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# I

## Contexts

### Theories of Myth

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#### What is myth?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Myth versus Fairy Tale

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

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

remarkably similar lines. He believes that it is this that gives the genre its characteristic and paradoxical quality of variation and uniformity.<sup>47</sup> For Cronan Rose, fairy tales are 'embryonic stories of development'; in this she shares Bruno Bettelheim's position that they symbolically present the path to independent existence by reducing the complicated and difficult process of socialisation to its constituent paradigms.<sup>48</sup> For Maureen Duffy, myths and fairy tales enable us to experience vicariously states and desires we are unable to live out.<sup>49</sup> She connects them to dreams and suggests that their generic conventions supply a framework in which anything can happen and the rules that govern existence are transgressed. Since the unconscious continually struggles with censorship and guilt she believes that this ambivalence between conformity and rebellion continues in the tales. She too follows Bettelheim in seeing the tales as particularly potent for children since they enable children to participate emotionally in situations they are still too immature to understand, and she perceives a continuing vitality in the emergence of such new fairies as UFOs. Italo Calvino describes the tales he collects as the stories of the vicissitudes of ordinary folk; he, too, points to their concern with the first stages of life: the trials of growing up, the departure from home, and the attainment and proving of maturity. For Calvino, the spells that dominate the tales represent the way existence is predetermined by complex and mysterious forces, while the manifold shape-shifting indicates both possibility and the commonality of life.<sup>50</sup> Marxist critic Frederic Jameson sees fairy tales as 'the irrepressible voice and expression of the under-classes of the great systems of domination'; for Michel Butor, fairyland is an inverted or exemplary world criticising 'ossified reality'.<sup>51</sup> Alison Lurie attributes the survival of fairy tale to its vividly symbolic presentation of common experience; Ernst Bloch highlights the importance of magical wish-fulfilment in expressing collective fantasy.<sup>52</sup> Rosemary Jackson argues that the distinguishing feature of fairy tale is the absolute authority of its omniscient narrative voice. The formulaic 'once upon a time' and 'happily ever after' that frame the story transpose it into a remote past, with the effect that the reader becomes a passive receiver of events that follow an unalterable pattern. For Jackson, the power of fairy tale rests in the vicarious wish-fulfilment it provides through its figurations of incest, rape, murder, parricide and rebellion, a function that works to sustain the social order by providing compensation for its privations. Jackson's analysis offers persuasive arguments for feminist rewriting of the genre, despite her indication that such an enterprise is impossible: her insistence that replicating the

genre's format buttresses the very ideology feminism seeks to undermine, while introducing differences disqualifies it as fairy tale, are points to which I shall return.<sup>53</sup>

Three prospectors in the land of fairy tale have been of particular significance in shaping my own point of view, and I will therefore delineate their positions briefly here. For Bruno Bettelheim, the importance of the genre lies in its role in human socialisation.<sup>54</sup> He argues that fairy tales teach children about basic predicaments and suggest the correct solutions according to the rules of their society in ways that children can understand. Bettelheim points to the simplicity of the genre, to its refusal of abstract concepts and minimum of detail, to its clear-cut presentation of a dilemma and depiction of fears or hopes by vivid images and actions, to demonstrate how the tales offer children a framework through which to externalise and control their powerful but imperfectly understood inner processes. He believes it is vital that fairy tale characters are either wholly good or wholly bad rather than combinations as in real life, since this makes it easier for children to identify with the good and condemn the bad; ambiguity, he suggests, can only operate against a secure sense of self established on the basis of such identifications. Once again, Bettelheim's view raises interesting questions for feminist rewritings which reveal that the wicked witch was good, or was wicked only because she had been unfairly treated. His prescriptions imply that any tampering with the genre will destroy it.

Bettelheim outlines a number of distinguishing features between fairy tale and myth. He stresses that whereas the mythical hero is often presented as a divinity or semi-divinity for the hearer to emulate, in fairy tale the figures make no such demands: their function is to personify and illustrate inner conflicts and suggest how these may be solved. Their message is reassuring, indicating that a happy life is possible providing 'one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity'.<sup>55</sup> Bettelheim sees a further difference in myth's portrayal of events as beyond ordinary mortal experience and fairy tale's signal that even its most fantastic strokes of fortune could happen to us. Both genres address the questions that continually preoccupy humankind, but whereas myth gives answers that are definite, those of fairy tale are suggestive. Myth most frequently ends in tragedy, Bettelheim concludes, while fairy tales end happily.

For Bettelheim, the truth of fairy tale is the truth of the imagination and not that of ordinary causality. He sees this as intrinsic to its

socialising function, stressing that for the developing boy it is crucial that it is a dragon as stand-in for his father and not his father that he slays in his bid to secure his princess/mother, since the image is acceptable and hence reassuring at the same time as it promises autonomy as a positive accomplishment. Bettelheim defends the undeveloped 'happily ever after' ending so frequently criticised by feminist and other commentators as an essential component of the genre, on the grounds that it holds out a pledge that present difficulties will be resolved.

There have been numerous critiques of Bettelheim's position, ranging from the charge that his analyses derive from misreadings of Freud, to condemnation of his refusal to take into account the gender bias of the genre, the differences between children, or the historical origins and evolution of the tales.<sup>56</sup> While I acknowledge the problems with his work, I cite it here as an influential study of the way fairy tale shapes our experience and understanding from our childhood years. Although I do not agree with Bettelheim that fairy tales speak primarily to children, I do believe that they can impact on adult life with all the resonance and force childhood memories produce – whether the emotions stirred by the tales are ones of terror, grandiose dreams of achievement, or puerile satisfaction in justice being dispensed.

For Jack Zipes, a prolific and important writer on the genre, folk and fairy tale share common roots with myth in their endeavour to explain natural occurrences and social customs.<sup>57</sup> He argues that it is this that gives the stories their generic quality, and he demonstrates how early tales deriving from a matriarchal world-view underwent successive stages of 'patriarchalization' to reflect the conditions of feudal society so that, by the Middle Ages, the goddess had been recast as evil witch, bad fairy or malevolent stepmother, and the emphasis on maturation and integration had become subordinate to the exploits of a male protagonist intent on domination and wealth. Zipes documents how matrilinear marriage and family ties were subsumed under the new patriarchal economic order, with the result that the ancient matriarchal symbols were altered or rendered benign.<sup>58</sup> Zipes goes on to analyse the impact of literacy and the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century on the form, themes and circulation of the tales as they became the province of a different class, and suggests how their rewriting in the Paris salons of the seventeenth century involved new emphases based on notions of *civilité* derived from the French court. He sees the choice of the term fairy tale (*contes de fées*) during this period as a blatant attempt to distinguish the genre from the

*contes populaires* (folk tales). Zipes points out that many of the *contes de fées* were written by aristocratic women, and he shows how they often contained a subversive element as alternatives to the imposed male norms were conceived and elaborated. He suggests that, in a similar manner, the Grimm brothers imposed their own ideal of 'benevolent patriarchal rule' on the stories they collected a century and a half later.<sup>59</sup> Zipes then unravels the trajectory of subsequent tales through the nineteenth century to show how they were used to critique social mores and as a vehicle for moral instruction.<sup>60</sup> He argues that this dual role continued in the twentieth century, when fairy tales were co-opted by the Nazis, for example, to legitimise their regime through an appeal to a shared Teutonic heritage, or became rich pickings for commercial corporations such as Disney whose exploitation of their escapist elements lulled consumers into accepting the status quo, as well as the instruments for dissident attack.

