantasy and magic is capable of creative transformation through mental rather than sexual power" (qtd. in Aberth 35). In *Down Below*, Carrington has liberated her inextinguishable spirit through incomprehensible suffering and ignited a lifetime of world-altering work. In this way,

Carrington finally becomes free to exist in the fullness she has fought since childhood to embody.

## Works Cited

- Aberth, Susan L. *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*. Lund Humphries, 2010.
- Carrington, Leonora. *Down Below*. New York Review Books, 1988.
- Cotnoir, Brian. *Practical Alchemy: A Guide to the Great Work*. Weiser Books, 2006.
- Edinger, Edward F. *Anatomy of the Psyche*. Chicago: Open Court, 1991.
- Fershtman, Shoshana. *The Mystical Exodus in the Jungian Perspective: Transforming Trauma and the Wellsprings of Renewal*. Routledge, 2021.
- Harding, Esther M. *Psychic Energy: Its Source and Its Transformation*. Princeton University Press, 1973.
- Roob, Alexander. *Alchemy & Mysticism*. Taschen, 2021.



Rotting Fruit on Branch / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

# The Anti-Christ's Blessing: *Rotting as a Virtue of Becoming Anew*

Amanda Barton, MA

Keywords: Anti-Christ, Friedrich Neitzche, City of Heaven, Decadence  
Content Warning: Discussion of Religious Bigotry Including  
Homophobia and Anti-Abortion Rhetoric

Humans love to muse over their world's demise and destruction because such a fantasy plays on their deepest desires for a birth of something new as the ground crumbles beneath their feet. Across many cultures, these desires are explored through the genre of apocalyptic literature. The reason why apocalyptic literature is so popular is because it encourages the reader to develop a new disposition on life or to partake in a heroic identity. However, before the heavenly skies can open their pearly gates to bring forth salvation or a new world order, the reader must reflect upon some brooding questions: What caused the gates of hell to open? What life events, actions, or pronouncements gave rise to all the pandemonium within the world?

While many cosmic, environmental, or viral calamities may signal that the end is near within apocalyptic literature, some works creatively inaugurate the impending doom with the arrival of an Anti-Christ figure. This begs another question: What message or psychological "blessing" does the Anti-Christ deliver after his identity has been revealed within a story? In his book *Aion*, psychologist C.G. Jung suggests that "*the destruction of the God-image is followed by the annulment of the human personality*" because the shadow—as in, the Anti-Christ—has disturbed and split up the psyche, and the shadow will continue to wreak havoc until a Christ figure *comes once again* to coalesce a new God-image (*CW* 9ii, par. 170). Psychologist Edward Edinger echoes this assertion in *The Archetype of the Apocalypse* by proposing that the arrival of the Anti-Christ

signals "the coming" of a new deity, or God-image, as the soul undergoes an upheaval (13). Both analysts provide a unique sketch of how individuals might envision and experience an apocalypse by contemplating upon how their Christian God-image undergoes a death and rebirth. Yet, Jung focuses more on the Christ figure's archetypal rebirth as a *continuing incarnation* process towards a higher state of individuation, or wholeness of being, than his archetypal death. He imagines this process as an alchemical "circular distillation" in which the individual must wrestle with old and new religious meanings and imagery to discern which new God-image might best serve their soul (Jung *CW* 9ii, par. 420). Whereas Edinger amplifies a constellation of apocalyptic images from the book of Revelation through an alchemical framework

as a means "to entertain the idea" that a Christian God-image can undergo a metamorphosis (*Apocalypse* 179). While both analysts insinuate that apocalyptic images mirror human behavior, they actually end up paying little attention to the psychological significance and mythic novelty that the Anti-Christ figure embodies as he unveils his Thanatosian smile to inaugurate "the coming" of an end.

Therefore, this article aims to expand this conversation by examining the Anti-Christ as an initiatory figure of the *continuing incarnation* process, musing over the decadent image of the Kingdom of Heaven (i.e., a metaphor for the Christian psyche) through a Nietzschean lens. To tackle this premise, this article will utilize the term "decadence," popularized by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, to describe the condition that something—whether idea or image—has entered a state of decay, a rot that is symptomatic of a "declining life" within an individual or a culture (Nietzsche *TI*, "Reason," sec. 6). Many of Nietzsche's writings used this term as a motif to accentuate the Schopenhauerian slogan "*God is Dead*" because the meaning or the "belief in God [and his kingdom] is no longer sustainable" in the sense that its current image has lost its symbolic charge within the modern world (Janaway *xxi*). In *The Birth of Tragedy*, for example, Nietzsche dialectically uses the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysius to describe the decadence within the intense cosmic fluctuation between the *form* and *formlessness* of the sacred, arguing that it produces a creative, but fragile, synthesis or union within the human soul (Geuss *xi*). Instead of using these archetypal thought-forms, this article employs the thought-forms of *Eros* (as the instinct to love)

and *Thanatos* (as the instinct to death) to archetypally contextualize the Christian decadence between the rotting Christ figure (*Eros*) and the emergent Anti-Christ figure (*Thanatos*) that inaugurates a new structure for the Christian psyche. By employing this approach and framework, the article will impart a dynamic understanding of how the Anti-Christ is an initiatory figure within Christianity who blesses a believer with a new psychological disposition on life, instead of truncating his God-image as a shadow figure who only looms destruction.

### **The Decay of the Erosian King and His Kingdom**

Creation naturally breeds the potential for destruction, and the opposite of this axiom is equally true. One may never know why this particular cosmic principle continues to elude humanity, especially as scientists, philosophers, and theologians agonizingly search for something that is eternal and everlasting. But in their vain search for that undying *logos* or symbol, they eventually hit a wall and come to the grave understanding that their current selves and ideologies have limitations. Instead of understanding why those limitations exist, they tend to assume—and utterly believe as gospel—that what they already have or know is the eternal truth, and then go on to judge those walls to forever be the scale and scope of a paradise or of sin on earth: the Garden of Eden, Sodom and Gomorrah, Jericho, Babylon, and Jerusalem.

Lamentably, nothing lasts forever. As Jung points out in *Aion*, the ineffable nature of a deity can never fully be encompassed or captured within a single God-image because human consciousness and creativity are forever changing. Just as a human consciousness can



undergo changes and transformations, the image of God established within their hearts can also experience a similar phenomenon. Therefore, “the God-image is not something *invented*,” as Jung writes, rather “it is an *experience* that comes upon man spontaneously—as anyone can see for himself unless he is blinded [or walled-in] to the truth by theories and prejudices” (*CW* 9ii, par. 303).

Perhaps creating God-images—whether they take the form of an animal, a human, a plant, or a building—is one of the key goals of religion because those images can help mankind “to establish an ontological position in the world – an orientation for one’s temporal existence” (Barrie 168). An imaginative way Christian theologians and thinkers have been able to concretize and orient their sacred experience of God’s numinous love, or *eros*, is through the Kingdom of Heaven parables, which serve in the Gospels as blueprints of a realized eschatology for when the apocalypse officially announces its blessed, yet deadly arrival. However, Christ surreptitiously explains to the Pharisees in the Gospel of Luke: “...the kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed, nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (*EVS* 17:20-21). Christ therefore suggests that a person’s inner psychic life, or their soul, *is* the Kingdom of Heaven. But *who* gets to rule over it, whether God or the Devil, depends solely on the individual and no one else, which is why the supposed “coming” of the kingdom cannot fully be comprehended and observed. Another interpretation is that if the nature of God can change, so can the nature of humans, and this change will always “come” or reveal itself in mysterious ways. For this reason, Jung

interpreted this idea as a psychological model for the *continuing incarnation* process because it enshrines this notion that the Kingdom of Heaven is both hidden within you and still yet to come.

Nevertheless, many Christians literalize this idea, trusting that the Kingdom of Heaven is an eternalized affair by citing cryptic parables from the Bible that foretell of this continuing incarnation. For instance, the Gospel of Matthew 13:44 states that “the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (*ESV*). Later, in the Gospel of Mark 10:15, it states that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (*ESV*). Therefore, “the kingdom is not principally about believing,” as religious scholar Peter Feldmeier notes, since the image of the Erosian kingdom is “about doing” *something* (45). On the one hand, the individual must sacrifice everything—i.e., will a death unto oneself—for the guarantee of a reality of eternal worth and love from God. But, on the other hand, the individual must preserve their Christian *logos* in their golden churches, aggressively proselytizing to ensure that their Erosian kingdom on earth is externally realized by insisting that others believe in their God-image as well.

As Nietzsche interprets it in *The Anti-Christ*, the Erosian kingdom metaphor painfully reveals that “the psychological reality of ‘redemption,’” or the development of a new outlook on life stems from “the profound instinct for how we must *live* to feel as we are ‘in heaven,’ to feel as if we are ‘eternal’” (sec. 33). Nietzsche genuinely admires how this metaphor offers a psychological setting for where the heart or the soul resides because it

implies that all a person has to do is journey into themselves to find their inner kingdom, their private garden of Eden, or that special place of love and wholeness within God. However, he critically points out that modern Christianity does not necessarily conceive of the Erosian kingdom metaphor as an inner experience or condition of the heart. Instead, Christians have interpreted the metaphor as "something that you wait for" as it comes upon the earth from the great beyond to administer glad tidings and proceed to judge those who are perfect enough to enter God's court (Nietzsche *AC*, sec. 34). That is to say, instead of envisioning eternal happiness as a state of consciousness, it is seen as the absolute rule of a divine monarch (Kaufmann 266).

For Nietzsche, attempting to externalize an ineffable idea into reality is to concretize a rigid projection of the God-image into the material plane. In this process, the Christian God-image loses its symbolic malleability. As adherence to tradition becomes stricter and the flow of life and death are dammed up within doctrine and dogma, the waters of Christ's Erosian love becomes stagnant, and without movement it will rot and putrefy. A person can see this damming up of an Erosian kingdom develop throughout the Bible, especially between the last chapter of Isaiah and chapter 16 of the Gospel of Matthew. In Isaiah, God declares "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest" (*ESV* 66:1-2). This idea that God has a "place of rest" implies there is a protean potential for the deity *and* his subjects to experience a death and rebirth as his numinous spirit and their souls move back and forth between the realms of earth and heaven. However, in the Gospel of Matthew, the

potential for this fluid movement between the realms of heaven, earth, and hell has completely ceased, especially when Christ tells Peter that "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you lose on earth shall be lost in heaven" (*ESV* 16:18-19). If the gates of heaven, earth, and hell are sealed up and blocked off, then there is no sense of movement between the deity and his subjects because everything is now solid as a rock. While the image of keys suggests that there is still movement between the realms, those keys are heavily controlled by the Christian institution, which strictly defines and dictates what kind of person enters heaven or hell based on their deeds and sins. As a consequence of damming up access to the other realms, the novel experience of psychologically going through hell is denied, and heaven, as the psychological state of well-being, is detained within the Gospels because only a pristine soul may be allowed to enter once their life is done on earth.

Since the Gospels place no value or merit upon journeying through a hellish landscape to potentiate the process of renewal, Christian apocalyptic literature picks up the slack. This genre compensates the individual's need to undergo a personal hell to transform their soul by willing death upon the agonizing chains that prevent a relationship with God's love. In doing so, apocalyptic writers and theologians construct a decadent temple to imprison the Erosian God-image's grace to which they, alone, hold the keys. As a result, the Christian imagination gradually begins to distort the Erosian God-image into a rotting message that Christ is the sole agent of salvation. Additionally, the individual's

potential to be the agent of their own salvation withers and rots away as the gatekeepers of Christianity hold the keys to heaven hostage, preventing personal empowerment and spiritual growth.

This ardent sentimentality of making earth “great again” for the coming Erosian kingdom stems as far back as the third century C.E. with the Christian rhetorician Lactantius, who begins to amplify the Christian imagination to designate who is worthy and unworthy to enter heaven. In his treatise on divine instruction titled “The Blessed Life,” Lactantius writes: “...after God’s coming the just shall be gathered together from the whole world. The holy city will be built in the middle of the world after Judgement is finished. God will dwell in it as founder along with the just who rule the earth” (*Apocalyptic Spirituality* 73). Christian evangelicals continue to uphold this mentality within our modern age, professing that natural disasters are the result of sinful people on earth. For example, in 2017, after hurricane Harvey, freelance reporter Kimberly Winston stated how many “religious finger-waggers,” including evangelical Reverend John McTernan and Franklin Graham, believed that the flood damage was God’s way of “systematically destroying America,” and that His divine retribution was the result of America supporting the “the homosexual agenda” and abortion rights. Here, it can be observed how an apocalyptic event, like a hurricane, can become a conduit and an opportunity for religious virtue signaling. According to religious historian Marjorie Reeves, this relationship between a “sense of ‘place’ and of ‘end’ is one of the chief roots of morality, and in all generations Christian writers have exhorted themselves and others to be ‘watchful servants,’ each playing his allotted

role responsibly, ‘for the end cometh’” of days (*Apocalyptic Spirituality* xiii). With the example above in mind, one can deduce how these Christian evangelical interpretations over hurricane Harvey have congealed the protean concept of the Erosian Kingdom into a toxic brick-and-mortar infrastructure by claiming it is “God’s will!” to destroy those who do not follow His righteous ways.

Observing this particular type of interpretation and mentality, Nietzsche keenly writes about how Christianity has become a rotten Erosian faith that aggressively “wage[s] a war *to the death* against” the entire concept of a psychological death—i.e., going through hell—that would enable a believer and their God-image to discover a “*higher* type of person” within their heart or soul (Nietzsche *AC*, sec. 5). His claims that Christianity’s war against the psychological significance of death within an individual is what gave rise to what he calls the “decadence” within the Erosian kingdom. In other words, denying access to the psychological novelty of going through hell and back as the believer walks with Christ is what precipitates the decadence to grow both inside a believer’s soul and within their conception of the Erosian Kingdom. He stresses this imagery within *The Anti-Christ*, explaining how God’s subjects have spun the image of the Erosian kingdom into a twisted underworld prison, a sickly “ghetto-kingdom” that breeds rot and decay within Christ’s *logos* (sec. 17). Again, Nietzsche’s idea that the Christian God-image is in decline or rotting is due to the absolute interpretation that the Kingdom of Heaven is *externally promised* by an external agent rather than *internally found* within an individual’s agency to enter their own heavenly kingdom.

He further explains this desire and "will to *immortalize*" or to externalize the Erosian God-image for future generations as a double-edged sword because when mankind deifies or apotheosizes the ineffable into the concrete, it dams up the God-image's fluidity of meaning (*GS*, sec. 370). Nietzsche elaborates this dual aspect of codifying an idol's meaning by stating how the instinct to deify or apotheosize the ineffable can either come from a place of "gratitude and love" or it can come from a place of "tyrannic will" (*GS*, sec. 370). These two conditions of the heart oscillate or circumambulate the codified God-image within the individual's psyche, thereby inducing a psycho-spiritual relationship that provides a sense of well-being and peace. While love characterizes a blissful feeling of complete acceptance, the tyrannic will characterizes a gnawing feeling of deep suffering and torment that compels the struggling individual "to turn what is most personal, singular, and narrow...into a binding law and compulsion—revenge[ing] himself on all things by forcing his own image, the image of his torture," onto others (*GS*, sec. 370). Therefore, the deification or apotheosis of the Erosian God-image is not a transhistorical matter that is forever set in stone as the gatekeepers of the Christian institution would have its followers believe. Rather, as Nietzsche argues in *The Anti-Christ*, it is a transvaluation dilemma because the experience of the ineffable, especially when one experiences apocalyptic events, is a socially negotiated phenomenon between an individual and their society, which is always susceptible to change as time progresses and values on life shift (sec. 13).

Thus, the main condemnation Nietzsche articulates throughout *The Anti-Christ* and his other works is

Christianity's refusal to let the sickly, rotten Erosian God-image from the Gospels die so it can become something better within the contemporary age. No more is death seen as a bridge, a transition, or a liminal space to prepare the individual to enter a new state of the heart, where the Kingdom of Heaven resides, because "the whole idea of a natural [or psychological] death is *missing*" from the biblical stories of Christ (Nietzsche, *AC*, sec. 34). Therefore, the Erosian love of Christ and his kingdom on earth retrogrades into a rotten image of tyranny and hatred that inevitably develops into the dark Anti-Christ figure, who will gladly bring death and destruction to what has been so precious built.

After discussing how the image of the Kingdom of Heaven is decaying, this article will now explore how the Anti-Christ initiates individuals into the continuing incarnation process. In this regard, he unveils how terrors of the apocalypse are not about a savior coming to rescue the faithful, but rather a painful revelation: Humans are the architects of their own hellish demise.

### **The Putrefaction and Rot that Incarnates the Anti-Christ**

Though it is tempting to think that decay can be avoided, Nietzsche writes that decadence is a necessary part of individuation (Ridley *xxvi*). As Edinger notes in *The New God-Image*, "the crucial feature of psychological ethics is that one's actions are based on a thorough awareness of the shadow in oneself and in others" (85). It is easy to see the shadow in other people, but it is even more challenging and difficult to see the shadow within oneself. This is possibly why Nietzsche perceived the apocalyptic experience as a popular and seductive subject matter within

Christian fiction because it encouraged the reader to have a conversation with the shadow. But as various writers and theologians construed their visions of what the Kingdom of Heaven *is* and *is not* onto the rest of the world, this type of fiction would eventually culminate into a distorted thundercloud of Christian “monadology” (Kaufmann 264). Apocalyptic writers desperately want to unveil the shadow figures that reside deep within themselves, but Christian dogma and logocentrism gaslight them to only see the shadow in others, proclaiming that Christ cannot return until everyone’s soul is saved in God’s eternal light. However, “the doctrine of the ‘eternal return’” that apocalyptic literature has galvanized is not ultimately about the lull of a permanent reunion with God, but “the unconditional and infinitely repeated cycle of all things” that chaotically churns man’s soul towards a better state of well-being (Nietzsche, *EH*, sec. 3).

