

## Mythology and Ecocriticism: A Natural Encounter Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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This issue was conceived to occupy a shared *locus* in the study of myth and ecocriticism which has so far been vacant. Its purpose is to link *topoi* such as Eden, the promised land and the new Canaan as manifestations of paradise, the Arthurian cycle, pastoral Arcadia, unexplored virgin tropical lands, and the American West with the current situation of the world we inhabit, in terms of our relationship with the land and the more-than-human world. Our aim was to show that myths and the literature of nature have been written in acknowledgement and understanding of each other, that they have evolved in parallel, with a common focus on the intervention of human beings in nature. Take the Greek myth of Prometheus for example: his betrayal of the gods led to an alteration of the world order. Prometheus became an icon of human rebellion, a recurrent symbol reminding humans of their inability to overcome divine power. At the same time, the Prometheus myth mirrors the eternal natural cycle of destruction and creation in its repetition throughout the history of literature, in emblematic works like *Frankenstein or Prometheus Unbound* by Mary Shelley.

If we wish to fully understand the present and the changes that have come about as a consequence of human wars and conflicts such as the events of 9/11 in the USA, the Iraq War and our connections and disconnections with nature, we must therefore go back to the ancient mythologies, and analyse how these have been presented and adapted in history and literature down through the centuries. The Holy Grail is one of the most commonly encountered myths. Since *The Romance of Perceval or Story of the Grail* by Chrétien de Troyes, the story of this chalice has undergone repeated transformations, serving as a symbol of Christianity pitted against the forces of Islam, a myth of eternal return, and a promise of salvation from the sin of Adam and Eve through the Passion of Jesus Christ. This powerful story of the Christian faith and religious devotion gave medieval knights the strength to fight for possession of Jerusalem for

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Christendom. The image of the Fisher King, which is closely associated with the Holy Grail, has also haunted the imagination of European scholars for centuries, and, together with the Grail, experienced different interpretations. The healing properties of the contents of the Grail (supposedly the blood of Jesus Christ) and its power to bestow eternal youth became the principal focus in works ascribing to it the ability to restore health to the land, which was wounded like its King. The mythical quest for the Holy Grail gained an element that linked medieval knights with classical heroes in their quest for the fountain of eternal youth, and this inspired expeditions to the Americas, where sixteenth-century Spanish conquistadors journeyed tirelessly towards El Dorado. The Grail also functioned as an equivalent to the Garden of Eden, from which the King would have been expelled, as his wounds metaphorically imply that he has fallen from Grace.

Myths of origin, cosmogonies and accounts of how the world was created have served to explain natural phenomena, including the nature of vegetal and animal species, all over the world. The most familiar attempt to explain the creation of the Earth is the Biblical Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve's fall from Eden. However, indigenous American myths have also attracted great interest in the last few decades, thanks to the work of anthropologists. Celtic and Nordic mythologies, and Asian traditions like those reflected in the *Enuma eliš* explain the origins of the world in terms which differ from those in Judeo-Christian tradition. But they too are closely connected with the land, nature and the relationship between human beings as farmers or shepherds and other species, as Louise Westling affirms in *The Green Breast of the New World*. Operating with myths often entails a return to the past, rediscovering and recycling old conceptions rather than creating entirely fresh ones. Many myths were originally conceived to explain the creation of the world, or natural disasters ranging from plagues to changes in the climate. Today myths of recovery of Eden often reflect hope, a resilient movement towards a re-balancing of the species leading to a more sustainable relationship with the natural environment. This is at least the case with those discussed in the articles in this issue.

