

# Daimonic Imagination



Daimonic Imagination:  
Uncanny Intelligence

Edited by

Angela Voss and William Rowlandson

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4726-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4726-1

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

These essays originated in a conference on “Daimonic Imagination: Uncanny Intelligence” held at the University of Kent in May 2011. This venture should be seen in the longer perspective of a body of studies and teaching undertaken at Kent, hosted originally as a module in the pioneering MA programme in the Study of Mysticism and Religious Experience. Its further development from September 2006 occurred around the MA in the Cultural Study of Cosmology and Divination, concurrently with a popular and successful undergraduate module. The brief life of this unusual and creative project, running somewhat widdershins to the mainstream concerns of the modern academy, was extended in the Centre for the Study of Myth, host to the current conference. The 2011 Conference is the fourth such gathering, and this collection the fourth in a series of essays drawn from, or directly inspired by, each conference. The previous publications are Angela Voss & Jean Hinson Lall (2007) eds, *The Imaginal Cosmos: Astrology, Divination and the Sacred* (Canterbury: University of Kent); Angela Voss & Patrick Curry (2008) eds, *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays on Astrology and Divination* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press) and Patrick Curry (2010) ed., *Divination: Perspectives for a New Millennium* (Farnham: Ashgate). Taken together, these collections in all their scintillating and sometimes confounding diversity are a treasure-trove for imaginative exploration and for scholarship in a primary domain of human experience that too often finds itself diminished or ignored. Our thanks are richly deserved by the many individuals who have carried this inspiration with their friendship and their thinking, and we also thank those who have offered material support, especially the Sophia Trust and the Urania Trust, with whose help so much has been done. With the current collection, special thanks are due to William Rowlandson and the Centre for the Study of Myth, for taking up the banner. It would not be fitting to end without an acknowledgment of the achievement of Angela Voss, whose determination and untiring vision have been essential in blazing a trail of imagination through all our work at Kent.

Geoffrey Cornelius



## INTRODUCTION

This collection of essays has arisen from a conference held at the University of Kent in May 2011, under the auspices of the Centre for the Study of Myth. It was dedicated to the inter-disciplinary exploration of the daimonic imagination—inspired creativity, extraordinary encounters and nonrational ways of knowing—in historical, literary and contemporary contexts. The conference generated a huge response from established academics, research students, practitioners of esoteric disciplines and creative artists. From the original forty-two speakers, twenty-three are represented here (plus three additional contributions) and their chapters demonstrate an exciting variety of approaches to an epistemologically challenging field of investigation.

Many religious and esoteric traditions talk of a “divine spark” or transcendent power in the human soul, sometimes described as the fount of intuitive insight and creative genius and sometimes as a guiding or protective power. This intelligent “other” is often considered to be an autonomous god, spirit, angel, muse or daimon, or alternatively understood as an aspect of the human imagination or “unconscious” in a Jungian sense. From the artist to the diviner, from the monk to the medium, a sense of communication with this other order of reality is commonly attested; this may take the form of an inner voice, a flash of intuition, a psychic or clairvoyant vision, “channelled” information, spirit-possession and even telephone or email conversations. Art and literature abound with images of this divine or cosmic intelligence, which we also see embodied in the “little folk” of folk tales and the “alien” of science-fiction. In a vast array of “new-age” practices, encounters with spirit beings via shamanic journeying, meditation, hypnosis techniques or psychedelic trips are often cultivated for healing purposes. Mystics in religious traditions speak of awareness of higher intelligences—angels, devas, jinn for example—or of one supreme intelligence, whilst in the secular sphere, the increase in interest in mediumship over the past decade or so attests to the undying conviction that the bridge between human and nonhuman worlds may be crossed, even resulting in the full materialisation of spirit beings within the séance environment.

In this volume, we are not concerned with proving or disproving the existence of such beings in any objective sense, and indeed several of the

authors here point to the impossibility of such an aim. Rather, we are concerned with the many ways that this “numinous other” is portrayed and experienced, and how it informs, and has always informed, human experience. In this, we are taking a unique approach to the subject, whilst drawing threads from the various fields within which nonhuman reality and its inhabitants are studied—such as theology and religious studies, anthropology, history, classics, literature, esoteric philosophy and cultural studies. It would be impossible to include a relevant literature review drawn from all these disciplines, but we should perhaps just draw attention to those explorers (and critics) of the daimonic realms past and present whose work has inspired our discussions at the Centre for Myth Studies—Plato, Plotinus, Dante, Marsilio Ficino, Emanuel Swedenborg, Immanuel Kant, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Frederic Myers, William James, Carl Jung, Rudolf Steiner, Henry Corbin, James Hillman, Stan Grof, Jorge Luis Borges, Patrick Harpur, Jeffrey Kripal, Terence McKenna, and others.