The truth of decay is intrinsically communicated in stories of the rise and fall of kingdoms, the death of stars, and the rise of the phoenix. In its religious beginnings, various Christian emissaries and writers built a poetic monument to house their Erosian God-image, equating Christ’s flesh and blood as the eternal foundations of his *logos* and love: “So Jesus said to [the Jews] ...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day...” (*ESV* John 6:53-54). Initially, these visceral, elegiac ideas brought hope to all who were willing to listen. But as time progressed, this Erosian God-image’s blood turned cold, and its flesh rotted into a decrepit, vile zombie who mindlessly hungers for more blood and flesh as a means to decorate

their faith’s ornate temple walls and to buttress its putrid authority. Consider this quote from Matthew:

[Just as] Jesus said.... “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but *within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness*. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (*ESV* 23:1, 27-28; italics are mine for emphasis)

Instead of looking into the mirror to observe how they have become monsters, as the Anti-Christ is propped up to be, the inhabitants of the Erosian kingdom began to view and construe these zombies as the enemy outside of their walls, as in outside of themselves. That is to say, the rotting zombie is a reflection of both them and the Christ image they hold. Christ still resides within the hearts of his believers, but he has now retrograded or devolved into an emaciated God-image that advocates love in the guise of strict obedience, fearmongering, and intolerance to new ideas and ways of living. The religious scholar Bernard McGinn writes: “[the] Anti-Christ today is not so much dead as disguised, having changed roles in new scenarios of the end that allow human evil a key, though not the only, role in impending destruction” (*Antichrist* 2). Christ did say he would give his people the keys to heaven, but one can suppose he forgot to mention that the first key would be a black and grimy one. If that were to be the case, then there is still hope and a possibility that an individual can find the golden treasure hidden deep within themselves, as Christ said in the Gospel of Matthew: “For where[ever] your



treasure is, there your heart will also be" (*ESV* 6:21).

This begs the question: how can a distressed Christian "walk with" Christ when apocalyptic experiences are alerting them that their God-image is nowhere to be found? To start, as Nietzsche argues, a person must stop externalizing their concrete projections of the Erosian God-image onto others and focus on renegotiating the concepts and images that are decaying beneath them. But in order to address and renegotiate their worthiness for themselves and their God-image, a person must actually cross the black, sooty threshold of the Anti-Christ's apocalyptic embrace. "To suffer from reality," Nietzsche asserts, "means that you are a piece of reality that has *gone wrong*.... The preponderance of feelings of displeasure over feelings of pleasure is the *cause* of that fictitious morality and religion: but a preponderance like this provides the *formula* for decadence..." of things—like a God-image—to undergo a trial of rebirth (*AC*, sec. 15). Rather than viewing the Anti-Christ as a deathly figure who wants complete annihilation, Nietzsche recognizes how his Thanatosian presence initiates the hellish crucible of reflection over the "war on and victory over all old concepts of 'true' and 'untrue'" ideas that continue to inspire and perplex man's state of the world (*AC*, sec. 13). As he proposes in *Ecco Homo*: "how much truth can a spirit [or soul] *tolerate*, how much truth is it willing to *risk*..." in the name of its God-image by not wrestling with the supposed truth of its ineffable nature (Nietzsche, sec. 3)? In this case, Nietzsche is not suggesting that one should refute the notion of God-images all together. Instead, he advocates for everyone to wrestle with the heart of any displeasing truth within reality: to let the old God-image die in

peace to conciliate and birth a new Erosian God-image for the contemporary age.

"Perhaps more than any other discourse," according to literary scholar Martha Nandorfy, an "apocalyptic [experience] performs the impossible: it summons death in the name of everlasting life and attempts to give voice to silence" (19). In *The Poetics of Apocalypse*, she asserts that one literary device most apocalyptic writers employ is apostrophe (19). In this context, "apostrophe" refers to the poetic speech, address, or discourse made by an entity who is either an absent figure (i.e., the recently deceased), an inanimate object, or something inhuman (i.e., any supernatural creature). This kind of entity enables the protagonist to voice or express their inner thoughts and feelings towards something—like a God-image—that is often unable to respond for the narrative purposes of turning their catastrophic life around ("The Other Kind of 'Apostrophe'"). In other words, apostrophe simply provides an imaginal setting or scenario for a character—and a reader—to have a self-reflexive conversation with their thoughts through worldly predicaments as their life changes. With this in mind and forgoing the literalization, the Anti-Christ image can embody this literary function, incarnating what has been lost within a distressed Christian's psyche and offering a zombified God-image with whom the protagonist can then address as they go through hell. As a rotten zombie, the Anti-Christ archetypally epitomizes the shadowy contradiction to the values, behaviors, and overall language of the protagonist—and the reader's—current worldview. Thus, as Nandorfy observes, the zombie would represent everything that is "against [the] diction" of Christ's *logos*, but this is not necessarily conceived as a means to

describe a believer's denial or ignorance; rather, the Anti-Christ becomes a way to engage one's evolving language as they attempt to cope with the changes of their world (Nandorfy 19).

So, instead of walking with Christ through a beautiful garden, they are on a hellish stroll with the Anti-Christ, who is eager to expose the wild weeds and filth that grow within them. In this case, the Anti-Christ represents "a tangled web of complex forces, programs, and effects" that is usually kept hidden "from ordinary consciousness" (Eichman 135). By having a discourse with "the dark side [one can] see that 'evil' is not an all-powerful, consciously spiteful agency determined to do us in – rather, evil is imbalance, ignorance, and [intolerance]" that needs to be heard and meditated with in order to restore balance and peace (Eichman 135). If they let the Anti-Christ figure guide them, then they can begin to construct a new God-image, a new Erosian Kingdom, that will serve them well until another evaluation is needed. Perhaps, the only real eternal truth is that the cycle of death and rebirth, no matter how it manifests within our lives, is forever constant.

However, as Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast argues, "Christians have not done particularly well in cultivating a practical method for integrating the shadow" within their religiosity because there is too much "enthusiasm for the divine light" and divine perfection:

We tend to get *trapped in the idea* of a static perfection that leads to rigid perfectionism. ...On the level of religious doctrine, it's a God that is totally purged of anything that we call dark. Then we try to live up to the standards of a God that is purely light, and we can't handle the darkness

within us. And because we can't handle it, we suppress it. But the more we suppress it, the more it leads its own life, because it's not integrated. Before we know it, we are in serious trouble.

(131-132; italics are mine for emphasis)

For Steindl-Rast, the major crutch that has prevented a proper exploration of integrating the shadow of the God-image's light is the Christian conception of sin. Rather than interpreting sin as a discombobulated state of being within oneself that needs to be transmuted, Christianity typically interprets sin as a state of alienation from God's luminosity in which the darkness needs to be exorcized or repressed when their inner demons want to voice their concerns or interests (133).

From this perspective, an individual can reason how the narrative of Christian dogma and logocentrism have gaslit apocalyptic writers into seeing the shadow in others. They have been conditioned to project their darkness and inner demons onto another Christian God-image, the Anti-Christ, in order to mitigate and repress their sinfulness while basking in Christ's light. Nevertheless, "when one 'projects,' one is really giving away an energy or power that rightfully belongs to one's treasury," according to poet Robert Bly (29). As Christians project their sins or whatever is objectionable in their morality onto something *other*, they rid themselves of the power and responsibility to handle their own darkness because Christ will take care of it—Christ will slay the monster for them. But, as common knowledge dictates, zombies are incredibly terrible at fighting. This mentality reveals a problem within the Christian imagination, in which believers have forgotten how to be arbiters and agents of their own salvation,

immoderately relying instead on Christ to walk through hell and back for them. Due to this deficit within their psyche, especially as it fraternizes with dogma and tradition, most Christians are unable to envisage a creative relationship with the darkness that dwells deep within themselves and society.

But all is not lost, as psychologist Sigmund Freud suggests in *Totem and Taboo*, because the Anti-Christ can play an instrumental role in the mourning process of ideas and people. As a Thanatosian God-image or apostrophe, his rotten incarnation enables the survivors of the apocalypse to compost their contradictions and ambivalent feelings by detaching their memories and expectations from their deceased loved ones (Freud 59). But, detaching the memories and expectations of what the Erosian God-image amounts to is quite the Herculean task to renegotiate in today's terms because "Christian worship is fundamentally an *anamnesis*," the "active" remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection no matter the century (Smolarski 11). By only actively remembering the light, many contemporary Christians believe they are receiving "strength from *remembering* God's power [as] present and active throughout all of human history," which is why for them it would be absurd to believe, as Nietzsche did, that their Erosian God-image must die in order to be reborn (11).

### Conclusion

As Jung once famously said, "the brighter the light, the blacker the shadow," to allegorically demonstrate that the more a person holds something firm within their hearts, the more alive and rotten its opposite becomes (*CW* 18, par. 759). It is, perhaps, equally true that the more zealous a person is

about their religious beliefs, the more animated their religious theodicy becomes as their vision for the heavenly kingdom is projected onto the external reality. For so long, contemporary Christianity has focused so much on the agency of light that they have lost sight upon the value and blessing of what the darkness—i.e., the rot—can insightfully provide in times of tribulation. The Anti-Christ is, without a doubt, a terrifying boogey-man. He amplifies their limiting world views to insidious ends and reveals their religious fallibility and fragility. As long as believers are unable to integrate or recognize the darkness within themselves, the Anti-Christ will continue to initiate a Thanatosian death upon their souls, holding up a black mirror to reflect their decadence ideals. From this standpoint, the Anti-Christ does not stay put beneath this foundation for long—and he does not wait for permission to emerge. As Eninger states, "the evolution of the God-image is through a dynamic process of development" that must undergo a state of putrefaction—a state of rot—in order to become something greater than what it was before (*New God* 110). This is why the Anti-Christ's "*hammer pounds on its prison with fury and cruelty*" because his will to die and his desire to become something better is just too strong (Nietzsche, *EH* sec. 8). Thus, Christians must confront the limitation of Christ's symbolic power as certain aspects of his Godly shadow are swept underneath the foundation of dogma and fundamentalism (Jung, *CW* 18, para. 1661). Death comes for us all, but the Anti-Christ blesses its believers with a death of what ideals have gone rotten so that they can enter the Kingdom of Heaven once again.

Works Cited

- Barrie, Thomas. *The Sacred In-Between: The Mediating Roles of Architecture*. Routledge, 2010.
- Bly, Robert. *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*. Edited by William C. Booth, Harper & Row, 1988.
- Crossway Bibles, editor. *ESV: Study Bible: English Standard Version*. English Standard, Crossway, 2008.
- Edinger, Edward F. *Archetype of the Apocalypse: A Jungian Study of the Book of Revelation*. Edited by George Elder, Open Court, 1999.
- . *The New God-Image: A Study of Jung's Key Letters Concerning the Evolution of the Western God-Image*. Edited by Dianne D. Cordic and Charles Yates, Chiron Publications, 1996.
- Eichman, William Carl. "Meeting the Dark Side in Spiritual Practice." *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*, edited by Jeremiah Abrams and Connie Zweig, 1st ed, J.P. Tarcher ; Distributed by St. Martin's Press, 1991, pp. 134–37.
- Feldmeier, Peter. *The Christian Tradition: A Historical and Theological Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*. Translated by A.A. Brill, George Routledge & Sons, LTD.
- Geuss, Raymond. "Introduction." *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, edited & translated by Ronald Speirs, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. vii–xxx.
- Janaway, Christopher. "An Introduction." *Beyond Good and Evil: The Philosophy Classic*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, Wiley, 2020, pp. vii–xxix.
- Jung, Carl G. *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. Princeton University Press, 1978.
- . *The Symbolic Life: Miscellaneous Writings*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- Kaufmann, Walter Arnold. *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*. First Princeton classics edition, Princeton University Press, 2013.
- McGinn, Bernard. *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil*. 1st ed, HarperSanFrancisco, 1994.
- McGinn, Bernard, and Marjorie Reeves, editors. "Lactantius: 'The Blessed Life,' Book VII of Divine Institutes." *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-En-Der, Joachim of Fiore, the Franciscan Spirituals, Savonarola*, Paulist Press, 1979, pp. 25–80.
- Nandorfy, Martha. *The Poetics of Apocalypse: Federico García Lorca's Poet in New York*. Bucknell University Press, 2003.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Edited by Aaron Ridley, Translated by Judith Norman, Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- . *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, Translated by Ronald Speirs, Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- . *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Edited by Walter Arnold Kaufmann, 1st ed., Vintage Books, 1974.

Reeves, Marjorie. "Preface." *Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-En-Der, Joachim of Fiore, the Franciscan Spirituals, Savonarola*, edited by Bernard McGinn, Paulist Press, 1979, pp. xiii–xviii.

Ridley, Aaron. "Introduction." *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, translated by Judith Norman, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. vii–xxxiv.

Smolarski, Dennis Chester. *Liturgical Literacy: From Anamnesis to Worship*. Paulist Press, 1990. *Internet Archive*, <http://archive.org/details/liturgicallitera0000smol>.

Steindl-Rast, Brother David. "The Shadow of Christianity." *Meeting the Shadow: The Hidden Power of the Dark Side of Human Nature*, edited by Jeremiah Abrams and Connie Zweig, 1st ed, J.P. Tarcher; Distributed by St. Martin's Press, 1991, pp. 131–33.

"The Other Kind of 'Apostrophe.'" *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/apostrophe-literary-device-meaning>

Winston, Kimberly. "Where Are the Condemnations of Harvey as God's Punishment?" *Religion News Service*, 29 Aug. 2017, <https://religionnews.com/2017/08/29/where-are-the-condemnations-of-harvey-as-gods-punishment/>.





Keys Hanging from Red Ribbon / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

# Beyond the Sum of Their Parts: *An Alchemical Flight Towards Freedom*

---

Kira Kull, MA

Keywords: Alchemy, Winged Hermaphrodite, Psychology, Dragons, Gender, Tarot

It ascends from the earth to the heavens, and descends again to the earth,  
and receives the power of the above and below. Thus you will have the  
glory of the whole world. Therefore all darkness will flee from you.

*The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*

Throughout the myths, art, and literature of many cultures, androgynous and dual-sexed figures have long played a symbolic role in the healing of the psyche and the unification of the Self. Alchemical works from European medieval and Renaissance philosophers particularly feature a remarkable quantity of images that depict conjoined heterosexual couples (sometimes fraternal twins) in various stages of unification into one body. As a queer and intersex scholar, I felt naturally drawn to investigate their history, spiritual meaning, and psychological significance, with particular focus on the almost ubiquitous presence of winged renditions of these figures.

Applying a hermeneutics of Jungian psychology rooted in the work of Edward Edinger, this paper will engage alchemical imagery and treatments of the Tarot, surrealist literature, Richard Blust's "The Origin of Dragons," and my personal encounters with these symbols in dreams to demonstrate the powerful implications of an integrated multiplicity inherently proposed by the mythic figure of the winged hermaphrodite.<sup>1</sup>

Following the Aristotelian precept that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, amplifications of the hermaphroditic symbol abound. With a focus on birds, dragons, and the mirrored duality in Christ and Lucifer, I propose that these winged amplifications are suggestive of an ancient cyclical plurality within each of us. Far exceeding ideas of sex and gender, these symbols are contextualized in stories of creation, destruction, and transformation, shedding archetypal light on various oppositional spectrums of human identity such as good/evil, spiritual/material, individual/collective, and human/divine.

Many queer activists equate gender to a sliding scale rather than two binary options,

---

<sup>1</sup> Although it serves as the more common word employed by alchemical and classical theorists, "hermaphrodite" is generally considered a derogatory term reserved for reclamatory use within the intersex community. For more on the socio-historical usage of these terms, see the introduction to my article titled "Bringing Intersex Back" (Kull).

which might be a more accurate description of morality as well, yet this paper largely explores the alchemical philosophers' proposition that the distillation of starkly oppositional extremes prior to their integration serves as the only, or at least most effective, path towards a demonstration of perfection, individuation, and Selfhood. Bringing personal perspectives from my queer and intersex lineages to complexify the largely European psychological and alchemical methodologies with which I am engaging, my phenomenological approach to this topic arrives uniquely through my embodied and intuitive experience. In this piece, I interchange terms like dual-sexed, androgynous, intersex, and hermaphroditic with the gender expansive fluidity ascribed to these images and characters, often aligning my usage with those of the authors or artists I am referencing. Rather than to confuse, my intention is to *include* the array of language and ever-evolving terminology used to describe both real and mythical people beyond the gender binary. Neither will this piece overtly employ the work of queer theorists whose ideas would certainly be applicable, nor will I hold myself to the expectation to resolve or reach a total conclusion regarding the winged hermaphrodite. As I share what I have found by following the intuitive thread of curiosity, I invite the reader to join me in this cultivated field of alchemical activation and observe the ways in which these images and ideas impact them throughout the arrival, exploration, and integration of the symbol.

