

PERSEPHONE RISES,  
1860–1927

MARGOT K. LOUIS

## PERSEPHONE RISES, 1860–1927

*Dedicated to my father, Harry Louis, with deepest love and gratitude, and  
to my beloved nieces, Winnifred R. Louis and Robyn Louis.*

*Thanks and warm affection to those of my friends and colleagues who  
have done so much to make this book possible.*

# Persephone Rises, 1860–1927

Mythography, Gender, and the  
Creation of a New Spirituality

MARGOT K. LOUIS

*University of Victoria, Canada*

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2009 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Copyright © Lisa Surridge 2009

Margot K. Louis has asserted her moral right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

### **British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Louis, Margot Kathleen, 1954–2007

Persephone rises, 1860–1927: mythography, gender, and the creation of a new spirituality

1. English literature – 19th century – History and criticism 2. English literature – 20th century – History and criticism 3. Mythology, Classical, in literature 4. Sex role in literature 5. Spirituality in literature 6. Persephone (Greek deity) in literature

I. Title

820.9'382

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Louis, Margot Kathleen, 1954–2007

Persephone rises, 1860–1927: mythography, gender, and the creation of a new spirituality / by Margot K. Louis.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-7546-6455-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. English literature—19th century—History and criticism. 2. American literature—19th century—History and criticism. 3. English literature—20th century—History and criticism. 4. American literature—20th century—History and criticism. 5. Persephone (Greek deity) in literature. 6. Demeter (Greek deity) in literature. 7. Myth in literature. 8. Gender in literature. 9. Women in literature. I. Title.

PR468.P42L68 2009

820.9'38202114—dc22

2008029302

ISBN 13: 978-0-7546-6455-0 (hbk)

# Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Permissions</i>	<i>xvi</i>
Introduction: Gods and Mysteries: The Revival of Paganism and the Remaking of Mythography through the Nineteenth Century	1
1 A Myth Appropriated: Greek Persephone to Romantic Proserpine	25
2 Marriage by Capture and the Captive Wife in Jean Ingelow and Dora Greenwell	43
3 Proserpine and Pessimism: Goddesses of Death, Life, and Language from Swinburne to Wharton	55
4 The Virgin with the Sheaf: Fertility, Ritual, and Imagination in <i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i> and <i>My Ántonia</i>	85
5 "I am Koré": The Modernist Underworld and the Rising Persephone	109
<i>Appendix A: The Sinister Influence: Causes of Fin-de-Siècle Pessimism</i>	<i>137</i>
<i>Appendix B: Proserpine: A Bibliography, compiled by Yisrael Levin</i>	<i>139</i>
<i>Works Cited</i>	<i>143</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>157</i>



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# Foreword

The plan to bring this book to press was hatched in the waiting room of a cancer treatment centre. As Margot Louis faced a diagnosis of terminal cancer, she mourned that she would not be able to see this book—the devoted work of many years, originally intended as the first of a multi-volume work—through to publication. She believed that she would have time to finish the manuscript but knew that she would not be able to secure a book contract, put the manuscript into house style, or copy edit and proofread the final product. That was how I—helped by a group of Margot’s friends and colleagues—came to shepherd this book through press. One of Margot’s last acts was to sign the contract with Ashgate, a joyful moment for both of us as she knew then that her work would see the light. She died a week later.

I have been honoured to help bring that plan to fruition, and I would like to thank the friends of Margot who have helped me in the difficult task of copy editing a manuscript after the author’s death: Gordon Fulton, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Heather Reid, and Judith Mitchell have all contributed to the difficult judgments about what Margot would have wanted. I am grateful to Yisrael Levin (Margot’s doctoral student, himself a specialist in Victorian myth and literature) for adding a bibliography of literature about Proserpine; to my copy-editing assistant, Jessica Gillies, for her many hours of painstaking work; and to my student assistant, Brittnee Russell, for her labour in transferring footnotes to and starting to construct a list of works cited for this book. I would also like to thank the many colleagues who have responded to my barrage of questions about phrasing, sources, and style: Kim Blank, Laurel Bowman, Nicholas Bradley, Alison Chapman, Luke Carson, Susan Doyle, Chris Fox, Linda K. Hughes, Janelle Jenstad, Magdalena Kay, Matthew Kay, Gary Kuchar, Mary Elizabeth Leighton, Yisrael Levin, Krista Lysack, Robert Miles, Allan Mitchell, Judith Mitchell, and Herbert Tucker. I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Department of English at the University of Victoria that enabled me to hire an assistant for this task. Finally, I am grateful to Ann Donahue at Ashgate Press for taking on the challenge of publishing a book under these unusual circumstances.