The essays in this book spread a wide net over the ocean of daimonic phenomena. The variety of methodologies and approaches is deliberately extreme, multi-faceted and interdisciplinary, for the daimonic in its very nature defies categorisation and transcends the limitations of one single mode of academic discourse. This is not to imply that traditional approaches have nothing to say—indeed the historically informative study and the literary critique are essential starting points for further ontological and epistemological questions arising from phenomenological or experiential viewpoints. We have structured the collection to reflect such a methodological journey, and in so doing it is our intention to expand the remit of scholarship when confronted with material that challenges accepted post-Enlightenment positivist and materialist assumptions about the nature of reality. The enthusiasm generated by the conference at Kent was testament to the determination emerging at the present time—from both researchers and practitioners—not to let existing paradigms of knowledge suppress or deny *a priori* the acknowledgement in all cultures of human interaction with nonphysical consciousness/es.

The overall question which was addressed by the conference, and which is addressed by the majority of the contributors to this volume, is that of the nature of this consciousness in terms of its *intrinsic* or *extrinsic* relation to the human mind. They ask, can the “entities” encountered in a dream, vision or spiritual journey be considered as fully embodied—as *real*—as the creatures in the material world, or should they be firmly relegated to the realm of the fantastical imagination, the “unconscious” mind or the hallucination? But even this question is inevitably tied to the

assumptions of a Cartesian world-view, in which subject and object are clearly separated. For several of our authors, it becomes clear that in fact this is the wrong question to ask of the daimon, for the answer can only be “yes” to both lines of enquiry. It is not surprising, then, that for many contributors the work of the French historian of religion Henry Corbin is seminal and authoritative in its delineation of the *mundus imaginalis*, an intermediate world between matter and spirit. In this place—accessed through the “active” imagination or altered states of consciousness—spiritual intelligence becomes clothed in sense-perceptible images which are experienced as vibrant, alive and even more “real” than ordinary reality.

The origins of the idea that there is a mode of perception available to human beings which transcends discursive and analytical thinking are found in Platonic epistemology, and are fundamental to Western esoteric traditions. According to Plato, this “intuitive intellect” has direct apprehension of spiritual or noetic reality, which the rational mind can then process, interpret and analyse. In fact, the rational mind simply cannot grasp the totality of such a gnostic insight and if it tries to do so will inevitably reduce it to its own parameters of vision, often with a lofty disparagement of its validity. Interestingly, modern neuroscience has reached the same conclusions with regard to the function of the brain hemispheres, in that the legitimate role of the right hemisphere is now understood to be that of “master” to the left’s “emissary”.<sup>1</sup> In the light of this metaphor, many of the chapters here suggest ways of pushing the boundaries of research methods to include imaginal, performative and experiential insights which can then be processed and appraised in the light of scientific, psychological and metaphysical frameworks. Anthropological, phenomenological and ethnographic research, for example, provides a set of tools for the intrepid explorer of psychedelic realms to reflect on their own encounters and to muse on the ontological status of nonphysical entities from first-hand experience. Rachel, Luke and Cardin suggest that future research must rely as much on mystical and metaphysical premises as psychological ones, and Rachel goes so far as to make the radical suggestion that taking nonphysical reality seriously would have profound implications for the origin of the human race. Thus for many contributors, the willingness boldly to challenge cultural assumptions in search of the daimonic is not only permitted but essential for a fully holistic appraisal, whether this is through psychedelics, performance and creative projects, auto-ethnography, spiritualism,

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<sup>1</sup> See I. McGilchrist (2010) *The Master and his Emissary* (Yale: Yale University Press).

shamanic journeying or a broader appeal to take seriously the pre-modern conception of the human being's place in a sacred cosmos.

Perhaps most importantly of all, many of the essays in this book call for a return to the *metaphoric* or *symbolic* to create a paradigm-shift away from the deadening literalism of our modern age. In so doing, the question of whether the alien is a physically real being from a physically real outer space or simply an empty creation of science-fiction is no longer central. Instead, such a being may be seen as a culturally-specific archetype, an entity who may be encountered—as fully embodied—in a dimension of consciousness which simply cannot be subject to analysis by the rational mind. As Andy Letcher has pointed out:

The prevailing cultural discourses, however, do not make this [middle position] easy. Anyone who, say, stands up and proclaims the existence of hives of self-transforming machine elves in a parallel dimension to ours is likely to meet with a cynical and derisive response. Culture can only tolerate elves and faerie denizens if they are bound firmly into film, the pages of fiction—children's, sci-fi, fantasy or the knowing conceit of magic realism—or the symbolic language of the unconscious, where the ridiculous possibility of their actual physical existence need never be raised. As [Robert] Graves noted, the dirty synthetic world has asserted itself as the sole factual truth.<sup>2</sup>

Why is the power of the imagination to recognise—to know—nonphysical beings so disregarded in our Western culture? The answer lies deep in the roots of the Enlightenment schism of religion and science, where all that cannot be “known” through empirical observation or logical deduction is relegated to either superstition or supernature, the “faith” of spiritual sensibility being set in opposition to the certainty of human reason. As Corbin laments throughout his work, the potency of the imaginal realm as an interface between gods and men has become reduced to the product of mere human invention, with no substance, no authenticity and certainly no “truth”.

