

**Marta WEIGLE, *Spiders & Spinsters: Women and Mythology*
(Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1982,340 p.,
ISBN 0-8263-0644-6)**

Margot Louis

Volume 15, numéro 1, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082557ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082557ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Louis, M. (1993). Compte rendu de [Marta WEIGLE, *Spiders & Spinsters: Women and Mythology* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1982,340 p., ISBN 0-8263-0644-6)]. *Ethnologies*, 15(1), 166–169.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1082557ar>

These questions are important if the reader is to have an understanding of this text since it is more than an exploration of the roots of contemporary cultural studies. It is a call for a new discursive practice, hopefully one that is not guided only by topic but also by method.

The articles are not a problem for this reviewer. All are "classics" and have been published before. All are interesting and a pleasure to read. All have popular culture as the object of their investigation. The question of including these specific examples as opposed to others is generally one of choice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOYNE, Roy, *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1990.

GILMAN, Sander, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1988.

Barry EDGINTON
The University of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Marta WEIGLE, *Spiders & Spinsters: Women and Mythology* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1982, 340 p., ISBN 0-8263-0644-6).

This is an invaluable sourcebook on the relationship of women and mythology in the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions, and in the aboriginal traditions of the Americas. Its richness will surprise and enlighten even those who have happily immersed themselves in the recent outpouring of scholarly and popular works on goddesses, feminist analyses of fairy tales, narratives of historical or legendary heroines, and visions of matriarchal or gynanic cultures; those who are not acquainted with this material will find *Spiders & Spinsters* a good place to start.

The book's weakness is chiefly organizational. The unwary reader may become entangled in these linked webs of poems, myths, passages of scripture and scraps of commentary, theories of matriarchy, and anthropological accounts of ritual and other cultural practices. To add to the (initial) confusion, Weigle has illustrated her text or texts with pictures of cats' cradles, aboriginal artifacts,

classical statues of goddesses and Amazons, sand paintings, pottery designs, illustrations from children's books, and of course entomological art; the immediate relevance of these diverse images is not always obvious. Weigle has chosen to begin with the particular the connections between weaving, spinning, spiders, and women in myth and folklore and to spiral outward toward the general: myth as providing the model by which womanhood is defined, myth as the charter of established social order, and, finally, the redefinition of myth itself. I personally found the opening chapters at once stimulating and frustrating, but was increasingly impressed as I proceeded through the book; some readers may wish to begin with chapters five and six and then turn back to the earlier material.

Unlike many who have written on this topic, Weigle does not proselytize for "The Goddess", although she documents the eloquent hunger of many feminists. "Discover, uncover, recover. Piece together the fragments of a reality so diminished by time and appearance as to seem lost forever... In the knowledge of her freedom is a source of our own deliverance" (Kay Turner, qu. p. 168). Weigle, however, points out that origin myths in which goddesses alone create the universe are on the whole rare (making up perhaps one-fifth of recorded origin myths, according to the note on p. 45); female figures are more likely to appear in recorded myth as monsters than as "creative benefactors" (p. 53; I wonder whether this is still true, given the enormous energy with which beneficent female deities have been revived, researched, and celebrated over the decade since *Spiders & Spinsters* was first published). Again, Weigle offers a wide sampling of writings on the concept of matriarchy did it exist? If so, what, exactly, was it? Why is the concept important? and covers most sides of the debate, so far as it had proceeded by 1982 (those who are interested in this question would want to go on to the more recent works of Marija Gimbutas and other scholars who have been reshaping concepts of non-patriarchal neolithic social systems). Weigle's own perspective is suggested by the fact that she gives the last word on this topic to two authors who look forward rather than back. Paula Webster suggests that the real value of the concept of matriarchy is that "It pushes women (and men) to imagine a society that is not patriarchal, one in which women might for the first time have power over their lives. Women have been powerless, and have had their reality defined for them, for so long that imagining such a society is politically important" (qu. p. 282-83). And Sharon Barba's poem, "A Cycle of Women", also looks ahead, in the end, to the rising of a new goddess,

not on the half-shell this time
 nothing to laugh at
 and not as delicate as he imagined her:
 a woman big-hipped, beautiful, and fierce (qu. p. 284).