I would like readers of this book to know that I have followed Margot’s instructions in changing her work as little as possible. I have adjusted punctuation, citation, and capitalization to follow MLA style, corrected minor typographical errors or infelicities, transferred footnotes from Margot’s published work to this manuscript, and constructed a list of works cited. If there are errors in these aspects of the book, they are my own and not the author’s.

*Lisa Surridge*  
*University of Victoria*





**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# Preface

Thee I revisit now with bolder wing,  
Escap't the *Stygian* Pool, though long detain'd  
In that obscure sojourn, while in my flight  
Through utter and through middle darkness borne  
With other notes than to th' *Orphean* Lyre  
I sung of *Chaos* and *Eternal Night*,  
Taught by the heav'nly Muse to venture down  
The dark descent, and up to reascend,  
Though hard and rare ....

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost* III.13–21

As spring returns to the Northern Hemisphere, she rises slowly in the south: the constellation Virgo, the Virgin, dim and difficult to see but for the brilliant star Spica, the wheat-sheaf or “spike” of wheat which the Virgin bears in her left hand. The brightest of the stars marking her right arm is Vindemiatrix, the “female grape-gatherer”; this constellation is in Western astronomy indelibly associated with “the life of fruits and corn,” the agricultural cycle (Cornelius 114; Swinburne, “The Garden of Proserpine” 171). The starry Virgin is she whom the Greeks called Koré (the maiden), Persephone, the goddess who descends into the underworld to rise again; the Romans assimilated this figure to their own corn goddess, Proserpina.

The goddess Koré, Persephone, Proserpina moves powerfully through the literature written in English over the past century and a half. Interest in goddesses generally revived in the nineteenth century, thanks to the cultural shifts created by Romanticism, and thanks also to the work of scholars like Johann Jakob Bachofen, whose book *Das Mutterrecht* (1861) proposed that patriarchal society must have been preceded by matriarchy. At the same time, a new fascination with deep and hidden forces within the psyche or the culture gave fresh urgency to the symbol of a vitalizing or appalling underworld. Moreover, the gradual collapse of religious faith in the nineteenth century was intimately connected with the development of fresh intellectual and emotional approaches to death, resurrection, and mythic thinking itself. The slow, difficult alteration in the position of women also prompted new ways of thinking about violation, marriage, and the relationship of mother and daughter. All these changes were reflected and explored in the literature that employs the myth of Persephone.

This book focuses on Victorian and early Modernist literature, showing how male and female writers argued over the myth of Persephone, revising and reinterpreting one another's representations of the goddess and versions of her story. At one level, this study may seem to record a confusion of warring voices and incompatible impulses, as each writer tries to tug the goddess in one direction or another, making her serve the writer's own agenda. At a deeper level, this is a tale of cultural changes reflected, and to some extent effected, through the

controversies and literary creations explored here. The rise of paganism (among other alternative spiritualities) and the undermining of Christianity's exclusive supremacy in Western religious thought; the struggle between asceticism and a reviving reverence for the body; the brief but culturally significant dominance of pessimism; the Modernist celebration of fertility and of the life force; and, above all, the long and still-continuing struggle over whether the mythmaking imagination is to be understood as masculine and is to work chiefly or exclusively on male experience—these are the topics I hope to illuminate. My argument is that the myth of Persephone provides an ideal nexus for these movements; by studying the tale as it is explored, celebrated, and recreated in literature, we can understand how these developments are connected. Through the nineteenth century, Christianity was weakened as an imaginative force partly by the revival of an increasingly hedonistic Hellenism but also, more severely, by a shift in sensibility that made the pain of life seem incompatible with the concept of an omnipotent and benevolent God. This shift in sensibility contributed to the brief dominance of pessimism at the turn of the century: the painful world seemed to many writers depleted of value, and the act of bringing new life into the world appeared to be morally unjustifiable. At the same time, however, a contrary strain of thought was beginning to emerge, powerfully supported by the uncovering of fertility cults across much of the globe. The modern imagination turned to the contemplation of primitive ritual to regenerate its own shaken faith in life and its shattered sense of community. Most significantly, these developments made room for fresh female perspectives on the mythic imagination, the nature of sexual freedom, the complexities of reproduction, and the potential of a female deity.