Many of the researchers in this volume are indeed pioneers, but they stand on the backs of such visionaries as Myers, James, Steiner and Jung, all of whom called for a more integrative approach to spiritual matters and a willingness to suspend disbelief in the possibility of higher, or deeper, intelligence. Furthermore, each author, in revealing a different aspect of the daimon, also reveals something about themselves and their relationship to their inner genius. For some, a strictly conventional approach to their

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<sup>2</sup> A. Letcher (2007) *Shroom, A Cultural History of the Magic Mushroom* (London: Faber & Faber) 295.

material, an impersonal evaluation of data, is the chosen mode—inspired perhaps by the daimonic muse of solid historical or literary critical research. For others, it is important to engage sympathetically with their material and let it reveal something of itself to the reader, whilst still others overtly challenge the accepted model by drawing on their own experiences and insights or offering auto-biographical narratives as research. The reader is thus deliberately led to consider for him or herself the distinctions between varying kinds of discourse, and whether any one approach is sufficient to do justice to the multi-faceted, paradoxical and Mercurial nature of daimonic experience. In the end, he or she may agree with Myers, who concluded as long ago as 1903:

Now it is that we feel the difficulty of being definite without being trivial; how little of earthly memory persists; how little of heavenly experience can be expressed in terms of earth; how long and arduous must be the way, how many must be the experiments, and how many the failures before any systemised body of new truth can be established. But a sound beginning has been made, and whatever may be possible hereafter need not be wasted on a fresh start.<sup>3</sup>

It has taken a long time to build on Myers' "sound beginning," but we hope that now the time is ripe for an integration of imagination and critical thinking within academic research which will break new ground and begin to reveal ways of healing the antagonisms so often aroused by the subject of paranormal, "occult" or nonrational experience.

Angela Voss and William Rowlandson, January 2013

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<sup>3</sup> F. Myers (1903) *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* ed. S. Smith (New York: Longmans, Green & Co) 406 (quoted by Palmer in this volume p.138).



**PART I**

**DAIMONIC HISTORY**

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN SPIRIT POSSESSION  
IS SEXUAL ENCOUNTER:  
THE CASE FOR A CULT OF DIVINE BIRTH  
IN ANCIENT GREECE

MARGUERITE RIGOGLIOSO

**The genesis of parthenogenesis: how I got here**

“The daughter becomes identical with the mother.” This statement by Erich Neumann,<sup>1</sup> providing what may well be the key to the mystery of the cult of Demeter and Persephone in antiquity, haunted me for months as I wrote my master’s thesis on these two goddesses of central Sicily. There was a depth to it, fascinating and unplumbable, that kept me traveling ever further inward.

I remember standing in my brother’s apartment in Brooklyn, New York, in January 2001 when I received the insight that was the starting point of this research. I had been reading Sicilian scholar Anna Maria Corradini’s book *Meteres: Il Mito del Matriarchato in Sicilia (Mothers: The Myth of Matriarchy in Sicily)*. Corradini stated for me what seemed a sudden and profound truth: the Demeter-Persephone mystery was, at core, a *female only* mystery. Stripping off the layers that the Greeks had added on through the violent intrusion of Hades and other male gods into the story, she suggested that Demeter was a pre-Hellenic *parthenogenetic* goddess who produced the natural world—and her daughter, Persephone—spontaneously out of her own body.<sup>2</sup>

Parthenogenesis. Self-conception. Virgin birth. Mothers and identical daughters. As I stood in my brother’s small office, I had the strange sensation of a foreign thought suddenly illuminating my mind: were holy

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<sup>1</sup> Neumann: 309.

<sup>2</sup> Corradini: 12-14; 81-83.

women of ancient Greece once engaged in attempting to conceive children miraculously?

Since that time, shards of a Greek history seeming to link women and divine birth have continuously presented themselves to me, glinting through obscure passages in ancient texts and in the prose of unsuspecting contemporary scholars. I have collected these pieces, and in my books *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece* and *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity*, I have assembled them. It is a vessel that may still have many missing parts, but one that begins to reveal an integral form and shape, nonetheless. I share some of the key pieces in this chapter.