I first encountered mention of winged hermaphroditic figures in surrealist author and painter Leonora Carrington's book *The Hearing Trumpet*. Through the *prima materia* of this novel, the following portion of the paper explores two themes: the divine

generative couple/twins as they appear throughout philosophical imagery and the psychological implications of ornithological alchemy as relates to dual-sexed figures in Carrington's novel. In the very first pages, the elderly protagonist announces herself as a proudly bearded woman (5), followed by the mystical tale of her life in a retirement facility, including the *mise-en-abyme* story of the cross-dressing Abbess of the Convent of Santa Barbara de Tartarus (90), whose innermost frame references the hermaphroditic bearded Mother/Father goddess called Barbarus (113). As a bearded intersex woman who had never encountered any such figures outside of a circus "freak show," I could hardly believe what I was reading. Carrington also writes of a celestial winged hermaphrodite who will be discussed at length, but notably makes their first appearance on an ancient Hebrew scroll alongside the "two spirits which are known as Twins...the one Female and the other Male" who existed at the beginning of time (116).

These "Twins" call to mind the earlier stages of the alchemical process<sup>2</sup> as depicted in the *Rosarium Philosophorum* and *Aurora Consurgens*. As a creation story for Carrington, it seems likely they could represent the divine pair known as Sol and Luna, or a pair of similar opposites rooted in gender, celestial entities, and/or the elements. Like gender expansive people, this concept of creation emerging from divine opposition is hardly new; whether as Mother Earth and Father Sky, or the joining of the Sun and the Moon, Light and Dark, Matter and Void. Alchemical images of such a pair

---

<sup>2</sup> While there are certainly other classifications and an array of scholarly (and colloquial) debates regarding alchemical processes, Edinger employs the seven operations as: *calcinatio*, *solutio*, *coagulatio*, *sublimatio*, *mortificatio*, *separatio*, *coniunctio*.



provide a complex accounting of such a union with the first visual depictions of the alchemical hermaphrodite appearing in the *Aurora Consurgens* in the early 13th century (Forshaw 2). In one of these striking Medieval images, the talons of a blue-black raven wrap around the bodies of two heterosexual lovers conjoined at the hip, its beak open and ready to devour them (fig. 1). The enormous wings of the bird almost appear as if they belong to the nude figures who stand atop a pile of already deceased ravens.



Fig. 1 Hortulanus, *Aurora Consurgens* via [Europeana.eu](http://Europeana.eu)

Carrington writes of her creation

“Twins” saying, “And when these two Spirits Met such was the manner of the birth of the

Winged One [or the Feathered Hermaphrodite, Sefhirá]” (116-117). At first I assumed that by “Met” Carrington suggests they consummated their partnership, resulting in a conceived child. Yet the choice of word to describe their union is curious, and after delving into the alchemical imagery of Sol and Luna, I wonder if it holds deeper significance. In *Anatomy of the Psyche*, Edward Edinger compiles an assortment of art and literature to explore the processes of alchemical transformation and how they can be applied in Jungian psychoanalysis. While the alchemical couple appears relative to various steps in the journey of separation, transformation, and union, the operation most ubiquitously related to the specifically winged hermaphrodite is the *coniunctio*, which brings about the complete union of two opposites “to create a third substance with different properties” (Edinger 211). Perhaps this “manner of birth” that Carrington describes implies the literal meeting and merging of these male and female spirits in a *coniunctio* that results in a single winged dual-sexed being.

If the *coniunctio* image represents the pinnacle of alchemical transformation, then the conjoined couple enclosed in the raven’s wings ready to add their unified corpse to the pile is a classic demonstration of the process called *mortificatio* typically connected with death and a descent into the underworld. In a ternary alchemical system, this stage is known as the *nigredo* and associated with the color black, followed by *albedo* (white), and *rubedo* (red). Like the hermaphrodite, birds play an important role throughout alchemy but carrion birds such as ravens and crows typically

indicate a symbolic death<sup>3</sup> that must occur before the next stage can be reached. A particularly potent and healing dream of mine expresses the direct movement from the *nigredo* to *albedo*:

*I'm flying over a dark forest and land on a rock outcropping partway up a cliff's edge. Suddenly, a black crow flies toward me, demanding that I follow it. I refuse, but the crow is persistent and bites me, drawing blood. Turning angrily to fully face it for the first time, I watch the crow change from black to white. My whole attitude softens so that when it takes off this time, I joyfully follow.*

At the time of the dream, I was wrestling with some old guilt that had long outlived its usefulness. With none of the alchemical context I have now, my dream consciousness was able to harness the color-coded ornithological imagery to effectively clear the guilt from my psyche, facilitating a kind of death for those feelings. Edinger notes that *mortificatio* belongs to the archetype of the wounded healer (164) and through this dream—in what I now recognize as an undeniable testament to the power these symbols hold in the collective unconscious—I understood for the first time how my pain could be transformed into medicine, just as the crow transformed from black to white, attacker to friend, and as the alchemist seeks to transform lead into gold.

With that said, Edinger proposes *sublimatio* as the operation most ubiquitously associated with birds (122). Sublimation deals

---

<sup>3</sup> See the *Rosarium Philosophorum* for images of a conjoined couple using their tombstone as a marriage bed. Some images here and similar ones elsewhere show carrion birds on or above the hermaphrodite figure.

with the transformation of a solid into gas, evoking air, ascension, and the spiritual, naturally relating to birds and flight. The *Rosarium Philosophorum* of 1550 AD provides possibly the most classic visuals depicting the marriage of Sol and Luna via the hermaphroditic union, while surrealist author and artist Ithel Colquhoun offers a delicately woven account of such a couple in *The Goose of Hermogenes*. A stylistically similar tale within the tale, she writes of the young and innocent Oriole and Corolla who meet and instantly become inseparable (40). One day, Oriole shows Corolla a chapel on his grounds and they fly together up to the ceiling to better view a stained-glass window (44). At first she is hesitant, but over time flying becomes their joyful secret and even ends their tale as they follow a magical bird and fly into the sunset (49). While this story clearly represents the *coniunctio*, it bears the hallmarks of *sublimatio* as well, and beautifully evokes the spiritual transcendence of love and union.<sup>4</sup>

Edinger differentiates the symbolic meaning of ascending and descending birds, writing, “Upward movement eternalizes; downward movement personalizes” (142). We can see the truth of this contrasted in Oriole and Corolla's flight upwards into the sky, immortalizing their love beyond the physical realm vs. the descent of the *mortificatio* crow encircling the *Aurora Consurgens* couple, perhaps nodding to the way interpersonal conflict can shatter the fantasy of a romantic coupling. This duality foregrounds another alchemical operation: *circulatio*. As intoned at

---

<sup>4</sup> Like that of the “Twins” in *The Hearing Trumpet*, tales and images of such a pair abound. See the Tarot's Major Arcana for the journey of these “solar twins” in the Sun, Lovers, Tower, and Devil cards, to name a few (Campbell & Roberts).



this paper's opening, the infamous *Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus* promises that one who ascends and then descends will have "the power of the above and below...the glory of the whole world" (qtd. in Edinger 142). A medieval Islamic representation of this alchemical process is the image of two birds biting each other's tails in an unending cyclical movement, evoking the psychological "repeated circuit of all aspects of one's being" (143). As one revisits the juxtaposed aspects of the Self, one becomes aware of the "transpersonal center" and can facilitate true integration of all disparate parts, aka *coniunctio*.

The *circulatio* is epitomized through the ornithological symbol of the phoenix. Said to have originated in Egyptian myth, the phoenix gained farther-reaching popularity during Graeco-Roman rule, becoming a symbol associated with the savior of early Christianity owing to its capacity for resurrection (Brisson 112). Naturally associated with fire, the phoenix belongs primarily to the *calcinatio* operation, which initiates the alchemical process by purifying a substance through burning and reducing it to ash (Edinger 17). Adding an ancient intersex element to the mix, Lactantius' *Poem on the Phoenix* written circa 400 AD employs both Pagan and Christian subtext and refers to the bird with feminine articles: "Female or male she is, which you will, neither or both, a happy bird, she regards not any unions of love: to her, death is love...she is both herself and not herself, gaining eternal life by the boon of death" (qtd. in Brisson 113). As a self-generating—and self-regenerating—winged hermaphrodite, the

mythology surrounding the phoenix<sup>5</sup> embodies the cyclical *circulatio* and undoubtedly informed the philosophers of later alchemical practice, who presented the associated two most challenging and painful processes—*calcinatio* and *mortificatio*—as not only essential but beautiful operations in the transformation process. Thus, it is not just the creature's cyclical multiplicity but her *embrace* of the cycle itself, in all its glorious and grotesque stages of the unending spiral between life, death, and rebirth, that typifies a divine *coniunctio*.

Following this discussion of hermaphroditic twins, ornithological alchemy, and the phoenix of resurrection, I turn now to the other most ubiquitous winged alchemical figure: dragons. *The Hearing Trumpet's* internal story tells of Abbess Doña Rosalinda Alvarez Cruz della Cueva who quite dramatically gives birth to the bard Talliessin's child by first expanding to "such a monstrous size," then floating in the air, and finally exploding (124). What emerges in the aftermath is a "a boy, no bigger than a barn owl, luminously white and winged" who "they took...to be an angel" before he vanishes up into the observatory (124-125). The angel/devil dichotomy will be discussed at length later, although it feels significant to note the fluidity of this character who appears first as a winged cherub and re-emerges as a figure of destruction.

Back in the central narrative, Carrington and her comrades witness a tremendous earthquake, watching as the tower walls "split open like a broken egg" (166). Filled with mythic imagery and alchemical

---

<sup>5</sup> The phoenix is shockingly absent from Edinger's book, yet appears in many other alchemical works.

symbolism, the Tarot card deck(s)—and especially the Major Arcana—present an apropos hermetic companion for enriching this exploration in *The Hearing Trumpet* and beyond. In *Tarot Revelations*, Joseph Campbell examines the Marseilles Tarot deck alongside Richard Roberts' exploration of the now ubiquitous Rider-Waite version. The Tower of Destruction is described by Campbell as “the great lesson of the humbling of man’s pride” (21). In readings, people tend to fear the Tower card’s fiery imagery of destruction and its accompanying warning against the heights of pride, a mythic reference to the fall of the Tower of Babel whose architects believed it could be built as high as the heavens. Yet, as learned from the phoenix and the alchemical operations of *calcinatio* and/or *mortificatio*, destruction is not always a negative thing and can actually lead to a marvelous transformation and renewal. Evoking the poisonous qualities of sulphur, Jung directly names the “dragon of Babel” as a cause for the Biblical tower’s demolition (117). Carrington uses Sefhira and the broken tower for this precise reason: as a harbinger of the destruction and re-creation of the world.

Though not expressly a dragon, this winged figure who emerges from a cracked “egg” to reign fire upon the world certainly evokes the dragon archetype (nodding both to Babel and the dragon of Revelation). Carrington’s winged hermaphrodite—who I believe to be the matured cherub born from the exploded Abbess—is finally free: “It shone with a bright light coming from its own body, the body of a human being entirely covered with glittering feathers and armless. Six great wings sprouted from its body and quivered ready for flight” (166). The symbolism is electric as Sefhira, long trapped by the

man-made tower, their wild cosmogenic power hidden from humanity, is unleashed once more upon the world (fig. 2). Here, it is the gloriously winged hermaphrodite who brings about the humbling of the world, simultaneously revivifying the unbounded Great Goddess, an ancient generative creative force emerging alongside the destruction to facilitate a resurrection of the world.

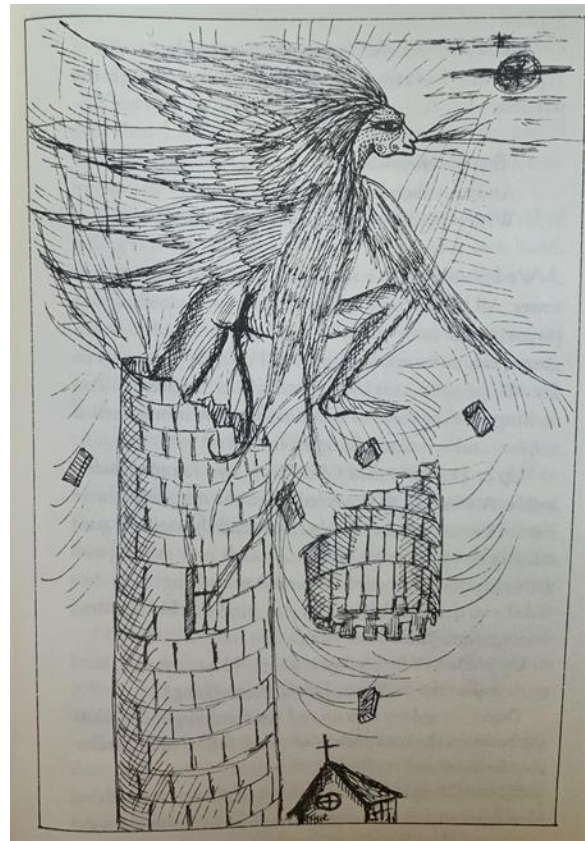


Fig. 2 Sefhira Escapes the Tower (Carrington 1967)

In the final few pages of *The Hearing Trumpet*, the likewise dual-sexed Great Goddess appears before the group as a collection of bees, saying that with her Grail cup returned, she will at last “drink again with the Horned God Sefhira the Pole Star, my husband and my son” (194). Marked by this primordial (and incestuous) reunion of the dark Earth Mother and the light Air

Father-Son, the world can truly begin to heal. For me, the winged hermaphrodite of *The Hearing Trumpet* evokes the destructive *calcinatio* and the spiritual ascent of *sublimatio*, above all signifying the wild queer creation spirit of humankind whose imprisonment engenders trends of repression and whose liberation grants a collective freedom of spirit.

When I first read the name Saphira, I remembered the book *Eragon* by Christopher Paolini, a favorite from my pre-teen obsession with fantasy, wherein the title character is accompanied throughout the series by a female dragon named Saphira.<sup>6</sup> Separately, my search for other examples of winged hermaphrodites quickly led me to a paper by Robert Blust entitled "The Origin of Dragons." Blust quite convincingly argues that dragons evolved syncretically from rainbows, sharing a trend towards multiplicity and androgyny. Looking at the "physical and behavioral traits attributed to dragons" across six major geographic locations, Blust traces the overlapping associations from different cultures, noting that connections to rain and bodies of water, flight, horns, scales, and an opposition to thunder, lightning,<sup>7</sup> or the sun are the most common traits (520).

The presence of more than one element connected with dragons in multiple cosmologies offers a compelling correspondence with the inherent pluralism of androgyny, bolstered by the elemental associations readily evident in dragon symbolism: Fire (breath/the sun), Water (rain/river/sea serpents), Earth (cave dwelling,

stone/iron scales), Air (flight/sky dwelling). Blust argues that dragons "like the rainbow [are] symbolically androgynous," intimating that both rainbows and dragons contain an inherent gender expansive psychological association (529). While he employs the outdated usage of "bisexual" to mean androgynous and/or intersex, the evidence he presents is remarkable. The Panare Indians of Venezuela view the rainbow as both female and male (528) and the Murinbata of Aboriginal Australia speak of a "Rainbow Snake as a male portrayed with female breasts" (529). A Balinese myth tells of the goddess<sup>8</sup> Uma, whose phallus is torn off and thrown into the sky, creating the first rainbow, and the Bantu people of Central Africa recognize the rainbow as uniting "male and female...fire and water, high and low" (529).

Sometimes the elemental gender alignments are reversed from hegemonic Western views such as among the South African Venda who consider water to be masculine and fire feminine, speaking to an ongoing debate among Taoist metaphysical scholars as to whether the dragon originated from the *yin* or *yang* principle (Blust 529). Blust also mentions the Mayan Celestial Iguana, Itzam Na, although somehow misses the feathered rainbow serpent Quetzalcoatl of Mesoamerica who unites sky and earth as a sometimes androgynous figure (Estrada 10). Likewise, the Yoruba Orisha of the rainbow, called Osumare, is often depicted as a serpent, with some versions of the myth explicitly naming them as intersex, while in other descriptions, the Orisha lives half the year as male and the other half as female ("Orisha

<sup>6</sup> Jung would likely call Saphira an external manifestation of his *anima*, but that is a different paper.

<sup>7</sup> Lightning typically appears on the Tarot Tower card, serving as another connection between Carrington's Saphira and the dragon of Babel (Campbell & Roberts).

<sup>8</sup> Gender expansive term for a deity who could be considered transgender, nonbinary, and/or intersex.

Osumare”). Specifics aside, Osumare serves as a symbol of transformation, unity, and balance and plays a role in the Yoruba creation myth, just like *The Hearing Trumpet’s* “Twins” and many of the rainbow serpent deities mentioned above (“Orisha Osumare”).