In examining these processes, it will be useful to invoke Barbara Newman's concept of "imaginative theology." The "imaginative theologian," Newman says, thinks by means of the "devices of literature"; he or she "works with images and believes, with Christine de Pizan, that 'the road of the imagination ... reveals the face of God to whoever follows it to the end'" (Newman 298, 297).<sup>1</sup> Newman is discussing the fruitful similarities between fictive visions and the personal narratives of visionaries in the Middle Ages; as applied to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, the concept can be still more valuable. One can in fact argue that part of the accomplishment of this later period was to demonstrate that imaginative theology is the only kind that exists or, as William Blake put it, that "the Poetic Genius ... was the first principle and all the others merely derivative" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Plate 12, xxi). What allowed this perception to be taken seriously was a century and more of effort by mythographers and poets, anthropologists and literary critics, theologians and novelists, all engaged in an anguished and stirring debate that mediated the shift from various forms of Christianity to a far greater spiritual diversity.

This process has often been represented, misleadingly or at least simplistically, as a counter-religious secularization, a progress toward a purely rationalistic consensus. However, a close examination of the scholarship and literature most

---

<sup>1</sup> I am obliged to Maidie Hilmo for drawing my attention to this work.

influential in the creation of new attitudes toward myth, and new ways of using and relating to myth, will show that much of this work is informed by profound religious impulses that have gone unrecognized as such largely because the spirituality they expressed and developed was not Christian. Until very lately, even the discussion of spiritual vision, in any form outside the dominant versions of the leading religions, seemed to smack of the eccentric and the unscholarly. (Even Christian or Jewish mysticism has not been quite exempt from such prejudice.) Too often, writers like A.C. Swinburne, Jane Ellen Harrison, and H.D.—writers who were openly non-Christian, or anti-Christian, yet who approached religion seriously and with passion—have been routinely denigrated or ignored. Yet it is impossible to understand what was really going on in the development of attitudes to myth and literary uses of myth without taking seriously the development and redirection of spiritual energies at the same time.

Until very recently, “myth criticism”—that is to say, a criticism of literature focused on texts’ allusions to and use of narrative structures drawn from myth—weakened itself by failing to fully appreciate the spiritual dimension of myth and related religious practices. The old style of myth criticism (which flourished from the 1970s to the early 1990s, when it came into disrepute) was based on universalist models of myth, such as the Jungian theory of archetypes held within the “collective unconscious.” It traced in all literature conscious or unconscious evocations of such popular images as James Frazer’s dying god, Joseph Campbell’s hero with a thousand faces, and the great mother or great goddess who came to dominate several versions of woman-centred spirituality. In the last two decades, however, we have come to understand how deeply this very syncretism is rooted in the practices of nineteenth-century “armchair anthropologists,” practices widely condemned and disdained in the anthropology of our own time. Gradually, we have come to realize that it is essential in mythography to see how a myth operates within its cultural context; similarly, it is essential in literary criticism to see how a mythical allusion or pattern of mythical echoes within a literary text operates within that text’s cultural context. We begin also to understand that each text that responds to or exploits a myth, explicitly or implicitly, participates in its culture’s discourse on the significance of myth in general and the meaning and usefulness of that particular myth.

In short, myth criticism is becoming historicist, responding to the specific historical and cultural contingencies informing each mythopoeic text rather than asserting a universal and transcendental value reaffirmed in each appearance of the myth. During much of the 1990s, myth criticism was in abeyance, as critics needed to develop a sophisticated understanding of the cultural context of each period before such issues could be satisfactorily addressed. In Victorian studies, the work of Frank Turner, Robert Ackerman, and Catherine Gallagher (among others) through the last two decades of the twentieth century provided a strong foundation for such understanding, yet it was only in the twenty-first century that a new myth criticism—employing the methods of historicist and cultural studies—has begun to develop, in the works of such scholars as Dinah Birch and Sharon Weltman.

The present study begins by outlining two general mythographic trends in the nineteenth century: first, the slowly increasing respect for ancient Greek paganism as an expression of spirituality as opposed to the dismissal of ancient religion at the start of the century as superstition and frivolity; second, an increasing emphasis on Greek chthonic ritual as a worthy focus for ancient religion and a corresponding tendency to dismiss the Olympian gods of Homeric mythology as fictions of immortality rather than figures who could mediate to their worshippers some understanding of primal feeling, loss, death, and passion. Both of these trends brought Persephone into new prominence. A chthonic goddess, dragged into the world of death like a mortal rather than enjoying the endless bliss of Mount Olympus, forced into the experience of loss and passion rather than embodying a beautiful serenity, this forgotten child of the Olympians now took centre stage.