During the course of this research I have come to realise there have been so many artefacts staring at us for two thousand years that it is truly stunning no one has put them together before as evidence of possible female cultic practice.<sup>3</sup> Practically all of the legendary heroes who came to head the great genealogical tribes of early Greece, as well as various historical political and spiritual leaders and a handful of humans turned divine were all said to have been born of mortal women through sexual union with gods. Not only were Heracles, Perseus, Theseus, and a host of other legendary heroes associated with divine birth stories, but so were historical figures such as Pythagoras, Plato, and Alexander the Great. In certain corners of the Graeco-Roman world, it was believed that miraculous conception could occur through the influence of snakes and celestial rays of light. The healing cult of Asclepius held that women could be impregnated with supernatural assistance—a belief that was the basis for the entire nearby Egyptian civilization. The *basilinna*, the “queen archon” of classical Athens, was even attested to conduct a secret and presumably sexual rite with the god Dionysus every year. Are such stories and practices—and many, many more—to be dismissed as mere remnants of mythology—that is, fiction—alone? Or do they point to something important about the actual beliefs and rites of ancient Greece?

I argue for the latter. In doing so, I offer what amounts to a radical reinterpretation of ancient Greek religion, one that suggests that priestly women—and the figure of the “holy virgin”—may have been considered far more central to the founding of Greek civilization than previously

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<sup>3</sup> The literature that has come the closest proposes the existence of the *hieros gamos*, or rite of sacred marriage, in ancient West Asia and the ancient Mediterranean world. According to some scholars, the sacred marriage was a ritual act of sexual intercourse between a king and priestess as a means of guaranteeing abundance and fertility for the people. This idea has itself received its share of critique (see Nissinen and Uro). The present work in part reframes the sacred marriage concept by considering women’s agency in it, a much-neglected theme.

understood. Specifically, I make the case that certain specialised priestesses in ancient Greece may have endeavoured to conceive children in various non-ordinary ways as an elevated form of spiritual practice. The intended purpose of this practice was to give birth to a hero or heroine, gifted spiritual leader, or what was considered to be a supernatural being—an individual who, it was thought, could not enter into the human stream through the “normal” sexual channels. This miraculously-born individual was considered a special soul capable of benefitting humanity significantly in some way, or of heralding or reinforcing particular value systems for the human race.

I have discovered that attempting to produce offspring through various asexual and/or magical methods was thought to be a specialised sacerdotal activity for women. Although some Greek writers, such as Herodotus, were reportedly sceptical about women’s capacity for virgin birth, there were many who apparently believed it was possible—including some in the highest intellectual echelons, such as certain followers of Pythagoras and Plato. Throughout my works, I demonstrate that Greeks who believed in the reality of such a phenomenon held miraculous conception and birthing of a child to be the most advanced form of magico-spiritual achievement possible. At its best, divine birthing was considered a feat that could transport the human race to a new level of functioning and awareness through the influence of the incarnated individual. The evidence shows that the purported birth of a specially conceived child was thought to result in the apotheosis, or actual divinisation of the priestess herself—a “promotion” from human to goddess—and led to her corresponding veneration. Similarly, the child of this conception was considered to be of a divine nature and likewise the focus of worship.

To be clear, my task is not to argue whether birth through miraculous means is or ever was possible. Neither is it to argue whether any assumed practice by women in ancient Greece to conceive and give birth miraculously to a special category of children was successful or not. Rather, my intention is to present and analyse a vast array of information from history, legend, and myth suggesting that groups of priestly women in ancient Greece who at the very least *attempted* divine birth as a spiritual discipline *and who were believed at the time to have been successful* may have formally existed. In doing so, I bring into relief an aspect of Greek religion that has been obscured in the patriarchal era through the relegation of divine birth stories to the status of quaint and frivolous fables.

It is also important to note that in presenting evidence for the existence of what I am calling *divine birth priestesses* in Greece, my aim is not to make a scientific case that parthenogenesis—that is, conception and

birth without the participation of the male—ever may have existed as a method intended to eclipse sexual procreation and do away with men.<sup>4</sup> Nor is it to suggest that parthenogenesis should be explored as a means of doing so in future. I discuss parthenogenesis in the religious context only, as a possible spiritual practice that would have had a specialised purpose.

For this work, I approach ancient and secondary texts and iconography using a number of methodologies, which, given the provocative nature of what is being proposed, deserve some attention. I first and foremost utilise a feminist hermeneutical approach. That is, I recast written records applying what Schüssler Fiorenza calls “a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion that understands texts as ideological articulations of men expressing, as well as maintaining, patriarchal historical conditions.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, I follow Barbara Goff’s approach of reading texts “against the grain,” or reading them “for other than their ostensible significance”<sup>6</sup> in order to recover where and how historical women may have had agency and autonomy in an attempt to create a more complete and accurate picture of the ancient Greek priestesshood.

