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Marilyn Butler

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CHAPTER I

A map of mythologising

Mapping Mythologies is a history. It is a study of some of the most innovative, characteristic and influential British writings of the period 1730–1820, which it seeks to read with better understanding by re-establishing the needs, beliefs and assumptions that governed them: the wider ‘language’ they were written in, the questions they were answering. The feature these writers have in common is their interest in primitive religious figures, beliefs or myths.

Other books and articles have explicated what some of these writers, and others like them, had to say about myth. The underlying premises of such enquiries are often unstated, but they seem to fall into two categories, with some scholars subscribing to both assumptions, some to only one. The tradition that poetry enjoys a special relationship with religion, even that it performs a semi-religious function, is found in Plato and in some Renaissance thinkers and has underwritten much literary criticism since Coleridge and Friedrich Schlegel in the early nineteenth century. Probably most of the critics who have become interested in poets’ use of myth have been impelled by an interest in religious ideas.

Since the Second World War, and especially since the 1950s, an eloquent body of criticism has emerged in praise of Blake, Shelley, the ‘visionary’ parts of Wordsworth, a handful of poems by Collins and Smart and the exotic dream writings of De Quincey. This criticism testifies essentially to a commitment in the modern critical community, especially in America, to religious, idealist sentiment, which coincides with an often marked lack of sympathy with orthodox Christianity, most especially with the Church of England. The critics who have been drawn to the eighteenth-century tradition of mythological poetry have been critics of Anglicanism – Northrop Frye, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom. Northrop Frye has thrown his considerable weight behind the view that for half a century, say 1740 to 1790, English literature is interesting primarily as the prelude to something else – that is, as the era of pre-Romanticism. Frye makes a

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[More information](#)

superbly confident historical simplifier because he is deeply ahistorical, indeed despises history precisely for its commitment to the local and the contingent. His loyalties lie with the (non-Anglican) Protestant religion, not with worldly politics. He sees culture as a universal phenomenon, expressive of the individual and generated from within. Frye's hatred of French cultural influence has itself an odd ring of the eighteenth century, that period of resented French hegemony, an echo further strengthened by his debt to the German Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. In line with a strong tradition of pietism in northern European Protestantism, Jung too dislikes progressivism and materialism, and he proposes that the road to the deeper truths lies through a kind of cultural regression to the basic (reverent) instincts shared by mankind in its infancy.

Thus for Frye, as for M. H. Abrams in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), the major English poets after 1800 rebelled against French materialism and, in reviving traditional literary forms and a submerged religious language of symbolic plots and images, recovered a primal wisdom lost in the pursuit of technological progress. Using highly unorthodox, individualistic routes, they found their way to the self and God. Frye's intellectual influence has been overwhelmingly North American, and strongest on a group of younger scholars whose own family and intellectual roots are Central European. The association of Romanticism with religious revival, a very uneasy and often implausible link given only English materials, works much better for an early-nineteenth-century Germany reacting powerfully against Napoleonic domination. German idealism and what is surely German cultural nationalism plays a discernible part in the work of Geoffrey Hartman, and is overwhelmingly present in the increasingly Zionist Prometheanism of Harold Bloom. These writers see in Romantic mythologising not secularisation but a purifying of the springs of religion, as old as or older than Christianity, via a universal language of allegory and myth.

Yet for an eighteenth-century poet to take up the topic of (pagan) mythology was certainly not in itself evidence of any religious commitment. Eighteenth-century Western European societies were so constituted that only one creed – one or other sect of Christianity – was admitted in each state as true religion. This state of affairs is crucially different from the situation prevailing in Europe today, when other creeds, particularly the Eastern ones, enjoy high prestige and are generally and officially regarded as having more in common with Christianity than with materialism or scepticism. In the eighteenth century, however, paganism, scepticism and materialism were perceived as closely allied. This would appear supremely

