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MONSTERS OF ANTITHESIS

Melody Leming-Wilson

I stay away from the vague concept of the 'pre-patriarchal,' since nobody knows exactly what it means. I accept the existence of matriarchal societies.

Gottner-Abendroth, 1

Certain feminists now claim that women once ruled western society and that men were subservient to them. This is not a new concept, it was popular with male scholars such as J.J. Bachofen and Robert Graves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The idea has gained momentum of late, however, and a plethora of "new age" books dealing with The Goddess lines the shelves of booksellers. In a society as intolerant as ours it is comforting to feel that the tables of the oppressed had once been turned in the other direction; unfortunately, much of the literature espousing this belief is not well grounded. As can be seen from the quote above, a belief in matriarchy requires a certain amount of faith, and tunnel-vision. It is necessarily speculative.

If a pattern exists, it seems reasonable that it has not arisen in a vacuum, and our patriarchal society, stretched as far back as history has gone, or can go, still must have antecedents. Beyond what we know lies something between hypothesis and speculation. This is the realm of matriarchy. Regardless of historical veracity,

however, matriarchy exists, in theory if not in fact, and this discussion will address some of the theories surrounding the idea of matriarchy in Western Culture. In the first section of this paper I will attempt to define and discuss matriarchy as set out by some of those who believe it existed in fact, then I will discuss some of its detractors. In the second section I will consider matriarchy in the context in which I think it has the most bearing, in the literature in which it appears.

The definition of the term "matriarchy" is almost as unclear as its historical veracity. The definition I will pursue, however, is not one of the matrilineal naming of children, nor of matrilocal living arrangements, nor even of a society wherein the Mother Goddess is worshiped, but rather a society in which women have substantial authority. The most immediate definition comes from the dictionary. *Wester's New Riverside University Dictionary* reads:

> *Matriarchy -1.* A social system in which descent is traced through the mother's side of the family.

This definition increases in interest when compared with what should be a simple antonym, the definition of patriarchy in the same dictionary:

> *Patriarchy -1.* A system of social organization in which descent and succession are traced through the male line.

The distinctions made in these two ostensibly opposite definitions give rise to the difficulty under attack from proponents of a matriarchal system. A feminine society is a "social system," whereas a masculine one is a "system of social organization." In addition, while the matriarchal society traces only descent, the patriarchal one traces both descent and succession, a term with a connotation of ownership. The final dichotomy is found in the fact that it is the male "line" which is

traced, while only the female "side of the family" need be followed. This is in contrast to the definitions of maternal and paternal, which are perfect opposites with no added or changed language other than the words maternal, paternal, mother and father. These distinctions, boiled down, illustrate the frustration felt by those proposing a belief in a primordial matriarchal system. The female version of societal rule provides no organization or succession, and rather than providing a genetic line, it is clustered around a family. This minimizes any potential scope of power.

The definition given by Heide Gottner-Abendroth, a proponent of the existence of a factual matriarchy, runs, in part, as follows: "Matriarchal societies are generally characterized by an agricultural economy, which ranges from simple gardening skills to a highly developed technology of irrigation systems..." (Gottner-Abendroth, 2). She further delineates matriarchal social structures into three subsets: "matrilineal, or heritage by female descent; matrilocal, or the establishment of residence with the clan of the mother; and by the dominant influence of the eldest mother of the clan, or in the case of the whole tribal council consisting of all the eldest mothers of the clans" (Gottner-Abendroth, 2). All of this categorization and careful description presupposes a verifiable entity to examine.

A much more concise, and perhaps, more telling definition of matriarchy is to be found in William Blake Tyrell's: *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking,* in which he refers to the crimes committed by women in Greek Literature as "matriarchy." This, as will be seen later, comes very near the original purpose of matriarchal myth.

> *The present book makes no other claim than to provide the scholarly world with a new and well-nigh inexhaustible material for thought. If it has the power to stimulate, it will gladly content itself with the modest position of a preparatory work, and cheerfully accept*

the common fate of all first attempts, namely, to be disparaged by posterity and judged only on the basis of its shortcomings.

- Bachofen, *Mother Right*

The nineteenth century Swiss Jurist J. J. Bachofen's closing remarks to his introduction to *Mother Right* are appropriate. His work has undergone much scrutiny, and the criticism has not always been kind. Mary R. Lefkowitz in *Women in Greek Myth* attempts to discredit Bachofen's work by pointing out the existence of mythic elements within early histories and then stating that "Bachofen's theories would be of purely antiquarian interest were it not that they continue to be taken seriously by scholars who are not familiar with the methods of ancient historians" (24). In *The Second Sex,* Simone De Beauvoir dismisses Bachofen's theories by stating that the primordial, matriarchal world aspired to by women was "dreamed by Bachofen" (618).