Another methodological approach I employ is neo-euhemerism. That is, I look to mythology and legends as sources of important clues about historical events and actual ancient cultural and cultic practices. The term *neo-euhemerism* derives from the name of the fourth century BCE writer Euhemerus, who, by investigating the actions and places of birth and burial of the divinities of popular religion, claimed the gods were simply deified human beings, great heroes who were revered because they had benefited mankind in some important way. His rationalising method of interpreting Greek myths, known as classical euhemerism, was revived in the nineteenth century by scholars such as Spencer. In more recent works, Nilsson, for example, argues that the Greek epics originated in the aristocratic society of Bronze Age Mycenaean culture, reflected the deeds of historical men, and described contemporary events while mixing mythical and folktale elements. Harrison similarly assumes that myth reflects broad historical contours of Greek and pre-Greek culture. Farnell, too, throughout his classic five-volume work *Cults of the Greek States*, conjectures that various myths may have been indicators of actual custom and ritual.

The intuitive flash I received that wintry New York day in January 2001—that specialised women in ancient Greece may have participated

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<sup>4</sup> For a summary of current scientific thinking on parthenogenesis, see Rigoglioso 2009: 205-209.

<sup>5</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza: 60.

<sup>6</sup> Goff: 25.

actively in attempts to produce children parthenogenetically as part of a spiritual calling—stimulated me to approach my research on ancient Greek history and religion in new ways. In my studies, I began to notice data that seemed to cluster around and verify this idea, which inspired me to seek out supporting information more actively. As I made sense of the data I was collecting, further and unanticipated patterns began to emerge. New insights were sparked which subsequently stimulated ever new cycles of mining ancient texts and secondary literature in search of validating details. The process thus was both deductive and inductive.

I soon discerned in the ancient literature that there was more than one method by which women were credited with achieving divine birth. A theoretical structure began to emerge that seemed to allow the data to speak in the most coherent way possible. In this chapter I present that structure—what I am calling a taxonomy of divine birth priestesses.

### **The role of trance and virginity in divine birth practice**

Before proceeding with the taxonomy, I should note that regardless of the type of reproductive method attempted, the practice as a whole most likely required that the priestess enter a profound non-ordinary state of consciousness, or “trance” state. This finds support in Lezzi-Haftner, who similarly theorises that such a state was part of the *hieros gamos*, or sacred sexual union, that purportedly took place between the historical *basilinna* and the god Dionysus. She bases this on her interpretation of images on ancient ceramics thought to portray the *basilinna* (or possibly her mythic prototype, Ariadne) in a ritualised “drowsy” or “sleep” state waiting for her union with the god.<sup>7</sup> I contend it is indeed only through a hypnagogic state that a priestess would have been thought capable of fully accessing her special skills as well as the spiritual forces believed necessary to guide her in this most extraordinary of activities.

Iamblichus describes various ways in which the spiritual adept was thought to enter into non-ordinary states of consciousness in the ancient world, which included what he calls “potions.”<sup>8</sup> His remarks are echoed by Lewis, former London School of Economics anthropology professor, who mentions “psychotropic alkaloids,”<sup>9</sup> or what are today known as *entheogens*. This term, introduced into the English language by Ruck et al., derives from *entheos*, which in Greek means “full of the god,” “inspired,” or “possessed,” and connotes a state in which both the practitioner was “in the

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<sup>7</sup> Lezzi-Haftner 1988a, b.

<sup>8</sup> Iamblichus: 1.3.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis 1971: 39.

god” and the god was “in the practitioner.”<sup>10</sup> *Entheos*, then, anciently referred to a state of “oneness” with the deity, and an *entheogen* is thus a substance (usually plant-based in the ancient world) thought to engender such a state.<sup>11</sup> I suggest that whilst engaging in a meditative state may have been enough for some divine birth priestesses to enter what was believed to be the requisite spiritual condition for their task, imbibing entheogens may have been a particularly effective means of doing so. In *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece*, I point to literary evidence attesting to the presence of one entheogenic plant, asterion (cannabis), in connection with the cult of Hera at Argos, and the probable use of various entheogenic compounds by the prophetesses of Apollo at Delphi.<sup>12</sup>

