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The Infertile Goddess
A Challenge to Maternal Imagery in Feminist Witchcraft

This paper explores the imagery of Mother Goddess and the resultant romanticisation of mothering found in feminist Witchcraft. I approach the topic from a personal perspective as a feminist Witch dealing with infertility. I argue that while Mother Goddess imagery is not, in and of itself, bad, rather it is limited to one type of female experience. If feminist Witchcraft is to be relevant to a large range of women and their varied experiences, multiple Goddess images must be developed and utilized, including the infertile Goddess.

Let me begin by telling a story: There once was a young Mennonite girl who dreamed of having 12 children. She spent hours during church services thinking up baby names rather than listen to the preacher. These names often included conventional names with odd spellings. Like Mychael with a Y. What can I say? It was the '80s. When she got a bit older this still young Mennonite girl decided 12 kids was a bit much, giving birth might be a bit painful, and there were millions of parentless children in the world; she was going to adopt—maybe only four. She grew a bit older, got married, left the church, became a Witch—you know, typical things to transition from young Mennonite girlhood to young Mennonite womanhood. Or, maybe not so typical.

It does seem a bit of a jump from being Mennonite—of the relatively fundamentalist variety—to being a Witch. Why Witchcraft, you ask? Well, conservative as her Mennonite community was, this young woman was always concerned with women's roles in the church and feminist theology. Long before she left the church she refused male language and imagery for God, though wondered what to call God, if God wasn't male, since 'God' seemed to be a masculine term. In Witchcraft, that is feminist Witchcraft, she discovered Goddess. (And she discovered Witchcraft by reading an essay by Starhawk who

sounded so Mennonite in her peace theology. When she found out Starhawk was a Witch this young Mennonite woman needed to rethink some of her assumptions.) What was so appealing in the imagery of Goddess was the potential for multiplicity. If the Goddess is in all women (and possibly men though feminist Witches can't seem to agree on that) and all women represent Goddess, then clearly there must be many, many images of Goddess–perhaps even many, many Goddesses. How exciting. How seemingly revolutionary.

Feminist Witches have constructed religious imagery and ritual in opposition to mainstream patriarchal religion, particularly Christianity. As such they have spent some effort in rethinking deity and how imagery and language about deity affects human self-understanding. A significant aspect of this rethinking is the speculative construction of Goddess imagery. It is important to note that when feminist Witches talk about Goddess(es) they are aware of the constructed nature of their reliance on this imagery. For Starhawk, the Goddess is a "symbol for 'That-Which-Cannot-Be-Told'" (Starhawk, 1999: 32) and "a name for power-from-within" (Starhawk, 1997: 4). For Barbara Walker, the Goddess is a "symbol of [women's] self-empowerment" (1990: 4) and a "spiritual construct" (2000: 28). Sheila Ruth (1994), in her feminist Pagan philosophical treatise, *Take Back the Light*, calls the Goddess a metaphor and warns that "People tend to fall in love with their symbols, to reify them, and thus to idolize them. Frequently they forget or choose not to acknowledge the fictive nature of the symbols they themselves have created"(77). The admittedly constructed nature of Goddess imagery is significant. Feminist Witches are opposing patriarchal religion through their speculations. But what are they opposing and how creative are their speculations? Is a Goddess, particularly a Mother Goddess in direct opposition to a Father God, the most useful speculation in creating a feminist religion? I have come to believe that the reliance on Mother Goddess imagery, and the related romanticism of the female reproductive process, while speculating a new kind of deity, does not do much to speculate a new kind of religion or a new way to conceive of femaleness.

The defining of femaleness by reproduction, which often happens in the production of Mother Goddess imagery, is not unusual in the larger corpus of literature on Goddess religion. The prehistoric Goddess is seen by most feminist Witches as primarily a Mother Goddess largely due to the way archaeological artifacts are interpreted. Though archaeologist Marija Gimbutas does not insist that every Goddess figure is a Mother Goddess, the majority are given some association with fertility. "As a supreme Creator who creates from her own substance," says Marija Gimbutas (1982), the Great Goddess of life, death and regeneration "is the primary goddess of the Old European pantheon. In this she contrasts with the Indo-European Earth-Mother, who is the impalpable sacred earth-spirit and is not in herself a creative principle; only through the interaction of the male sky-god does she become pregnant" (196). This opposition of the "true" parthenogenetic Mother Goddess versus the

male-reliant non-creative Mother Goddess is important for feminist Witches who prefer a separatist existence. If the Goddess does not *need* a God, neither do they need men. It is ironic, however, that in the same book that Gimbutas points out the parthenogenetic nature of the Great Goddess and highlights the fertility imagery found in Old Europe she also maintains the egalitarian nature of Old European mythology. She insists, though, that even if the God was given power in Old European society, *creative* power was the domain of the Goddess, and creative power means fertility.