In Chapter 1, we explore the classical and English heritage of texts concerning Persephone and the emergence of the goddess in Romantic literature as an avatar of the Romantic self, losing and then regaining her original closeness to Mother Earth. I first paraphrase and analyze the three primary classical sources for the tale of Persephone or Proserpina: the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the version of the tale in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae*. Then we see how the best-known allusions to Proserpina in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton offer a variety of paradigms for interpreting the myth, which may be seen as a prophetic affirmation of Christian doctrine, or as a sardonic illumination of the relationship between the sexes, or as the growth of a female power into sexuality and self-knowledge. (In subsequent chapters it becomes apparent that the first of these three paradigms is desperately asserted in the Victorian age, against the insistent growth of radically new interpretations; the second and third of the paradigms continue to be influential to the present day.) Romantic explorations of the myth, from Mary Shelley's closet play to Margaret Fuller's seminars, show the figure of Persephone developing from a naive child to a formidable embodiment of the maturing mind of humanity. In the course of this process, unexpected and fearful issues arise; a new underworld opens.

Chapter 2 shows how J.J. Bachofen's theory of primitive matriarchy and John McLennan's theory of "marriage by capture" as the basis of patriarchal marriage offered a new lens through which to see Persephone's story: the myth then becomes a revelation of marriage as a fundamentally violent institution and one that creates a bond between male and female at the expense of an original bond between mother and daughter. Poems by Jean Ingelow and Dora Greenwell in the 1860s and 1870s explore the tragedy of such a development; they also show how the daughter's sexual initiation can affect her own growth, and they consider how far mother and daughter may overcome the alienation that has been imposed upon them.

In Chapter 3, we see how a rival tradition develops in Persephonic poetry from the 1860s to the end of the century. A.C. Swinburne and his male contemporaries, contemplating the goddess in her darkest aspect as queen of the underworld, use her to face fundamental spiritual questions: Does death offer immortality or oblivion? Is life worth living? Is the will to life itself a blind, amoral force to be rejected

and transcended? The debate over pessimism becomes more urgent as pessimism comes to dominate avant-garde thought through the *fin de siècle*. For writers and artists like Swinburne, Walter Pater, D.G. Rossetti, and Mathilde Blind, Proserpine becomes the embodiment of a world and a linguistic system without meaning or hope; writers like Lewis Morris, George Meredith, Isabella Valancy Crawford, and Alfred Tennyson employ the same trope while passionately attacking the nihilistic vision of life with which it has become associated; and William Sharp, Arthur Stringer, and Marjorie Pickthall expose the terms of this debate without attempting to resolve it. Finally, after the turn of the century, Robert Bridges and Edith Wharton present this very debate as a quarrel between Persephone and her mother, linking the argument over pessimism to the ambivalence within the mother-daughter bond that Ingelow and Greenwell had disclosed. As the divine daughter grows up and learns the grim wisdom of the underworld, she becomes more and more hostile to her mother's optimistic and perhaps naive vision of life.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts from these familial, theological, and philosophical problems to social and aesthetic issues. To give life is to be fertile. Is fertility a value or a nightmare? For Schopenhauer, this was a metaphysical question; for such early Modernist novelists as Thomas Hardy and Willa Cather, the issue retains an important metaphysical dimension but is predominantly a social one. How is fertility warped, or enabled and supported, by present financial, political, and marital institutions? How is female fertility understood, punished, or rewarded within the sexual politics of the day, and is fertility with all its possibilities and concomitant vulnerabilities empowering or disabling to women? In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy both celebrates and laments fertility but seems on balance to respond more powerfully to a pessimistic view of fertility as it acts in his society; Cather, responding to *Tess* both as a novel and as a performed drama, revises Hardy's vision radically in *My Ántonia* and ends with a powerful affirmation of fertility and life.

