



Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion)

By Wendy Doniger

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Hindu and Greek mythologies teem with stories of women and men who are doubled, who double themselves, who are seduced by gods doubling as mortals, whose bodies are split or divided. In *Splitting the Difference*, the renowned scholar of mythology Wendy Doniger recounts and compares a vast range of these tales from ancient Greece and India, with occasional recourse to more recent "double features" from *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* to *Face/Off*.

Myth, Doniger argues, responds to the complexities of the human condition by multiplying or splitting its characters into unequal parts, and these sloughed and cloven selves animate mythology's prodigious plots of sexuality and mortality. Doniger's comparisons show that ultimately differences in gender are more significant than differences in culture; Greek and Indian stories of doubled women resemble each other more than they do tales of doubled men in the same culture. In casting Hindu and Greek mythologies as shadows of each other, Doniger shows that culture is sometimes but the shadow of gender.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Respected scholar and writer Wendy Doniger brilliantly traces the many instances of doubling, splitting, and impersonation in ancient Greek and Hindu mythology, comparing, for example, the illusory Sita in many versions of the *Ramayana* with the illusory Helen of Troy, from Plato to Iris Murdoch. She also touches on later versions of the myths, such as Victorian descendants of Narcissus: Dr. Jekyll and Dorian Gray. This is academic writing at its most enjoyable: sprightly, rich, and unpredictable, elaborating the sort of satisfying and far-reaching connections that one finds in a Henry James novel or a Shakespearean comedy. Why compare these two distant cultures at all? "I am arguing first that ancient Greeks and Indians are cousins," Doniger explains, "and then that all women are sisters." In her introduction, she asserts that myths derive much of "their power and endurance from their ability to express a deeply troubling paradox that everyone in the community shares and no one can solve." Duplicitous lovers beware. --*Regina Marler*

From Library Journal

Doniger, a distinguished professor of the history of religion at the University of Chicago and author of several previous studies of mythology, has written a perceptive and compelling new book on gendered themes in classical Greek and Hindu mythology. But while her comparative focus is on tales from those two cultures and eras, her insights extend to later cultural stories and contemporary variations on ancient themes. Each chapter examines an aspect of the doubling or splitting of women, and sometimes men, and the cultural and mythic functions of such divisions. While the stories are inflected by both gender and culture, Doniger concludes that gender is more significant in determining the relationships between the myths. Throughout, she interprets the stories, old and new, in terms of fundamental aspects of the human psyche, illuminating the ways in which "myth responds to complexities of the human condition." Well written and engaging, this book should appeal to specialists and generalists alike. A Julia Burch, Cambridge, MA
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Review

Doniger believes that by uncovering resemblances in unrelated stories she can establish common themes in mythology. But she doesn't stop there. Identifying likenesses is also a path to revealing subtle but significant differences, she says. If scholars accept her conclusions, Doniger's latest project seems destined to become a milestone in the study of mythology. -- *Jeff Sharlet, Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 26, 1999

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Rebecca Wheeler:

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