What Bachofen does achieve is a postulation representative of his period. He believes myth to be at least partially grounded in reality and states that "the strictness of the Roman patriarchal system points to an earlier system that had to be combatted and suppressed" (Bachofen, 75). This is a theory recently echoed by Gottner-Abendroth.

In addition to Bachofen's insight with regard to the future of his own work was his recognition of the paradigmatic shifts that this field had undergone, and would continue to undergo. He writes that his "critics speak of improbability, but probabilities change with the times; what is out of tune with the spirit of one cultural stage is in harmony with that of the next; what seems improbable in one becomes probable in the other" (83).

An unfortunate symptom of the age in which Bachofen worked is his profound concern over hetaerism. He states that "there is no doubt that matriarchy everywhere grew out of woman's conscious, continued resistance to the debasing state

of hetaerism" (94). This is one of the areas in which Gottner-Abendroth, in *Matriarchal Mythology in Former Times and Today* takes a stand different from that of Bachofen. She asserts that matriarchal societies did not practice permanent marriage, and that the many opportunities for free sexual encounters were not a disadvantage (2). This dichotomy in the beliefs of Bachofen, writing in the nineteenth century, and Gottner-Abendroth, writing in 1987, serves as another example of the changes that have occurred, even among individuals asserting largely the same theories.

Heide Gottner-Abendroth spends some time discussing the transformation from matriarchy to patriarchy. She asserts that the Pre-Hellenic matriarchal cultures existing in, among other places, Asia Minor and Crete were more or less absorbed by the incoming Indo-Europeans, preferring the term "conquered." She states that the Indo-Europeans performed the:

> *typical trick by which a matriarchal system of myths is changed into a patriarchal one simply by changing the sex of the primary deity. In this way, the Great Goddess ... is suddenly transmogrified into the Great God ... in order to be credible he imitates the abilities of the Great Mother Goddess, especially her capacity to give birth. Since he obviously lacks the necessary organs, he compensates by birthing from his head ... from his forehead ... or from his thigh (4).*

With the coming of the Indo-Europeans and, ultimately, writing, the chthonic goddesses are re-defined, as women tend to be, in terms of the male gods the conquerors brought with them, and are subsequently "written down" in that form. Athena, who retains much of her independence is attributed to Zeus, sans mother, and her strength is from there forward described as masculinity. Hera became Zeus' wife, and the stormy nature of their relationship reflects the tension originally caused by the forced marriage (Spretnak, 21).

Other examples of modifications made by the invasion of Olympian deities into the largely chthonic matriarchal cultures can be found in Charlene Spretnak's book *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths*. It is her belief that Athena was originally Cretan, and had served, in part as a fertility goddess. She was also patron of "wisdom, arts and skills, protecting architects, sculptors, potters, spinners and weavers" (97). Another loser in the patriarchal takeover is Pandora. Etymologically the elision of παν, Doric for everywhere, in every way, or by all means, and δορα, to give or present, give rise to a name with the meaning: "giver of gifts," or just further removed, "one to whom all gifts are given." Originally the maiden form of the earth goddess, bringer of all things, she has been bowdlerized to bring only the evils women traditionally loosed on mankind.

The similarities of this transmogrification to Christianity's incorporation of elements of pagan religions lend some credence to the idea that matriarchy is based in historical fact. If there are substantive similarities between the conversion from matriarchy to patriarchy and the conversion from Paganism to Christianity, a carefully documented, historically established event, then by inference a case can be made for the historical veracity of matriarchy.

Thus far, however, I have considered only those authors supporting the existence of matriarchy. Two authors who would detract from the historical veracity of matriarchal society are Sarah B. Pomeroy and Simone De Beauvoir.

Sarah B. Pomeroy, in *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, recapitulates the ideas of theorists such as GottnerAbendroth but is distinctly suspicious of the concept of a pre-hellenistic matriarchy. She presents anthropological evidence which may serve to refute some of the evidence used by these theorists to establish a dominant motherworship cult. The late neolithic figurines found in Crete are largely representations of the female body, often with

enlarged genitalia, and this has been used to reinforce the possibility of a mother-worship cult, and possibly the existence of a formal matriarchy. But Pomeroy states that while only 9.2 per cent of the recovered figurines are male and 12.8 per cent are indeterminate, only 37.3 percent are clearly female and 40.7 per cent are specifically sexless. These numbers would not indicate that the majority of the art in that area at that time depicted the Mother Goddess. In addition, the fact that these figures tend to depict fat females may have more to do with a concern over hunger than sexuality (14-15). She also addresses the possibility that matriarchy might have existed in those principalities which had queens, but refutes it by noting that " ... no one would call Renaissance Britain a matriarchy just because of the reigns of Mary Stuart, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth" (23).

