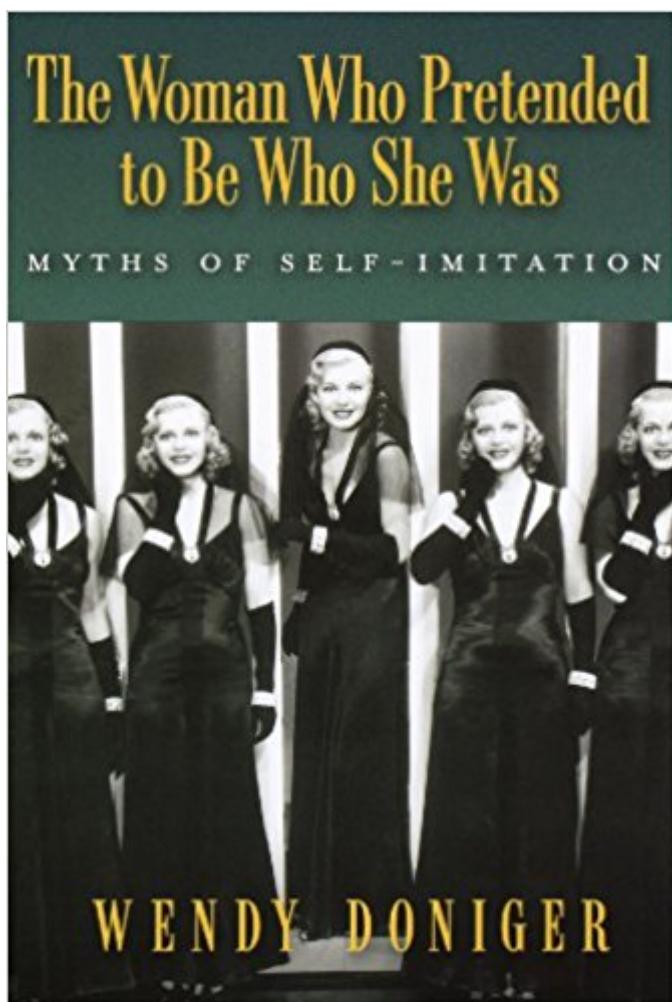


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# The Woman Who Pretended To Be Who She Was: Myths Of Self-Imitation



## Synopsis

Many cultures have myths about self-imitation, stories about people who pretend to be someone else pretending to be them, in effect masquerading as themselves. This great theme, in literature and in life, tells us that people put on masks to discover who they really are under the masks they usually wear, so that the mask reveals rather than conceals the self beneath the self. In this book, noted scholar of Hinduism and mythology Wendy Doniger offers a cross-cultural exploration of the theme of self-impersonation, whose widespread occurrence argues for both its literary power and its human value. The stories she considers range from ancient Indian literature through medieval European courtly literature and Shakespeare to Hollywood and Bollywood. They illuminate a basic human way of negotiating reality, illusion, identity, and authenticity, not to mention memory, amnesia, and the process of aging. Many of them involve marriage and adultery, for tales of sexual betrayal cut to the heart of the crisis of identity. These stories are extreme examples of what we common folk do, unconsciously, every day. Few of us actually put on masks that replicate our faces, but it is not uncommon for us to become travesties of ourselves, particularly as we age and change. We often slip carelessly across the permeable boundary between the un-self-conscious self-indulgence of our most idiosyncratic mannerisms and the conscious attempt to give the people who know us, personally or publicly, the version of ourselves that they expect. Myths of self-imitation open up for us the possibility of multiple selves and the infinite regress of self-discovery. Drawing on a dizzying array of tales-some fact, some fiction-The Woman Who Pretended to Be Who She Was is a fascinating and learned trip through centuries of culture, guided by a scholar of incomparable wit and erudition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Doniger, a scholar of religion and mythology at the Univ. of Chicago, completes her trilogy about the varieties of identity confusion (*Splitting the Difference*; *The Bedtrick*) with a book about the ways in which people imitate themselves. A concept that at first sounds bizarre and unlikely, self-imitation, Doniger shows, is a multi-faceted phenomenon that has been exploited by folktales around the world, and especially by movies. She identifies several classic types and provides an impressive range of examples, drawing from early and modern Hollywood, Bollywood, opera, literature and mythologies. Many instances of self-imitation arise in the context of romantic difficulties: the comedic masquerades of *The Marriage of Figaro* and the contortions of the film *My Favorite Wife* are just two examples. Other typical plot elements are reincarnation, face-lifts and "mind lifts," such as those in the movies *Vertigo* and *Total Recall*. Doniger demonstrates an amazing facility for keeping such plot twists, which are by their nature confusing, straight in her mind, so that she can make comparisons throughout. The reader may have more difficulty following along, especially when the identities get so complicated that Doniger has to talk about

"George-as-Larry-as-George-as-Larry-as-George-as-Larry" when referring to movies like *I Love You Again*, a 1940s film that depicts a "doubled and squared amnesia and a pretended recurrence of that amnesia (to the third degree)." However, Doniger generally provides extensive, clearly written plot summaries, and her discussion of them, though sometimes drawing on relatively obscure philosophy or psychology, is accessible and jargon-free. Anyone who enjoys brain-teasing plots in mythology or cinema will be fascinated by the sheer number of examples Doniger furnishes and the ease with which she untangles their meanings. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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one sometimes forgets that she is revealing ancient truths about who we are and how we live, about the patterns of human relationships and other messy realities."--Parabola"Another subtle and dizzying study of the games we play with identity, by the author of *The Bedtrick*." --Mary Douglas, author of *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*"Wendy Doniger is a wonderful writer, and when she brings the great film classics (and B-movies) into conversation with world mythology, she reveals unexpected and humanly profound patterns in both the films and the myths that no one has seen before."--Francis Ford Coppola"I couldn't put it down! Buy this book!--Annie Dillard, author of *For the Time Being*"Doniger energetically tracks the motif of self-imitation across culture and centuries...The book brings into focus a fascinating trope and sketches its importance with an obvious delight that is both stimulating and not itself unworthy of imitation." --Journal of Religion

It's always a pleasure to read Wendy Doniger because she is so insightful about her subject matter. For me this is the first book by her that I have read that deviates from her usual subject, that of Eastern religions and tales. I found it excellent and informative on the human condition of self-identity, too subtle to go into here in a few words. The dealer was prompt and the book arrived in good time exactly as described.

I have a confession - I have not actually read the book yet, merely heard Prof. Doniger present the topic at Radcliffe. But if it's anything like her other ones, I expect an open, intriguing, and profound look at people pretending to be people pretending to be who they are. (those are her words, not mine!) In this book, Doniger breaks away from central Asia and religion and goes all over the board, covering French aristocrats, Shakespeare, African folklore, and yes, even Arnold Schwarzenegger. Despite .com's topic descriptions, this is not just about gender, but also race, politics, and art, and the very nature of identity. When people flip through categories like pages of a book, they reveal the illusions of gender, race, etc. Doniger is thorough, inventive, humorous and brilliant in her research and writing. Why haven't I read it yet? Why haven't YOU read it yet? Teachers, assign this book for your spring classes so I have an excuse to go buy it!

Yawn. Pointless.

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