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## ***Goddesses: Mysteries of the Feminine Divine* by Joseph Campbell, Ed. Safron Rossi**

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Additional Keywords

Joseph Campbell; Goddesses; Myth; Comparative mythology

**GODDESSES: MYSTERIES OF THE FEMININE DIVINE.** Joseph Campbell; edited by Safron Rossi, PhD. The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell. Novato: New World Library, Canada 2003.

MUCH OF THE WORK IN *GODDESSES* IS COLLECTED from a variety of sources and periods of Campbell's lifelong explorations of myth. This introductory text sets the stage for the reader to delve into the text in hopes of finding source material for their own growth in understanding. It helps keep the reader's eyes focused on the kernel of Campbell's work, rather than any of the empirical claims and their relative standing as working contemporary academic models of human anthropology.

The great difficulty for works on history is that history is a moving target. The text of the well-known *Golden Bough*, at the time considered a sincere insight into the mythological origins of the Occident and Europe, is today a 19th century artifact of the study of myth and history itself. From a certain viewpoint one can see the importance of Tolkien's refusal of both metaphor and analogy applied to his mythological worlds. When drawn upon too literally the mystery can become lost to the latest discoveries, insights, and advances both cultural and scientific.

The same is in part true of the work of Joseph Campbell in the arena of mythological types, themes, and structures that we see in *Goddesses*. Yet we do not stop reading Aristotle because of his general misogyny [*History of Animals* 608.b 1-14], or the early Christian writer Clement of Alexandria because of his belief in the factual existence of the phoenix [*First Epistle*, Chapter 25].

So what do we read these works for? Typically, wisdom, an insight into our own nature as human beings and our relation to the larger world around us. Physics doesn't work the way Aristotle thought it did, nor do particular elements concerning anthropology or gender in Campbell's *Goddesses*. However, we desire knowledge. Humanity's passion for inquiry is shared across multiple epochs and crosses linguistic, scientific, and cultural lines.

Possibly my favorite entry in *Goddesses* is the opening essay describing our current cultural struggle here in the West for women making their own way in fields of endeavor. Campbell holds that with no 'Hero' archetype that is particularly female we face a dilemma. In this he brushes up against the very question as to whether this archetype is even needed, seeing as the rise of the individual is now at the forefront. To this analysis contemporary readers might add the current questions of gender which push and pull at our current understanding of what a gender-associated archetype might actually mean. Following through on Campbell's thought it is his opinion that we are now the ancestors laying the archetypal groundwork for the far future. With such an opening salvo of honest struggle and hope tied together, a real picture of

Campbell's own view of the function of myth and how it evolves begins to appear.

In *Goddesses* we can find much of that passion for continued growth and understanding. Campbell freely delves into vastly different cultural milieus and time periods in order to draw out what wisdom might be found in human self-understanding and human relations. And it seems that even years after his death those insights he shared resonate deeply enough that individuals still turn to Campbell's overall work for insight and solace.

And *Goddesses* provides much in the realm of the mythological that can be of use for quite some time. This collection of Campbell's thought covers a wide range of historical epochs. While still addressing contemporary concerns, he ranges from the paleolithic goddess imagery, particularly those elements as interpreted by Maria Gimbutas, on through the ancient Occident and Western mythos. From there Campbell continues with the classical West from Greece to Rome and tracing his mark all the way up through the medieval romances and the era of chivalric mythology.

At each stage along the way Campbell provides us with a context and setting before diving below the surface to obtain his goal. For each facet of direct import to the mythology for the West he searches out the thread of the feminine divine, trying to determine not only its source, but its contemporaneous location within the historical setting of the discussion. As always Campbell doesn't fail to provide the reader with enough material to process after setting the book down.

While garnering aid from these works however, the reader should always be aware that many of the scientific and historical references are dated. At times these references are also considered by current specialists in the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and religion (not to mention gender studies) to be quite wide of the mark in their interpretation. Since myth is not subject to empirical analysis this leaves much of Campbell's *Goddesses* fruitful for the foreseeable future. Once again remembering that we read these writers of mythology for the *kerygma*, or kernel, of human truth, not for in depth analysis of the facts.

And it seems a generous thought to hold that perhaps in some hundred generations, having taken our cue from Campbell, we might be called 'ancestors' and 'builders of archetypes' for a new world we have yet to see born.

—Carl Badgley