For Zipes, then, the fairy tales we have come to regard as classics are neither ageless nor universal but the products of a particular historical and economic conjunction.<sup>61</sup> As his survey shows, the stories have been continually rearranged and transformed to reflect changing values and tastes, and he suggests that they assume mythic status only when they resonate with the dominant ideology: a constellation that has been predominantly male for thousands of years. Zipes quotes as an example 'Rumpelstiltskin' which, he argues, began as a tale concerning the female activity of spinning.<sup>62</sup> In the early tale, Zipes writes, there was no father, the name was discovered by a female servant, and the original 'Rumpelstiltskin' flies away at the end on a cooking ladle – a kitchen utensil. In the later Grimms' version the story is framed by men – from the boasting father to the megalomaniac king – and spinning is itself devalued since what counts is its transformation into gold. Zipes contextualises the Grimms' retelling in terms of nineteenth-century industrialisation and the concomitant transfer of power into male hands.

Zipes' distinction between fairy tales which aim to instruct and those which seek to propel their readers to criticise social control leads him to distinguish between two kinds of revisioning. The first involves the transfiguration of a well-known tale in which the author depicts its familiar ingredients in an unfamiliar manner, so that the reader is forced to consider their negative aspects and perhaps reject them. This typically entails the breaking, shifting, debunking or rearranging of traditional components in order to liberate the reader from their programmed response. Zipes locates a second type of reworking in the

fusion of 'classic' configurations with contemporary settings and alternative plotlines. He argues that such revisions do not reassemble the tales into new wholes, but expose instead the artifice of the stories and present the reader with different options and points of view.

At the opposite pole to such liberatory rewritings, Zipes believes that fairy tales today fulfill a conservative function, compensating the individual for the restrictions imposed by repressive administrative and bureaucratic regimes.<sup>63</sup> Unlike the original folk and fairy tales, which were communal, told by gifted tellers responding to the needs and wishes of their listeners, and embodied general problems in an accessible form, Zipes suggests that the mass-mediated versions that currently circulate are mere make-believe, with little relevance to the lives of their audience. They are 'a technologically produced universal voice and image' which stultifies a general public with escapist fantasy.<sup>64</sup>

Zipes' detailed work into the history of fairy tale and his insistence that stories are continually being rewritten to respond to the prevailing ideology seem to me crucial starting points for a feminist reading of the genre. His work on liberatory retellings also appears to me important, though I would weight the emphasis differently to argue for a balance between the retaining of familiar elements and the introduction of the new. One of the problems with the type of postmodern variant Zipes cites is that its continual efforts to break open or debunk traditional modes can leave the reader disoriented to the point of paralysis. One of the strengths of reworking fairy tale, I would suggest, is precisely the interplay between the known and the new: like the good fairy, the presence of customary elements reassures and underpins our daring to defy prohibition and go to the ball.

Like Jack Zipes, feminist critic Marina Warner stresses the importance of historical context when considering the meanings of the tales. She maintains, for example, that critique of the formulaic happy ending is based on a misunderstanding of its origins, since for the Parisian women tellers of the seventeenth century companionate marriage, involving the right to choose one's partner on the basis of love, was a feminist objective.<sup>65</sup> In her monumental study *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, Warner unpicks the accusations of misogyny that are levelled against such figures as the malevolent stepmother to reveal the accusers' ignorance of the situation in which the tales evolved.<sup>66</sup> For Warner, the vital connection with the web of tensions in which the women of the stories were enmeshed has been lost, with the result that every poisonous female is taken as an archetype, representing all women in all circumstances and at all times.

To demonstrate her thesis, Warner shows how absent mothers were a frequent feature of family life at a time when death in childbirth was the most common cause of female mortality. Surviving orphans were often raised by their mother's successor, and Warner suggests that the inclusion of the harmful stepmother may have started as a warning: as she points out, history is full of examples of heirs and heiresses murdered by a new spouse, ambitious for their own offspring. The enmity of stepmothers towards children from earlier unions that marks so many tales from around the world is, Warner stresses, the product of patrilineal systems that arrange women's exogamous marriage and prevent their autonomy. The wrong that women do in such stories should not be extended to all women, since it arises from their vulnerability within a social and legal framework which continues to change.

For Marina Warner, fairy tale is an inherently feminist genre. She notes how the reading of fairy tale is popularly regarded as a 'girly' activity, and recalls how as a child the genre's characteristic shape-shifting appeared to her to hold out the possibility of change: its wonders, she writes, disrupted 'the apprehensible world in order to open spaces for dreaming alternatives'.<sup>67</sup> For Warner, the tales are optative rather than prescriptive. Though they have the purpose of teaching us where boundaries lie, it is their paradoxical refusal of limits that achieves this. She argues that the genre has a double function, on the one hand charting perennial drives and terrors, while on the other mapping actual, volatile experience. It is this, she stresses, that gives the stories their ongoing fascination and power to satisfy. They imagine what might lie ahead and suggest ways of proceeding: their happy endings are promises or prophecies rather than accomplished conclusions. For Warner, the enchantments of the tales act as camouflage, wrapping brilliantly seductive images round the harsh truths or daring utterances they speak. Thus she links the role of fairy tale to its etymological history, tracing the close correlations between the words for fairy and speech.<sup>68</sup>

Warner shows how the majority of the fairy tellers were women and contends that the downgraded status of the genre enabled women to speak when they were otherwise deterred from doing so.<sup>69</sup> Her book is full of shocking details of the exhortations on women to be silent, including a sixteenth-century engraving of the paragon 'Wise Woman' whose lips are pierced and sealed with a padlock to which, presumably, only her father or husband holds the key.<sup>70</sup>