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*A map of mythologising*

3

obvious to most modern students of comparative religion, in whose field of study eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century attitudes to non-Christian myths naturally fall. But professional ‘religionists’ tend to have their own problems with the eighteenth century, and the thought of the era immediately prior to the institutionalising of comparative religion as a ‘discipline’ is often subject to peculiarly insensitive, unsympathetic treatment. Literary specialists come upon some of this work in the no doubt simplified form of summaries designed as ‘background’ to the study of literature: for example, in a number of scholarly books and articles on syncretic religion in Romantic literature,¹ or in Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson’s *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680–1860* (1972), a large, useful anthology of writings on myth. The assumption of most of the articles and certainly of the anthology is that mythologists, whether writing treatises or poems, were engaged in a corporate and ultimately disinterested investigation of the world’s religions. By the early nineteenth century, their endeavours had led to the institutionalising of their interest in university departments of comparative religion, or, more likely, in sub-departments within faculties of theology. By that point, the test of the good mythologist’s calibre nominally had become not the quality of his own religious feeling, but his scholarly zeal in getting at the historical nature and detail of non-Christian religion. Yet Feldman and Richardson, like the comparative religionist Mircea Eliade, who introduces their volume, plainly also hold that a religious view of the world is a pre-requisite for writing well about myth.² They pay little attention to that desire to criticise religion, which is so salient among so many leading eighteenth-century intellectuals, such as Bayle, Voltaire and Hume.

Not quite all writers on eighteenth-century mythology order their topic by the academic equivalent of the Whig Idea of Progress, which has intellectuals of the past struggling slowly towards the eminence on which we now stand. F. E. Manuel’s *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (1959) is a model of unpatronising history of ideas, and remains the best survey of prose treatments of myth in the period, an invaluable background to the poetry. But where the strong preconceptions I have outlined have influenced the judgements of writers on myth, they have been, I believe, almost wholly misleading. Eighteenth-century poets could not and did not aspire to be academics disinterestedly enquiring into primitive religion. Their handling of the topic cannot indeed be taken as face-value evidence of an interest in religion as such at all. A detached curiosity in relation to esoteric knowledge is found or at least professed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century university departments, where it earns professional

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

rewards. But even in these modern conditions it is not, surely, a sufficient motive to account for the wide spread and passionate preoccupation, or craze, that mythologising has intermittently become outside as well as inside the academy in the last three centuries. There are plenty of examples from the sixteenth century onward of leisured individuals with disengaged minds who pursue learned hobbies which look – as trainspotting and stamp collecting do – like the collection of detail for its own sake. But when a subject enjoys a general vogue, as mythology did particularly from 1660 to 1730, and again about a century later, from 1760 to 1830, the spirit of enquiry is unlikely to be so dispassionate, or the method so eclectic and desultory. Revivalism is not a motive, but rather a strategy, part of a drive to unseat or delegitimise something in the present, by claiming authority from the past for something else. To understand creative tradition-building, we have to look for explanations beyond mere antiquarian curiosity.

Was the thrust behind mythography indeed religious – an impulse, as first Frye, then Bloom, Abrams and others have claimed, to recover the ancient wisdom challenged by eighteenth-century materialism and barely defended by the established church?³ We might try to answer this question by investigating who the actual mythologisers in the period were, what audience they wrote for and against which opponents. Manuel states, and Feldman and Richardson imply, that the typical mythologist of, say, 1680 to 1720 was a Dutch or English Protestant clergyman, or a Frenchman from a Huguenot background like Bayle.⁴ In the excesses of paganism – the details of which world travellers were making available – he found a useful analogy to the excesses of Catholicism, the theatrical show of its rituals, the credulity of its believers, the machinations of its priests. Some of the early-eighteenth-century English Deists were Anglicans, equally concerned to ridicule the ‘enthusiasm’ of the Protestant sects. Yet others, as we shall see later in this chapter, cast doubt on current established religion as the tool of the powerful, and advocated an alternative religion as both purer and, in a scientific age, more natural. So paganism was taken up, though initially by men who would usually have described themselves as sincerely religious, because it was a device for identifying false religion, while generally leaving true (moderate Protestant or ‘rational’) religion intact. In the second wave of mythologising, from about 1760, it was the atheist and materialist d’Holbach who took the initiative, defining all religion, especially the established state religions of Western Europe, as superstition, and making the absurdities of paganism a pretext for dismissing religion altogether. By mid-century another line of argument, developed by Hume in *The Natural*

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*A map of mythologising*

5

History of Religion (1757), bore unfavourably on Christianity in general. Hume argued that the religious impulse is not innate to man, and thus not a feature of all societies, nor specially characteristic of primitive ones. It was only a minority of unorthodox writers, later in the eighteenth century, who made a positive case for some pagan religions – often those believed to be extinct, such as Greek paganism and Zoroastrianism – as benign, beautiful and perhaps morally superior to Christianity.⁵ But to argue thus is still to attack Christianity, and it is commonly used as a tactic to unseat the practice of belief. Shelley, for example, is quite capable of pointing out in one passage that Greek paganism is ‘an elegant worship’ or that Zoroastrianism was compatible with early natural science, or that some religions have been more civilised as social codes than Hebraism, while still concluding that modern man has outgrown the gods – an Enlightenment assumption he shares with Hume and with Freud.