Blust directly references the alchemical dragon of European literature, calling it “a symbol of the philosophical concept of the conjunction of the opposites (sometimes portrayed as a regal androgyne)” (529). In addition to the obvious *coniunctio* implied by the union of opposing elements in the rainbow and dragon, many, if not all, of Edinger’s

To complexify the plurality present in dragon lore, my mind is drawn toward the juxtaposed characterization of dragons in myth, fiction, and pop-culture. On one end of the spectrum reside purely friendly companion dragons, while on the other there are the myriad stories of a gallant young knight who must slay the evil monster dragon to rescue a fair maiden. In these cases, the dragon is often dismembered, evoking the *mortificatio* operation in which, as Jung suggests, the dragon is “a personification of the instinctual psyche” (qtd. in Edinger 150). In one particularly fascinating image from the

*Atalanta Fugiens* (1617 AD), Sol and Luna slay a dragon together (fig. 3), signifying their need to overcome this “primordial psyche”—relating to the lesser *coniunctio*—before they can achieve a truly divine union (Edinger 152). This first phase of *coniunctio* typically deals with lust and brings about a unification of the flesh that often precedes a necessary *mortificatio*, exemplified in another image in the *Atalanta Fugiens*, where a woman and a dragon embrace in an open grave, each killing the other (Edinger 213). According to Edinger, this *coniunctio* creates an ego identification “with contents emerging from the unconscious,” often resulting in “individual and

collective transferences” due to a murkiness of the individual’s sense of self (213). This calls to mind an unhealthy form of enmeshment that romantic partners can experience—sometimes called codependency—where the pair become lost in an ongoing pattern of unconscious wounding followed by repair rooted in a compulsive identification with the other or with the relationship itself.



Fig. 3 Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens*, 1618, via Europeana.eu

alchemical operations reference dragons, often through elemental association.<sup>9</sup> The intertwining of the elements, genders, and both creation and destruction follow the dual-sexed dragon at every mythological turn.

<sup>9</sup> *Calcinatio* is fire, *solutio* is water, *coagulatio* is earth, *sublimatio* is air (Edinger 18).

Similarly, Jung discusses the ouroboros symbol of simultaneous self-destruction and generation, equating the serpent eating its own tail to the fear of incest, particularly regarding procreation between mother and son (qtd. in Edinger 255). Clarifying that "the dragon is saturated with his water and coagulated, and so he eats his tail," Jung offers a darker take on the self-regenerating hermaphrodite (Jung 191). Where the phoenix exists in the realm of fire and air as a hopeful symbol of rebirth, the *coagulatio* dragon elicits a sense of cannibalistic and incestuous horror linked to the dark and damp of water and earth. The archetypal mother-as-monster invokes the dragons of primordial seas such as Tiamat or the Leviathan and harkens back to the reunion of Sefhira and the Goddess at the end of *The Hearing Trumpet*, although this reunion is presented by protagonist and author as a blessed and welcome one.

In "The Origin of Dragons," Blust proposes that these ancient sea serpents exhibited moral flexibility and were not considered "wholly evil but...ambivalent both in nature and in impact" (526). Though ambivalence is commonly defined as neutrality, the term's etymological roots refer to someone who has strong, often conflicting feelings on both sides<sup>10</sup> (*Online Etymology*). In similar milieus as the outdated "bisexual," "sexual ambivalence" has been a word deployed in reference to intersex and androgynous people, alongside the likewise old-fashioned term "ambisexual." While most early 20th century psychologists approached gender expansive people with negative assumptions, I wonder

---

<sup>10</sup> From the German *ambivalenz* coined in 1910 by Swiss psychologist Eugen Bleuler with Latin roots *ambi-* "both, on both sides" and *valentia* "strength" from *valere* "be strong" (*Online Etymology*).

what a positive assumption of this capacity to hold multiple truths at once would yield—perhaps a sense of inner strength and flexibility that would feel understandably threatening to the more rigid prevailing epistemology (the kinds of ideas likely explored in the tragically lost work of Magnus Hirschfeld).

With etymological intertwining of sex/gender ambivalence and moral ambivalence in mind, the dragons in modern stories like *Eragon*, *Game of Thrones*, and *The NeverEnding Story*, take on new meaning, particularly in comparison with the purely evil dragons slain by knights. The dragons of *Eragon* and *GoT* represent a middle-ground kind of monster-as-companion archetype, where their fearsome capacity for violence can be tamed and harnessed due to a unique and familial bond with a human (perhaps akin to an "ambivalence" that simultaneously terrifies their foes and comforts their allies). However, the dragon Falkor from the 1980s popular film *The NeverEnding Story* is described as a "Luck Dragon" and only exhibits friendly and supportive behavior throughout the entire film, posing no threat of violence, even to the protagonist's enemies (Petersen). I can likewise recall many stories from my childhood that feature purely friendly dragons, such as *Puff the Magic Dragon* and *The Knight and the Dragon* by Tomie dePaola. Another significant dream from several years ago addresses the psychological complexity of dragons through an encounter with a Tiamat-like serpent of the sea:

*Rejected from a foreign realm, a different dimension, I am falling toward the dark waters below. Barely able to stay afloat in the waves, terror grips me as I suddenly sense a giant*



*creature moving in the depths. But I realize I shouldn't make assumptions, and they might be able to help me. Lifting only its head above water, the enormous serpent unceremoniously observes that I do not belong here and, with some cajoling, agrees to help me find the way back to my world. They carry me through the water (showing only occasional frustration at my humanness), serving as a guide to the portal that will take me home.*

Through the lens of ambivalence, I see my shift from terror to hope as a kind of psychological plurality mirrored in how the ancient archetypal serpent engaged with me, somehow both annoyed *and* supportive. By exploring elemental associations, androgyny relating to rainbows, and moral complexity in storytelling and psychology, dragons seem to exemplify an inherent multiplicity on par with the alchemical hermaphrodite, undoubtedly amplifying their relationship as the only two symbols associated with every alchemical process of transformation. If we are to follow these connections and view dragons as a symbol interchangeable with the winged hermaphrodite, then I would suggest that the mythic slaying of the dragon could be read as a tragic destruction of the ancient and divine androgyne, like the caging of Carrington's Sephira, in a display of ego-driven—often patriarchal—externalized domination and internalized repression of multiplicity.

Speaking of the patriarchy, Christian-coded symbolism permeates European alchemical imagery, often equating the figure of Christ with the final *coniunctio* hermaphrodite. Considering His pluralities as both human and divine, combined with a frequent presence of both male and female

characteristics, *The Book of the Holy Trinity* describes how “Jesus Christ becomes the ultimate hermaphrodite” (Forshaw 4). In addition to ornithological themes of *sublimatio* ascension (e.g. the dove, the holy spirit), Christ was often likened to the aforementioned phoenix of resurrection,<sup>11</sup> making him “analogous to the [Philosopher's] Stone” (Forshaw 4). In the *Rosarium Philosophorum*, this final *coniunctio* winged hermaphrodite is called “The Demonstration of Perfection” and is followed by *Aenigma Regis*, “The Riddle of the King,” which begins: “Here is born the king of all glory” in an indisputable reference to Christ as King in both heaven and earth (“The Rosary of the Philosophers”). Evoking the power and mystery of total integration, the conjoined figure boasts bat-like wings, crowns on their two heads, and holds a cup with three snakes in one hand and a single snake in the other. Of note, the snakes appear feathered and, at least to my eye, look rather more like eels, the notoriously mysterious and sometimes hermaphroditic serpents of the sea (“European Eel”). The figure also stands atop a triple-headed serpent, signifying the conquered “lesser” *coniunctio* dragon while

He giveth fortitude, long life, beauty  
And Purity. He expelleth Anger,  
Sorrow, Poverty and diseases  
Blessed is he on whom God bestows  
this gift.” (“The Rosary of the  
Philosophers”)

I have encountered a complete lack of scholarship that would explain (or explore) why the wings of the hermaphroditic *Rosarium* couple are feathered in earlier sequential images and leathery in this final stage. Yet *The Book of the Holy Trinity* also

---

<sup>11</sup> See Campbell & Roberts 142, Brisson 112.

shows two alchemical dual-sexed figures that both have bat-like wings, calling "one good and Mercurial and the other evil and Luciferian" (Forshaw 4). Turning from the dual-sexed Christ to the hermaphroditic Lucifer, the Tarot provides an evocative depiction of the winged Devil. Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* proposes a version of the Devil whose intersex form also features bat wings, taloned feet, and a pair of "solar twins" on either side (61). He says, "I am the angel who dwells in the point where lines fork. Whoever retraces the way of divided things encounters me, whoever descends to the bottom of contradictions runs into me, whoever mingles again what was separated feels my membraned wing brush his cheek!" (61). With each description, the Devil references an alchemical operation: "divided things" is *separatio*, "descends" is *mortificatio*, "mingles" is *coniunctio*. Unlike common perception of the Devil as purely evil, Calvino's version offers multiplicity and ambivalence akin to that of the ancient sea serpents.

Perhaps a more frequent characterization of Lucifer is the Biblical serpent of temptation who convinces Eve to eat the apple. Richard Roberts acknowledges the serpent as a "form of this so-called Devil," emphasizing that the snake of Eden is wrapped around the "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, that is, of the pairs of opposites" on the World Tarot card (74). This suggests to me that the serpent/dragon/Devil archetype can be viewed as one who entwines, or encompasses, dualities. Indeed, a great conundrum of the Christian Devil arrives etymologically through the name Lucifer, meaning "lightbringer." He is famously an angel first—as noted by Calvino's Devil of the Tarot—whose fall headfirst from heaven to earth Roberts links with the Hanged Man, calling him an ideal

vessel for the "divine outpouring" of light on earth (140). Thus, the alchemical Lucifer can be seen to share divinity with humanity through his sacrifice and descent, not unlike the mirrored story told in Christ's sacrifice and ascension.

The fallen angel from heaven to earth and the earth-born child of God who rises to the heavens again evoke the *circulatio* described in the opening *Emerald Tablet* quote. Both archetypes appear in Tarot, with the Christ-like Temperance card preceding the Devil as a similarly androgynous figure, markedly boasting a rainbow above their head and straddling the realms with one foot on land and one on water. Indeed, Campbell observes that the angelic Temperance "is the first winged figure in the series" and represents "control of the [physical] appetites" as well as "the virtue of humility" (19). These Christ-like qualities oppose the formerly discussed characteristics affiliated with the Devil card of temptation and pride, which Campbell calls the "ultimate sin," naming a refusal to humble himself in heaven as the reason for Lucifer's fall (20).

While Christ and Lucifer so often appear at odds—each representing only one aspect of the duality of good and evil—perhaps their hermaphroditic alchemical archetypes exist both *in* and *of* cyclical transformation, demonstrated through a mutual aim towards integrated liberation and amplified by their fluidity of gender and ability to traverse the realms of heaven, earth, and even hell. Like the two birds biting each others' tails, they are caught in an unending circle with Christ as Phoenix and Lucifer as Dragon, each individually indicative of every stage of transformation while moving in oppositional unison along the circular paths between above and below.

Quoting a 12th century alchemical text, Campbell references the World Tarot card saying, “*God is an intelligible sphere, whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere*” (24). As a final *coniunctio* image for this exploration, he calls the figure at the center of the Tarot’s World egg “the dancing female androgyne of the alchemists” (24). Said to contain all four elements including the fifth “quintessence,” the alchemical egg is held by the stunning winged hermaphrodite of the 1582 AD *Splendor Solis* (fig. 4). With the egg in



Fig. 4 Trismosin, 1582, Splendor Solis via Europeana.eu

one hand as a symbol of the holistic alchemical mystery, the mirror in their other hand is round and also invokes the elements with rings of fire, air, and water, showing a reflection of the natural landscape at its center. According to Edinger, the *multiplicatio* quality of the Philosopher’s Stone occurs when it “projects itself upon base matter and thereby multiplies itself” (227), not unlike that of a reflection in a mirror that multiplies the presence of whatever image it encounters. A phrase I often hear is

that “hurt people *hurt people*,” yet I have never heard it said that “healed people *heal people*.” Perhaps this could be the externalization of the healing attained by an individual achieving unification of the disparate elements of their Self, which is to say that an individual with a healthy integrated psyche might gently nudge those around them toward that same type of healing simply by virtue of their presence.

In fact, I would propose that it is the radical acceptance of the very idea of inherent multiplicity in the Self that grants the alchemical hermaphrodite their wings in the final *coniunctio*, allowing them to step into their full and embodied power as a symbol of psycho-spiritual healing and possibility. While it would be easy to suggest a romanticized conclusion that intersex/trans/nonbinary people are the magical property which, like the Philosopher’s Stone, can heal the world, I believe the more apt message of this paper lies not in what people with gender expansive bodies can do for the world, but how their experiences with the internal and external cycles of oppression and liberation speak to all of us. In my own journey of reclaiming and elevating the aspects of my intersex body that I formerly experienced as shameful, I am beginning to learn the meaning of transmuting that which is lowest into highest while holding compassionate space for the cyclical moments when it becomes lowest again. Perhaps the winged hermaphrodite’s lesson is less about embodying everything, everywhere, all at once, and more about a psychological and spiritual elasticity that embraces a constantly spiraling reality and cultivates a sacred ambivalence opportune for adapting to life’s sudden changes as we each fly ever closer to the full expression of our true multitudinous Self.

## Works Cited

- "Ambivalence (n.)." *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 19 Sept. 2022, [www.etymonline.com/word/ambivalence](http://www.etymonline.com/word/ambivalence).
- Blust, Robert. "The Origin of Dragons." *Anthropos*, vol. 95, no. 2, 2000, pp. 519–36. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40465957>.
- Brisson, Luc. *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*. University of California Press, 2002.
- Calvino, Italo. *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. Translated by William Weaver, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998.
- Campbell, Joseph, and Richard Roberts. *Tarot Revelations*. Vernal Equinox Press, 1987.
- Carrington, Leonora. *The Hearing Trumpet*. New York Review of Books, NY, 2020.
- Colquhoun, Ithell, et al. *Goose of Hermogenes*. Peter Owen Publishers, 2018.
- Edinger, Edward F. *Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy*. Open Court, 1994.
- "European Eel." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/animal/European-eel>.
- Estrada, Gabriel S. "An Aztec Two-Spirit Cosmology: Re-Sounding Nahuatl Masculinities, Elders, Femininities, and Youth." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2/3, 2003, pp. 10–14. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3347344>.
- Forshaw, Peter J. "Alchemical Images." *Encyclopedia of Early Modern Philosophy and the Sciences*, 2020, pp. 1–10, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20791-9\\_472-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-20791-9_472-1).
- "GMC: Orisha Osumare." *Temple of Athena the Savior*, 9 Sept. 2016, [templeofathena.wordpress.com/2016/09/09/gmc-orisha-osumare/](http://templeofathena.wordpress.com/2016/09/09/gmc-orisha-osumare/).
- Hortulanus, et al. *Aurora Consurgens*, Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland, Zürich, Zentralbibliothek, Switzerland, [https://www.europeana.eu/item/9200211/en\\_list\\_one\\_zbz\\_Ms\\_Rh\\_0172](https://www.europeana.eu/item/9200211/en_list_one_zbz_Ms_Rh_0172).
- Jung, C. G. *Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 14: Mysterium Coniunctionis*. Edited by GERHARD ADLER and R. F. C. HULL, Princeton University Press, 1970. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhr0d>.
- Kull, Kira. "Bringing Intersexy Back." *Wussy*, vol. 11, Spring 2023, pp.169-174.
- Maier, Michael, et al. *Emblema XXV. DRACO non moritur, nisi cum fratre ☿ sorore sua interficiatur, qui sunt Sol ☿ Luna. Atalanta Fugiens*, Ex Typographia Hieronymi Galleri, 1618, pp. 109, National Library of France, France, [https://www.europeana.eu/item/9200519/ark\\_\\_12148\\_btv1b100378431](https://www.europeana.eu/item/9200519/ark__12148_btv1b100378431).
- Petersen, Wolfgang, director. *The NeverEnding Story*. *HBO Max*, 1984, <https://play.hbomax.com/player/urn:hbo:feature:GXrHtWA2beYmBSgEAAACU>.
- "The Rosary of the Philosophers (Part 5)." *The Alchemy Website*, Leivity.com, <http://www.leivity.com/alchemy/rosary5.html>.
- Trismosin, Salomon, et al. "The Hermetic Androgyne," *Splendor Solis*, 1582, Wellcome Collection, United Kingdom, <https://www.europeana.eu/item/9200579/mhr6kdaw>.





Socializing Amidst Pillars / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull



# The Ground is Alive: *A Psychology of Embodied Religion*

---

Rick Alexander, MA

Keywords: Religion, Embodiment, Psychology, Voodoo

Content Warning: Mention of Racial Trauma, Slavery, and Oppression  
of African Traditions Under Colonialism

When used in a Western and predominantly Christian context in the 21st century, the term religion refers mainly to a set of intellectual beliefs. To be religious in this sense is to accept either that a statement is true or that something exists, meaning that religion is primarily about the story one tells themselves, presumably with the secondary hope that such a story will inspire action and habit to align with the truth claim that has been taken on faith. This way of viewing religion is expressed in common parlance whenever a religious person is identified as a "believer." As an example of this way of viewing religion, when applying to a Christian seminary, acceptance into the program was contingent on my willingness to sign a "faith statement," independent of my participation in any ritual or particular way of being. This is not to insinuate that ritual is unimportant in a Christian context, only to show that it is underemphasized in comparison to the centrality of belief. To view this primarily intellectual orientation as the only way of expressing what it means to be religious, however, is to restrict the term religion to the way it is often used and carried out in Western society.