For the purposes of this study, I have opted to keep the label 'fairy tale' despite its problems, since it is more widely used than its

alternatives such as 'wonder' or even 'folk' tale. I draw no distinction between myth and fairy tale as the terms seem currently synonymous, even though I recognise important differences in their historical evolution and I continue to see a happy ending as the peculiar province of fairy tale. I am also aware of the ongoing tendency to 'gender' the two, and the hierarchy which the equation of myth with masculinity and fairy with femininity produces. I agree with Maureen Duffy that our definition of a fairy cannot be restricted to saccharine and largely nineteenth-century images of figures dressed in white tulle: I consider that fairies can just as easily be alien space craft or even an accommodating bank manager. I also believe that the simplifications of the genre are important, presenting general shapes onto which the reader can paste the necessarily more complex and idiosyncratic details of their experience. Even though such formulaic devices as the customary 'once upon a time' are late additions, I see the way they encapsulate fairy tale's ability to transport us beyond the confusions of our lives into a realm where destiny is clear, and where we benefit by example, as intrinsic to the genre's power. For me the tensions between the 'anything can happen' promise of the magic that we will transgress all the rules and the inexorability of the story as its sequence of events is played out are enabling, because they echo the complicated patterns of our own desire to dare and to need to conform. I find Bettelheim's work helpful in identifying fairy tale's connections with the powerful motivations and emotions that drive childhood; I am convinced that these connections continue to resonate in adults and that this explains the genre's enduring appeal as it fuels, shapes, alleviates and alters our fears and dreams. Jack Zipes' and Marina Warner's careful investigations into the specific historical and economic geneses of the tales seem to me necessary to bear in mind, while Warner's positive insistence that the tales can change and change again offers a rallying cry to feminist writers. As Angela Carter puts it, fairy tales are rather like potato soup. No one knows who first invented it, there are a million subtly different recipes, and all we can do is tell our own version.<sup>71</sup>

## **The Mother Goddess**

Feminist critic Mary Daly argues in her book *Gyn/Ecology* that the patriarchal myths we have inherited derive their potency from 'stolen mythic power'.<sup>72</sup> Daly's insistence that mythologies around the world

originated in the worship of the mother goddess as the source and destination of all life draws on the scholarship of a number of leading mythographers. In order to present this view, I have chosen to concentrate here on the work of Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor, and Riane Eisler.

In their richly researched and passionate account, Monica Sjöö and Barbara Mor present a wealth of biological, anthropological and archaeological evidence to conclude that religion originally centred on worship of the cosmic mother.<sup>73</sup> They show how archaeology and anthropology have consistently downplayed any contrary evidence, overlooking, for example, the fact that among hunting-and-gathering peoples between 75 and 80 per cent of a group's subsistence derives from women's food-gathering activities, in order to argue for the primacy of the male role in human evolution. Similarly, they query the way science has sidelined such discoveries as the fact that maleness in mammals is a derivation from the otherwise female embryo so as to uphold the view that women are inferior to men.<sup>74</sup>

Sjöö and Mor study the surviving images from the earliest periods of human civilisation to demonstrate how the earth was originally perceived as the female source of cyclic birth, life, death and rebirth – a belief, they argue, which underpinned all mythological and religious thinking for at least the first 200,000 years of human existence. They document how in all the oldest creation myths the female goddess creates the earth from her own body, how the earliest human images known to us are the pregnant guardian 'Venuses' found in Upper Paleolithic remains (from approximately 35,000 to 10,000 BCE), and how burial arrangements from around 200,000 BCE vividly illustrate the connection between death, rebirth and a universal mother.<sup>75</sup> Sjöö and Mor draw on Marija Gimbutas' extensive study of pictographs found in Old Europe between 6500 and 3500 BCE to show how life was viewed as a continuum deriving from and destined for a cosmic goddess, whose associated motifs of horns, the lunar crescent and a cross symbolised the waxing and waning moon.<sup>76</sup> They speculate on the impact a woman's capacity to give birth must have had on peoples unaware of the connection between intercourse and pregnancy: while men may well have been seen as 'opening' the womb, pregnancy and childbirth must have been thought of as involving a magical connection between women and the fertile earth, or else as an act of parthenogenesis with the woman as autonomous creator. Sjöö and Mor argue that such analogies fed into a celebration of the female for a substantial period of human history; an emphasis that was gradually

co-opted by male groups devising their own imitations of menstruation and childbirth, as in the Australian Aboriginal initiation ceremony where cuts are made on the penis and the initiate passes between the legs of his elders, or in the circumcision of the foreskin and reverence for the magical wounds of Christ that mark the Jewish and Christian religions: in both cases, Sjöo and Mor write, the imitation is deemed sacred while actual menstruation and childbirth are debased or considered dirty or sinful.<sup>77</sup>

Most of the famous goddesses of Greek myth, Sjöo and Mor suggest, entail the dismembering of the earlier figure of a universal goddess into her constituent aspects: Aphrodite as goddess of love, Athene goddess of wisdom, Demeter the mother, Persephone the daughter, Artemis the virgin huntress, and so on. Sjöo and Mor show how in these guises the goddesses are often presented in conflict with one another.<sup>78</sup> They document the introduction of Zeus, the sky-father, into Mycenaean–Greek myth by nomadic invaders, and trace the gradual transformation of the goddess's son or lover into a war god and increasingly dominant patriarch, usurping her functions and powers and served by a male priesthood actively remaking the old mythologies.<sup>79</sup> Sjöo and Mor suggest that the advancement of food-management techniques and the decrease in the need for hunting during the Neolithic period altered men's role. They speculate that their new task of guarding food supplies from marauding thieves coupled with substantial developments in the use of metals during the Bronze Age generated an interest in warfare. Women, who had played a primary role in Neolithic society, were ousted with this shift to male, military power: they became, along with children, animals, land and resources, the prizes in a new regime of raid and conquest. Sjöo and Mor argue that this is why patriarchy's inaugural myths, from the Indian *Mahabharata* to the Greek *Iliad*, revel in the glorification of war. They are warrior tales describing the feats of a battle-loving elite bent on victory and theft. Sjöo and Mor delineate how their patriarchal sun or sky god was everywhere imposed on the formerly earth-and-moon worshipping communities by invasion or internal revolt: where the vision of a universal mother goddess was not entirely obliterated she was turned into a harmless consort with limited or negative powers.<sup>80</sup>

Sjöo and Mor suggest that when a mother goddess was the origin of the universe all creation was perceived as being of her substance, just as a child is thought to be of the same flesh as its mother. With the introduction of a male god, however, this vital link could not be

maintained since the male body can neither produce offspring nor itself feed them, with the result that the notion of an originary oneness became dualised and the universe, including god, was dislocated from the self and objectified. Sjöö and Mor connect this development to the emergence of the rigid class system of royal masters and slave labourers that coalesced around the new patriarchal elite, overturning the preceding 300,000 to 500,000 years of communal Stone Age living. They stress how such a regime required punitive ideologies which justified the privileges of the few and the exploitation of the many in order to sustain itself; they study the writings of the Bronze Age to demonstrate how creation was newly paraded as evil while the creator alone was revered as good. The concept of original sin consequently supersedes a belief that we all share in the divine substance to persuade us of our corruption and need for leadership and salvation. Sjöö and Mor argue that all patriarchal religions emphasise the Father's separateness and absoluteness; he is pure spirit divorced from matter, perfection knowable only through abstraction, the Logos. As a corollary, they write, it is the corrupt mother who becomes responsible for the existence of death, illness, pain and decay in conjunction with her evil lover or devil. This is the antithesis of the mother goddess who was neither consummate nor motionless but figured the ceaseless renewal of life in parallel with the waxing and waning moon; she thereby reconciled the opposites that have subsequently determined our thinking, since within her being diminishing and dying are as integral to continuation as birth and becoming.

