Review: From Olympus to Camelot: The World of European Mythology

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4 also explores the concept of maya, the mysterious power of the divine. While the story of Madhu and Kaitabha from Bhagavat Purana demonstrates that maya can be employed to confuse adversaries, the story of King Harishchandra extols the importance of steadfastness to conquer the powers of maya.

The concluding chapter, “The Living Legacy,” outlines the significance of pilgrimage in Hindu culture and presents a brief review of the religious images and stories represented in popular art, films, television programs, and comic books. These examples show that Hindu myths are a part of the living culture of the people of contemporary India.

Although Dallapiccola has done a commendable job in summarizing a topic as broad as Hindu mythology and offering a fresh perspective, this book has very little to offer outside the realm of religious or South Asian studies. For example, the book does not contain any contextual information regarding the importance of these myths and their telling in contemporary India. The text of the book does not have a smooth flow and Dallapiccola does not share her criteria for the selection of specific examples employed to prove a point. A lack of bibliography or reference list indicating the editions and the versions from which various stories have been drawn leaves an interested reader without guidance as to how to examine the actual text on a first-hand basis. In summary, even though Hindu Myths is designed to be an introductory book, it is more suitable for a scholar who already has a general idea of Hindu mythology and is primarily seeking an introduction to additional versions from North and South Indian religious texts.


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David Leeming has added to his series of small, readable mythology texts with his latest book, From Olympus to Camelot. Unlike the anthologies, such as God and Goddess, which he recently coauthored with Jake Page, this book contains fewer translations of mythic texts. Rather, Leeming here boldly attempts to bring together the diverse strands of opinion on European mythology’s origins to create a portrait of myth’s role as a fundamental shaper of culture and belief.

By exploring linguistic, cultural, and historical connections among the various myth traditions of Europe, the author has created a companion volume for those wishing to delve into the backgrounds of the myths featured in myriad recent anthologies. As with Leeming’s other works, From Olympus to Camelot is primarily written for general and student audiences. The chapters are subdivided into short, clearly labeled sections, allowing a reader to use the volume as a narrative reference of pantheons, histories, and languages. The book reads far better as a whole survey, however, as it steadily builds from prehistoric traditions through the familiar Greco-Roman, Celtic, and Germanic mythology, until finally ending with Christian hegemony and modern philosophical myths, all in fewer than two hundred pages.

The coverage of Europe is comprehensive here, including less-studied mythologies such as the Baltic and Balkan ones, as well as non-Indo-European traditions. Leeming effectively uses archeological evidence to demonstrate not only the sources of these myth traditions, but also how they interact with and influence one another. For example, without subscribing entirely to the theory that all the earliest European myths originated in gynocentric, earth mother worshipping traditions, Leeming shows how much archeological evidence supports such theories and explains how the later development of patriarchal pantheons suppressed, but did not eliminate, goddess worship.

Leeming offers welcome linguistic conveniences, such as including both the Latvian and Lithuanian terms in the Baltic chapter and explaining to readers that the Irish fairies known as sidhe are named for the sidhe, or underground mounds, in which the Tuatha were purported to have lived. These linguistic notes, spread throughout much of the text, give readers an introduction, albeit a brief one, to the cultural
context of the myths. The linguistic details are especially helpful as Leeming navigates the complex relationships among the gods of the Greek pantheon. The etymological relationship among Zeus, Dionysos, and theos is especially well drawn. Some may find these linguistic asides to be needless window dressings, but for those interested in pursuing the myths further, the wide range of terminology provides that access.

Undergraduate students will probably find the last section of the book, “European Mythic Patterns and Christian Hegemony,” most engaging. Here the author explains why Christianity found such fertile ground in Europe by describing the archetype of the dying god and two of its pre-Christian representatives, the Norse Baldr and the Greek Dionysos. The archetype, seen through the lens of Dumézil’s tripartite function of the god as king, warrior, and fertile progenitor, was familiar enough to ancient Europeans that a tripartite Christian God, whose human form was at once priest, victim, king, and god, was not farfetched. As Jesus supplanted other dying gods, the Christian Father displaced the sky gods such as Zeus, Mary replaced the long suppressed great goddess, and Christianity thus eventually pushed other mythic systems aside.

For the myth scholar, there is little new in Leeming’s latest work, but seeing these traditions juxtaposed with one another opens new paths of understanding. For the student or general reader, this volume answers a wide range of questions and surveys a vast number of gods and goddesses in an efficient and readable way. This latter audience is clearly the one for whom this book was written. For a knowledgeable reader expecting critical and theoretical apparatus, copious notes, or detailed explanations of the contexts, functions, and underlying meanings of European mythology, this book will fall short. For a reader in search of a solid survey and foundation for further study, From Olympus to Camelot will provide an engaging and enlightening entry into the fascinating world of European mythology.


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Walter Mignolo’s study of colonialism’s three main “technologies”—language and writing, memory and archiving, and cartography—visualizes the European Renaissance as a period of great social and cultural transformation in Europe. Renaissance culture, however, also effected similar (colonial) transformations in the Americas.

Mignolo’s argument, unfolding through a critical analysis of arts, letters, and maps, is that the classical revival in the European Renaissance was a justification and agent of colonial expansion. Mignolo’s opening chapter situates Nebrija’s 1492 and 1517 Castilian grammars and the works of Bernardo Aldrete within the larger Spanish project of colonizing the Amerindians. Castilian was treated as the language of communication and not of scholarship, and the dissemination of its grammar, rooted in a theory of the letter, effectively erased the regionality of spoken languages and colonized the voice. Castilian became the grammar of a new colony. The emphasis on the book meant that written work was seen as the only repository of religion and knowledge. This meant that cultures with alternative modes of inscribing the sacred were rejected as primitive. The European valorization of the book, associated with literacy and authority, was thus closely aligned with the colonization of “bookless” cultures. The Western book became the symbol of the letter, conceived of as a carrier of knowledge from the New World to the European metropolis, and, most important, as a means of transmitting Eurocentric knowledge and ideas from the metropolis to the colony. This was the colonization of languages.

Historiography and archiving, argues Mignolo, are Western inventions that are complicit with early modern empire-building. Because the native oral and visual cultures of the New World had already been rejected, the next logical