Another important preliminary point is that it appears that in many, but not all, cases, virginity, that is, abstinence from sexual intercourse with men, was thought to have been a biological and spiritual precondition necessary to render non-ordinary conception possible. Greek myths and legends of women conceiving the children of gods indicate that such women were generally virgins in the younger years of their lives. Some seem to have been dedicated virgins from the time of menarche or earlier. I discuss the virginity requirement in ancient Greek priestesshoods more fully in *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece*.<sup>13</sup>

## A taxonomy of divine birth priestesshoods

I now turn to the taxonomy. In exploring Greek myths and history, I have discerned what appear to have been a number of different non-ordinary ways by which women were thought to conceive divine or divinely endowed children. I suggest that the method used depended on the ontological framework with which the particular cult that the priestess served viewed the universe. Thus, in general, gynocentric (female/goddess-centred) theologies corresponded with priestesshoods in which women attempted to mimic the ultimate parthenogenetic capacity of the creator goddess in generating divine children. Androcentric (male/god-centred) theologies corresponded

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<sup>10</sup> Cook: vol. 1: 673. One ancient literary example of *entheos* is found in Euripides (*Hippolytus* 141).

<sup>11</sup> Wasson et al. and Eyer argue that entheogens were used to stimulate the culminating experience of initiates during the Eleusinian Mysteries, for example. See also Hillman for a history of the widespread use of entheogens in the ancient world.

<sup>12</sup> Rigoglioso 2009: 175-76.

<sup>13</sup> Rigoglioso 2009: 43-46.

with priestesses in which non-ordinary reproduction was thought possible through the sexual union of the priestess with a god.

The first category in my proposed taxonomy of divine birth priestesses is what I am calling the *pure parthenogenetic priestesshood*. I propose that this priestesshood was dedicated to attempting conception without the participation of a male in any form whatsoever—either human or divine. I subdivide this priestesshood into two further categories: *pure daughter-bearing parthenogenetic priestesshoods* and *pure son-bearing parthenogenetic priestesshoods*.

I hypothesize that this priestesshood was dedicated to producing female offspring only, and that it marked the original and first stage of the practice, carried out when social structures were matriarchal. This would have been a period well prior to the advent of the Olympian cults, when various Greek goddesses, among them Ge/Gaia, Athena, Artemis and Hera, were conceived of as creator divinities who generated cosmos, earth, and all life without male consorts—that is, they were virgin mothers.

Given my theory that priestesses patterned themselves after their goddesses, I submit that one class of sacerdotal women of this time consisted of virgins whose holy reproductive rituals were aimed at generating the spontaneous meiosis of their ova. This type of activity would have corresponded with biological parthenogenesis in the animal and insect world. There, given that progeny conceived parthenogenetically share the same genetic material as their mothers, such offspring are generally female.<sup>14</sup> On the symbolic level, the parthenogenetic creation of the human daughter would have been understood as a process whereby the mother essentially “replicated” herself. The holy daughter born in this unusual way would have been seen as an earthly manifestation of the Great Goddess, and the mother would have been thought to achieve divinity herself for having accomplished the birth of such a being. That is, in being able to generate life spontaneously from her body in the *manner* of the goddess, she was thought to *become* the living embodiment of the goddess. We can think of the parthenogenetic mother and daughter “goddesses” as “twins,” a motif that I suggest formed the basis of the earliest layer of the cult of the mother-daughter goddesses Demeter and Persephone.<sup>15</sup>

I propose that with the development of patriarchy and the increasing domination of cultural institutions by men, the male god came into theological ascendancy. Pure parthenogenesis at this secondary stage was

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<sup>14</sup> Jerry L. Hall, ViaGene Fertility director, personal communication, August 19, 2004. One important exception is the honeybee.

<sup>15</sup> See Rigogioso 2010: 103-107.

modified to bring in a child who served as a human manifestation of this male god. Thus we have the creation of what I am calling the *pure son-bearing parthenogenetic priestesshood*.

The “birth of the divine son,” I contend, was considered a special kind of numinous event that expressed, to borrow Neumann’s words, “the miracle of the male’s containment in the female.”<sup>16</sup> The priestess was now exalted for having incarnated one “other than” herself, yet still without the benefit of a male fecundator, a feat that may have been seen as even more challenging than bringing in a female. The male holy child—an expression of the newly ascendant male godhead—was rendered “king,” and was expected to agree to a ritual death in order to benefit humanity. His death served, in the words of Pindar, as “requital for ancient wrong” (*penthos*);<sup>17</sup> that is, it was believed to release the community from negativity associated with the transgressions of their living and deceased members. In undergoing this ordeal, the miraculously born individual was thought to be apotheosised on the ontological level—that is, to achieve godhead—which resulted in his subsequently being worshipped as a divinity.