In two influential studies, Riane Eisler supports Sjöö and Mor's account of the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal worldview although with a different emphasis.<sup>81</sup> Eisler charts her discovery that the culture she grew up in, where either the only or the most powerful deities were male, was the product of a societal shift during Western prehistory from what she terms a 'partnership' to a 'dominator' model. She studies the 30,000-year-old images found in caves in the Dordogne region of France of the female vulva which, she argues, was revered as the magic 'portal' of life, possessing the power of physical regeneration as well as spiritual illumination and transformation.<sup>82</sup> Eisler traces the proliferation of such female images through the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods into the Bronze Age, and argues that until the Bronze Age the extant art suggests a mythology based on the interconnectedness of all life rather than a sense that nature, woman, darkness or evil are forces to be conquered and controlled.<sup>83</sup> Eisler draws on a number of archaeological studies to speculate that

the societies which developed in more fertile areas where nature could be viewed as a life-giving and sustaining mother and where agriculture gradually replaced hunting-gathering oriented towards a partnership model, involving a celebration of the feminine and rites concerned to align the community to beneficent nature. This did not preclude the destructiveness of periodic storms, droughts, floods, sickness or accidents which, she suggests, could be explained as part of a cyclical process rather than as opposing and hostile forces. In contrast, Eisler argues, in less hospitable areas the powers governing the universe would have appeared malign. Rituals were consequently less a celebration of propitious nature and more an endeavour to placate and control its unreliable, apparently angry and harmful powers. Eisler suggests that in this climate hierarchies based on fear and force were common, particularly during times of scarcity. She documents how these patterns were gradually institutionalised and inscribed in mythological and religious precepts. Eisler points out that Homer's *Iliad*, which is commonly considered as the repository of much that is noble and valuable in Western heritage, takes place several thousand years after the invasions that sealed the transition to the dominator model, and is itself about the exploits of war. The qualities its mythical gods and heroes portray are those of consummate killers, and she cites the opening quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon about their rights to a young girl Achilles claims as a trophy of war as an instance of its heinous attitude to women.<sup>84</sup>

Eisler sees in the surviving documents from Sumer a pattern for what happened elsewhere. Sumer is the oldest Western civilisation from which there are extensive deciphered written records, and Eisler studies these in conjunction with the hymns to and about the goddess Inanna, the Sumerian queen of earth and heaven, to show how an early mythology dating as far back as the Paleolithic period which celebrates the sexual union of female and male partners as a life-sustaining rite is superseded by tales of battle, conquest and domination. Eisler links this transition to the establishment of a military hierarchy under the threat of invasion by the formerly free Sumerian city-states where power rested with the citizens. She observes the disbanding of a partnership in favour of a dominator model throughout world mythology, and details, as an example, how in Indian iconography the infinity sign represented by two circles initially indicated equal sexual union between female and male before its meaning was altered, so that the symbol is now understood to refer to two male deities.

This view of a shift from communities which valued and celebrated the female to societies which depended on violence and a commanding father has also been expressed by a number of male mythographers. In *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves studies the language of myth in northern Europe and the Mediterranean which, he argues, was a magical language connected with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the moon goddess, some of which date back to the old Stone Age.<sup>85</sup> Graves suggests that the underlying theme of this mythology was the birth, life, death and resurrection of the god of the waxing year, and that a pivotal moment concerned his defeat by the god of the waning year for love of the all-powerful, triple goddess: their mother, bride and layer-out. He shows how this 'language' was converted during late Minoan times as invaders from central Asia substituted patrilineal for matrilineal beliefs and practices and altered or falsified the existing mythology to reinforce their changes. Graves sees the Greeks' rejection of myth and institution of a rational poetic language which became the model for classical enlightenment in this context, since worship of the moon goddess required men to pay spiritual and sexual homage to women. Despite numerous problems with Graves's study, his relegation of women to a position of muse rather than creator among them, his analysis of the transformation and continuing presence of an early matriarchal mythology has had a widespread impact.<sup>86</sup> Joseph Campbell shares Graves's view of an originary goddess, arguing that her demise came under the influence of marauding invaders for whom an organic, non-heroic relationship to nature was at odds with their reverence for battle and an inaccessible, patriarchal god.<sup>87</sup> Campbell outlines how the earlier, goddess-oriented mythology celebrated the equality of female and male and gave women status within the community, in contrast to the invaders' notions of opposition and domination. Like Graves, Campbell discerns the enduring influence of the goddess in mythologies around the world, interpreting the biblical story of Eve in the garden of Eden, for example, as a reworking of a more ancient tale in which the goddess gives fruit from the tree of life to a male visitor.<sup>88</sup>

Reading through the evidence, of which the work presented here is only a small selection, the argument that an early mythology based on a cosmic and maternal power was supplanted by invaders whose aggression and competitive hierarchies were presided over by a remote 'Father' appears convincing. Equally accurate, it seems to me, is the suggestion that traces of this early mythology still resonate, since it explains why myths continue to exert such a hold. According to this

view, rewriting myth is not only a matter of weaving in new images and situations but also involves the task of excavation, sifting through the layerings of adverse patriarchal renderings from which women were excluded, marginalised or depicted negatively to salvage and reinterpret as well as discard. It means looking at the petrifying figure of Medusa and perceiving the vitality of the ancient snake goddess beneath the veneer of loathing she has been condemned to wear. As Riane Eisler points out, our cultural landscape, in which the average US child will watch over 20,000 screen murders and witness more than 200,000 acts of violence by the time they are eligible to vote, must be reconstructed as well as deconstructed if we are to establish an alternative to a system driven by punishment and fear.<sup>89</sup> As Sjöö and Mor contend, changing economic and social conditions is only one step: repressive behaviours, sadistic power relations and competitive greed have been wired-in to our nervous systems, and it is this sanction to exploit and dominate that we must counteract through a *total* revolution.<sup>90</sup> We must ply the persisting power of myth to this end while shearing away the misconstructions of destructive regimes: we must jettison myth's lies while simultaneously reinventing its truths.

