

McCoppin, Rachel S. *The Legacy of the Goddess: Heroines, Warriors and Witches from World Mythology to Folktales and Fairy Tales*. McFarland, 2023.

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Rachel McCoppin's study of female archetypes considers the role of the feminine in world mythology, folklore, and fairy tales. McCoppin's argument unfolds over eight chapters, essentially split into two halves, bookended by a preface, introduction, and conclusion. Her purpose and desire for the book is perhaps most clearly stated in her conclusion. She writes, "This book has strived to portray how the female characters of folktales and fairy tales hold many important similarities with the most powerful imaginings of femininity that cultures around the world once envisioned—the goddesses of mythology" (244). The first half of the book examines how the female characters within myth, folktales, and fairy tales often serve as guides and teachers to the male protagonists they encounter. These chapters delve into different narratives that feature a female archetype aiding the masculine archetypal hero. The second half of the book focuses on the female archetypal hero in her own right as the author analyzes the role of formidable heroines found in many folktales and fairy tales from around the world. These chapters analyze the female heroes, protagonists, and villains as major actors within their own quests as opposed to characters acted upon by masculine heroes.

Throughout her book, McCoppin tells of, reframes, and analyzes a myriad of female archetypes and their respective narratives. She evidences the paradigmatic nature of various archetypes by tracing these characters across diverse cultures and different genres. In each archetype and tale she discusses, she meticulously points the archetype back to figures of the goddess. Thus, McCoppin's book becomes a matriarchal genealogy as she seeks to reclaim the feminine from the patriarchy.

She situates stories, heroes, and cultures commandeered by men and restores them to a feminine genealogy.

As McCoppin creates this genealogy, she also frames it in a feminine manner. She does not linearly trace cultures and characters and narratives, but instead focuses on liminality, almost like a dropped stone creates outward, emanating concentric circles from its source. She uses the goddess as the source, the stone, and lets the archetypes (Mother Nature, the warrior, the witch, the ghost, etc.) emanate from her, tracing these archetypes back to the source of the goddess in ever-concentric circles. She traces this genealogy across fuzzy sets of genre and culture, thus implicitly challenging the patriarchal dualism that would subjugate womanhood and the feminine to begin with.

McCoppin reframes many familiar folktales and fairy tales by positioning a villainized or subordinate woman as the hero, thus implicitly (and at times explicitly) complicating and challenging theorists like Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. For example, using Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist theory as a lens, McCoppin retells familiar fairy tales such as "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Rapunzel," whose female characters are either viewed as evil witches or maidens to be acted upon instead of actors in their own stories. Specifically, she positions the notorious mother/stepmother archetype "as the most admirable character in the tale . . . [as] she is a 'plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, and impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy'" (Gilbert and Gubar 389-90, qtd. in McCoppin 206). McCoppin reshapes these well-worn narratives by reclaiming a matriarchal view of culture and establishing a matriarchal genealogy of humanity's heritage where the feminine is not reduced to tropes without agency. Instead, she reclaims these archetypes to positions of power as protagonists and inciters—heroes.

However, while McCoppin is fastidious and successful in pointing iconic, cultural stories back to the goddess (nobly resituating the feminine as a catalyst of belief, art, and humanity), because her argument is so entrenched in dualistic binary by nature of her subject matter, she at times struggles to unlink herself with some of the more problematic aspects of the hero's journey, and by extension, Campbellian theory. While there are moments where McCoppin leans into non-binary thinking, like engaging in the fuzzy sets of culture and genre, in writing to resituate the feminine goddess as a focal point, she further entrenches her argument in gendered character traits and roles that only serve the patriarchy. For example, the author argues that the marriage conquest of divine nature acts to portray the subversion of patriarchal ideals. However, she fails to address the problem that the institution of marriage and role of wife in and of itself can be interpreted as a means of patriarchal subservience (32, 35-36). For many of the myths she discusses in her book, marriage and sexual conquest is still the crux and climax of the narrative. Thus, the reader still must reckon with women not as heroes but as helpers to the heroes, perhaps even prizes to the heroes, even if they have agency within the myth.

In reclaiming the archetypal enchantress in "Beauty and the Beast," McCoppin argues the enchantress in the fairy tale is "a woman with explicit supernatural abilities . . . [signaling her] connection of traditional goddess-oriented ideologies" (35). She also acts as catalyst in the tale, "as she made an unworthy male turn into a beast, so that he could learn the ways of nature and the importance of sacred women. Therefore, the role of the enchantress is directly connected with Beauty in the fairy tale, as united, both women serve the same agenda" as characters with ability and agency as opposed to villain and victim, respectively (35). However, the dualistic antithesis to McCoppin's argument is that both Enchantress and Beauty serve as pawns to a patriarchal system—one as the angel and the other as the demon—in which the Beast wins sexual conquest

of Beauty. In another example, McCoppin offers a feminist reading of Theseus and Ariadne; however, in this reading too, the hero Theseus is still featured as the protagonist and the woman, Ariadne, exists on the margins of the story (71-74). Even when valorizing Ariadne, the story still centers on a man growing into a chosen identity for himself. The hero focuses on self-actualization while the female entity focuses on marriage, birth, or educating the hero. While McCoppin at every instance points back to the goddess and her worship, thus elevating the feminine, she does not consider the cost of flipping the patriarchal binary. Is goddess worship just another way of dehumanizing women? I think of Emerson's elevation of Nature and his depiction of it as feminine only to record in his journal, "Women should not be expected to write or fight or build or compose scores; she does all by inspiring men to do all. She is the requiring genius" (qtd. in Eckel 596). Perhaps in analyzing these myths, folk tales, and fairy tales, the archetypal narrative is too deeply rooted in the quest narrative which itself is too deeply rooted in conquest, thus perpetuating a binary that intentionally subjugates an other, regardless of reclaiming and resituating the goddess as a worthy and autonomous figure.

Despite these critiques, there is immense value in reclaiming and resituating the goddess as it allows the reader to create the world and its cultures in a woman's image, allowing for positive and powerful feminine representation. As American cultural norms continue to embrace a religious, oligarchal ideology that elevates the idea of a masculine god while aggressively subjugating a feminine goddess, retracing a genealogy to feature the goddess reclaims a power that would offer agency and autonomy to traditionally othered groups. Therefore, McCoppin implicitly undermines a Western cultural belief that would see the goddess as folkloric as opposed to legitimate. By creating this genealogy, she challenges the idea that history is a neutral collection of facts, and instead links history with the "fictional" nature of myths, folktales, and fairy tales—

constructed narratives heavily influenced by power dynamics. By inverting those power dynamics, she challenges history as fact and myth as fiction, creating an account of a matriarchal genealogy that emancipates femininity from the patriarchy.

McCoppin concludes her book by lamenting that “female characters within modern and contemporary works still end up perpetuating the journeys of male characters, or only partially gaining self-actualization lack[ing] the heightened spiritual abilities that many folktale and fairy tale women discovered within themselves in order to reach goddess-like apotheosis” (244). Retracing a cultural genealogy toward the goddess emboldens marginalized individuals who exist outside the confines of traditional masculinity to find full self-actualization in their own right, creating representation that would proliferate that self-actualization across perpetually othered identities.

Works Cited

Eckel, Leslie Elizabeth. "Emerson, Reluctant Feminist." *The Oxford Handbook of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Oxford UP, 2024.

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