

## WOMEN IN MYTHOLOGY

### *The Power of the Feminine in Ancient Tales*

A blinding bolt of lightning forks across the sky – a crash of thunder echoes from the mountains.

An earthquake tumbles multi-storied buildings to the ground, buckles bridges, destroys whole cities.

Tidal waves rake the shore, washing away centuries-old sea walls.

We gasp in wonder at these phenomena, and we can understand how the ancient peoples of pre-history identified these forces as powerful gods, capable of senseless and destructive anger.

Gods like Zeus, Poseidon, and Apollo can seem real even today – their powerful manifestations in nature give credence to the many ancient stories about their impact on the lives of humans. Recurrent disasters like Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti, and our own destructive flooding can almost make us wonder if these ancient gods have returned to harass the earth.

But what about the goddesses? They don't seem to be rattling windows or splitting open the earth – where are they? Have they left our consciousness permanently?

Scholars of ancient culture tell us that the earliest, largely agricultural societies identified their deities with the life-giving earth, whom they worshipped as female earth

goddesses. But nomadic invaders, who depended not on the earth but on the variabilities of weather, overcame these agricultural societies, and these sky-god worshippers imposed their culture on the earth-goddess peoples. True, Athena won the contest for Athens and the beautiful temple in which we stand is her tribute, but the fact is, most of the famous myths seem to glorify the male gods and their exploits. And the images of the male gods have dominated our imaginations since ancient times.

Are we so distant from the earth that we can no longer find the goddesses in our lives? Rachael McCampbell's paintings tell us otherwise. The vivid stories told through her canvases recreate those moments in mythology where the feminine forces of nature and of our own psyches have taken control. These forces make no loud crashes, knock down no buildings, but their power can change lives as profoundly as any tsunami or earthquake.

Look at the story of Demeter. Death snatches away Demeter's beautiful daughter, and Demeter's grief shrivels all living things on earth. Her intense mother-love forces death to give up his claim, at least partially, and our very seasons reflect the cycle of love and grief that Demeter experiences every year. Who among us has not felt the cold grip of death on our hearts as winter closes in, darkening our days and dampening our spirits? We can call it "Seasonal

Affective Disorder” or the blues, but it is as real as Demeter’s tears. And what heart has not quickened to see the young green leaves bud, as nature shakes off her winter clothes? We can feel the warmth of Demeter’s joy in the spring breezes. And what mother would not search the ends of the earth and brave the god of Death, if only she could bring back her dead child? Earthquakes can shake the ground, but a mother’s love can change the course of the seasons.

Mother-love is not the only theme of feminine power that runs through the myths and resonates with our psyches today. Both world history and personal experience are replete with tales of how a woman’s beauty can affect individual lives and the fates of nations. England’s King Edward VIII famously “gave up the crown for the woman he loved,” the beautiful Wallis Simpson, and women from Cleopatra to Joan of Arc have captivated the men around them with their strength and beauty. The legendary beauty of Helen of Troy is the force behind half of these paintings – the Trojan War was fought for her loveliness – yet the artist has wisely chosen not to depict Helen’s face, only the effect it has upon the old warriors who still find her beauty worth the lives of their sons and grandsons. Helen stands, shimmering in a golden light, and she, no more than those who behold her, can control the force of her beauty. She

remains untouched, in the words of the poet Richard Wilbur, “perfectly beautiful, perfectly ignorant of it.”

Beauty can be cruel as well, as can mother-love – the entertainment news is full of stories about “Mommie Dearest” – type mothers, but none of them can hold a candle to Clytemnestra, who killed her husband and his new mistress and then was murdered by her own son. And you guys have, I’m sure, run into beautiful women who can freeze you with a look if they catch you admiring them – just be thankful you don’t get turned into a white-tailed deer on opening day of hunting season, like Actaeon! Indeed, the legend of Circe also shows us that the term “male chauvinistic pig” is not a new concept in the history of male/female relations!

But love and marriage are also celebrated in the myths about women. Cupid and Psyche, so beautifully depicted in the painting on display here, reveal how difficult it can be to reconcile erotic love and the mind or soul – Freud talked of the clash between the Super-ego and the Id, and Shakespeare himself often tackled the dilemma of passion versus reason and the tragedy that can ensue when one or the other dominates. But this story reveals the secret of a relationship that truly works: when Passion (Cupid) and Reason (Psyche) truly unite, the result of their union is pure

Pleasure, and that is the very name given to the child of these two gods.

And finally, the myth that closes the story of the Trojan War, a war over the infidelity of a wife, is the tale of Odysseus's return home after twenty years of wandering. During those long years, Penelope, his wife, has endured loneliness, importunate suitors, and the task of raising their son all by herself. When Odysseus finally returns, Penelope faces the same dilemma that many young military wives face today, as their husbands return home from Afghanistan or Iraq, changed men after their horrific experiences. Is this the man I married? How will I know? But Penelope shows us that a loving wife can lay bare the soul of her man, can help him reveal himself as the man she married.

In this story, as in all these myths of goddesses and women, it is that special feminine insight, that intuitive and almost magical instinct, that constitutes the power of the feminine in these ancient tales. The goddesses and women of mythology do not exert their power with a crash of thunder or the roar of pounding surf. Their power is in the subtle rhythm of the heart's beat, the feather touch of a mother's kiss, the warm embrace of a loving wife. As the psychologist and scholar of mythology Carl Jung put it, "Myth is the primordial language... and no intellectual formula comes anywhere near the richness and

expressiveness of mythical imagery." As we view these paintings, we can feel their truth and experience the resonating force of their stories, and we can gain from them a better understanding of the power of the feminine in our own lives.