The aim of this paper is to compare the above modern Western view of religion with the sentiments expressed in religions of the African diaspora thereby highlighting a more complete picture of what it means to be religious. To explore and understand ways of relating to religious life that fall outside of the belief-centric perspective of Western Christianity, I propose the term "embodied religion." Particularly with Santeria and Haitian Vodoun, one can see that an emphasis toward embodiment rather than the intellect creates unique differences that change the way devotees interact with religious symbols,

engage in ritual, commune with the archetypal realm, and ultimately relate to the Ground of Being<sup>1</sup> itself. Whether or not one is religious in this context is not only a question of what one believes but also of how one orients their body in time and place, as well as in one's aesthetical response to the felt sense of the spiritual realm.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Ground of Being is a term employed by Aldous Huxley in *The Perennial Philosophy*. "The divine Ground of all existence is a spiritual Absolute, ineffable in terms of discursive thought, but (in certain circumstances) susceptible of being directly experienced and realized by the human being" (21). It is used here as an ontological statement to denote Absolute reality, which depending on one's religious orientation may or may not be conceived of theistically, making it applicable for our comparative analysis.

The English word religion stems from the Latin *religio* which signifies a psychological disposition that can be characterized as a reverence for God or the gods, i.e. for the unseen powers traditionally associated with the divine. Note that when using the term psychological here I am not referring only to “mind” or “brain” as is often done in post-enlightenment thought where psyche and matter are considered mutually exclusive. Many traditional cultures, including those of African descent discussed in this paper, do not recognize any such division and as such, can give us a functional image of what an embodied approach to religious life looks like. Rather than proceed with presupposed dualism, psyche in this context refers to an integral whole where biology and consciousness interpenetrate each other and partake of the same reality. Such a holistic definition of psyche already begins to bridge the divide between belief and action. Thus, the psychological disposition associated with the term *religio*, necessarily refers to an orientation toward the divine that includes the whole of one’s being.

The roots of *religio*, although historically obscure, are popularly thought to have originally meant “to bind or to connect” (New World Encyclopedia). If religion is defined more in alignment with its etymology “to bind,” we can infer that it characterizes a disposition in which disparate elements of the cosmological order are reconnected and brought back into the whole. Religion is then a way of orienting toward the world that includes a reconnection or re-ligamenting of what has been separated. Specifically, it is through religion that humans are reconnected to, and find their place within, a larger order; for many religious adherents, a divine order.

The way in which that reconnection takes place, either laying heavy emphasis on the intellect or on embodied action is a matter of a particular religious practice, but both can and should be seen to adequately characterize a religious way of being.

Such a view widens the Westerners’ frame of reference leaving room for a plurality about what it means to be religious in the first place. Further, the intellectual bent insinuated with the modern use of the term alienates aspects of religious life which may be thought of as having to do primarily with embodied action, irrespective of intellectual understanding, which in themselves bring about their own kinds of meaning-making, revelation, and ways of relating to the cosmological order. It is worth noting here that in the same way the intellect and body are not mutually exclusive, neither are belief and action. It is strictly a matter of emphasis, though that should not be understood as *merely* a matter of emphasis. For when one is speaking of the ultimate nature of things in the way that religion attempts to do, what one places emphasis on can inform everything down to the smallest minute detail of everyday life. Additionally, as in the case of Haitian Voudoun, for example, such a distinction became the difference between life and death for the adherents who struggled under the weight of religious tyranny.

### **A Dynamic Ontology**

To even begin to understand the worldview associated with African diaspora religions, which contain within themselves an enormous variety of practices and traditions, it is prudent to first seek an understanding of how the worldview they possess dramatically differs from that generally found in the West.

In part, this is because the term religion itself is a generally Western word stemming first from Roman culture. It is true of indigenous spiritual traditions the world over that they simply do not have a separate word for what the West considers "religion." This speaks both to the difficulty a Westerner may have in projecting such a term onto these traditions in order to study them, as well as the propensity to divide things which indigenous cultures have no intention of dividing. Thus, from a Western perspective, one should proceed humbly and with caution, knowing that until one takes on the ontological position they seek to study by looking at the world through the adherents eyes, they simply cannot adequately interpret what they are perceiving.

This propensity to divide, however, does help us understand the ontological position that one begins with in Western culture, which has been radically influenced by rationalistic materialism. Western post-enlightenment consciousness often takes inanimate materiality and sterile reason, built upon Aristotelian logic, to be the foundation of reality. In this view, the physical world constitutes what is "real," and is thus completely separate from the spiritual realm. Further, it is through reason without paradox or ambiguity that reality organizes itself and thus, becomes intelligible. For the Westerner operating within this view of reality, metaphysical assertions are mere speculations that belong only to the realm of belief, and thus they are rarely, if ever, seen as integral to the framework of materiality.

As an alternative example, Maya Deren's book *Divine Horseman* provides an introduction to Haitian Voudoun which gives us a radically different ontological position. In this tradition it is the spiritual realm that

provides the basis for reality and therefore conditions a devotee's movements and actions within reality. Thus, religious ceremonies are not only about devotional worship but also have practical implications for how the devotee should engage with the world. To even speak of practicality and spirituality as separate in this context makes little sense, for in the mind of adherents, both are integral to human life. "In Haiti it is precisely the loa and the ancestors who are consulted for technical and practical advice in reference to planting, building and, certainly medicinal remedies" (Deren 189). The *loa* in Voudoun are spirits who serve as intermediaries between the human realm and the transcendent creator. Psychologically speaking, the *loa* are personified archetypes, similar to the gods of ancient Greece that preside over particular aspects of being. Save for a few fervent holdouts, the Westerner, even the religious minded Westerner, can hardly imagine a world where the archetypal realm is consulted before the doctor, or worse, the doctor and the mediator of the archetype are one and the same person. The view present within the traditions of the African diaspora, where the practical and spiritual support each other, is summarized well by Mircea Eliade who writes, "The sacred world provides the models or archetypes for meaningful action in the profane world of ordinary life" (qtd. in Murphy 129). Again, it should be noted that even to posit such a distinction between sacred and profane in this way is a projection of Western categories that are meant to aid in Western understanding. The Haitian Voudoun devotee themselves would likely just call it life, which is best lived in harmony within the divine order that is governed by, and proceeds from, the spiritual realm.

It should also be noted here that the very act of being “embodied” demands a certain practicality. For it is only in the mind that one can escape into the past which exists nowhere in reality; into the future that is yet to happen and is equally impoverished in relation to its existence; or into high-minded abstractions, second-order meaning and intellectual reasoning. The life of the body is inextricably anchored to the present moment and thus its concerns also must be. To be in the body is to necessarily concern oneself with practicality.

Beginning with the spiritual or archetypal dimension as the foundation for practical life also necessarily means that the fixed world of form is not as fixed as it first appears. In his book of the same title, Joseph M. Murphy describes Santeria by noting that “the real world is one not of objects at all but of forces in continual process” (130). To understand the ground of reality in this religious perspective, we must understand this idea of continuous process and movement. The whole thing is alive as a dance between form and the spirit that animates that form. As Mary Starks Whitehouse reminds us, “movement is the great law of life” (qtd. in Pallaro 41). Everything alive moves. All of reality in Santeria is conditioned by a principle known as *ashe*. “*Ashe* is growth, the force toward completeness and divinity” (Murphy 130). Similar to the Hindu Tantric notion of Shakti, *ashe* is the existential ground of all reality and is characterized by its dynamism and aliveness. Moreover, it is the aspect of divinity which theologians refer to as immanence, that which is right here and immediately available to incarnate life. Thus, in this conception, the existential is found in and through the material. In light of this, all of

reality should not be viewed as sitting upon a static bedrock but rather upon a vibrating animation whose only constant is continuous change. In Santeria, this movement does not shift at random but is instead always moving toward Olodumare, a supreme but remote spirit who is ultimately the owner of heaven and all human destinies: “Olodumare is the object of *ashe*, the ultimate harmony and direction of all forces” (Murphy 130). Harmony in this sense is a result of the self organization that rises out of an innate relational capacity which is built into the very substructure of Being itself. In this view, the disparate elements and animating forces of creation all seek a *religio*, that is, a reconnection or harmony with each other through the force known as *ashe*.

In examining Santeria’s ontology, where the ground of Being is dynamic and reciprocally engaged, we are given a model for not only the way things are with the world, but also for the way humanity can participate in the way things are. It is for this reason that within religions of the African diaspora there is an emphasis on dance and bodily movement. Murphy further explains, “Santeria is a danced religion because dancing expresses the fundamental dynamism of *ashe*” (131). The devotee that dances liberates *ashe* and channels it in the body. This is accomplished in two primary ways.

In one way, because the very ground of Being itself is alive, to move is to accord oneself with reality, therefore the act of movement helps an individual find themselves within the larger order of Olodumare. Perhaps one of the most potent ways that human meaning is made is to realize that people are not, as modern reductionist materialism would have them believe, the end product of random chance

with no purpose outside of the purpose that they can assign to themselves, but are instead, able to find their own story nested within the context of a larger story. This, in fact, is a potent benefit of religious adherence and a primary way of human meaning making; to see the purpose of the individual part in its reconstitution with the whole. How much more meaningful it then becomes when that reconciliation and harmony is felt in the body and not only as intellectual abstraction.

The second way that dance helps one relate to the world is through the trance-like state that movement can bring about. "Special states of mind brought on by dance reveal the world as it truly is, a world of unfiltered *ashe*" (Murphy 131). Thus, movement reveals the essence of life. It does not make sense, however, to articulate such a revelation in terms of Cartesian knowledge or explanatory concepts to be believed in, as if life's essence could be distilled into a dogma or the right configuration of facts. To see this as the only method for attaining knowledge would be to move back into the modern scientific worldview and to discount the kinds of participatory knowledge that come as a result of one's engagement with the world. In contrast, the truth as revealed in the African diasporic context can only be experienced. Moreover, dance is not only a participatory engagement with revelation, it is also the means of worship that puts one in right-relationship with what has been revealed.

Another point of ontological departure between Western religious thinking and that of the African religious traditions such as Voudoun, is the fundamentally reciprocal nature between the spiritual and the human realm. Within the Abrahamic religions, there is the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*; creation out of

nothing. In this schema, creator and creation are separate and the flow of dependent relationality moves in only one way; the creature depends on the divine but certainly not vice versa. Voudoun, in contrast, pictures a cosmos where energy flows in both directions. "In Voudoun the cosmic drama of man consists not of a dualism, a conflict of the irreconcilable down-pull of flesh and the up-pull of spirit; it is rather, an almost organic dynamic, a process by which all that which characterizes divinity—intelligence, power, energy, authority, wisdom—evolves out of the flesh itself" (Deren, 27). Here, humanity and the spiritual world are, in the words of Maya Deren, "eternally and mutually committed: the flesh to the divinity within it and the divinity to the flesh of its origin" (127).

The commitment of divinity to flesh is vastly different from the Western worldview. In this perspective, the spiritual realm, communed with first through the *loa*, are made of the ancestors. Hence the divine world evolves out of the material world giving a unique importance to the body as origin. A soul is first matured and grown out of the flesh of the individual person. Over time, through the process of death, one's soul evolves, first as an individual spirit, and over much time, into a spiritual principle or symbol, as the individual personality fades into the background of history. A spiritual symbol within this framework thus derives its potency and power from the ancestors—the embodied beings—that have gone before. The importance of this should not be overlooked, for it signifies that earthly life has divine significance and further, that one imbued with earthly life has a commitment to live, not just think, in a particular way that is commensurate with the entire order of things.



## Exclusivity in the Mind, Plurality in the Body

We need not speculate about the differences between the intellectual Western religious orientation and the African embodied religious orientation because the brutal history of slave trade in Haiti provides us with a case study, not only in the differences between the two but also in what happens when they come together in a struggle for dominance. Perhaps one of the most astounding aspects of African diaspora religions the world over is their resilience and ability to adapt and provide meaning under the most unimaginably dire of circumstances. The history of slavery in Haiti gives us insight into the way embodied religion provides resilience against suppressive forces and can help a people survive amidst the rigid intellectual exclusivity and physical violence of colonial invasion. In addition to the collective mythic elements that allowed the Haitian people to win their freedom and become the first nation to permanently abolish slavery<sup>2</sup>, it is also prudent to look at how, as individuals, they were motivated to maintain a connection with their past amidst an environment of tyranny that wished to erase it.

In Haitian Voudoun, the power of the *loa*, and thus the power of the spiritual world is directly tied to one's engagement with it. Engagement here is not a way of thinking or believing as much as it is a way of living religiously; an embodied experience and participation with the forces that shape reality. In light of this, Deren says, "the serviteur does

not say "I believe." He says: "I serve." And it is the act of service—the ritual—which infuses both man and matter with divine power" (187). While many Haitian people converted to Catholicism, either by force or choice, many others continued their practice out of an obligation to serve the ancestors and stay connected to the source of power they would need to pursue the dangerous path of freedom. Because this spiritual power stems from religious acts rather than mental devotion, the adherents were able to continue to serve, even while the colonialists forbade the belief.

Monotheism, when expressed solely through the literalism of belief, demands a rigid exclusivity. If one's religion is expressed solely through a professed commitment to a deity, then obviously any deity that goes by a different name is, by definition, outside of that particular religious "belief." During slavery in Haiti, French slave owners forbade Voudoun as a religion and physically punished anyone caught practicing any religion outside of Catholicism. What happens, though, when religion is more than what is professed?

While animistic religions are often dismissed by Western thinkers as "primitive" for their simplicity, the sophisticated religious system practiced by the Haitian people shows this to be inaccurate. Deren describes the Haitian Voudoun worldview as a complex system of thought where divinity exists on a spectrum, which on one end is marked by the High God of Africa, a totally abstract first source and evolutionary principle, and on the other end by the *loa*, which like the saints of Catholicism "are considered to be on a level far below God" (55-56). Also like the saints, the *loa* act as a divine mediator and can be appealed to for wisdom, guidance and help in navigating the human realm. This sophisticated

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on this, See Maya Deren's section entitled *The New World Answers for the New World Needs* (61), which depicts the role that the Rada loa (considered protective) and the Petro loa (considered aggressive) played in inspiring the Haitian people to take back their freedom from French colonist.

hierarchy of the divine is important for a number of reasons but chief among them in regard to the survival of the religion is the fact that it allowed the Haitian people to find parallels within their own system of thought. For them, the Catholic system did not present a threat in the same way that the system of Voudoun did for the Catholics. In fact, not only did it not threaten their religion, it added to it. Because the highest principle of this African religion was out of reach to humanity, the addition of Christ as a symbol between the *loa* and God Most High provided an important link in connection.

Part of the way African diaspora religions survived also comes down to the fact that when one's spiritual practice is primarily embodied, that is to say, independent of words, one is free to find parallels in word and image without transgressing against one's religion. Therefore a practice in Haiti developed where slaves who were forbidden to practice their native religion began to use the images of Catholic saints within Voudoun ceremonies, while in their hearts finding parallels to their own native divinities (Deren 56-67). Of course, such an affordance could not be extended to a religious adherent if what they meant by religion consisted solely of a set of beliefs.

### **Embodying the Symbol**

To speak of symbols in the context of African diaspora religions, we in the West must resist our inclination to see them in relation to secondary or higher order meaning. For the Haitian practitioner, it would make no sense to ask what a symbol "means" as if the intellectual meaning is somehow more real than the ritual acts performed. "The real visible action of a ritual is not the symbolic statement of some idea; on the contrary, it would be the verbal

statement, the metaphysical concept, or the abstract idea which would be understood as a symbol, at one remove from the reality of the act or fact" (Deren, 194). It is moving the body in reality that is ultimate and not representative of some larger truth. Thus, the movement of the practitioner and the larger truth are one and the same. It is through this that duality is collapsed into a non-dual orientation; the seeker and what is sought cease to be experientially different from each other. What's more, is that through the performance of the act, the devotee is learning through an embodied pedagogy. Theologian Theodore Jennings refers to this as the "noetic function" of ritual. For him "ritual does not primarily teach us to see differently but to act differently" (qtd in Grimes 328). In Haitian Voudoun, "The major educational service of rituals would be vitiated if they were symbolic in nature" (Deren 194). Participation and movement are how ritual knowledge is passed on to the doer of action. "The [ritual] action reaffirms first principles—destiny, strength, love, life, death" (198), which are felt as living realities here and now.

One way that the difference in orientation can be felt is through the examination of a common symbol. Both Christianity and Haitian Voudoun make use of the cross as a primary symbol for engaging with the unconscious. As a root metaphor for both, it highlights the intersection of the horizontal (human) and vertical (spiritual) plane. The difference of course, is how these symbols are integrated into ceremony and, ultimately, into the devotee. In Protestant Christian religious service, the cross is always kept at a distance, typically hung out of reach behind the altar in the back of the church. In Roman Catholicism, the cross is also hung in the back

but, in an attempt to bring it closer to the individual, is often signed across the body. While kneeling to pray is also typical of both services, one may notice that most movements within these traditions are typically linear and minimal, as if the rigidity and exclusivity of the belief system has been enforced on the movement of the body.

Ceremonies in Haitian Voudoun or Santeria always start with offerings which are signaled first toward the cardinal points. The first movement is not up and away from the human plane but is grounded within it. When newcomers are brought into the ritual, it is typical that they would walk the four cardinal directions, stopping at each point to bow and kiss the ground three times (Deren 205-206). The movement of their entire body is what first makes the cross. One sees right away that an embodied religion also includes worship that is directed both upward and downward and is grounded in physical reality. Further, the existential and ontological ground of Being is honored in and through the physical ground that is the support of all movement.