Historically, "the most important mythology humans have developed" in their relationship with the earth has been focused on the attempt to regain Eden, as Carolyn Merchant has pointed out. However, current myth criticism and ecocriticism do not endorse an attitude of nostalgia for the lost paradise, like Milton's eponymous work; on the contrary, it reflects a new attitude towards nature and the more-than-human world. The contributors to the special section in this issue of *Ecozon@* address what Parker Krieg calls the "voyage to recover what has been severed" in terms of a more imbricated relationship of human beings with nature. Most of them also acknowledge the special relevance of forests to the preservation of nature. As Robert Pogue Harrison has argued:

Ecological concern over forests goes beyond just the forests insofar as forests have now become metonymies for the earth as a whole. What is true for a particular forest's ecosystem is true for the totality of the biosphere. Humanity begins to appear in a new light: as species caught in the delicate and diverse web of a forestlike planetary environment. More precisely, we are beginning to appear to ourselves as a species of parasite which threatens to destroy the hosting organism as a whole. (199)

Although certain fables and animal myths have tried to teach us throughout history that human beings depend on natural diversity and all species depend on one another, the interaction between species in the natural world has been characterized by human domination, and that in literature by anthropocentrism. The subjugation of nature derives in no small measure from a myth: the Biblical story of how God created man. Women, represented by Eve, were located in the hierarchy of species a step below Adam, whose role it was to exercise control over “inert matter and docile women” (Westling 10). The articles presented here show that, while many myths have served to reinforce human exceptionalism and male superiority, other myths contribute, in their recurrent use in literature and film, to challenging them, and to establishing a more positive connection between the sexes and with other species and the natural world.

The myth of wilderness as a savage and threatening place (rather than an asylum or refuge) has contributed to configuring a positive vision of urban societies, and artificial spaces under the control of humans, as God instructed when He created Adam and Eve. In her account of the lament over the dying wilderness in the USA in the work of early twentieth-century American writers, Louise Westling shows how exploitation was linked with gendering of the land and the landscape, but also how an initially ambivalent attitude towards nature was transformed into an ethic of responsibility through the evocation of certain ancient myths. These myths are validated as important points of reference in the quest for a new understanding of the natural world and effective interspecies communication.

What is then new in the nine essays collected here on mythology and ecocriticism? They reflect on the past, present and future of humanity and nature, more specifically on how the ancient myths have configured the world in the course of history, and how human beings have disregarded the impact of our species on the planet, even though these same myths have warned us of the dangerous impact of our non-ecological practices. All the articles included in this section are concerned with acknowledgement of the agency of animal species or of the natural world at large in their analyses. They explore literary works from a posthuman perspective: human beings are relegated to a subordinate position in representations of a combination of species engaged in an egalitarian relationship.

The first article of the section, Esther Valdés Tejera’s “La percepción del paisaje desde la realidad de Occidente: entre la naturaleza y la razón” (“The Perception of the Landscape from the Western Perspective: Between Nature and Reason”) aims precisely at tracing the development of societies through the transformation of wild natural spaces into urbanised ones. The author considers representative moments in the history of the perception of the landscape in the West (although she also draws some interesting comparisons with Eastern ideas), and illustrates the paradigm shift between these stages with the help of the myths that underlay the corresponding conceptions (myths of the Mother Earth Goddess, of the Olympian gods, the shift from polytheism to monotheism, etc.). Valdés perceives a tendency to destruction, and sketches some ideas for the future ideology needed to build a sustainable world: such an ideology should be based on the concept of life and centered around ethics.

Michaela Keck's article "Paradise Retold: Revisionist Mythmaking in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy" is directly concerned with the myth of paradise. Keck explores Margaret Atwood's feminist revision of the myth from an ecofeminist standpoint. She shows how Atwood reconceives paradise by duplicating the ancient human dreams of it in Crake's techno pagan and Adam One's eco-millennialist "gardens of delights," both of which are refracted through evolutionary science and ecology. This postmodern vision of the garden of paradise features genetic engineering practices and technological advances, in the attempt to create a perfect society in which there is no longer any distinction between different living beings: they are presented as a single category. Atwood includes several Eves, each with their own characteristic ways of seduction, but avoids the categorization of victims.