Weigle always bears in mind the fact that myths are collected and reported by people who are themselves conditioned whose perspective and ability to hear are at once directed and limited by their own mythologies. "Most myth texts have been collected by men from other men, and they are usually interpreted from a male's perspective" (p. 67); "[t]hus, both gods and goddesses, culture heroes and heroines, male and female monsters to say nothing of all the Olympians and the Virgin Mary are largely male constructs" (p. 95). Up to the 1970s it was still true that collectors often preferred to rely on male informants where they could, and that mythology itself was usually "defined and studied as a public, collective, male-dominated means of communication which pertains to cyclic time and metaphysical or supernatural reality (the numinous)" (p. 293). Religious systems centred on androgynous concepts of deity have often been misrepresented, as when Western scholars refer to the Aztec Ometeotl using the masculine pronoun (p. 267-68). Collections of hero tales tend to be heavily imbalanced in favour of men, and analyses of hero narratives, from J. G. von Hahn to Joseph Campbell, have emphasized masculine development (p. 198). The way in which anthologies and films of fairy tales have emphasized the most passive and docile model of feminine behaviour has long been recognized and deplored (p. 207-10).

For Weigle, myths are the cultural equivalent of Rorschach blots (p. 95); the act of reading myth and ritual expresses the reader's own culture. For example, the segregation of women during their menstrual periods has sometimes been interpreted by Western observers as suggesting that women are despised as unclean at such times; yet one Papago woman explains, "'That is the time when we are powerful and the men are afraid. We like to see them slinking past with their backs turned.' Then she chuckled. 'No matter what my husband wants me to do in these days, he can't make me do it'" (Ruth Murray Underhill, qu. p. 173). However, this issue also functions as a Rorschach blot for Weigle herself. Her desire to see this ritual as suggesting "the creative power of a menstruating woman" seems to affect her reading of one account: "the Winnebago Indian *[sic]* Mountain Wolf Woman clearly experienced an increment in power during her first menses", says Weigle, and yet the narrative, which is quoted at length, seems to me rather to breathe fear and disempowerment.

Because mother had told me to do so, I ran quite far into the woods... I bowed my head...and there I was, crying and crying. Since they had forbidden me to look around, I sat there with my blanket over my head. I cried... [Older female relations make her a shelter.] There I sat in the little wigwam. I was crying. It was far, about a quarter of a mile from home. I was crying and I was frightened. Four times they made me sleep there. I never ate. There they made me fast. That is what they made me do (p. 174-75).

Although the vision which she had after her fast eventually enriched Mountain Wolf Woman in a very practical way, it seems clear that this child's initial experience of the procedure differed widely from the response of the mature

Papago quoted above. The diversity of practices and reactions among various tribes, age groups, and individual families should not be underestimated.

As a rule, however, Weigle's connective commentary is dispassionate, perceptive, and reasonably cautious. The book as a whole is joyously tendentious and looks forward to "a deeper awareness of the powerful worlds created by gossip and legend, by women considering their own [lives] and the lives of those around them, by women telling each other, often privately, about the strange and not-so-strange... in their physical, interpersonal and intrapersonal lives" (p. 298). Although parts of Weigle's discussion have become slightly dated over the last decade, this work, with its lucid summary of still-vital controversies, its lavish detail and full bibliography, is still important to all students of the female in mythology.

Margot LOUIS
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia

John DORST, *The Written Suburb: An American Site, an Ethnographic Dilemma* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989, 220 p., ISBN 0-8122-1282-7).

Alexander WILSON, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto, Between the Lines, 1991, 335 p., ISBN 0-921284-52-7).

Sharon ZUKIN, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, 326 p., ISBN 0-520-07221-9).

In the opening pages of *The Written Suburb*, John Dorst mentions a remark attributed to Lévi-Straus, that the contemporary, urban world is too fragmented, diverse and complex for ethnography. In contributing to the spatial turn in cultural analysis, all three books reviewed here rise to this challenge. Although they represent different political and scholarly perspectives, each grapples with the task of interpreting the inscriptions consumer culture has made on the landscape.