Simone de Beauvoir, writing *The Second Sex* in the 1950's, balanced between Bachofen's rather romantic *Mother Right* and the recent explosion of Goddess literature, presents a pragmatic and exhaustive discussion of the development of patriarchy.

> *The triumph of the patriarchate was neither a matter of chance nor the result of violent revolution. [Man] once relinquished a part of his independent existence to Nature and to Woman; but afterward [he] won it back*
>
> Simon De Beauvoir - *The Second Sex, P. 77*

A fundamental aspect of de Beauvoir's work is that "when two human categories are together, each aspires to impose its sovereignty upon the other" (de Beauvoir, 61). De Beauvoir believes that man was able to achieve dominance in part because as nomads, he acted as defender of the moving clan, while the women carried the children and supplies, and also in part because the amount of time that women would have spent in the various stages of childbirth would have limited their strength and ability to gain substantial control. During

this nomadic period deities were represented by some sort of asexual totem, but with the advent of early agriculture, the connection was made between motherhood and the products of the earth and "maternity became a sacred function" (66).

Because the earth seemed in a mystical sense connected to woman and was thought to have certain dark powers in common with her, early agricultural societies developed aspects of matrilineality. Woman and the mysterious Nature both represented the alien in man's dualistic view of the world. It is this Other that is worshiped in the Goddess cults and it is outside the realm of humanity that her power is exercised. Moreover, woman's role was one of nurture, not creation. Gradually, as man asserts his own powers over nature, and develops faith in technique over magic, nature's magical aspects begin to fade, along with those he had instilled in woman. "Woman was venerated only to the degree that man made himself the slave of his own fears, a party to his own powerlessness: it was in terror and not in love that he worshipped her. He could achieve his destiny only ... by dethroning her" (76). He then relegated his gods to "Olympian heaven and kept the terrestrial domain to himself" (75-76). Woman, however, remained, in part, in "bondage to life's mysterious processes," making her distinct from man and alien as he moved forward into technology. " ... The day when agriculture ceased to be an essentially magic operation and first became creative labor, man realized that he was a generative force; he laid claim to his children and his crops simultaneously ... there was no struggle, no victory, no defeat" (78-79).

It is possible to carefully meld the theories of any of these scholars to produce a convincing discussion on either side of the argument. For example, Heide Gottner-Abendroth's discussion of the absorption of female deities by incoming male ones can be related to Simon de Beauvoir's discussion about man's deliberate "dethroning" of woman and the

relegation of his deities to Olympus with the advent of technology. These two constructed events might, in fact, be one and the same. This can be read in, at minimum, either of two ways. An essential difference between these two theories is that Gottner-Abendroth believes that women were dominant in their own right, whereas de Beauvoir believes that they were placed in their elevated positions to benefit man. Also, whereas Gottner-Abendroth believes that the women were dethroned by incoming ideas brought by invaders, de Beauvoir believes they simply were no longer necessary. These are both, as are the many others, simply different versions of the same paradigmatic structure.

Ultimately, however, "in the absence of written documents from the time or with the archaeological evidence now available, we must recognize that it is as foolish to postulate masculine dominance in prehistory as to postulate female dominance. The impartial scholar will be forced to confess that the question is open and may never be answered" (Pomeroy, 15).

Where matriarchies have been most effective is in literature. Literature for Ancient Greeks evolved over the centuries from mythic poetry such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to the theatrical works of Classical Greece. Also evolving during this time was the historical genre. I use the term genre to identify these early histories as a subset of the literary tradition that preexisted them. Greeks saw myth, in some sense, as history (JACT, 305), and ascribed only the same level of veracity to their histories as we do to our journalism (Veyne, 5). But myth also represented the superstructure for Greek society, most importantly the "stability of the οικοσ particularly when this was threatened by sexual crimes..." (JACT, 305). Thus, theatre, myth and history can all be read as having the same purpose, if not in intent, then in result.

Matriarchy takes several forms in Greek literature, from the Amazonian tribe related by Herodotus to aberrant women like

Clytamnestra and Medea, but the essential factor which made each of these attractive to their creators is the didacticism they afforded. Myth provided a bridge from the human world to the divine, and the breaches represented by each of these examples threw society's security into question. The subservience of women was a staple of Greek life and women who stepped out of line threatened chaos.

It would be easier to understand the necessity Greek men felt to retain κυριοσ over their women if we could understand how they thought.