### *Mythos and Logos*

In an influential essay published in the 1970s, feminist critic and writer Hélène Cixous argues that man's endeavour to place himself at the origin in the guise of a transcendental Father has reverberated through history, determining our society and culture to the extent that it is now virtually impossible to conceive of the world in any other way.<sup>91</sup> Structures of binary opposition, in which one term is defined against what is deemed as its other, have organised our thinking and decreed that woman shall operate as the negative of man. This pattern is transmitted in our culture and language as they create the world for each new generation. For Cixous, women are no longer magnificent and powerful goddesses: they appear in our myths and legends only as passive victims, ruinous sirens or unheeded Cassandras. Her strategy for circumventing this repressive scheme involves reading those writers such as William Shakespeare and Heinrich von Kleist who, in their renderings of the stories of Antony and Cleopatra or Achilles and Penthesileia, bring into being modes of relating that are not dependent on opposition, as well as employing literature's rich potential to inscribe alternative accounts.

Cixous's essay draws on the work of contemporary critics, including the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.<sup>92</sup> For Derrida, Western thought is founded on the mistaken notion of an originary 'logos', a term borrowed from the Greek which Derrida variously glosses as truth, reason, meaning, thought and speech. Since this foundation is an illusion it is inherently unstable, as whatever it refuses or devalues continually threatens to destroy it. Derrida coins the term 'phallogocentrism' to indicate the indissociable link between phallus and logos. Since it is man who constitutes the origin, and since its institution and reproduction can only be achieved through the reduction or effacement of what is different, woman serves as its site of alterity: she is the sacrificial victim of a system within which she exists only as a void.

An eloquent illustration of this endeavour to appropriate the origin can be found in the problematic transfer of power from father to son that founds Western mythology.<sup>93</sup> In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Gaia, the primordial goddess of the earth, bears Uranos, the sky, and takes him as her lover. Their progeny are feared by Uranos, who forces them back into Gaia's body until the overwhelming pain causes her to turn to her other sons for assistance. Cronus castrates and disposes of his father, but then worries that he in turn will be overthrown by his children and so swallows them as soon as they are born. In this he is finally outwitted by his wife Rhea, who when her youngest son Zeus is born fools Cronus by wrapping a stone in swaddling. Zeus calls on his uncles for support, and a ten-year battle ensues following which Zeus is ensconced as the supreme Father.<sup>94</sup> This pattern is repeated in the story of Danae, imprisoned by her father Acrisius because of a prophecy that her son will destroy him, as well as in the tale of Oedipus.

The concept of *mythos* as distinct from *logos* has an interesting history. G. R. Manton outlines the transition in the classical Greek period from an attitude that regarded myth as true to its subsequent relegation to the category of 'story'.<sup>95</sup> He delineates how truth gradually came to be understood as what can be empirically tested, and he compares, as an example, the histories of Herodotus, which include portents and supernatural explanations, with those of his successor Thucydides, whose accounts are based on research and evidence. John Creed charts how *mythoi* began to be considered as unreal or fantastical stories, demonstrating how by the time of Plato's *Republic* the term was synonymous with falsehood.<sup>96</sup> *Logos*, on the other hand, as Albert Cook points out, indicated both the narrative and its explanation: in contradistinction to the fictions of myth it derived from the apparently superior realm of reason.<sup>97</sup>

The Enlightenment's return to the precepts of classical Greece initiated a fresh attack on myth, as Joseph Addison's publication of a mock-edict forbidding any poet to invoke a god or goddess illustrates.<sup>98</sup> The contemporary historian Michel Foucault suggests in his study *Words and Things* how the renewed emphasis on reason that emerged during the seventeenth century altered our world-view from recognitions of resemblance and interconnection to a system of rigid demarcations.<sup>99</sup> *Mythos*, according to this view, conveys a less partisan mode of perception and organisation to the code of abstract representations that separates words from things and the speaker from the subject he strives to master. *Mythos* here comprises the playful possibilities of language to create a plurality of meanings that will exceed all rational binary orders, including the foundation of the *logos* itself.<sup>100</sup>

The conjunction of *mythos* and *logos* presents some challenging questions. If woman only exists within the current order as the negative other of man, how might it be possible for women to rewrite the myths that have scripted their demise? Is it the case, as feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray suggests, that women can have no voice at all within the present scheme, or can speak only as the mimics of men?<sup>101</sup> Can women's writings inscribe alternative modes of being and relating to those dictated by the *logos*, as Hélène Cixous believes, or will they, as critic Elisabeth Bronfen fears, hover on the difficult border between terrorism and collusion?<sup>102</sup> If it is true, as linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva maintains, that we can only operate from inside the system of representations within which we are immersed, does it follow that women's writing will repeat the way we have been taught to see?<sup>103</sup> Can the different trajectories of *mythos* exceed and undermine the totalising forces of *logos*, or are they merely a safety-valve for dissidence? It is to these and other problems as to how myth might be plied for feminist ends that I now turn.

## Is Feminist Rewriting Possible?

In the two 'princess' tales that frame a collection of stories by Jenny Diski, a princess placed alone in a tower at birth spends her life reading books.<sup>104</sup> In the final story, towards the end of the princess's life, it begins to dawn on the princess that the books she has been given to read might be wrong, and that despite their insistence that what princesses in towers do is to wait, she might not be rescued after all. One of the many interesting features of Diski's stories is that the

narration casts doubt on whether or not the princess is actually a prisoner. There is a door in the tower and the door has a keyhole and on the other side a key hangs on a piece of string but neither we nor the princess ever discover if the door is locked. The ending to the stories is equally ambiguous. Although the princess is not rescued in the classic manner something does finally happen to her: her cat, her lifelong companion Dinah, dies and is replaced by a kitten. This ending seems to encapsulate the problems that beset the feminist rewriter. There is undoubtedly a questioning in Diski's stories, an ironic revelation of the perfidious effect of fairy tale on women's lives, there are even new events, yet these appear insignificant when set against the multitude of texts that continue to keep princesses in their towers. We are left as we finish reading in exactly the same place: Dinah may have died but her successor has already been installed. Princesses may periodically question the regime that promises rescue, but they are too firmly stuck inside the story, Diski's tale implies, to even try the door. The pattern is too entrenched for an insurgent princess to be anything other than an exception which proves the rule.

Jenny Diski's stories return us to the *logos*, and to the notion that the view it ordains is so deeply embedded in our culture and language and hence in our conception of ourselves that it is impossible to see beyond it. For Jacques Derrida, the *logos* functions through a destructive dialectic of opposition, a strategy which is doomed to fail since the very process of demarcation and rejection means it is shaped by whatever it designates as its other and struggles to deny. These traces threaten its jurisdiction, and Derrida suggests a strategy of rebellion which should inspire all weary princesses. He argues that writing in particular retains the knowledge of its own creation, since the system of differences whereby its meanings are produced allows other possibilities to come to the fore, disrupting every attempt by the writer to control what is said.<sup>105</sup> This 'supplement' within writing constitutes its radical potential, since a text can always be made to reveal its history, including its manipulations and suppressions. For Derrida, this 'feminine' excess entails the possibility of a plurality which deconstructs our conceptual system. He consequently urges writers to employ a multiplicity of styles and to work to keep the opportunities for meanings open, by attending to and incorporating the myriad other pathways that are generated as one writes. In contrast, therefore, to the logocentric text which strives to establish and police its own weave, what might be termed a 'feminine' text is an unguarded network that continually unfolds outwards towards others.