Although a detailed analysis of parthenogenetic themes in Gnostic texts is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to mention here one Gnostic passage that contains a stunning testament to the existence of an ancient esoteric belief in women’s capacity for pure parthenogenesis in a religious context. The passage appears in *The Revelation [or Apocalypse] of Adam*, the last tractate of Nag Hammadi Codex V. It describes one of the means by which “the illuminator of knowledge,” the salvific figure known as Seth (of whom Jesus was considered by some to be a manifestation), was thought to have been brought to humanity:

[F]rom the nine muses one separated. She came to a high mountain and spent some time seated there, so that she desired her own body in order to become androgynous. She fulfilled her desire and became pregnant from her desire. He [the illuminator] was born. The angels who were over the desire nourished him. And he received glory there and power [...]<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Neumann: 309.

<sup>17</sup> The fragment is preserved in Plato: “For from whomsoever Persephone shall accept requital for ancient wrong, the souls of these she restores in the ninth year to the upper sun again; from them arise glorious kings and men of splendid might and surpassing wisdom, and for all remaining time are they called holy heroes amongst mankind” (Plato *Meno* 81b). I contend this references the sacrificial death and apotheosis of divinely born children that I am positing here.

<sup>18</sup> In Barnstone and Meyer: 186-87.

The text, ascribed to the end of the first or beginning of the first centuries CE, contains the most direct ancient reference I have located to date of an episode of pure parthenogenetic conception. The excerpt even affirms the method by which the woman supposedly achieved this feat: by “sitting on a mountain” for some time, that is, through a non-ordinary state of consciousness likely brought about through an extended period of meditation. The identification of the female as a “muse” suggests a priestly connection the Greek tradition, where muses and nymphs, as I explain throughout my works, were related figures frequently associated with divine birth stories. Although the child believed to have arisen from this particular miraculous conception was male, it is not unreasonable to suggest that such a self-generative mechanism would have been considered a valid method of producing holy female children, as well.

Evidence in Greek cult for pure daughter-bearing and son-bearing parthenogenetic priestesses, as well as of their sequential emergence, hypothesised above, is otherwise mainly suggestive. In my books, I discuss myths that may point to the existence of pure parthenogenetic priestesses of the daughter-bearing kind in relationship to the cults of Ge/Gaia, particularly at the earliest days of the oracular cults at Dodona and Delphi. The story of Hera’s parthenogenetic birthing of Ares, Typhon, and Hephaestus, may be an allusion to son-bearing parthenogenesis. The mystical formula recited by the high priest at the conclusion of the Eleusinian Mysteries—“Brimo has given birth to Brimos!”—an expression that may have referred to the birth of the divine male child, also may be an allusion to the latter.<sup>19</sup>

As patriarchy continued to develop, male and female deities came to be conceived of in sexual relationship to one another. This phenomenon finds expression in myths such as that of the goddess Cybele and her fecundating consort Attis in Phrygia. Still later, as patriarchy eclipsed matriarchy nearly completely as the dominant social form, the universal deity came to be seen as primarily *male*, sometimes with shadow female attendants who assisted in the generative process in a much reduced and passive role. This is expressed in myths of deities such as Zeus and Hera.

This transition marked what I propose was a concomitant shift to what I term the *hieros gamos*, that is, “sacred marriage” *divine birth priestesshood*. In the condition of the *hieros gamos*, a woman was thought to conceive a child as the result of “sexual intercourse” with a male supernatural entity or god, and without the involvement of a human male. The numerous stories of unions between women and gods in Greek mythology and legend indicate that this form of *hieros gamos* became the most

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of this feature of the Eleusinian Mysteries see Harrison: 562-64.

widespread method for achieving what was believed to be miraculous birth in the incipient days of Greek culture. The women involved are depicted as either mortals or “nymphs.” Mortal women who engaged in such unions were generally honoured as “heroines,” a status that afforded them divine honours upon their death. The term *nymph* referred to a low-level female divinity, generally a nature spirit. Many such nymphs were also honoured in cult. I believe there is evidence that “heroine” or “nymph” status in fact was a posthumous cultic marker for the priestess who was believed to have borne the child of a god.

The influence of patriarchy on the divine birth cult of this era can be seen in the fact that women’s supposed unions with gods nearly always resulted in the production of male figures who promoted the patriarchal values of the Greek state and of Zeus-centred Olympian religion. Often these purported children grew to become founders of a lineage or city-state—that is, they were “heroes,” which means they were generally warriors in service to the patriarchy. Indeed, such male figures were seen to be the very incarnations of the patriarchal Olympian gods themselves. Speaking of the phenomenon of father/son divine pairs a bit further afield in Phrygia, Ramsay illuminates this phenomenon, noting, “the father and the son [...] are merely complementary forms of the single ultimate form of the divinity as male,” and “the character and personality of the God-father and God-son pass into one another in such a way in the divine tale or drama, that no clear line can be drawn to separate them.”<sup>20</sup> We see this exemplified, for example, in the story of Heracles, the supposed son of Zeus by the mortal woman Alcmene.<sup>21</sup> The rare female progenies of purported *hieros gamos* couplings are often depicted as themselves later engaging in *hieros gamos* unions with gods, indicating that they may have been considered part of hereditary lineages of divine birth priestesses.