Continuing with the Haitian Voudoun ceremony, with meticulous effort, the *serviteur* will then use flour to draw fine lines on the ground, making the *vever* (symbol) of the *loa* being invoked. All designs begin with a recognition of the crossroads by drawing the cross, the symbol associated with Legba, which marks the entrance to the divine world. Note, it does not stand for the entrance or meeting point between worlds, it is that entrance.

“For all this elaborate design [the *vever*] is bit by bit destroyed by the grains of maize, peanuts and other food placed upon it, smudged by the death throes of the sacrificed chicken laid upon it, and in the end, the god having eaten,

and the *vevers* function being thus fulfilled, it is walked on, danced on, and finally its remnants are swept away” (Deren 205).

This, perhaps, presents the most startling difference between religions that are primarily intellectual versus embodied. Rather than the symbol being placed at a distance, it is part of the earth itself, only visible long enough to frame the bodily movements of the devotee. Over time, the symbol fades through the rhythm of dance, as if it were being absorbed into the bodies of the devotees where it can thus provide ongoing strength and fulfillment long beyond the end of the ritual. Far from out of reach, it becomes part of the body itself, integrated through the movement that occurs on top of it, thus closing the gap between the human and divine; between life and our concepts of life.

The mind/body dualism that characterizes Western thought is not solved but is rather dis-solved as one enters a way of being where the dichotomy simply does not exist. Perhaps one conclusion of becoming conscious of embodied religion from the Western perspective is that Westerners might begin to think about religion not only as a designation for what another thought or believed but about how they are in the world. For those who are “believers,” and wish to experience a deepening in what their own religion has to offer, perhaps this knowledge will make them less likely to avoid embodiment practices which may be part of their own tradition but alien to their particular sect. As examples, fasting and other aesthetic practices, as well as pilgrimage and other ways of physically moving in the world have long been a part of Western religious life, even if modern culture has largely

dismissed these practices in favor of intellectual understanding.

Through embodied religion, movement is a holistic response to the spiritual world. It is an act of reciprocity on the part of the human who looks to the divine for guidance. Movement creates a channel so that wisdom can flow between the living and the ancestors, each with a duty to the other. Here, the body itself is the vessel of devotion and service toward the spiritual realm is accomplished through fully giving one's body to the religious imperative.

Physical movement and the giving up of oneself is not a symbolic act with a secondary gain, it is a primary act that allows one to accord themselves with the very Ground of Being, which itself is found to be alive and in constant flux. When religion is embodied, the existential is sought through the material, the sensual becomes the doorway to the spiritual, and the energy that pulses all life into existence is made tangible through entering its rhythms. The dirt, sweat, and blood that mars the devotees body after ritual is physical proof that one has entered it fully and completely. In an embodied orientation toward religious life, movement becomes prayer, the bridge that connects the individual and the archetypal realm. This bridge, however, is not crossed in soul, spirit, or mind alone as an act of transcendence up and away from earthly life, but it is danced across in the literal physical body—the symbol acting as dance floor, the movement as worship, and the body's aesthetic response as revelation.

## Works Cited

- Deren, M. *Divine horsemen*. Thames & Hudson, 1953.
- Huxley, Aldous. *The Perennial Philosophy*. Franklin Classics, 2018.
- Jennings, Theodore W. Jr. *On Ritual Knowledge*. In Grimes, Ronald L. *Readings in Ritual Studies*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.
- Murphey, Joseph M. *Santeria*. Beacon Press, 1988.
- Pallaro, Patrizia. *Authentic Movement: A Collection of Essays*. Kingsley, 2011.
- “Religion” *New World Encyclopedia*. <https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Religion#Etymology>.





Bougainvillea Above Steps / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull

# The Priestess' Shadow:

## *Ariadne and the Minotaur*

---

Laurel M. Bergsten, MA

Keywords: Archetypal Psychology, Ariadne, Brother and Sister Dynamics  
Content Warning: Mention of Familial Trauma and Abuse

Man Ray's photograph, *Minotaur*, is arresting: a nude woman's torso, arms overhead, head tilted back into darkness, with her stomach sucked in to create a cavernous hole. The composition creates the illusion of a beastly head with breasts for eyes, arms for horns and the belly opening wide to devour the world. In my early twenties the image sent me into the myth of the Minotaur. As I read, I recognized myself and my own story in Ariadne's, noticing the patterns of love, sacrifice and betrayal that had defined my romantic relationships with men. Ariadne's story is determined by her relationship to men. She starts with the Minotaur and King Minos, then she is abducted/rescued by the heroic Theseus to be abandoned later, and finally finds love with Dionysus. Over the past few years, I have tended to different parts of the story, noticing where each mythical figure has a role in my narrative, certain, at times that I had found the transcendent Dionysian partner, only to reveal another Theseus. Reflecting on these moments I recognize James Hillman's notion that all figures in a myth matter in pathologizing (*Re-visioning* 103). In my attention to Ariadne and her lovers, the Minotaur faded in importance, as did Pasiphae and Minos, though they are each critical to the mythic narrative. Though I was engaging deeply and personally with the story, I was not attending to all the parts, and thus no figure could be complete or contextualized.

In Man Ray's photograph I recognize both the pain and ecstasy in Ariadne's story. The model with head thrown back could be in the throes of pleasure, or the contortions of grief. From the start of my exploration into the myth I have been sympathetic to the Minotaur, preferring to villainize Theseus and King Minos. I speculate that the myth does not tell me everything I need to know about the Minotaur, and Ariadne's relationship to it. Ginette Paris notes on the mysterious gaps in myths that, "it's in this very

imprecision—which dream-like, doesn't necessarily make connections between events—that a trigger for our imagination is sometimes found. The meaning of a myth has to be renewed over and over and always requires filling in the missing places" (40-41). The photograph is compelling because it contains a possible piece (or pieces) of the story. Her body takes on the shape of her brother, the monstrous minotaur, who is bound to her by the labyrinth, dead or not. The female body *embodies* the Minotaur.



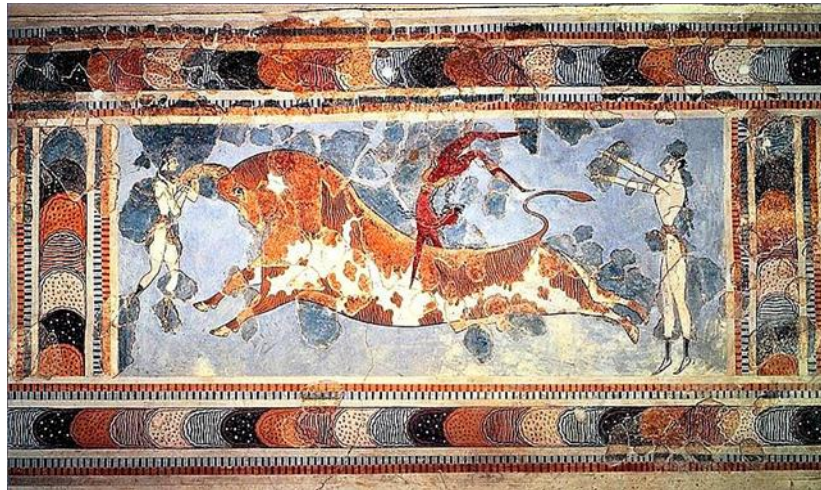
The egoic Theseus gets credit for confronting the shadow-figure Minotaur, but I find this situation wanting. It neglects Ariadne's relationship with her brother, which I am not convinced is always antagonistic. Hillman says in *Mythic Figures*, the Gods in myth are "internally necessary to one another" (273). With a title like *Mistress of the Labyrinth*, it is clear to me that Ariadne has a special bond with the loci, so why not with the inhabitant? Together Ariadne and the Minotaur offer depth and complexity to their narrative field and find that love transforms this archetypal relationship into a balanced union. The Minoan Goddess tradition that Ariadne descends from can inform and help rehabilitate this relationship, as will the work of other Ariadne scholars like Ginette Paris, Chris

Downing and Marina Valcarengi. Significantly, Hillman contributes the important aspects of psychological polytheism from archetypal psychology, and a love centered exploration of the Anima.

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford present an anthropological look at the Minoan Great Mother Goddess in the book *The Myth of the Goddess*. Notable in this compilation of research is the attention to bulls in Minoan culture. A honey gathering and mead-making

ritual took place in alignment with the rising star Sirius. At the end of this ceremony a bull was sacrificed, and from its corpse bees arose and perpetuated the cycle. Baring and Cashford argue that these rites are carried over into Greek myth via Dionysus, the Bull God (119). Bulls appear prominently in art and artifacts of the Minoans. The lethal sport of bull vaulting, in which competitors leapt over charging bulls in an arena, is depicted as well. Baring and Cashford suggest that the bull vaulters "were priests and priestesses undergoing an initiation rite into the service of the goddess who presided over the ritual," and that the sport took place before the sacrifice of the bull to increase its ritual power (141). Martin Nilsson took special note that this sport was open to all genders, which

correlates with the sacrifice of girls and youth to the minotaur and adds the important possibility that captives were forced into the sport as well (176). If bull vaulting resembles the



Fresco of Bull Leaping from Knossos, unknown ancient artist via Wikimedia Commons

minotaur of Greek myth, then the sacrifice of the bull certainly does as well. The minotaur in the labyrinth is Ariadne's initial setting, or her initiatory setting, much like the priests and priestesses leaping over the bull. The Minotaur's death opens Ariadne to move on to a new or higher situation, and her story ends

with an ascension to immortality with the God Dionysus.

The association between bulls and the goddess potentially extends to the earlier Paleolithic era. Baring and Cashford state that the shape of the bull's horns, like the crescent moon, are associated with feminine fertility, making it an apt sacrifice to a life-giving goddess (30). The Goddess on Crete is not just associated with bulls though. Baring and Cashford profile several important and interrelated aspects of the goddess, and note several deities in Greek mythology that resemble aspects of this goddess including Demeter, Persephone, Aphrodite and Ariadne. The dominant theme for the Goddess which connects to these Greek deities is cyclical fertility: life, death, and regeneration. On a shallow level, Ariadne's story is void of these themes with no obvious connection to vegetation or death, but various symbols within the myth, such as the thread and the labyrinth, can be traced back to Goddess rituals from Crete, and thus she finds company with these other deities.

Christine Downing notes on Ariadne's "blending" with other goddesses that "She is one of the pre-patriarchal Goddesses who blend in and out of each other in such confusing ways because they are women as women themselves experience their woman-ness. From that perspective the nice, neat, clear-cut differentiations don't quite work; we know we are each all of those things, at least in possibility" (145). The shift from this vague blended Goddess to a company of separate deities, who could include Persephone, Demeter, and Aphrodite, is compelling. The Greek myth transforms Ariadne from the Minoan Divine Goddess to mortal human. This shift sounds like a demotion, but

mortality strengthens Ariadne's connection to death. She joins Psyche as a mortal maiden who may navigate the underworld. Moreover, Ariadne is not un-divine. Through both parents she has divine heritage, and versions of her conclusion see her ascend to divinity. Ariadne's association with other figures means that she has a strong underworld connection via the labyrinth which, like Persephone, gives her credibility as an anima figure. Downing notes that "Ariadne, no longer the anima waiting outside the labyrinth while another enters, means soul as what is at the labyrinth's center, the center of the self" (148). This center-of-self located in the labyrinth connects Ariadne to the Minotaur. The "blend" of pre-patriarchal Goddesses also blends with the Minotaur. These figures are pluralistic. Is it he or she at the center of the labyrinth, or both?

The labyrinth is an important symbol to the myth and to the Minoan Goddess. Spirals and meanders are another goddess symbol which predates the tradition in Crete (Baring and Cashford 24). Spirals decorate numerous ancient artifacts globally and the simple patterns transform into labyrinths with looping paths that draw ever nearer to a center where the Goddess resides. One of the big connections to the Goddess on Crete is the dancing labyrinth. Homer references Ariadne's dancing floor in *The Iliad* on the shield that Hephaestus makes for Achilles:

And the crippled Smith brought all his art  
to bear  
on a dancing circle, broad as the circle  
Daedalus  
once laid out on Cnossos' spacious fields  
for Ariadne the girl with the lustrous hair.  
(bk. 18, lines 689-692)

Daedalus, as the known architect of the labyrinth, is also the designer of Ariadne's

dancing floor. These two spaces may be connected or may be one and the same. Baring and Cashford assert that lines like the labyrinth pathways may have been marked on the dance floor to guide dancers (136). They also make the dancing connection to the Goddess evident: "Dance in all early cultures, was a way of communicating with the goddess, drawing her through ritual and ecstatic gesture into the midst of spiraling forms that became, as they were danced, her epiphany" (136). Carl Kerényi specifies Ariadne's connection: "Ariadne discloses a close relationship, such as only the Minoan 'mistress of the labyrinth' could have had, to both aspects of the labyrinth: the home of the Minotaur and the scene of the winding and unwinding dance" (99). Thus, Ariadne dances us in and dances us back out. Hillman says, "The healer is the illness and the illness is the healer" (75). With Ariadne there is healing, but not before she has taken us through the ritual dance.

Baring and Cashford include reference to the "goddess knot" which was "[a] knot of cloth, corn or hair hung at the entrance to shrines or pinned up on the ceremonial occasions of bull vaulting was a sign of the presence of the goddess and came to stand for the goddess herself" (120). This knot is internally referential to the looping pathways of the labyrinth itself and is a possible connection to Ariadne's thread that she gifts to Theseus. The knot, associated with the goddess, and Ariadne's thread have a great connection to the feminine intuition, a great power. The gift is a sacrifice for love and Ariadne places her brother's fate and her power as a priestess or Mistress of the Labyrinth into Theseus' hands. Hillman references the Anima as a lover in *Re-Visioning Psychology*: "she comes to life through love and insists on it, just

as Psyche in the old tale is paired forever with Eros" (44). Therefore, Ariadne's gift makes sense. It is by her love (her gift) that he can enter and emerge from the labyrinth.

The thread's composition comes into question when considering agricultural themes of regeneration inherent in the ancestry of the labyrinth's ritual components. Joseph Campbell points out the long process of making thread: "Centuries of husbandry, decades of diligent culling, the work of numerous hearts and hands, have gone into the hackling, sorting, and spinning of this tightly twisted yarn" (24). Campbell goes on to note that thread becomes a symbol of collective wisdom, a valuable tool on a journey of individuation. Hair, animal or human is an alternative possibility when considering the composition of the thread. Animal hair may refer, again, to the agricultural theme, but human hair is another contender. The act of cutting hair is prevalent in Greek myth; Achilles cuts his hair in mourning of Patroclus and Scylla cuts her father's hair to help Minos win the war. This leads me to question if the Goddess knot is not yet another powerful lock. Hair grows from the head, the source of knowledge and the psychological home. Ariadne's offering of hair as Mistress of the Labyrinth would be a powerful gift. It contains the genetic material and wisdom of her line, which may be needed when facing the Minotaur. The personal sacrifice of cutting away a piece of oneself is all the more significant. The sacrifice of Ariadne's thread or hair stands in for and foreshadows the sacrifice of the Minotaur and her family of origin. This act makes Ariadne complicit in her brother's death though it is an act associated with romantic love. With Theseus she navigates her way to new realities. The knot itself resembles



the spiraling in and outs of the labyrinth, but its powers to be wound and unwound are profound in this context carrying the ability to tether and guide.

One of the important foundations in Minoan ritual is the sacred marriage. As social structures shifted towards patriarchal systems, the association of the bull to lunar-feminine fertility was reassigned to the solar-masculine vitality. This allows for the still feminine lunar to have an equal-opposite partner in the masculine solar. In the ritual the bull substitutes for the king and is slain to end the previous cycle, allowing the sacred marriage of the King and Queen to take place, beginning the next cycle (Baring and Cashford 140). The king-sacrifice reemerges as the archetype of the son-lover. The male god dies and is reborn to the goddess. Baring and Cashford say, "In this way he incarnates the form of life that has to change, while she remains as the principal of life that never dies and continually renews itself through its changing forms" (133). This may explain why, in the Greek myth, Ariadne has three bull companions: the minotaur, Theseus (who in some versions is descended from Poseidon, another deity associated with bulls), and the bull god Dionysus. Descended from the great goddess, she is the constant aspect in these sacred "marriages." Thus, the minotaur's death is necessary for regeneration. Just as bees arise from the corpse of the bull, Ariadne takes on new lovers as her old partnership dies.

Ginette Paris interprets Ariadne's initial relationship with the bull-men of her life as oppressive. She first paints a bleak picture of Ariadne, a gullible heroine who is passed from man to man: brother and father, to lover, to god. This too was my impression of Ariadne; I thought her a victim of patriarchy who makes the ultimate sacrifice of her feminine power for

a man's gain. I resented Ariadne's plight, and recognized similarities in my own situation. However, both Paris and I found Ariadne's power and sovereignty within the myth. Paris notes, "She has a taste for rebellion (rebellion against the Minotaur, against her father's authority)" (42). I found it unlikely that Ariadne was rebelling against the Minotaur, but I did accept her rebellion against her father. This may tell more about my own story than Ariadne's, but I don't find it implausible. The myth implies her motive is love, which aligns with stories of other young women who betray their family, like Scylla and Medea. Yet the relationship she has with her family is unclear. She allows her brother to die, a devastating sacrifice. By looking at other male/female relationships in the myth an oppressive masculinity emerges. Europa is raped by Zeus, and Pasiphae pays dearly for her husband's mistake. Ariadne belongs to a lineage of sexual trauma. Yet, as Marina Valcarengi says, the minotaur is innocent. Part-animal and part-man he has access to neither world, nor the capacity to understand his crimes (122). My intuition says that Ariadne is sympathetic to the Minotaur, and she has the best ability to understand him. Both are subject to the oppressive patriarchy of Minos. Any ordinary girl, or any ordinary ball of thread would not be so helpful in the labyrinth.

