

THE ARCHETYPAL WOMEN

Sheila Michaels

An archetypal pattern is an image we hold in common, and all of us recognize as an absolute pared-to-essence truth. We know it is true because the knowledge comes from within, it is born with us. An archetypal pattern is part of the instinctive apparatus, "stamped upon the physical organism", and "inherited in the structure of the brain". It will figure similarly in the dreams of a three-year-old in Tierra del Fuego and a 78-year-old Berliner. (How a 12-year-old Papuan produces the Virgin Mother image is not my look-out.) That essentially is what an archetypal pattern is about. Archetypal patterns appear in all our cultural works because the artist has experienced them as truths; the audience responds because it recognizes its own experiences. Clear?

So...let's see the archetypes of women as presented to us by the Jungian school. We experience the female archetype from within and without. Within because one is a woman; or, if a man, because one is half-woman. Jungians hold the spirit is half each sex. (Yeah, babe; even spirits have sex. Wouldn't you just know?) Externally one experiences women because if you live in the world, you meet women. Right?

Diagram Of The Female Archetype:

SEXUAL

mother - fruitful, nourishing, ambivalently attracting/forbiding

temptress - dangers sex represents to young man

NON-SEXUAL

virgin inspiring, commanding

devouring mother - will squeeze to death if you don't escape

~~DEMETER~~
Earth Goddess
goddess of birth & maturing

VIRGIN MARY
Musés, Athene,
Diana - virgin goddess of birth labor

CIRCE - sirens
mermaids, young witch, Medea

SPHINX
Medusa, old witch, devouring crone

You might like to bear in mind the male age-roles which correspond to the Virgin, Temptress, Mother and Crone. They are - Dig! - THE YOUNG GOD: transcendent youth, creative, feminine, sometimes androgynous - as Dionysus & Apollo (my archetype has acne and sweaty palms.) THE HERO: emotional, combatant - Achilles; MAN OF THE WORLD: intrigue, subtlety - Odysseus, (the flagging fifties?) WISE OLD MAN: governor, head of state - Zeus, Aegens, Charlemagne. Does this give you a clearer insight into who, until now, has been creating the culture in which we are tropisms, and who, until now, has been absorbing and responding to it.

Let's examine, away from the Jung-Bodkin-Frye school of interpretation, what other meanings these archetypes might hold, and consider the historical origins of some. It is significant not only that this school interprets the female archetypes as it has been presented to us by literature, which has been changing and reinforcing their changed connotations in the last 4,000 male-dominated years; but that they have not considered sufficiently correlative Norse and American Indian legends. How would they explain the similar figures in cultures where, before contact with Hellenic-influenced peoples, females were autonomous or companionate? Where would they fit the warrior Brunhilde, invincible, model ruler and not a virgin, who neither inspired nor commanded men to action?

Of the "non-sexual inspiring archetypes", Athene & Artemis/Diana probably reflected an earlier society where women, not yet encumbered by pregnancy and nursing, were hunters and warriors, before they became debilitated through repeated childbearing.

Athene was the Kore or place-spirit of Athens which was occupied by matriarchal Lybian tribes in 4,000 BC. The area they had occupied previously in Western Lybia was flooded by Lake Tritonis and is identified as Atlantis. It was known as the home of the Amazons. "Amazons" later became a generalized reference to the warrior priestesses of the Moon-goddess, and to the groups they governed throughout the Near East. The Amazons, according to the Illiad formed part of the confederation of Troy. Athene was the youngest of the triad of Metis, goddess of wisdom, who bore her by parthogenesis. This reflects the period when women were the dominant sex, and fatherhood was not recognized. The Achaean conquerors of Greece spared the temples of Athene on condition her votaries accept the sovereignty of their patriarchal god Zeus. (In classic times the Attic warrior-maid figures are depicted on the footstool of Zeus.) The suppression of her cult and the arrogation of her attributes to Zeus was portrayed in the swallowing of Metis by Zeus, who then bore Athene from his head. Jane Harrison in her Prolegomena to the Study of the Greek Religion terms this birthing, "a desperate theological expedient to rid an earth-born Kore of her matriarchal conditions". Aeschelus has her say in the Eumenides:

There is no mother bore me for her child,
I praise the Man in all things (save for marriage)
Whole-hearted am I strongly for the Father..

The maidenhead of Athene became symbolic of the invincibility of the Athenians, and they sought to disguise earlier myths of her rape by Posidon, the forefather/god of the Athen's aristocracy. As the democracy rose, vanquishing the aristocracy, the people revived the figure of the Kore Athene, the maiden Herakles (Hercules), who was the embodiment of the spirit of the people. The merging of her worship with Posidon rendered her a sexless figure. In almost all cultures the place-spirit and fertilizing agent fights and vanquishes a sea-monster or serpent. Thus the legend of Athene besting Posidon, god of the waters. On her shield is the figure of the serpent. On the back is the legend of the Amazons.