Derrida's insistence that writing has the revolutionary potential to counter the phallogocentric system is a notion shared by Hélène Cixous.<sup>106</sup> Writing, she argues, presents an unbounded space in which the self that strives to constitute itself through mastery of the other is relinquished and in which the other can finally be received. Consequently, she suggests that the feminine writer's task is to actively inscribe the heterogeneous promptings that are thrown up by the process of writing, an endeavour that will bring into being an alternative mode of perception, relation and expression to that decreed by the prevailing schema.

The psychoanalyst and critic Julia Kristeva ties the process of language acquisition to the infant's developing sense of itself as distinct from its mother's body and surroundings, and the accompanying requirement for it to control its innate instincts to conform to social convention.<sup>107</sup> She argues that in order for writing to contravene the rules we have been taught it must return us to the metaphorical scene of castration, in other words to the point of separation between our unsocialised, drive-governed selves and our constitution within a 'symbolic' order of precepts, so that we can re-experience and perhaps redraft the premisses which currently organise this division.<sup>108</sup> The writer's task is to embrace in their writing the 'semiotic' or heterogeneous corporeal energies which reject, disrupt, supplement and alter the terms of one's relation to the cultural contract, a practice radically at odds with the monological procedures of the present patriarchal regime. Like Derrida and Cixous, Kristeva urges the writer to continually reflect on the processes of writing, to inscribe plural meanings into their work, and to draw on the unconscious for inspiration since this is where outlawed alternatives to the prescribing order are lodged. Significantly in relation to the rewriting of myth, she maintains that disruption can occur both through the inclusion of unanticipated meanings generated by a word or phrase in the course of writing and through references to other texts. This 'intertextuality', Kristeva maintains, can offer a potent strategy for dissidence.

Luce Irigaray stresses that the Law which organises Western culture is the patriarchal desire to distinguish, reproduce and exchange the *same* image. Woman under this regime exists only in relation to man: she is the other in an exclusively male scheme, with no value or attributes of her own apart from her reflective capacity. Irigaray contends that language is the mainstay and medium of this order, but argues that women can at present do little more than 'mimic' the discourse we have had no part in creating: any attempt to speak will merely

reproduce its repressive hierarchy. Despite the bleakness of her denunciation, Irigaray's writing indicates a possible subversive tactic as it strives to disclose the mechanisms of the phallogocentric procedure and identify alternatives.<sup>109</sup>

Feminist critic Judith Butler examines Irigaray's assessment to pinpoint a number of difficulties which are relevant to feminist rewriting.<sup>110</sup> Butler suggests that Irigaray's strategy of mimicking Plato in order to expose the assumptions and manipulations of his account makes it hard to tell whether it is Irigaray or the philosophical father who is speaking. If Irigaray is 'in' the father's voice, Butler asks, how can she also be at the same time outside it? If she locates herself 'between' the two positions, then doesn't this leave the system of binary oppositions she wishes to dismantle intact? How can Irigaray's different voice, Butler goes on, be identified as she retells Plato's story, and doesn't the act of retelling reproduce the very story she wishes to undo? Butler locates some possible solutions to these dilemmas in Irigaray's tactic of mimicking the *excesses* in Plato's narration as well as in her mimes which 'reverse' Plato's intention, both of which reproduce the original so as to highlight the prejudice and grandiosity that underlie Plato's claims. As will be discussed below, these expedients can be seen at work in the fictions of a number of contemporary women writers.

Irigaray's insistence that phallogocentrism is so all-pervasive that mimicry is currently the only option available to women and Butler's analysis of the difficulties involved in such a manoeuvre are echoed in feminist critic Diane Purkiss's essay on women's rewriting of myth in contemporary poetry.<sup>111</sup> Purkiss identifies three recurring modes of rewriting which can also be traced in women's fiction: shifting the focus from a male to a female character, as in Barbara Walker's stories of 'Gorga and the Dragon' and 'Jill and the Beanroot'; transposing the terms so that what was negative becomes positive, as in Angela Carter's reinterpretation of the wolf from 'Little Red Riding Hood'; and allowing a minor character to tell their tale, as in Alison Fell's novel of Mrs Gulliver.<sup>112</sup> There are problems contained in all three modes, Purkiss argues, since they all tamper with internal patterns, leaving the mythical discourse in which they are embedded intact. She stresses that the endeavour to retrieve a buried or marginal voice has the paradoxical function of endorsing the original myth. Postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak takes this argument a stage further to suggest that it is *impossible* to restore a voice that has been dispossessed, since the very act serves to re-cover it; an assessment that points to the more general dilemma of how to rewrite a text without

'mastering' its source and so reproducing the objectifying and annihilating procedures of binary law.<sup>113</sup> Derrida's notion of opening up the weave of writing to enable other meanings to come to the fore is a potentially empowering one for feminism, yet it leaves the question of what will happen to this tactic when confronted with the particular requirements of the genre unanswered. If the feminine writer adheres to Cixous's admonition that there can be no ordered beginnings and endings, no definitive characters, or events that follow a predetermined course, then isn't what she is writing the very antithesis of myth? If we adopt Kristeva's richly suggestive stance, how can our corporeal drives find expression in a mode of narration from which the personal has been successively erased? The difficulties confronting the feminist rewriter appear immense. Must we conclude, then, with Camille Paglia, that the feminist project of rewriting myth is both pointless and absurd?<sup>114</sup>

If Diane Purkiss is right, and altering internal patterns or attempting to express silenced or marginal voices leaves the central discourse inviolate, does it follow that feminists must begin again, from a place outside myth? Yet if we do this, we not only vacate the arena to allow myth's power to continue unimpeded, we also deprive ourselves of its undeniable force. I am also more optimistic than Irigaray or Purkiss about the potential impact of rewriting a myth. As Elisabeth Bronfen argues in a different context, the disruption caused leaves traces, so that the regained order contains a shift and is no longer the homogeneous realm from which difference is eradicated.<sup>115</sup> The work of feminist critic and myth-maker Mary Daly presents an example here. In a series of influential books, Daly works to dismantle the stranglehold of patriarchal myth and to create woman-focused words, images and tales.<sup>116</sup> For Daly, this metaphorical shape-shifting and gynocentric spinning opens up previously barred meanings and areas of experience, which have the capacity to unlock corresponding 'metamorphospheres' in us.<sup>117</sup> It is impossible, having once read Daly's etymological tracings and new glosses on words such as 'virgin', 'spinster' and 'hag', or laughed at her pun on 'phallosophy' and hilarious definition of patriarchy as 'Yahweh & Son: mythic paradigm for any corporation of cockocracy, for any all-male family business', to view their sources in the same light.<sup>118</sup> The problem, then, is not to avoid myth, but to find ways of rewriting it which do not return us to the negative prescriptions of the *logos*.