Before mythic content in an eighteenth-century or Romantic poet can be assumed to be expressive of innate religious feeling, then, his poem will have to be separated from the prevailing thrust of mythologising for a century before him. The assumption that non-Christian subject matter would in this period and in these cultures be readily equated with a generalised spirituality, let alone with Christianity, is simply ahistorical. The subject remained topical and profoundly controversial until after the English younger Romantics were dead, and indeed long after that, though a more tolerant syncretism did also evolve in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Before that, the onus is on the modern scholar to show that a mythologising poet was *not* a sceptic or a materialist or a schismatic or otherwise unorthodox. Claims about an impulse to religion within the collective unconscious must be checked against a group portrait of the mythologising poets – where they lived, how they lived, what they read, who they wrote for, who they were allied to and who they rejected. We must also remember that they were not merely wordsmiths and aesthetes, but also interested parties with a profession to establish and individual professional careers to advance.

Who were the eighteenth-century English poets? Most people at once think of an urban individual, probably one of a literary group, a man of course and almost certainly a Londoner: Pope and the circle round him, Gay, Swift (though often a Dubliner), even Addison, Steele and Prior, down to the Grub Street hacks; or, less distinguished poetically, Johnson and *his* circle, Goldsmith, Boswell, Garrick, Reynolds and Burke. Though we may be aware that most of the Pope group and all the leading members of the Johnson circle began life as provincials, we are more interested in the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

fact that they became Londoners, and wrote their books while living in the capital. In previous periods a would-be writer or 'wit' gravitated towards the Court in search of princely or aristocratic patronage; now they tended to congregate in London because the modern commercial successor to patronage, literary journalism, was (almost all) fixed there. Edinburgh became a rival publishing centre only in the early nineteenth century: most eighteenth-century Scottish writers who stayed in Scotland earned their livings initially by other means – at the Scottish bar (Kames, Monboddo, Mackenzie, Boswell, Jeffrey, Scott), or as academics (Hume, Robertson, Ferguson, Beattie, Blair). There was nothing to stop a country poet from sending his work to a London bookseller to be published at his own expense. Equally, he might place a poem in either a London or a provincial newspaper or journal – but for this he was most unlikely to receive payment. If he wanted commissioned written work, including reviewing (the only type of work for which he would probably be paid), and if he aspired to get a play put on, he needed to be in the capital. To make an income and a name from literature, a writer needed to woo the publishers, for during the eighteenth century publishers succeeded rich noblemen as the effective patrons and economic controllers of literature.

The diminishing role of the patron and the expanding role of the publishers had large implications for the social status and self-image of the writer. In Pope's day, when the leading writers depended on the financial support of wealthy aristocrats like Harley, Bolingbroke and Lyttelton, they tried to assume some of the social and political standing of their paymasters, and demanded rather than requested a paid place in government service.⁶ The rhetoric of Pope, Swift and the Patriot poets of the 1730s (Thomson, Aaron Hill, Savage and their like) measures the Walpole administration against a high concept of the role of culture in the good society, and finds it wanting. But by the middle of the century, aristocratic patronage was declining: as every Johnsonian knows, Lord Chesterfield failed to become the patron of the great Dictionary, which had already been commissioned instead by an enterprising publisher. Men like Edmund Curll already controlled the popular media like the novel and the journals in Pope's day, but the expensive book and long prestigious poem still had to find, and could find, a wealthy patron. In Chapter 2, we shall see Thomson's shift to commercial funding, and the way in which his poetry seems to reflect his growing reliance on the socially equal transaction with his publisher. But the significance of the development goes far beyond its influence on individual careers like those of Thomson and Johnson.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*A map of mythologising*