Valcarengi explores the idea that the Minotaur is a negative Animus. On the psychological landscape of the Ariadne archetype, Valcarengi states, "Frequently I meet Ariadnes who nourish and hide their minotaurs: they are convinced that all men resemble their internal image of animus, and thus the monster from Crete, and they affirm, consequently that men are violent, primitive, and inferior—an inevitable evil" (123). I resisted

this statement, and I still don't believe this is the only possible relationship Ariadne can have with her Minotaur, but I recognize some truth here. The experience of violence, abuse, and abandonment that Ariadne's matriarchal line is subject to would manifest a dark masculine reality—the minotaur, fed by fear and insecurity, but resented. I find it more likely that the Minotaur is the shadow to the Ariadne archetype. This setup provides different modes to address the shadow: send in the violent Theseus, be eaten, or perhaps find a way to love the beast.

The path of love has some substance in cinema. Two contemporary films which dip into the labyrinth narrative are Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*, and Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*. Both thwart the heroic masculine by depicting young women who must venture into the labyrinth, and both films feature narratives that present a brother and sister. I will venture more on *Pan's Labyrinth*, in which the main character Ofelia is told she must take her brother into a labyrinth and spill his blood to claim her heritage as princess of the underworld. She makes the decision not to hurt her brother, demonstrating a shift that has occurred from the heroic masculine to the intuitive feminine. By treating the minotaur—her brother—with love, the story transforms. The sacrifice is not the bull, but the old self, as Ofelia steps into her role as an older sister and protector. She refuses to hurt her brother, forfeiting her life on one plane of existence, but gaining a kingdom. In this final scene the dialog is very clear, "You have spilt your own blood instead of the blood of an innocent," and she passes the test (del Toro). Ofelia becomes the sacrifice needed for her own destiny. An infant human brother is different from the beastly minotaur, but both are

innocent, and she has a reason to resent him—her mother died birthing him—but instead she finds a way to love him. Acceptance of the Minotaur is key to this love, as Hillman states, "Perhaps the loving comes first. Perhaps only through love is it possible to recognize the *person* of the soul. And this connection between love and psyche means a love for everything psychological, every symptom or habit, finding place for it within the heart of imagination, finding a mythical person who is its supportive ground" (*Re-Visioning* 44). The openness to the Minotaur could allow for a new understanding of Self without romantic upheaval, internal union replaces the need for external union.

As a final alternative, I present the theory that Ariadne and the Minotaur are part of the same psychological complex. Both are products of the sacred marriage of the bull man to the goddess, and both are associated with the same loci. They are two sides of the same coin. Kerényi notes that the coins from Knossos present images of the labyrinth, a minotaur, and a possible Ariadne figure. The coins also demonstrate the starry nature of both Ariadne and the Minotaur. The Minotaur is named "Asterion," the root *aster*, meaning star, and Ariadne has her own constellation after she unites with Dionysus. Kerényi describes a specific coin design with a star at the center of the labyrinth. He states, "No luminous aspect of the Minotaur was accepted by the Greeks outside of Knossos, but the Knossos coins bear witness to a star in the labyrinth, to the lunar nature of Ariadne" (106). Christine Downing's blending and pluralistic goddess image lends itself to the interpretation that the star at the center of the labyrinth could be Ariadne, the Minotaur, or both.

Man Ray's photograph exemplifies this, Ariadne is both a woman and Minotaur. Her position is significant. It reflects the shape of the bull, the frightening and devouring maw. It reflects wild abandon with ecstatic posture. The upright arms also resemble the Great Minoan goddess in artifacts and frescos. Finally, the posture is similar to the position the bull vaulters take before the leap, with arms out to grasp the horns, indicating a mastery over the beast. Ariadne is all these things, and her relationship with the minotaur has an opportunity for variation. Even in the myth when the Minotaur dies, she continues to select bull-men as lovers, so she never truly separates from the Minotaur. These motifs I see in myself thus do not reflect one reality but many that overlap and shapeshift. On their own, Ariadne and the Minotaur have the possibility to become negative aspects. Ariadne gives too much of herself and is left behind. The Minotaur is all consuming and deadly. But together there is potential for an integrated experience where the loving anima/animus can connect to the shadow pieces and find union.

## Works Cited

- Baring, Anne, and Jules Cashford. *The Myth of the Goddess*. Viking. 1991
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1949.
- Downing, Christine. "Ariadne, Mistress of the Labyrinth." *Facing the Gods*. Edited by James Hillman. Spring Publications, 1980.
- Hillman, James. *Mythical Figures*. 1st ed., Spring Publications, 2007.
- . *Re-Visioning Psychology*. Harper Perennial. 1975.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin Books, 1990.
- Kerényi, Carl. *Dionysos : Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, Princeton University Press, 1977. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/pacgradins-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6209654>.
- Nilsson, Martin P.. *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology*. University of California Press. 1932.
- El Laberinto Del Fauno: Pan's Labyrinth*. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Telecino, 2007.
- Paris, Ginette. *Pagan Grace*. Translated by Joanna Mott. Spring Publications, 2003.
- Radnitzky, Emmanuel (Man Ray). *Minotaur*. 1933. Museum of Modern Art, Manhattan.
- Valcarenghi, Marina. *Relationships, Transforming Archetypes*. Nicolas-Hays Inc. 1997.



Subject Captures Photographer / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull





# Hermes Overdosed:

## *The Archetypal Hermes in Social Media*

---

Lydia Griffiths, MA

Keywords: Archetypal Psychology, Hermes, Social Media

In today's world, we take instant communication for granted. With the swipe of a thumb, we can connect to anyone, anywhere in the world. We send a message into the air, reduced to zeros and ones, to re-emerge in someone else's hand—instantly. As a millennial, it shapes my life. Internet, social media, and cellular communication have catalyzed the rise of globalism, multiculturalism, and diffused boundaries at a speed that was once considered only the domain of the gods. Within the hyper-communication of the present age, in every *Instagram* reel, *TikTok* video, *Facebook* comment, and cell phone notification ping, Hermes lives. However, Hermes is not just the god of communication, but also of trickery and deception. He stole Apollo's cattle when he was an infant, only a few days old, and convinced Zeus of his innocence. The Hermes archetype is shaping lives when I misread a message, when offended strangers insult each other in comments, when we apply filters to faces, when influencers push products, when we exchange money, or when tweets incite insurrections.

The issue at play—misinformation, hiding behind personas, and generating obscene wealth—is not the fault of Hermes energy, but that its relationship to it is unconscious. Any unconscious connection with a myth or archetype is dangerous. We have no control over our actions and feelings. The narrative controls us.

Social media demands constant attention, from both users and viewers. I feel the pressure to post the right stuff, post enough, like enough and share enough. I compare myself to the images I see, even though I know they are not always true, or they are manipulated to sell a certain story. Social media is pluralistic, and filled with tricks, much

like the Graeco-Roman trickster god Hermes. This paper aims to explore, through the lens of Archetypal Psychology and Greek and Roman primary texts, how the god Hermes' energetic signature is at work in our digital and social media landscape.

According to the works of Hesiod and Ovid, Hermes is a complex, intersectional god. He is the son of Zeus and Maia. He is the gatekeeper, messenger and slayer of Argus. He is the god of the marketplace, luck, crossroads, travelers, games, and he is associated with the underworld. He is keen-sighted, bearer of the golden rod, rich in flocks. These various epithets and identities collide in our world filled with images.

Hillman wrote that any phenomena, event, or situation that causes anxieties and neurosis also reveals our souls to us and deepens events into experience (Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* xvi). Glen Slater explains that Archetypal Psychology and Hillman's foundational work draws on Jung's notion of "universals' – archetypal determinants that shape psychological life" (Slater xv). The field of Archetypal Psychology pays attention to images and metaphors as "primary archetypal expressions" (xvi) and looks for universal patterns that exist in imagination, and thus myth, before manifesting in the world. Archetypes are modes of appreciation and styles of consciousness (Hillman, *Re-Visioning* xix). They are the "deepest patterns of psychic functioning, the roots of the world, governing the perspective we have of ourselves and the world" (xix). It is important to note that Hillman thought our psyche, patterns, and psychological natures were not a monolith of thought, feelings, and experience. Rather, psychic life is polytheistic, like the pagan pantheons, and important when meeting each psychological event on its own terms (Slater xvi). This happens through personification, which is a mode of being in the world "and experiencing the world as a psychological field" (Hillman, *Re-Visioning* 13). The soul and psychic life are polytheistic, though not necessarily religious as they embody multiple figures and centers, such as dreams and images (26). The act of imagining the soul in multiple images "prevents the ego from identifying with each and every figure in a dream and fantasy" (31). In short, psychology consists of the way we perceive images.

In fact, when there seems to be an overdose of energy or archetypal patterns in

our culture or personal life, then we have become intoxicated with one god, or become monotheistic in our psychic life. Our technology changes rapidly, and our ravenous appetite for digital information displaces other forms of communication—i.e. sensual, artistic, or silent—and we are isolated in Hermes' clutches (Hillman, *Mythic Figures* 257-259). In order to see what archetypes are at play, we must enter myths and recognize "our concrete existence as metaphors, as mythic enactments" (Hillman, *Re-Visioning* 157). Diane Rayor's translation of *The Homeric Hymn to Hermes* describes Hermes' birth:

Maia bore a wily child with a seductive  
mind—  
a robber, cattle rustler, guide of dreams,  
who stands watch by night, guardian at the  
gate  
who would soon reveal glorious deeds  
among immortal gods.

(*Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 4.13-15)

From birth, Hermes' mind is filled with mischief and deception. He carries this archetypal energy with him as he shows up in dreams and imagery.

Craving meat, he sprang  
from the fragrant great hall to a  
promontory,  
thinking through utter trickery in his mind  
as thieves plot in the black of night.

(*Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 4.64-67)

Hermes was born hungry. Craving meat. This hunger spurred him to trickery. The intertwined nature of speech—containing the duality between speaking the truth and speaking lies and as a vehicle of communication for truth and lies and that which is plural between—are all part of the Hermes archetype (Paris, *Pagan Grace* 62).

In human history, we have never had so much instantaneous communication across such distances. Social media has changed how we communicate and is one of the dominant forms. For example, *TikTok* reported 1 billion users in 2021. This is an extraordinary percentage of the world's population, and most of them are younger than 25, although many older adults use the app, too (Bursztynsky). This younger demographic's engagement with social media shapes the future of communication. Much of *TikTok*'s growth happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, which prompted people to connect with one another during lockdown. *Instagram*, also boasts over 1 billion users (Bursztynsky). Although the aesthetic and audience of both apps differ, they hold considerable sway in people's lives.

Archetypal patterns of Apollo ruled the Age of Enlightenment, based on Cartesian and empirical thought. The intoxication with Apollonian thought created a need for a counterbalance, inviting Hermes to expand his power. When the powers that be in a culture promote a dominant mindset based on rationale and positivism—which encourages the world to be viewed as binaries, excluding everything in between—that mindset invites disruptive, clever, and astute energy to rise as a contrast (Paris, *Pagan Grace* 61). This new mindset pushes the oppressed to uprising, questioning the status quo. Hermes energy knows how to play the game and is not afraid to question and break the rules. It is "the power of humor and ridicule in the face of harsh authority" (61). This notion should not be confused with Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysus binary, which considers the different aspects of "madness" and "rational." Instead, the arrival of Hermes in force shows the lack of

flexibility in a rigid system. Zeus commissioned Pandora's creation and Hermes bestowed her with cunning and deceit, qualities that challenged the rigidity of the structure (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 27).

The Hermes myth centers communication at the intersection of language and where "complexity threatens to become confusion" (Paris, *Pagan Graces* 63). Language has the ability to carry multiple meanings at the same time. It is ambiguous. The Apollonian sees a single interpretation, but Hermes, the two faced god, brings many, with all the layers of confusion, miscommunication and clarity of multiple meanings. Paris writes that Hermes "is comfortable somewhere between the explicit and the implicit and never tires of inventing nuances of voice, tone or gesture to place his message in the right context" (63). She contrasts this with Apollonian communication which is clear and singular in meaning. Hermes' communication "borrows from twisted pathways, shortcuts and parallel routes; it makes many round trips and ends up sometimes in meaningful dead ends. The paths of Hermes are multiple" (63). Globalism continues to grow to the point where no one region is self-sufficient anymore (Seong, Jeongmin Samandari, et al). This invites the Hermes archetype, which comes in response to a community which has swollen to such Titanic levels, and can feel like an overdose (Hillman, *Mythic* 256). Hillman uses the term Titanism, borrowed from *The Theogony's* primordial gods, the Titans, to explain the phenomenon of something growing too big. When ideas and phenomena swell, they consume and remain unchecked. Eventually a counterbalance will rise and overthrow them, as seen in the myth with Zeus imprisoning the Titans (Hesiod, *The Theogony* 166-167).

Hillman argues that the balance to Titanism is inviting in the gods, such as Hermes (Hillman, *Mythic Figures* 144).

Since his birth, Hermes has been pestering Apollo, and over the past few decades Hermes' grip has tightened. Alongside globalism and a rise in collective consciousness, borders and individualism dissolve so that everything feels like an intrusion into personal and private spaces (Hillman *Mythic Figures* 255). Anxieties and paranoia rise, and in response, people isolate, exclude themselves, and join separatist groups to resist what they perceive as "the Other" (255-256). A 2023 study published in *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine* found "that more time spent on social media was associated with higher levels of loneliness, in particular for people who used social media as a means for maintaining relationships" (Bonsaksen et al). Additionally, as pointed out in Jessica Koehler's *Psychology Today's* article "Tribalism in the Age of Social Media," social media has contributed to a rise in tribalism, promoting an easy way to have opinions validated and fostering an us-vs-them mentality.

The way in which the algorithms of *TikTok* and *Instagram* work furthers a sense of division into "in" and "out" groups. A person scrolling through social media platforms will only see videos that the algorithms deem "likeable." These algorithms select videos based on a user's prior likes, engagements, and on popularity among the user's friends. Without actively searching, people can spend all day on the app and receive very different videos and depictions of the world and current events. The content they see is tailored to them. As a result, people are only seeing posts by those who agree with them, creating an echo chamber where grievances and praise bounce

against the walls much to Hermes' delight. The results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where liberal voters were certain that Hillary Clinton would win over Donald Trump, illustrate how the guile of Hermetic miscommunication deluded an entire country. The January 6, 2021 incursion of the U.S. Capitol is another manifestation of boundary anxieties, the fear that concrete boundaries are becoming weak and falling away. People who wished to stop the ratification of the vote rallied outside of the capitol building. The perpetrators of the rally-turned-raid organized on social media sites like *4Chan* and *Reddit* (Talley and Levy).

During the day, President Trump exacerbated tensions by broadcasting misinformation. As a result of his actions, Trump was "permanently" banned from *Twitter* and temporarily banned from *Facebook*. This outraged his followers, fueling more hateful comments and the ongoing cries of "fake news." However, on March 17, 2023, *META*, *Facebook's* parent company, reinstated Trump to *Facebook*. During his ban, Trump created a social media platform called *Truth Social* that was meant to be free from censorship, and many of Trump's posts contained false information and *QAnon* conspiracy theories (Rutgers). Likewise, *Twitter* reinstated Trump in November of 2022.

Misinformation colors our current relationship with social media. There have been security breaches that seized private information and national security information leaked through *Discord*. News anchors have cited falsified documents. Companies sell personal details to advertising companies, and foreign powers have tampered with elections. It is so bad that fraudulent user accounts called

"bots," created by organizations and individuals seeking to spread misinformation, constituted the majority of *Twitter* users at one point (Wojcik). This means that most of the traffic on certain popular topics was not even human, evidence that this channel of communication is packed with Hermes' trickery. During the 2020 presidential election, users on *TikTok*—mostly in the Generation Z demographic—allegedly bought tickets to President Trump's Tulsa Rally to prevent others from attending (Douek), another manifestation of the meddling of a cunning and mischievous child, laughing at the confusion he sparked.

Of course, the influence of social media can be invisible, much like Hermes. Hermes, when he dons his cap, turns invisible. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Zeus (Jove) sends Hermes (Mercury) to murder Argus of a hundred eyes. Hermes first approaches invisible, but when he removes his cap, he disguises himself in rural clothes. Hermes lulls Argus to drop his guard and eventually to sleep with music and varied talk (Ovid 1.766-774). This story illuminates how social media can lull us into a false sense of safety, can give us a false narrative, and can redirect, or decapitate hundreds of eyes, all while going unnoticed.