In "Carnival Anthropocene: Myth and Cultural Memory in Monique Roffey's *Archipelago*," Charles Parker Krieg examines the role of myth in and as cultural memory through a reading of the novel *Archipelago* (2013) by the Trinidadian-British author Monique Roffey. Although it initially suggests the journey of an epic hero with psoriasis towards destruction like Captain Ahab against the white whale, this tale reverses the trajectory of the *Moby-Dick* narrative. When the main character's house is destroyed and his family are lost in a natural catastrophe, he embarks on a quest to overcome his flood trauma. Although the novel has a realistic contemporary setting, Krieg shows that it employs mythical elements and narrative structures, and offers an alternative to the familiar story of anthropogenic environmental change as a linear accumulation of loss or foreclosure of the future.

"Una llamada por la justicia medioambiental en *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* de José María Arguedas" ("A Call for Environmental Justice in *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* by José María Arguedas"), by Shiau Bo Liang, deals with the novel *The Fox from Above and the Fox from Below*, by the Peruvian writer José María Arguedas. The author argues that Arguedas combines his authorial voice with the voices of ancient mythical figures to make a powerful call for environmental justice for indigenous peoples in the context of the industrialization of modern Peru. The mythical figures involved are "zorros" (foxes) taken from the Moche and other ancient Peruvian cultures. Characters in Arguedas's novel metamorphose into foxes, and become trickster heroes. Through their dialogue, Arguedas gives a broad ecocritical account of the environmental and social degradation accompanying Peru's rampant industrialization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on the lost paradise of the coastal city of Chimbote. A return to origins and wilderness, as envisioned by Arguedas, is necessary for the salvation of the indigenous inhabitants from the advances of modern civilization. As Shiau Bo Liang points out, the image of the exploited city as a fallen woman also echoes the tenets of contemporary ecofeminism.

If foxes are, somehow, the heroes in the novel which Shiau Bo Liang deals with, a tiger appears in the play studied by Qurratulaen Liaqat in her article "War-Afflicted Beings: Myth-Ecological Discourse of the Play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* by Rajiv Joseph." Liaqat shows how, to convey the hazards of the Iraq war, Rajiv Joseph incorporates ancient and medieval myths (for example, Philomela's rape, as told by

Ovid, and the quest for the Holy Grail), as well as using monotheistic religious texts to build a myth-ecological narrative of the dilapidated ecology of the contemporary world. The setting in this case is of the utmost relevance: the fact that the garden of Eden is believed to have been located in Iraq demonstrates how human beings spend their lives longing for paradise and attempting to return to it, and illustrates the function of myths and spiritual symbols. After the destruction caused by the war, including the bombing of a zoo, Rajiv Joseph reflects on the violation of human, animal and environmental rights. The shooting of a tiger by a US army officer shows how life loses its importance in wartime.

Like the play to which Liaqat's article is devoted, the novel dealt with by Sławomir Studniarz has also something to do with current events involving the US. These serve as an excuse for Studniarz to go back in time and contemplate the Mexican-American war and the end of the frontier as reflected in Paul Auster's novel *Travels in the Scriptorium*. According to Studniarz, Auster's novel offers a revision of two essential myths of the American nation: the myth of the West and the "errand in the wilderness," with Manifest Destiny as its later incarnation justifying the imperialist mission. The wilderness itself is divested of spiritual significance, desacralized, as the Alien Territories are converted into an arena of carnage and indiscriminate slaughter. The 'advances' of civilization against the 'dangers' of the wilderness appear once more in the confrontation between the two.