7

A momentous change occurred in the history of literature between 1730 and 1750, the swift rise to prosperity and power of the commercial bookseller. The breakthrough came with the publishers' establishment of a highly efficient sales network throughout the country, an achievement no doubt facilitated by better roads and an improved coach service, but also crucially served by their development of a specialised literary medium, the general magazine and literary review. These were commercial ventures designed not for the existing cognoscenti in the capital, but for a new public living anywhere, who might be reached by the printed word and induced to buy books – which the publishers of the journals sometimes published themselves, but more commonly distributed and sold. Thus a staple element in the magazine and the sole element in the review was the report on a book just published. From the start, books *were* bought because individual purchasers or library-borrowers had read about them in journals, but many, many more books were read about than were actually read, so that an audience for 'literary intelligence', and for current knowledge, speculations, ideas, was developed, or actually created. A special type of middle-class national culture emerged for the first time during the eighteenth century, a reading public geographically scattered (for journals circulated throughout Great Britain to Ireland, North America, and gradually to the distant outposts of empire), but seemingly homogenous through their interest in current ideas and new knowledge. Many such readers encountered new creative literature primarily in the pages of current journals: such literature was one of the 'new' discourses, along with the applied sciences, travels, news, current opinion, and unlike the old learned discourses, such as classics and theology. We from our vantage-point may think of literature as an old-established, traditionalist, and learned pursuit. A study of the medium in which it was normally presented to the eighteenth-century public suggests that readers then may have thought of it very differently.

It is of course maddeningly hard to know what any common readers, let alone all of them, thought. The penetration of literature down into the populace is well illustrated from the diary kept between 1752 and 1761 by Thomas Turner, the Sussex mercer or local storekeeper, who read sermons, Elizabethan and sentimental drama, Milton, Locke and Sterne, and with a friend, the local tailor, shared a subscription to the *Universal Magazine*. But there is little discernible policy in Turner's eclectic reading, and his critical judgements seem uninteresting, a fact which has deterred at least one literary scholar from using the diary as a mine of information about mid-century literary tastes. Yet Turner's self-image

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

as a reading man is in itself extremely interesting. Something – and surely it was his consciousness of belonging to a large, unseen literate community – gave Turner the confidence to pass reflective, unfavourable judgements upon the two leading village worthies, the largest landowner (whom Turner identified as grasping) and the frivolous, hard-drinking rector, and to write of a life spent reading books as an ideal life.⁷ At least a guess may be hazarded that this man's social self-respect may have been representative. It is one characteristic of the new reading public which is reflected in the innovative movement in popular poetry of the second half of the eighteenth century.

Before the repeal of the Licensing Act in 1695, books could not be published outside London except by licence, save in the university towns of Oxford and Cambridge and the archiepiscopal city of York. (Terry Belanger has emphasised, rightly, the startling implications of this.)⁸ It is hard now to imagine what life in an English provincial town must have been like in 1690, with no locally originated printed matter, no advertising, playbills or newspaper; and hard to exaggerate the stimulus that must have been provided by the arrival in the provinces of booksellers who were also publishers, the owners of news sheets or newspapers, the printers of privately commissioned local volumes, the distributors of books from the capital.⁹ In the course of the eighteenth century, the provinces became more self-confident and self-aware, and much of the best writing and art being produced in Britain became unashamedly provincial. Its provinciality is not to be measured by its place of publication, because publishing was for historical reasons still very centralised in England. What distinguishes eighteenth-century provincial writers from their nineteenth-century successors (such as Jane Austen) is the existence of a strong provincial ideology outside literature itself: the strain of middle-class opinion known in the eighteenth century as 'patriot'.

Recent historians have begun to trace amongst the trading classes of eighteenth-century Britain a highly competitive, not to say chauvinistic attitude to the nation's chief trading rivals, France and Spain.¹⁰ There was a zeal to go to war with these European powers in various parts of the globe, occasionally in the name of liberty, national dignity or the Protestant religion, but more practically in the interests of securing overseas markets and of maintaining control of the seas. The very strong sense of Englishness or Britishness characteristic of the patriot middling orders was felt to be in marked contrast with the cosmopolitan, religiously tolerant stance of the great Whig families who ruled the country, and with the German royal family. Almost all the eighteenth-century poets discussed in this book write

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Marilyn Butler

Excerpt

[More information](#)*A map of mythologising*

9

at some time or other as ‘patriots’, and most as self-proclaimed provincials, or, to use another contemporary expression, as spokesmen for a ‘Country’ tradition: Thomson, Collins, Gray, Macpherson, Chatterton and – an apparently anomalous case – the Londoner Blake, who, alienated by his class from sophisticated urban values, picks up a large number of the characteristic Country motifs in the course of his long career. The motifs that matter are not the mere opinions of the general public, or a section of it, inertly reflected, but new forms, images, a virtual mythology of the country, that made this strand of sentiment a rich subject for poetry.

