

Mother and Goddess

The Ideological Force of Symbols

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L'auteure analyse l'impact de la déesse monothéiste et son symbolisme dans la communauté Wicca.

Central to contemporary North American goddess worship, especially as it is experienced by women, is the symbol of the Mother Goddess. This hegemonic representation of the female divine is not without danger for the men and women who worship it. Even though it is only one of many ways the goddess is represented, its symbolic strength is such that it silences and constrains other possibilities and in so doing, alienates some worshippers from the object of worship.

Within the local Wiccan or Craft community in which I work, study, and worship, I have been witness to, and/or a participant in a number of rituals and discussions (not to say arguments) which I now see exemplify aspects of the ambiguous nature and the ideological force of the symbols of *the goddess, the mother, and the goddess as mother.*

Wicca or Craft (from witchcraft) are synonyms used by male and female individuals who self-identify as believers in a Goddess and/or God-based religion (Rabinovitch) and who hark back to what they believe was an original form of nature-based fertility cult, identifying themselves with the figure of the historical witch as an outsider with power (DuFresne and Rabinovitch).

The particular Wiccan community I belong to is centred in Ottawa but extends from Montreal to Toronto. This geographical area encompasses the area of interaction of participants in Rainbow Gathering (Minifest), an annual Wiccan/Pagan festival held on private land in MacDonaldis Corner, Ontario.

Most telling in our discussions have been strongly felt statements made by male ritual participants and members of the priesthood of several traditions¹ about how threatened they feel by Goddess monotheism especially as it is theorized and lived by some of their female co-worshippers. I defend my presenting these male objections *because,*

let us not forget, these are men who have invested much self definition and personal spirituality in being, themselves, goddess worshippers. Furthermore, these men, the Alogists² all, are underrepresented in the literature of goddess worship and in our own women's discourse because of some women's perception of the intrinsic political incorrectness of the male voice in the discourse of female spirituality. So, I recognize my iconoclastic and anarchist positioning and welcome the debate that, I hope, my words will provoke.

A second impetus to including these male voices is my recognition that in this local community of worship, their's have been some of the most vocal, critical,

and thought provoking statements regarding the apparent un-self-conscious and un-critical use of the goddess in a monotheistic, archetypal, and monolithic way.

As an aside, let us remember that, as much or as little, as *she* embodies our experience, as *she* is imminent in all of us, *she* is also and foremost an artifact of our own need for *her*. Therein lies the problem. In searching and finding *the Goddess*, we have reified the artifact of our own need.

Having done so, have we done ourselves a disservice? What do the men say? They ask: why is the Goddess alone? Where is the God? What happened to complementary duality, a basic tenet of Wicca and Neo-Witchcraft? Non-Dianic forms of Wicca all conceive of the immanent divine as realized in gendered form, both female and male.



Tamara Thieboux, "Female Spirit Preparing To Speak," watercolour, 12" x 9", 1990.

This divine couple is seen as both aspects of the same ungendered divinity and as a relational pair which are complementary and sexually in relation to/with each other. Why do women appear to deny access to the female godhood and experience to men? It is true that some women of non-Dianic traditions choose to meet at the full or new moon for worship of the Goddess. These "women's circles" are not open to male participation except by infant males with their mothers. The reason given for the existence of these women-only groups is that women need to discover for themselves what worship means and what a gendered divinity in their own image means for them. They seek a non-male mediated religious environment and experience. Many men feel threatened by this as they see it as exclusion and heresy. On the other hand, no impediment exists within Wiccan theology to prevent or condemn gender-based worship groups. The women have invited the men to form their own "men's circles" devoted to the worship of the God based on the same empowerment strategies as the women's groups. So far, the men have either refused or have been unable to foster a men's circle for more than a few months at a time. Some Ottawa women's circles are now close to ten years old.

Putting aside questions of "new" traditions such as Dianic theology, of the re-writing and re-interpretation of traditional sacred texts by women (see Eller; Spretnak), and of the selective blindness some men exhibit to the limits of the doctrines they promulgate, men are correct when they speak of a female dominated and controlled hegemony, of a new stereotyping of the possible, of a new thought control: the political correctness of worship.

Their pain, anger, and sense of betrayal is real and cannot be dismissed simply for being male. To do so would be to indulge in patriarchy in drag. Furthermore, their profound sense of unease and dismay echoes that of some women. Many of these could be described as marginal if one were to ascribe to the norm as being white, middle-class, anglophone, heterosexual, and fertile. These "other" women also have expressed dis/ease in being forced to identify with a conception of the divine apprehended as female that does *not* embody their experience, that is *not* immanent in them. As one childless woman cried "How do I connect with a Goddess which denies my existence? How can I feel that I belong when even the Goddess betrays me?" These are fundamental questions for which I have no answers. Nevertheless, to counter the pervasive nihilism of my comments so far, let me say that I do worship the goddess (no capital letters) and in her worship I find comfort and sustenance. She has been the mother I never had, she has mothered and accepted me as I never was, I have found sisters in her motherhood, and I have found in her aspect as Bride/Bridget³ a model of mothering other than the biological: word smyth, mother of healing waters, forger of metals, and embodied flame of life.

If she is immanent for me, if she truly embodies my experience, amongst a multitude of others, she must then be multiple and multiplex. She must be a process of being,

a locus of action. She must change, and be, and become, relevant and in relevance to my life. She must be unbounded, permeable, changeable. No longer god, godhood, or god-like, but my own process of living god-ness.

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¹Wiccans who care to do so, recognize various "traditions" within their faith. These traditions have recognized founders and follow standardized liturgical texts and formats in their rituals. Most of these traditions were founded in Britain after the 1950s. Some North American traditions reject canonical texts and identified founders/leaders for a more individualistic and "Eclectic" way of worship, thus the name. One North American tradition developed out of the 1970s feminist movement. It advocates Goddess monotheism and gender-based ritual segregation for worship. This tradition is called "Dianic" from the name of the Roman lunar goddess Diana.

²TheAlogy, from "thea" goddess, is a term first used in print by Naomi Goldenberg in *Changing of the Gods* (1979) to identify a "theology" of the Goddess.

³Bride/Bridget is a Celtic pre-Christian goddess which has been christianized as St. Bridget of Kildare.

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