Language is the vehicle of thought, and an understanding of a given language must at least assist in the understanding of its speakers' cognitive realities. The Greek language is built on balance. The particle μεν...δε, used frequently in Classical Greek and meaning, roughly, "on the one hand ... on the other," indicates the writers' tendency to create meaning by relating one idea to another through parataxis. "In the paratactic style juxtaposition is the clue to meaning...this intellectual habit of ordering things in alternatives, antitheses, and symmetries is characteristic of the ancient Greek manner of exposition" (Beye, 9). This balance can also be seen in the grammatical tendency for the verb to appear at the end of a sentence, requiring Greek speakers to sustain an idea, and their attention through a process quite alien by the standards of English speakers. Yet another example of this tendency is the ring composition structure of such Greek literature as *The Iliad,* in which Books I and XXIV, the first and last, mirror each other, as do II and XXIII, and successively inward, but not ultimately leading to a clear central focus at the center. This lack of a central focus does not negate the strength of the circular structure, but rather points out that to the Greek, it is the symmetry itself that is important, and not any particular content that has been placed at the center for impact.

It is this balance that women threaten and the Amazons of Herodotus are simply an exercise in opposition. Herodotus'

Amazons "have been formed by reversing patriarchal customs" (Tyrell, 41). In his account, the Amazons, captives of the Greeks, rise up during transport by sea and slay their captors. They are unable to sail, however, and quickly run aground in Scythia. Here they plunder the land and steal horses. The Scythian men initially engage them in combat, but after examining the bodies of those they have killed, discover that they are female. They decide that they wish to have children with these women and send forth their youngest men to entice them. The women are seduced, but refuse to live with the Scythians' women, not practicing any of their arts. They persuade the men to return to their parents and obtain their share of the possessions and to go with them to live by themselves. (Loeb, 313ff.) It is important to note that the external theme of this encounter is marriage, not war or combat. This encounter is fraught with oppositions to proper Greek life. Sexual relations take place outdoors in opposition to proper Greek behavior, the Scythians men "who stand for Greek women" are very young, and are made to present a dowry. The young men, like Greek brides, are made to leave their fathers' homes to live where their spouses choose (Tyrell, 41-43).

The Amazons, then, reside "on the other hand" of traditional Greek society. "My business," writes Herodotus, "is to record what people say; but I am by no means bound to believe it—and that may be taken to apply to this book as a whole" (Veyne, 12). Herodotus has clearly taken a tale out of folklore, without concern for the tale's verifiability, either for his own benefit or that of his readers, and imbued it with characteristics important to his point; that if there is such a race as the Amazons, a race of powerful, savage women, then they must be the precise opposite of Greek, and must also reduce the men they encounter to negative images of themselves. This is in keeping with the "tension of opposites" (Beye, 9) in Greek thought apparent even at the level of sentence

construction. A negative is shown in opposition to a positive, a woman out-of-line is a monster of antithesis.

One of the main monsters for the Greeks, even from mythic times is Clytamnestra. Early in *Agamemnon,* the Herald, at his first line, exclaims his joy to have returned to the "paternal soil of this land of Argos" (503). The land is not described in a dative or genitive construction showing possession by the father, but rather by using the adjective πατρον, which carries the connotation of something inherited from a father, clearly delineating Argos as patrilineal. But, in Robert Fagles' translation, Clytamnestra is referred to in terms of her mother, indicating that she has come down through matrilineal descent (Fagles, 92 ff). In the Greek, Clytamnestra is referred to as the daughter of Tyndarus, husband of Leda, and therefore, matrilineal descent is still indicated (Aeschylus, 83 ff). Clytamnestra's overweening activities during Agamemnon's absence, and her murder of him upon his return, are therefore attributed to her matriarchal rule. This is reiterated when at Lines 481-2, the Chorus Leader derides Clytamnestra for her premature jubilation that the signal-fires indicate Troy has fallen when he says that "It is like a woman's rule to approve a thanksgiving before the fact is known" (Goodwin, 36-38).

γυναι, κατ ανδρα σωπηρον ευøρονωσ λεγεισ

Agamemnon - L. 351

"Woman, you speak graciously, like a temperate man." When Athena is a positive force, she is masculine, and when Clytamnestra is a negative force, she too is masculine. Women acting in uncustomary ways act like men, and women who presume social power engender matriarchy.

Whether there ever existed a historical matriarchy is only one of many unknowable things. Because there is no solid evidence, anyone establishing the appropriate paradigm can lay a matriarchal society over it. Built into that paradigm would

be the literary accounts of matriarchy as proofs. It is fair to conjecture that a theme appearing in literature should have some historical grounding, it is also fair to assume that it does not.

The examples of Greek matriarchal myths/literature I have found are structured on the whole like specific Greek grammatical phenomena. If, on the one hand, Greek women behave in this manner wouldn't, on the other, strange, dangerous women behave like that?

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