In their emphasis on the issue of fertility, on emotion rather than theology as central to religious vision, and on group rituals rather than individual faith as central to religious practice, Cather and Hardy show strong affinities with the Myth and Ritual School that was transforming classical studies and anthropology at this period. Yet, far more than the ritualists, the novelists discussed here were keenly aware that the turn-of-the-century fascination with communal Dionysian ecstasies involved a great deal of imaginative nostalgia, projection and compensatory fantasy. The fallen woman with whom Persephone comes to be associated in *Tess* and *My Ántonia* is herself a Victorian creation. She embodies the social construction of female sexual freedom as degraded; she experiences the suffering created by such social constructions; but she also constitutes, in these novels, a vigorous protest against such constructions. Tess's husband, Angel, and Ántonia's chronicler, Jim Burden, react in rather different ways to Tess and Ántonia's "fall," but in each case their reactions expose the sexual confusion of educated and privileged males in their period. At a deeper level, the ways in which these men apotheosize, abandon, and return to the heroines expose the limitations and powers, the functions and the self-deceptions of the mythopoetic imagination itself.

The tale of these developments would be incomplete without at least a glimpse of Persephone's overwhelming popularity among Modernist poets. In this, as in so many other respects, the Modernists are profoundly influenced by the Victorians, fulfilling the Victorian dream even while they suppose themselves to be correcting their forebears' errors and limitations. Chapter 5 examines a selection of Modernist texts from the first three decades of the twentieth century, showing how William Carlos Williams's *Kora in Hell* and the first and third versions of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* call for the regeneration of society: a Persephone figure trapped in the underworld of industrial and capitalist society seeks—and in Lawrence's work finds—escape. The Western world's slow, struggling return to feeling and physicality is perfectly symbolized by Persephone's resurrection; and in this hopeful vision, her mysteries and myth are imbued with a genuine spiritual power, a new paganism that reverses and flouts Christian paradigms.

In the women's literature of the same period, however, although the emphasis is still very much on the need for escape from the underworld, Persephone at times seems the obstacle to escape—as in Amy Key Clarke's *Persephone* and Katharine Bradley's "Pomegranates"—rather than the escapee, the goddess-heroine who enacts our deepest hopes. In H.D.'s duology, *Her* and *Asphodel*, the heroine does become a liberating and self-liberating Koré. Like Clarke and Bradley, H.D. attacks the patriarchal tendencies of classical mythology and attacks also women's sadly frequent collusion with patriarchal convention. Demeter's world of Eleusinian fertility is to H.D., in these texts, a nightmare world of submission, depression, and self-erasure; the mother-daughter bond about which Ingelow and Greenwell could be so delicately ambivalent now represents a fetter that Persephone has to break. Only through a different kind of woman-to-woman connection can real freedom be achieved, as two Koré figures create a new familial structure.

In the conclusion to this study, we consider how the Koré functions in the period covered by this book. Each generation, responding to the shifting contingencies of its own era, but also building on and replying to the work of its predecessors, creates a different vision of her; she becomes a metaphor, a model, a deadly peril, and a regenerative goddess. Yet, more significantly, our altering responses to her show—and help to shape—profound cultural changes in our attitudes to the material world, to sexuality and fertility, to gender and ethics, to the family, and above all to spirituality. What spirituality is, what deity and worship are, what human society can be: these are the questions that Persephone forces us to confront.

*Margot K. Louis*

# Acknowledgments

First and foremost, my warmest thanks are due to my father, Harry Louis, without whose love and staunch support I would hardly have found it possible to work at all during my long years as an invalid from 1989 onward.

I am also grateful to my research assistants Miranda Burgess, Julie Brennan, Sandi Chamberlayne, Yisrael Levin, Lori Walter, and Thea Todd, who at various points have done so much to enrich this study.

Special thanks must go to Judith Mitchell. When, facing a diagnosis of ovarian cancer and a formidably disheartening prognosis, I was in despair about the possibility of completing this volume, it was she who suggested that some of the apparatus might well be created by other Victorianists in the department at various levels; her consistent support and encouragement have done much to enable me to complete the creative portion of the book and have buoyed me up through crises and self-doubt.

Lisa Surridge, with her accustomed generosity, has taken on the responsibility for whatever posthumous arrangements the manuscript may require; her careful editing, her tact and efficiency in delegating various necessary tasks and communicating with all participants, and her deep and consistent kindness have helped more than I can well express.

*Margot K. Louis*



# Permissions

Research for this book was originally published in *Modern Philology* (1999) and *Victorian Studies* (2005). The editors of both journals have graciously given permission to reproduce these essays here.

# Introduction

## Gods and Mysteries: The Revival of Paganism and the Remaking of Mythography through the Nineteenth Century

I had often wondered why the Olympians—Apollo, Athena, even Zeus, always vaguely irritated me, and why the mystery gods, their shapes and ritual, Demeter, Dionysus, the cosmic Eros, drew and drew me.