Overdosing on Hermes has diminished our personal identities outside of our information-based personas. Hillman writes that:

The word 'information' itself has become so inflated that it carries the code of an individual's DNA identity and destiny. Not wisdom, not knowledge, not inspiration, not learning, not comfort, not truth, not prophecy, not moral value, or aesthetic beauty. Instead of a messenger of the

gods, Hermes has become a servant of the Internet. (Hillman, *Mythic* 258)

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way people document every moment of their lives in posts, eager for validation. In social terms, if something does not appear on an *Instagram* story or reel, it did not happen. Our fantasies and images of the psyche are indistinguishable from the images on social media. Jung is credited for suggesting that "Image is psyche" (Jung qtd. in Hillman, *Re-Visioning* 23). Our psychic life is made of psychic images, fantasies, and imagery that emerge through feeling, impulse, sound as well as visual image. Image-making is the road to soul-making: "to live psychologically means to imagine things; to be in touch with soul means to live in sensuous connection with fantasy. To be in soul is to experience the fantasy in all realities and the basic reality of fantasy" (Hillman 23).

However, we are not living in the images of social media right now, rather we are drowning in them. We are inundated by a sea of images and fantasy and cannot find one to cling to that is not in danger of disappearing after 24 hours.

We need our fantasy, but when we forget the archetypal patterns or gods, then the pluralistic images of a single archetype grow into a monolith. The soul is polytheistic and expresses multiple truths, paths, and realities. Using Hillman's idea that god (energy) resides within complexes, I suggest that any overinflation with a single god, energy, archetype, or image enforces conformity. Hermes is a god of traveling many roads, his overwhelming presence in current culture makes it difficult to resist his ascension. We want to play with him, be like him, and be like each other. Fighting against his archetypal tide



is difficult. His presence and demands are clear. Social media is an example of this tendency. It demands that we look like those fabricated personas called influencers, that we feel physically sick that our faces do not look as good as those enhanced by filters, and that we feel ashamed for not following the latest trends. Even the term “avatar,” which is the image we use to represent our accounts on social media, means an embodiment of a deity, and in our present world, we are avatars of Hermes.

If the soul is polytheistic, like Hillman suggests, then consciousness exists in “multiple figures and centers” (Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* 26). When the soul is forced by dominant cultural patterns into singular ideas and containers, the psyche crumbles. Backed into a corner by the limitations of a socially-pervasive monotheistic image or container for the psyche, the ego inflates and begins to consume the other, plural parts of the psyche. Influencers, brands, filters, and trends on social media only inflame and strengthen the ego, cutting out and killing the other gods—i.e., voices who are vital to creating a balanced soul. We prioritized the images of people on the screen over the actual humans behind the screen.

We forget that there are real people behind these images and videos of people online and that comments have real life consequences, and often negative effects on our mental health (Cuncic). As an example, we can note the online body-shaming of Selena Gomez for gaining weight (regardless if it was due to medical reasons or not) in comments on memes and pictures posted. When we say such negative things online, we ignore the humanity of the person on the other side. We assume we can say whatever we want to them and project our insecurities, fears, and anxieties about the

world onto them because they are just images and fantasies constructed to please us. However, these words hurt the very real person behind the screen, affecting their mental and physical health. It also sends the message that their worth is only as valid as the comments on social media. But at the same time, influencers’ images—content created on the internet with the intent to sell a product—have a hold over us which shapes our obsessive literalism and convinces us to say, do, or buy anything. Hillman in *Re-Visioning Psychology* comments on this, saying:

The obsessive literalism of our belief in other people holds us tighter than any personified totem or fetish. How quick others are to become angels, or demons, nymphs or heroes: how we expect—how they disappoint! Others carry our souls and become our soul’s figures, to the final consequence that without these idols we fall into despair of loneliness. (46-47)

Social media looms over us because we have erased other modes of being, knowing, and communicating. As we remove and abstract our gods from our lives, the monotheistic worldview grows to Titanic form. But gods are interrelated and imply one another. As our society moves towards a singular worship of one god over all others, we lose the interplay and interrelationship between the gods, with all the nuance and complexity therein. One monotheistic mythic image swells above and over the others, eclipsing all complexity for a simple Titanic god. In this case and in this era, Hermes is this Titanic god (Hillman, *Mythic* 143). Hermes dominates us, and we struggle in the absence of the ambiguity polytheism provides, with its multiple levels of communication and

meaning. Hermes has become Titanic. Now, we are confined to "only one level of meaning and only one style of communication" (Paris, *Pagan Graces* 67). This is why Hermes stole the cattle from Apollo—to disrupt the straight, narrow style of communication that Apollo practiced, and introduce ambiguity and pluralistic meaning into the conversation.

Corporate giants like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *TikTok* behave like the ancient Titans. When the gods, or multiple consciousness of the psyche are gone, there is nothing to keep the Titans in check. Another way to look at Titamism is with the idea of monopolies. When a single person or company controls the entire industry it stifles innovation, diversity and intersectionality. For example, without the myths of Zeus, there is no one to stop Elon Musk from buying *Twitter*, or Mark Zuckerberg from successfully lobbying against antitrust laws. When Zeus cannot question Hermes about Apollo's missing cattle, the Titans can take over. People may create their own art on various internet platforms, connect with families, push for activism or change, but all of this is swallowed up in the endless hunger of the corporate Titan who harvests our attention like a cash crop. Just as Cronos ate his children because he feared they would usurp his power, social media algorithms demand more attention and devour the psychic health of influencers and users.

The endless need to create content and remain relevant consumes users' lives. In other words, social media platforms have become Titans. The Titanic energy has manipulated our engagement with the playful, curious, and communicative Hermes. Skills that were once useful and connected us in relationship, are now weapons. The issues at

play—misinformation, hiding behind personas, and generating obscene wealth—are not the fault of Hermes' energy, but that the relationship to it is unconscious. I believe that any unconscious connection with a myth or archetype is dangerous. We have no control over it, our actions, and feelings. The narrative controls us.

Even those who make money and benefit from the constant use of social media are suffering and symptomatic with a Hermes overdose. Consider the influencers like Mr. Beast or Addison Rae who have massive followings and wield incredible influence over their fans. Much like the wandering salesmen of old, these personas appear and are present wherever you are. Hermes' need for quick gratification and new excitement tempts our idle hands to open our phone and scroll through the page, numbly watching the videos presented to us, for each notification ping triggers a dopamine hit. Social media is a game. The stakes are high for the users, but the companies are ambivalent about the individual and whether they win or lose. Regardless, Hermes' love of games is prevalent. These influencers remain relevant by posting multiple videos daily and urge us to fulfill our needs by buying something new. Behind each video on *Instagram* and *TikTok* is the new world of money. Money that moves faster and in larger amounts than ever before, following the whims of Hermes: "With this hypertrophy of Hermes, money is no longer solid coin nor backed by gold, only words and numbers, mere messages sent by electronic data processing" (Hillman, *Mythic* 157). This is evident in the cryptocurrency phenomenon that is rife with dysregulation and vulnerable to fraud, such as seen in the ongoing 2023 Sam Bankman-Fried fraud trial.

The influencer who earned the most on *TikTok* in 2021 was Charli D'Amelio. At only 18, she has 142.9 million followers and earned \$17.5 million in a year, more than top Fortune 500 CEOs (Francis). Celebrities such as Kylee Jenner, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, and Kim Kardashian make even more. For example, The Rock reportedly makes \$1,712,000 per sponsored post on Instagram (Giacomazzo), though even this number could just be a fabrication to add to his influence.

Sadly, the ravenous hunger created by this Titanism cannot be sated. The more it is fed, the hungrier it becomes. We trap ourselves in an endless cycle. Just as the Titans wanted the power of the gods, so do we. We have bought into the illusion of social media and its fame and fortune, which only comes from constant attention.

I feel this in my life. I weigh my worthiness against the pretty pictures plastered on my social feeds. I do not measure up to the fancy homes, new clothing, luxurious travels, and perceived wealth. Part of my mind spends the day worrying about how to do better, another part wonders about which picture I can post to show off my fabricated life, and another feels upset that somehow I am “failing life.”

However, we now see posts of influencers in tears over cyberbullying, or the intense pressure to create and post content constantly. Without steady output, these people cease to be relevant. They are swallowed up in the void, their posts and identity forgotten in a sea of similar content. Kris Collins, who has 44.5 million followers and is one of the top 10 earners on *TikTok*, posted in a video on *Instagram* about how much work it was and the damage that her attempt to stay relevant has done to her mental health

(Collins). It is ironic that people like Elon Musk fear the Titans when he himself is one. On June 17, 2022, he tweeted “Is *TikTok* destroying civilization? Some people think so” (Musk). He replied to himself a moment later: “Or perhaps social media in general” (Musk). Musk purchased *Twitter* in October 2022 after a drawn-out legal case. In 2023 he changed the name to *X*, furthering his Titanic takeover. The whole affair has been nothing short of chaotic, and Hermes’ trickster energy fuels his tweets. These large moves encourage outrage as the primary emotion (Hillman, *Mythic Figures* 149). Zeus and his siblings overcame the Titans in battle, so it’s not surprising that people feel frustrated and angry.

*Twitter* has become Musk’s personal playground, with his own rules. Less than a year later, he has announced a new CEO and plans to step down. His fears echo, the psyche’s need to return home. Hermes has no home, and because we are intoxicated, we have vacated our physical homes for our virtual ones:

The earth and its buildings that give stability and shelter find their value determined by speculative development and mortgage rates. Hermes, who himself has no resting place or permanent abode on earth, has brought his importance and quick turnarounds of value into our human habitations.

(Hillman, *Mythic* 257)

How do we then come home again and honor our psyche’s polytheistic needs? Gods never act alone. In Greek and Roman iconography, Hermes is often paired with Hestia, for example in the *Hymn to Hestia and Hermes*: “Rejoice, daughter of Kronos and gold-wand Hermes— but I will remember both of you and the rest of the song” (Rayor

107). They are both intermediaries and share the role of communication between the Olympians and mortals (Simon et al. 121).

One attribute of Hestia is her immunity to the guiles of the other gods. She is also the goddess that receives the first toast at any gathering. She comes first before the other gods (Hillman, *Mythic Figures* 263). She demands our primary focus be on the home. *Focus* comes from the Latin word *hearth*, which is Hestia (263). She does not have altars or shrines, because she *is* the home. Hestia's name comes from the Indo-European word *inhabit*. We come "in" to Hestia. We come "in" to soul. Coming to Hestia is what makes work sacred (263). Coming home to presence tames the wild thievery of Hermes and brings stillness (264). We must find the cracks in our fantasy with social media and let the psyche emerge. Our *relationship* with social media is not monolithic; it is made of many parts and we need to see all of them. It will remain monolithic until we collectively acknowledge that all parts of our psyche—the wild, the still, the derivative, the clear—all belong and deserve our attention and respect. The fact that Hermes has manifested with such force is not wrong or bad; it is simply a single part of our psyche. He is merely an affliction, in Hillman's theory: "Afflictions point to Gods; Gods reach us through affliction" (*Re-Visioning* 104). Asking *how do we stop being obsessed with Hermes?* leads to the wrong answers. Instead, we ought to ask: *what kind of connection are we seeking through social media? What kind of attention and care is lacking in our society? and Is there a better way to have that need fulfilled?*

Part of the answer comes with the acknowledgement of Hermes' style of communication. Hermes uses pluralistic communication and double entendre. Our

style of communicating has long been focused on the written word, where what is written can only mean what is written (Paris, *Pagan Graces* 64). This type of communication is rife with various types of interpretations, historical re-readings and miscommunications. However, the rise of deepfake videos, "fake news," and the relentless push of persuasive language are all energies of Hermes and have given rise to his trickster dimension. Without concerted effort, sifting truth from lies, and signal from noise, has become extremely difficult. This kind of rational work is Apollonian, and now is getting too little of our attention. We need to invite Apollo back in, Hermes' brother and energetic counterweight.

In a triad with Hestia, who is calm and centered, a goddess of stability and sustenance (Paris, *Pagan Meditations* 200), the Apollonian and Hermetic are balanced. Her energy and power invite and draw us in to focus and warmly attend to each other. Hermes' storytelling—searching for multiple answers and loopholes—compliments Hestia's need for clear communication to prevent miscommunication and arguments (Paris, *Pagan Graces* 66). We need Hestia's energy in the world right now. When we ignore the gods, they force themselves into our awareness. We need to go home, find our calm, our center, our place of refuge, our focus on the hearth, and acknowledge and reconnect to the many archetypes and gods within our psyches.

## Works Cited

- Bonsaksen, Tore, et al. "Associations between Social Media Use and Loneliness in a Cross-National Population: Do Motives for Social Media Use Matter?" *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, vol. 11, no. 1, Jan. 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21642850.2022.2158089>.
- Bursztynsky, Jessica. "TikTok Says 1 Billion People Use the App Each Month." *CNBC*, 27 Sept. 2021, [www.cnn.com/2021/09/27/tiktok-reaches-1-billion-monthly-users.html](http://www.cnn.com/2021/09/27/tiktok-reaches-1-billion-monthly-users.html).
- Collins, Kris [Kallmekris]. "I'm Okay." *TikTok*, 27 Aug. 2021. [https://www.tiktok.com/@kallmekris/video/7001163312813673733?is\\_copy\\_url=1&is\\_from\\_webapp=v1&lang=en](https://www.tiktok.com/@kallmekris/video/7001163312813673733?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1&lang=en)
- Cuncic, Arlin. "Mental Health Effects of Reading Negative Comments Online." *Verywell Mind*, 23 Jan. 2021, [www.verywellmind.com/mental-health-effects-of-reading-negative-comments-online-5090287](http://www.verywellmind.com/mental-health-effects-of-reading-negative-comments-online-5090287)
- Douek, Evelyn. "1 Billion TikTok Users Understand What Congress Doesn't." *The Atlantic*, 10 Oct. 2021, [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/problem-underestimating-tiktok/620354/](http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/10/problem-underestimating-tiktok/620354/).
- Francis, Joseph Pisani and Theo. "These TikTok Stars Made More Money than Many of America's Top CEOs." *WSJ*, 13 Jan. 2022, [www.wsj.com/articles/these-tiktok-stars-made-more-money-than-many-of-americas-top-ceos-11642078170](http://www.wsj.com/articles/these-tiktok-stars-made-more-money-than-many-of-americas-top-ceos-11642078170).
- Giacomazzo, Bernadette. "You Won't Believe How Much Dwayne 'the Rock' Johnson Reportedly Makes per Instagram Post." *AfroTech*, 4 July 2022, [afrotech.com/the-rock-instagram-dwayne-johnson](http://afrotech.com/the-rock-instagram-dwayne-johnson).
- Hesiod. "Theogony." *The Works and Days; Theogony; the Shield of Herakles*. Translated by Richard Lattimore, Ann Arbor Paperbacks University Of Michigan Press, 1991.
- . "The Works and Days." *The Works and Days; Theogony; the Shield of Herakles*. Translated by Richard Lattimore, Ann Arbor Paperbacks University Of Michigan Press, 1991.
- Hillman, James. *Mythic Figures*. Edited by Joanne H Stroud, Spring Publications, 2007.
- . *Re-Visioning Psychology*. Harper Perennial, 1992.
- Koehler, Jessica. "Tribalism in the Age of Social Media | Psychology Today." *Www.psychologytoday.com*, 25 Apr. 2023, [www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-school-walls/202304/tribalism-in-the-age-of-social-media](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-school-walls/202304/tribalism-in-the-age-of-social-media).
- Musk, Elon, [[@elonmusk](https://twitter.com/elonmusk)]. "Is TikTok destroying civilization? Some people think so." *Twitter*, 17 June. 2022, 8:57 p.m. [twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1537962566638415872?s=20&t=BP0hZZ3mf\\_MIC\\_GflyAmEw](https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1537962566638415872?s=20&t=BP0hZZ3mf_MIC_GflyAmEw)
- Ovid. *Ovid Metamorphoses*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo, Hackett Pub. Co, 2010.
- Paris, Ginette. *Pagan Grace: Dionysus, Hermes, and Goddess Memory in Daily Life*. Spring Publ, 1990.
- . *Pagan Meditations*. Spring Publications, 1986.



- Rayor, Diane J. *The Homeric Hymns*. University Of California Press, 2014.
- Reuters. "Trump Returns to Facebook." *Reuters*, 17 Mar. 2023, [www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-returns-facebook-2023-03-17/](http://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-returns-facebook-2023-03-17/).
- Seong, Jeongmin Samandari, et al. "Global Flows: The Ties That Bind in an Interconnected World | McKinsey." *Www.mckinsey.com*, The McKinsey Global Institute, [www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/global-flows-the-ties-that-bind-in-an-interconnected-world](http://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/global-flows-the-ties-that-bind-in-an-interconnected-world).
- Simon, Erika, et al. *The Gods of the Greeks*. Edited by Alan Shapiro, The University Of Wisconsin Press, 2021.
- Slater, Glen. Introduction. *Senex and Puer*, by James Hillman, Spring Publications, 2013.
- Talley, Ian, and Rachael Levy. "Extremists Posted Plans of Capitol Attack Online." *WSJ*, 7 Jan. 2021, [www.wsj.com/livecoverage/biden-trump-electoral-college-certification-congress/card/x1dwwPqnJM1XfQh5LaUj](http://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/biden-trump-electoral-college-certification-congress/card/x1dwwPqnJM1XfQh5LaUj).
- Wojcik, Stefan. "5 Things to Know about Bots on Twitter." *Pew Research Center*, 9 Apr. 2018, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/09/5-things-to-know-about-bots-on-twitter/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/09/5-things-to-know-about-bots-on-twitter/).

Bouquet of Brightly Colored Flowers / 35mm Film Photo by Kira Kull





PACIFICA  
GRADUATE INSTITUTE