Artemis, protectress of animals and the hunt, only became the patron of childbirth in the Hellenic period when her worship was merged with the Near Eastern cult of Cybele, a goddess of animals and fertility. Thus the odd "inspiring" role was assumed, which fits her into the Jungian pattern.

As for the Virgin Mary: virgin birth (probably a parallel to the matriarchal parthogenesis) was a common means of singularizing the hero in antiquity. The depiction of the Virgin Mary is thought to be taken from the Asian-Aegean cult of Mari, an aspect of Aphrodite, goddess of birth and death. She was similarly portrayed, holding forth a child in one hand. Aphrodite of Melos (Venus de Milo) was this goddess cult on that island. She was called "black Aphrodite" and depicted as such. Not an inspiring, commanding figure, the goddess was the figure of birth and death, because (1) the mystery surrounding both, i.e., what are the source and end of intelligence? (2) birth often resulted in the mother's death or/and the child's, and (3) all creatures that are born must die, so that conception contains inevitably the consequence of death. (I doubt that this portman-teau contains the "lettle death" of orgasm - but still.)

As for the Muses, originally a triad personifying the orgiastic nightmare and associated with the number nine (as with the Celts), it was

logical that after their dancing was made more decorous, they should become the embodiment of the creative act. But that men should imitate the processes of women, the bringing forth of new beings, does not necessarily dictate that women should inevitably serve simply to inspire men in their creations.

SEXUAL: MOTHER FIGURES

Of the mother and earth goddesses, little need be said, except to add that most cultures draw the parallel of the mystery of fertility of the soil and of women. Because of the relationship believed to exist between the two, women were the first agriculturalists. This also, perhaps, because women who were unable to move quickly in late pregnancy or carrying small children tended to stay in encampments and dig for roots or gather vegetation. An interesting note is that most conquering groups tend to regard the original inhabitants as having the primary liason with the soil and spirit of the place and surround the conquered with taboos, using them as intercessors with the local gods. These were the original roles of the Untouchables of India and many other groups in North Africa and the Sub-Sahara. The conquered are usually made serfs, anyway. We may notice the belief that the cultivators of the soil practice magic and should not be disturbed, in the southern U. S. in the early part of this century.

SEXUAL: TEMPTRESS FIGURES

We may also assume that the conquerers are afraid of people who practice magic: Sex, the source of birth, is a mystery. A man may well fear that woman, capable of producing children, can be the source of other mysteries. And women, deprived of power, may resort to magic practices to exercise an influence when all other avenues are closed. Hence man, keeping woman in subjection, may have much to fear from her. The danger of the temptress then is that she may work any kind of power over him in revenge for her debasement, hence the paranoia of the conquerer dictates that he must be beware of her. He begins to fear her in the very role in which she is most vulnerable.

Temptresses are invariably free women (Circe, sirens, mermaids, witches, Medea)—or sometimes women who use men as men use women—and so are doubly to be feared as their subjection is not complete. They may wreck vengeance upon men, and man's retaliation against them is not assured. (It is also interesting to note that Robert Graves feels there is considerable evidence to show that the Odessey, in which so many of these figures appear, was composed at least in part by a woman, who portrayed herself as Nausicaa.)

NON-SEXUAL: DEVOURING CRONE

The devouring crone is also attributable to woman's function in child-bearing. The mystery of the spirits' existence before the woman produces a child connects her with the mystery of its fate after death. The womb which brings forth also swallows up. Of course these figures also remain in part from the era when all gods were female, and the crone/death was part of every triad.

The woman who is no longer capable of bringing life is feared as the creature who brings death instead. She is also freed of childbearing labors and being too old to work, may devote herself to magic and revenge. (While the old man is set to govern, what is the old woman to do but destroy if

she has no more ties to the group?

In summary, we see the cycle of women archetypes as one taken from the view of the oppressing caste. Women seen only in relation to men, not as independent agents, embody the fears as well as the vanities of that caste.

And where is the archetypal pattern of men as viewed by women? The answer so far is that there is none. Where, sisters, is our literature, our plastic arts, our body of myth? And of what value is it to us to continue to employ the connotations dictated by this masculine schema? (Their view of us is richer than their one-dimensional view of themselves. Can we not create one of them—just as vibrant and fascinating?) Perhaps the current state of fatigue in the arts only signifies the exhaustion of the male-dominant culture which feeds it. There are perhaps more fields to be opened by us than we have thought to consider.