The association of the Goddess and women with fertility is highly problematic for many feminist thinkers beyond myself. Archaeologists Margaret Conkey and Ruth Tringham are "quite sceptical about endorsing these 'positive' values [of fertility], since they are clearly entangled with many current debates about the state of 'family values' in contemporary North America. These debates, in turn, are obviously situated within the political manoeuvrings of conservative and right-wing politics that are very much at odds with many of the goals of feminist politics" (233-234, note 13). Emily Culpepper (1987) suggests that the importance of fertility in feminist Goddess religions is wrapped up in the importance of creativity. She writes in her essay, "Contemporary Goddess Theology: A Sympathetic Critique," that, "The Goddess is seen as giving birth to the universe. Birth becomes here the paradigm of creativity. Goddess as 'Mother of the Cosmos' thus carries an ontologically prior weight, and acquires a *generic* function. 'The Mother' is therefore a sort of first name, a name that uniquely stands for the whole of the Triple Goddess" (56). Thus, though feminist Witches call the Goddess, Maiden, Mother and Crone, the Mother is primary. Instead of seeing motherhood in its association with fertility as one example of creativity, it is taken as the prime model of creativity.

The high value given to creativity (imaged as fertility) entrenches the image of the Mother Goddess in feminist Witchcraft over any other Goddess image. What often ends up happening, however, is a reinforcement of the idealization of the nurturing mother. Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born* (1976), has shown how patriarchal systems have already sacralized motherhood while creating an archetype which reduces real women to failures. This archetype constructs,

> the Mother, source of angelic love and forgiveness in a world increasingly ruthless and impersonal; the feminine, leavening, emotional element in a society ruled by male logic and male claims to 'objective,' 'rational' judgment; the symbol and residue of moral values and tenderness in a world of war, brutal competition, and contempt for human weakness. (52)

The image of this patriarchal archetypal Mother is not that different from the idealized Mother Goddess promoted by some feminist Witches.

Cynthia Eller (2000), in her recent critique of pre-historic matriarchy theory, complains of the maintenance of the Eternal Feminine in feminist Goddess worship. She writes,

> Women are defined quite narrowly as those who give birth and nurture, who identify themselves in terms of their relationships, and who are closely allied with the body, nature and sex—usually for unavoidable reasons of their biological makeup. This image of woman is drastically revalued in feminist matriarchal myth, such that it is not a mark of shame or subordination, but of pride and power. But this image is nevertheless quite conventional and, at least up until now, it has done an excellent job of serving patriarchal interests. (6-7).

Because of this reliance on archetypal feminine imagery, says Eller, women, by trying to live up to the Goddess, begin to lose their humanity. "Feminist matriarchalists gaze in at themselves," says Eller, "in the wonder of self-discovery, but what looks back at them is not their individual self, but the eternal feminine" (2000: 67).

In *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*, Eller expresses her frustration that for many feminists who appeal to the Goddess, particularly a prehistoric, matriarchal Goddess, "Sexism is certainly said to be a historical construct, but femininity—however it is understood—is usually taken to be timeless" (2000: 63). Because of this timelessness of femininity women are denied individuality–they can only become a reflection of the archetypal Eternal Feminine which is a static identity. It is odd, remarks Eller,

> that the same people who are most devoted to the "naturalness" of sex differences—from fundamentalist Christians to feminist matriarchalists–also seem to be afraid that these "natural" sex differences will disappear if we don't constantly reinforce them, sometimes by outright coercion. What nightmare do they imagine awaits us if we stop obsessively labeling characteristics as feminine and masculine? Will we fail to recognize who we need to have sex with to make babies and the entire race will come to an end? (I say this with tongue in cheek, but I also believe that our addiction to labeling everything as masculine or feminine is part and parcel of our heterosexism.) (74)

Emily Culpepper (1987), too, sees the use of archetypal theory in feminist constructions of the Goddess as uncomfortably familiar. The Goddess, as an archetype of the Feminine creates what Culpepper calls "generic erasure." She laments,

> It is easy for the Goddess as generic to become not just a catalyst for

> insight but also a veil that covers up, erases or insufficiently differentiates important issues. When this happens, Goddess thealogy can have a flattening-out or dulling influence, giving us too pallid a picture of the richness of multiple female realities. This insight explained to me why I often found that poetry, art and ritual that focused on this generic goddess was *boring*! The archetype was receiving more attention than real women were. (61-62)