The symbolic loading of the fox and the tiger in Liang's and Liaqat's essays finds an equivalent in two articles dealing with winged beings, namely a swan and a butterfly. "Rewriting Leda and the Swan: An Ecofeminist Analysis of Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), and Lorna Crozier's "Forms of Innocence" (1985) and "The Swan Girl" (1995)," by Maricel Oró Piqueras and Núria Mina-Riera, offers a contrastive analysis of Crozier's and Carter's retelling of Ovid's account of the myth of Leda and the swan in his *Metamorphoses* (8AD) (also of W.B. Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan", written in 1928). The authors show how, in Crozier's and Carter's versions, the original meaning of the swan is subverted, by adopting connotations more in tune with a sense of interspecies community, and challenging the violence that Ovid and Yeats attributed to the bird by presenting it as Zeus in disguise. On the other hand, both Carter and Crozier challenge patriarchal domination by giving voice to and empowering Leda, the young female character in the myth. This empowerment is closely associated with Leda's harmonization with the natural world, since, by going back to nature, the young Ledas in Carter's and Crozier's works come to terms with their adolescent bodies and become women, free of restrictive cultural and social beliefs. Incidentally, it is worth noting that, as well as the above-mentioned motif of paradise lost and recovered, metamorphoses also constitute a central point in the history of myth, and Ovid's stories have been constantly recreated in literary texts, being frequently referenced today. Several of the articles included in this issue mention the influence of *The Metamorphoses* in contemporary literary works.

Luca Bugnone's "Le ali della Dea. Polissena e la Valle di Susa" ("The Wings of the Goddess. Polyxena and the Susa Valley") compares the ancient Greek myth of Polyxena

with a contemporary development in the Susa Valley (north-western Italy) involving the discovery of the rare and striking butterfly *Zerynthia polyxena*, whose scientific name includes that of the ancient Greek heroine. Despite the butterfly being listed in the Habitat Directive of 1992 among the rare, threatened, and endemic species of the European Union, the area where it lives has been selected as the planned route of a new high-speed railway line. Luca Bugnone compares the issue with Euripides' tragedy *Hecuba*, where Polyxena is described as the Trojan princess who prefers to kill herself rather than become a slave. Hence, the butterfly that carries her name might become a Trojan horse, enshrining the idea that "the liberation of nature so ardently desired by environmentalists will not be fully effected without the liberation of women" (G. Gaard).

After these articles dealing with animals as symbols of the drastic transformation and/or destruction of the natural environment, and with the development of interspecies dialogue, more specifically between humans and the more-than-human world, this special section about myths and ecocriticism ends with an article dealing with the question whether human intervention becomes necessary in the natural world or our species is just interfering with the course of natural events in a harmful way for the rest of species: "La torpeza de Epimeteo. La discusión entre intervencionismo y *laissez-faire* a la luz del mito prometeico" ("Epimetheus' Clumsiness. The Discussion between Interventionism and *Laissez-faire* in the Light of Promethean Myth") by Oihane Zuberoa Garmendia Glaria. Taking as her starting point and term of comparison the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus as told by Plato in his *Protagoras*, the author analyses and rethinks the debate between animalism (the position that humans should not consider themselves any different from the rest of animal species) and environmentalism. She argues that the supporters of interventionism (or environmentalism) are close to one of the conceptions present in Plato's version of the myth, that is: the human being as a creature endowed with culture and, for that reason, with the right to intervene in the relations between animals and the environment. On the other hand, animalists (as supporters of non-intervention) seem to echo the opposite vision of human beings as fragile animals who have not the knowledge or ability to manipulate nature. Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka have attempted to synthesize both attitudes in their work *Zoopolis*.

A general conclusion we might draw from the articles of this section is that interdisciplinary dialogue between mythcriticism and ecocriticism is not merely an experiment with doubtful prospects, but has already yielded some interesting reflections, and promises to yield more in future. Just as certain myths have legitimized the subjugation and exploitation of nature by humankind, others reflect a will to attain a harmonious relationship with the natural environment. The predominance of works inspired by the more-than-human world among those examined here reflects a desire to replace anthropocentrism by interspecies dialogue or other alternatives, some of which are envisioned in the contributions to this issue. Judging from the articles we have collected, myths of paradise lost and recovered have most often inspired contemporary writers who, rather than lamenting the historical loss of the wilderness, look actively forward to its transformation into gardens and farmed landscapes. We hope and wish

that, like those ancient myths, these studies will also inspire academic research and other kinds of action responding positively and realistically to the current environmental crisis, and leading in this way to the 'recovery of paradise lost'.

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