I see a first response to this dilemma in Derrida's insistence that the text will always slip away from us: just as the logocentric enterprise is never intact, so our own rewritings will always exceed and disrupt our

intentions. We can actively encourage this process by leaving the web of the text open: as Derrida reminds us, 'to weave is first to make holes'.<sup>119</sup> Yet if we make too many holes we are in danger of writing something other than myth. Perhaps the answer lies in rethinking the conjunction between the old and the new – or the live and the dead, to borrow philosopher Paul Ricoeur's resonant phrase.<sup>120</sup> This would involve keeping and benefiting from those elements which are still potent for us, while discarding or revitalising those which are dead, deadly, or simply no longer appropriate. It would enable us to envisage rewritings not only as pleasurable reversals or ingenious tinkering but as new embroideries, adding fresh images and colours to radically alter the picture. Feminist rewriting could thus include ironic mimicry and clever twists as well as a whole gamut of tactics that would open the myth from the inside as well as out, leaving in place enough of the known format to provide evocative points of reflection for its reader, but also encompassing different possibilities and other points of view. Marina Warner's rewriting of the tale of Susannah and the elders offers an illustration here, employing our knowledge of the original to complicate our relation to it through its invitation to identify with but also spy on Susannah. Warner reworks the existing template to prompt us to question our own roles as accomplices and voyeurs.<sup>121</sup>

My answer then is to try for the difficult and perhaps impossible balancing act. To follow the figure of Little Red Riding Hood and stick to enough of the path so as not to get lost completely, while taking in whatever flowers or strangers we encounter on the way. Critic Rosemary Jackson suggests that the fantastic nature of the genre can contribute to this: since it is free from many of the conventions that restrict our thinking it opens up spaces where unity and order are normally imposed.<sup>122</sup> She argues that its generic make-up disrupts the drive towards the institution of a single, reductive 'truth', introducing contradiction and polysemy. Jackson sees the movement of metamorphosis that is a persistent feature of myth as metonymic rather than metaphoric, since one object does not stand for another but rather slides into it, blurring the divisions and any concomitant hierarchy; she cites the psychoanalytic critic Jacques Lacan's contention that metonymy offers a means of eluding the repressive strictures of the social order to argue for its subversive power.<sup>123</sup> The honed quality of mythic symbolism also seems to me to provide rich potential since it encourages multiple interpretations, as the various configurations of the maze in Carol Shields' novel *Larry's Party* illustrates.<sup>124</sup> Some of Hélène Cixous's own feminine writings are notoriously difficult to

read as they glide from word-play through dense allusion to disruption of all the 'rules' including those of grammar, punctuation and page layout, to the point where rebellion dissipates into chaos.<sup>125</sup> It is my contention that the rewriting of myth can circumvent some of these dangers, since the known forms operate as compass points around which we can weave new and different stories. Employing the existing weft and warp in this way replicates the psychoanalytic notion of holding, in which boundaries encourage the individual to progress. The double momentum of security and innovation similarly mirrors Kristeva's strategies for dissident writing, since it provides a context within which we can rend and renew our relation to the established order: prompting us to reject what unfairly binds us while reaffirming our allegiance to what is productive. As Kristeva points out, we must adopt the social-symbolic code in order to function, and our revolts will be fruitless unless they occur within it in ways that can be understood. Feminist rewriting can thus be thought of in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction – of bringing into being enabling alternatives. Having drawn up some initial guidelines, we must now consider in more detail how myth can contribute to such an undertaking.

## Why Myth?

The causes of the Greek–Trojan war that provides the subject matter for Homer's *The Iliad* are a tangle of invasions and thefts of which the kidnapping of the famous Helen is only one example.<sup>126</sup> *The Odyssey*, Homer's second great epic, which charts the return journey of Odysseus 'the city-sacker' after the war, similarly commemorates deeds of extraordinary brutality culminating in the wholesale massacre of his wife's suitors and the serving-women who have loved them.<sup>127</sup> It is perhaps surprising, therefore, that the legacy of twentieth-century feminism should involve a return to tales in which violence is celebrated and where women are possessions to be won or disposed of. Do women writers retell these founding stories of Western myth in an attempt to set the record straight? Are they concerned to eradicate the distortions of patriarchy to reveal an anterior, matriarchal world-view and to create a more woman-centred account? Is it the case, as Camille Paglia would have it, that the savagery is a source of pleasure?<sup>128</sup> What is it that has prompted contemporary women fiction writers from

Margaret Atwood to Jeanette Winterson to rework these ancient narratives?

One answer to this conundrum is the dominant role of classics in Western education.<sup>129</sup> George Eliot, in *The Mill on the Floss*, gives a heart-rending account of young Tom Tulliver's struggles with the irregularities of Latin grammar because his father, the mill-owner, wants him 'to be a man who will make his way in the world'.<sup>130</sup> One of the many ironies in Eliot's novel is that Tom's sister Maggie is linguistically more gifted than her brother and learns the declensions easily, yet as a girl she is denied the education that is wasted on the practically-minded Tom. Virginia Woolf, who wrote a devastating essay on the fate of William Shakespeare's talented but female and therefore uneducated imaginary sister Judith, was refused the education automatically accorded her brothers (though she was given the run of her father's library): it is significant that when she could she chose to study Greek.<sup>131</sup>

A more important reason lies at the heart of the myth-making process itself. As Nicole Ward Jouve observes, drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur, we make the otherwise alien world a 'habitable' place through the stories we tell ourselves about it.<sup>132</sup> The process works in two ways, since what we know of ourselves and can project onto the world is itself a product of the language and literature we have received. Story-telling shapes us as we use stories to shape the world.