That Goddess-centred societies of the past are seen as also matriarchal, or woman-centred, reinforces the notion that there is something naturally "good" (as opposed to the natural "evil" of male-centred societies) about femaleness. Zsuzsanna Budapest (1989), when talking about the various Goddess imagery of Dianic Witchcraft, claims "We believe that Aradia, Goddess incarnate, is all women who come to a female-identified consciousness, to a social consciousness of the oppression of everything female, and who dare to fight for their own rights and the rights of their children" (160). Because the Goddess is essentially female, femaleness is romanticised as naturally and purely good. Because the Goddess is internal to all women as well as external, human women *are* the Goddess. This further reinforces the notions of purity and goodness as natural to femaleness. The association of "women" as a "good" group denies any differences between women. This, of course, is problematic in so many ways. As Laura Donaldson (1992) points out, "one effect of forging feminism from such univocal terms as 'sexual difference' and 'sisterhood' [with the implied goodness of all women in these categories] is the reduction of the Other to the same–an impulse at the heart of the colonialist project" (11). Furthermore, as Jane Flax (1990) points out in *Thinking Fragments*, the grouping of all women together as 'good' denies any recognition of the power some women hold over others, "e.g., the differential privileges of race, class, sexual preference, age, and location in the world system" (182).

Let's get back to our story: Skip ahead a few more years. The still youngish Mennonite woman has now lived almost 30 years in a society which judges women's worth by their fertility. She still thinks adoption is a good idea but figures she should try the whole "natural childbirth" thing first. After all, its now okay to be a feminist mother, isn't it? And giving birth is supposedly this wonderful spiritual experience, isn't it? And, frankly, she's curious to see what a child born of her and her Japanese Mennonite partner would look like. So, toss out the birth control, increase the sex, limit the alcohol and kitty litter changing and presto—she's hit with the most pain she's every encountered. Ovarian cysts, she's told. We'll have to operate, she's told. One of your ovaries will need to be removed, she's told, but the other one should be good. God gives us two for a reason ... she's told. The "E" word is not mentioned.

The day of surgery arrives—a month earlier than planned because the pain got too bad and morphine no longer worked to keep it bearable. Two "cysts" are removed. The one from the left side is seven cm in diameter. The one on

the right side is 20 cm in diameter. Along with the removal of the cysts was a removal of one and a half ovaries and both fallopian tubes.Now comes the "E" word. "You have endometriosis," the youngish Mennonite Witch is told. Endometriosis is a cronic disease in which endometrial tissue (tissue which builds up in a woman's uterus to be sluffed off during menstruation) builds up in odd and inconvenient places forming masses of tissue which may or may not cause horrible pain. About five percent of women in North America have endometriosis.

Okay, so here I am, and I'll now switch to first person to be clear to those who may not have guessed the identity of my protagonist, a youngish Mennonite woman and a Witch, infertile and angry. I am angry because I truly believed in the right of women to choose their reproductive options. I am angry because my choice was taken away. I am angry because my choice was taken away by my own body, not by "the Patriarchy." And I'm angry because, even though I know better, my infertility makes me feel like a failed woman. Everywhere I look I see pregnant woman and women with young children. And then there's the Goddess—the Mother Goddess. As I am struggling with my feelings of inadequacy as a female and anger at myself for feeling inadequate as a female, I see the Mother Goddess as another symbol showing me how I have failed, not met up to the norms of femalehood. I once became a Witch so I could relate to deity within myself. But in a tradition which highlights the Mother Goddess I felt I no longer existed. Its one thing to be a potential birth giver and choose not to give birth. It's an entirely different thing to not have the potential, or the choice, at all.

My challenge to feminist Witches, and others who find Goddess imagery empowering and useful, is to diversify the imagery. When Mother Goddess imagery becomes primary, as I see that it has, women who are infertile are alienated and constantly reminded of their insufficiency as females. Giving birth is *not* the epitome of creativity. It is one form, and an important one, I'm not denying that. But I want to see an infertile creative Goddess given as much attention as a fertile one. I want to see myself in Goddess imagery in more than just my own personal rantings. I want to see a recognition that femaleness is *not* a synonym for birth giving. And please don't give me the crap about mothering being metaphoric for all sorts of nurturing and creating. When mothering is equated to birth giving to the extent that it is in feminist Witchcraft, a side comment allowing women not to be biological mothers doesn't carry much convincing weight. Let's make creativity itself the model of the Goddess and spiritual growth and formulate mothering as one example amongst many. Let's proliferate Goddess images so that "the Mother" is not absent, but not predominant either. Feminist Witchcraft is about creating religious expressions to fit women's experiences. It has not adequately addressed women's experiences of infertility. My challenge to feminist Witches and Goddess worshippers in general is to make this a priority. The infertile Goddess is desperately needed.

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