The prose literature of patriotism needs identifying, but it should also be kept distinct from the mythologising impulse in poetry which we are about to consider. Over the century as a whole, controversial literature, including much ‘belles-lettres’, frequently polarised the community into ‘two nations’. In poetry, drama and the novel, as well as in journalism and polemical tracts, retired ‘Country’ virtue in middle life was frequently contrasted with wealth and corruption in high life, specifically in the Court and City, where power actually inhered. This does not mean that society was in an unstable or actively rebellious condition. A critical, restless animus in the new informal medium, the widely circulated printed word, became inevitable given the expansion of the leisured reading public and the narrowness of the power base. In *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975), J. G. A. Pocock describes a cluster of notions which he calls ‘republican’, and finds in oppositional literature throughout the century. The key figure was an idealised version of the individual independent citizen; a society was held to be virtuous when it was made up of an aggregate of such citizens (that is, when the key social unit remained quite small), and it departed from virtue as it became large, centralised, hierarchical, depersonalised or commercial. In itself, this republican rhetoric connotes neither right or left: it is used by Tories, Jacobites, real Whigs, Deists and Dissenters, by Bolingbroke and Tom Paine. What these writers generally do have in common is that they are temporarily or permanently out of power, and thus against those who are in power. Tories are perhaps more likely to associate the enemy with new money, Whigs and radicals with inherited pride of rank, but both sides are opposed to the identifiable central institutions, ‘the Court’, the King-in-Parliament and the alternating factions of Whig grandees who make up successive administrations, along with their allies, the wealthy city merchants.

Pocock’s analysis of oppositional idealism plays a part in the story that follows. But it is also only a part, because Pocock describes an unrepresentatively aristocratic discourse by selecting texts that are already,

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[More information](#)

in pre-professional days, proto-academic. Bolingbroke and his protégé Pope might advert to classical Athens and to Florence; but Chatterton ‘mythologised’ the burgers of Bristol, intellectually a comparable process, undertaken for perhaps similar motives, but nevertheless a world away in feel. Poetic mythologising in England generally drew on a variety of existing discourses, but it also transcended them all, with the result that, as we shall see, some poets cast their vote against learning and came out in favour of the oral, unlettered popular tradition, or of their individual inspiration, the Imagination of Blake and Wordsworth.

The most consistent feature of eighteenth-century literature is its alienation from power, its oppositional bias, its search for alternatives to the status quo. Its leading motifs are that power is too centralised in London, and in the hands of too few; it serves the interests of ‘Them’, the titled, landed, moneyed elite, rather than the interests of ‘Us’, ordinary humanity; it rewards their birth and wealth, not our merit. Modern students have been taught to think of Pope as an oppositional writer, but his financial dependence on aristocrats prevents him from being oppositional in the more characteristic late-eighteenth-century sense, which is the reason for the repeated efforts of subsequent poets, beginning in Pope’s own lifetime, to separate themselves from his example. In the 1730s, he is unmistakably in retreat from the Great Wen, as Cobbett was to call London a century later, from St James’s along with Cheapside and Fleet ditch. But a Twickenham garden is after all a half-and-half retreat. A grotto in the suburbs is not the Country Alternative in its most convincing form. Pope, the friend and protégé of great men, does not revile birth. Above all, his high-life, in-group subject matter is felt, by the rival bourgeois circle which emerged in the 1720s around Aaron Hill and James Thomson, to lack dignity or even to smack of complicity. Though admired by younger contemporaries as the greatest living poet, Pope nevertheless came under pressure from them during the 1730s to adopt a style that was serious, inspirational, patriotic and religious, and in the last years of his life even he succumbed to the new ‘serious’ style, if not to the whole ideology.

This book begins in the 1730s, because it is not until after that point that poets began intermittently to engage with the remote past in a spirit which effectively mythicises it. From the 1730s, the past was increasingly seen as past, preferably as unimaginably early, innocent, primal: only thus could it function as a challenge and alternative to urbane City culture. After Thomson’s *Seasons* (1726–30), a Country manner is increasingly fashionable, and may involve conscious ordinariness. A thoughtful, meditative tone replaces wit and elegance; the ‘town eclogue’ of a writer such as