—Jane Ellen Harrison, *Alpha and Omega* (1915) 204

From 1800 to the 1920s, the evolution of mythography both informed and was informed by wider cultural developments: the great and difficult project of replacing the Christian mythos that for so long formed the imaginative core of Western culture; the struggle between the drive toward transcendence and a reviving reverence for the material world and its seasonal cycles; the brief but culturally significant dominance of pessimism; and, in reaction, the celebration of fertility and of the life force. The pressure of these very nineteenth-century concerns redefined the study of ancient Greek religion in this era. Throughout the period, we find a recurrent insistence that the mythology of the ancient Greeks (specifically that of Homer) is less deeply, less truly religious than the Mystery cults of the chthonian deities: Persephone, Dionysos, and Adonis. To trace the variations on this theme through the mythography and literature of the period is to see the era's religious attitudes in the very process of formation.

We begin with a specifically Romantic approach to Hellenic religion. The gods of Greek mythology were denigrated as finite in form, limited in sympathy with mortal suffering, separate from humanity in their inhuman beauty and immortal joy—altogether inadequate, therefore, to a Romantic religious sensibility. By contrast, the Greek Mysteries were assumed to have satisfied the religious sensibility because they connected celebrants with one another, with nature, and with the infinite. This opposition between myth and Mystery (which may not seem to be characteristic of ancient Greek religion as we now perceive it) grew out of Christian and Romantic concepts of spiritual experience. More important, underlying this denigration of myth and elevation of Mystery was a very nineteenth-century agenda. In opposition both to rationalism and to a dogmatic Christianity, a pantheistic religious vision was created and projected onto the Mysteries. Further, against the dominant assumptions of the time, some Romantics suggested that the same religious sensibility informed both ancient Greek and modern Christian religion. This view deeply affected thinking about Greek religion through the high Victorian age. However, in the polarized atmosphere of the late Victorian

era, denigrating the Greek gods became a way to attack the Christian cult of transcendence and immortality and the focus on life after death; the exaltation of the Mysteries became a way to celebrate the sacredness of this life, of sexuality, and of the life force. More and more, late Victorians privileged ritual over myth and saw the fertility cult as central to the development of religion, while the myths they still honoured were those pertaining to the gods and goddesses of the Mysteries.

These developments, large as they are, do not make up the whole story. In this introduction, I focus on two entwined threads of a complex web (the attack on the Olympian gods and the exaltation of the Mystery cults) and show how these threads helped to form the larger pattern of Victorian attitudes to ancient Greek myth and religion. The invaluable surveys of Victorian mythography by James Kissane, Janet Burstein, and Frank Turner omit two factors: first, the persistence of a Romantic strain in Victorian mythography; and second, the close relation between mythography and poetry throughout the era. It is an essential part of my argument that British perceptions of myth at this period cannot be understood solely by recourse to British mythography but must be supplemented by recourse both to more sophisticated Continental studies and to British poetry.

In the early nineteenth century, British mythographers were hampered even more than their German contemporaries by the need to conciliate a strong evangelical lobby deeply suspicious of paganism in any form. Romantic and Victorian poetry, however, offered a field in which myth could be used, revised, even explicitly discussed with more freedom than was available to scholars at the time. Poets were not entirely exempt from evangelical pressure, but poetry was to a large extent protected by its traditional associations with myth and by the symbolic mode developed in the Romantic era.<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, a leading German Romantic, insisted that mythology was for poetry “a matrix, a sky, a living atmosphere” (81), and Romantic poetry in Britain also quickly developed a vigorous mythopoeic aesthetic. Much early and high Victorian mythography worked out concepts earlier popularized by Romantic poetry, even as poetry through the mid-century laid the basis for a critique of these very concepts and established those emotional associations and thematic emphases that came to inform *fin-de-siècle* mythography. Throughout the century, the profound connection of myth with literature—and especially with poetry—persisted, intractable and inexhaustibly fecund.

---

<sup>1</sup> Curtius points out that among the Ionian philosophers, and through most of Western Europe at least to the Enlightenment, Greek mythology was believed to be the work of poets: “For, as Herodotus says, Homer and Hesiod created their gods for the Greeks” (8); the revolt against myth was “also against poetry, ... for the Greeks had no religious records, no priestly caste, no ‘sacred books.’ Their theology was shaped by poets” (204).