Drawing on theories which refute the idea that the self is a single and consistent entity, Don Cupitt argues that the multiple layers on which myth operates accommodates individual complexity.<sup>133</sup> This, he suggests, is the contemporary function of myth: to enable us to compose from the vast range of possibilities enough coherence to perform. Cupitt supports his thesis by demonstrating how myth's multiplex structure corresponds to the circuitry of the brain. Each neuron, he writes, is wired to hundreds of other neurons creating countless strata of neural networks; a number of such networks must be stimulated for a response to occur, a condition that is satisfied by myth. For Cupitt, this link between physiology and myth has two further repercussions: it means we remember stories more easily than lists of data and that myths can open new neural pathways, equipping us to deal with situations we have not yet encountered. Like Ward Jouve, Cupitt believes that stories generate desires and models of behaviour. They offer a forum in which we can conduct imaginative experiments, distinguishing as well as providing an outlet for feelings and attributing value to them. Myth's highly symbolic form prevents a crude or mechanical reaction and induces a more considered and enhanced response.<sup>134</sup>

Cupitt's analysis provides a compelling manifesto for myth, and also indicates that we must be ethically responsible in our choice of what to write. Repeating Homer verbatim will only ensure that violent tales of warfare and rape are wired into the brains of each new generation.

A further reason for the continuing potency of myth is the way the tales have been refined over centuries of telling. As Nicole Ward Jouve suggests, there is still much truth in myth, despite its distortions and the unjust way it apportioned roles.<sup>135</sup> What we write as individuals cannot so easily achieve this resonance. We need to deploy myth's power, weaving our own versions onto its potent templates to attain the maximum effect. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* may have acquired mythic status, but it began with the story of Prometheus.<sup>136</sup>

Roland Barthes' work on mythology similarly uncovers an answer. His view that myths function by attempting to restore what they have stolen for their effect is empowering for feminist rewriters since it highlights the constructed nature of myth as well as the disruption caused to the plundered order by the act of theft.<sup>137</sup> Barthes suggests that the way myth creates its meaning makes it difficult to refute its power: once we have received the myth its impact cannot be erased by explanation or qualification. Deconstruction or the reading of myth to expose its manipulations and suppressions is not enough, we must counter with our own mythopoeia; as Barthes writes, our best weapon against myth is to mythify in turn.

Don Cupitt contrasts the way myth operates with the functioning of philosophy, which, he contends, has concerned itself since Plato with contemplating what it postulates as the unchanging, unitary 'Truth'. Stories, on the other hand, have a temporal structure which echoes how we experience life.<sup>138</sup> Truth, Cupitt stresses, in a metaphor that evokes the combat and violence of Greek myth, is a battlefield, an endless struggle for domination between rival stories. While I am not persuaded by Cupitt's assessment of competing stories, which seems to me to return us to the *logos* he is elsewhere at pains to undermine, I do share his insistence on the greater veracity myths contain. A final response, then, to the question 'why myth?' might be that its procedures enable the expression of more individually resonant, less easily co-optable, multifarious truths.

## Reading Myth

In her essay 'Sorties', H el ene Cixous describes how as a child she read Homer and Virgil, trying out the positions of the different male

heroes.<sup>139</sup> Her insistence that as readers we identify with characters irrespective of sex complicates feminist critiques of myth and fairy tale on the grounds that they portray gender misogynistically.<sup>140</sup> Kay F. Stone, for instance, argues that feminist rewriting which attempts to offer women positive role models by turning fairy tale heroines into dragon-slayers ignores the way we actually read.<sup>141</sup> It is, she stresses, a tactic which responds to the story's surface meaning overlooking other levels, such as the fact that the prince might symbolise inner strength or that Cinderella's glass slipper might stand for her vagina.<sup>142</sup> Alison Lurie similarly suggests that what we receive from myth and fairy tale depends on how we connect them to our life experience.<sup>143</sup>

For Hélène Cixous, a feminine practice of writing must be accompanied by an equivalent style of reading.<sup>144</sup> She believes that like the feminine writer the feminine reader must remain open to the myriad meanings of a text, without imposing their own prejudices and predilections and selecting only those elements which corroborate their view. Cixous stresses that this has implications for the type of texts we read, which should deal in an open and questioning way with the fundamental issues of human experience and contain the capacity to alter our perspective, motivating us to reconsider the manner in which we live.

Julia Kristeva argues for a mode of reading that involves the reader's active participation in the multifarious movements of the text, which, she contends, bring into play the drive-governed terrain of sexuality and the unconscious and consequently return us to the unordered realm of the pre-Oedipal before the divisions and requirements of social-symbolic law.<sup>145</sup> Like Cixous, Kristeva believes that this should influence our choice of reading, which should continually call us into question rather than assist the desire for mastery.<sup>146</sup> We must reject those texts which flatter our position and work with those which, through their pluralising and disruptive tactics, force us to consider our constructions and tenets. Kristeva describes such a text as whisking the reader through a process of dissolution by the exploding force of its rhythms, linguistic and syntactic transgressions and semantic possibilities. The reader, she insists, must work to follow this trajectory and refuse the demands of the super-ego for dominion, seeking, once the reading is over, to restore the relation to the cultural contract but with a new awareness of what is at stake.

In the introduction to their collection *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*, Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher suggest that Victorian women turned to

fairy tales partly because they were considered to be primarily for children which consequently made them more acceptable for women to write, and partly because their generic composition allowed the expression of otherwise forbidden truths.<sup>147</sup> Auerbach and Knoepflmacher argue that the ingredients which, in the early years of the century, were employed by the didacticists who dominated juvenile literature for moral instruction, gave rise in the middle and later years to tales that voiced women's frustrations and yearnings for autonomy. Since women were still expected to comply with rigid conventions, fairy tales offered strategies of indirection and disguise which produced a new generation of deviant, satirical, angry and even violent writers and readers.<sup>148</sup>

Auerbach and Knoepflmacher's contention that the magic and metamorphoses characteristic of the genre can be read 'contrapuntally', to borrow Edward Said's word, is one shared by numerous commentators of myth and fairy tale.<sup>149</sup> For Lévi-Strauss, to quote just one example, the units of myth only make sense if they are read in conjunction with other 'mythemes'.<sup>150</sup> He argues that we must read myth as we would a musical score, since we can only understand its components if we consider their relation to what is happening at other levels.<sup>151</sup> The fact that myth and fairy tale derive from countless generations of oral telling mean that we cannot canonise their diversity into standard versions and authorised interpretations; it is even possible that the disruptions to this variety caused by printing will be altered by a future of electronic publishing with its facilities for audience interaction and rapid updating. Certainly the plethora of rewritings of individual tales, of which this book presents a small selection, indicates that their form allows for very different readings. There are, however, critics who qualify or dispute this openness. Angela Carter represents a strong school of argument which insists that the context in which one reads shapes what one reads, and she cites, as illustrations, how the struggle towards German unification affected the version the Grimms chose to print as well as the way nineteenth-century prudery effaced the more salacious points from the tales.<sup>152</sup> Jack Zipes is one of a line of detractors for whom the stories have been standardised so that reading them reinforces the status quo.<sup>153</sup> Perhaps, then, the reading attitude we should adopt is Ricoeur's one of a 'post-critical naïveté', the difficult conjunction of critical alertness while remaining open to the wonders of the tales themselves.<sup>154</sup> It is this attitude that I have endeavoured to adopt in what follows.

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