Stories of unions between mortals/“nymphs” and gods also frequently express a common theme: the encounter with the god was often considered a violation or rape. Sometimes the union was also violently opposed by the “goddess” to whom the priestess was in service—frequently Athena, Artemis, or Hera, who I argue were originally considered parthenogenetic beings themselves. That is, union with male gods was strictly forbidden from the perspective of the old order. Yet such stories occurred in liminal contexts in which the goddess had already become subsumed into the Olympian pantheon, no longer as an independent parthenogenetic being, but as a daughter or wife of the new male creator god, Zeus. I thus suggest these stories indicate a time of transition and conflict during which

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<sup>20</sup> Ramsay: 1.34, 1.40.

<sup>21</sup> Rigoglioso 2009: 126.

priestesses from the pure parthenogenetic tradition may have been pressured into performing *hieros gamos* in order to produce what was believed to be the holy progeny who would advance the cause of Zeus and the other male gods. It was a pressure that at times these priestesses apparently vehemently resisted.

But there was, in some cases, ambivalence. The stories hint that engaging in *hieros gamos* with a god was thought to be a profoundly pleasurable sexual experience, one that many priestesses may have had trouble resisting. Moreover, great social status seems to have accrued to women considered to be the mothers of heroes born miraculously, as evidenced by the fact that frequently virgin mothers served as the eponyms of city-states and of topographical features such as springs and mountains. Thus the period of transition to *hieros gamos* divine birth seems to have been a time of confusion, conflict, and broken virginal vows to virgin goddesses.

In *hieros gamos* stories, I have discerned a secondary non-ordinary reproductive process whereby the priestess engaged in what was believed to be sacred union with a god using a human male as a “surrogate” for the male deity. As in all phases, this no doubt was thought to take place when both the male and female actors were in a profound trance state such that the deity was believed to manifest and impregnate the priestess through the body of the human male. Under such conditions, the child was still considered the progeny of the god rather than the man, yet this development allowed for the securing of the lineage through the paternal line. I propose that a number of Greek myths I discuss in which priestesses were said to have had intercourse simultaneously with a “god” and a mortal in the same night are indicative of this practice.

Support for this idea also can be found in one book of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Testament of Reuben*. This work, which dates to the second or third century CE, explains how it is thought that angelic beings known as “the Watchers” could copulate with human women and beget children:

As [the Watchers] continued looking at the women, they were filled with desire for them and perpetrated the act in their minds. Then they were transformed into human males, and while the women were cohabitating with their husbands they appeared to them. Since the women’s minds were filled with lust for these apparitions, they gave birth to giants. For the Watchers were disclosed to them as being as high as the heavens.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Collins: 266.

Although this work is mainly Jewish and Christian in nature, it is useful to the present argument in that it affirms the existence of an esoteric belief in antiquity that women could be “visited” in the trance state by male beings who possessed the power to impregnate them. What is described here is the mechanism by which this was thought to take place: the male beings “mentally” transformed themselves into the images of human males and inserted themselves into the women’s erotic fantasies activated during intercourse. It is these incorporeal beings, not the human males, who were understood to be the “true” fathers of children conceived in this way. This suggests that such beings were also understood to insert themselves into the precise physical substances exchanged during the conception process.<sup>23</sup>

*Hieros gamos* by surrogate fully put the practice of divine birth under the control of the patriarchy, as it placed the benefits associated with claims of divine birth in the male lineage. That is, in the earlier condition of *hieros gamos* divine birth, when no human male was involved, the prestige presumably would have rested with the purported mother alone. In this new situation, however, the divine child was arrogated to the sphere of a male “father.” The mother involved was thereby also made the property of this male. Moreover, the new arrangement guaranteed the retention of privileges associated with the “divine child” even if somehow the human performers believed they had failed in their mission to evoke the god. In other words, even if the male actor believed he had not been able to incorporate the god during sexual union—which would mean that the child was merely humanly, not divinely conceived—the claim of divine impregnation would have been maintained. Thus both the male surrogate and his male progeny would still have enjoyed sacred status and its associated political privileges.

### **Divine birth as an erotic act**

My reflections on this material have led me to conjecture that, in their essence, all types of attempted pure parthenogenesis and *hieros gamos* divine birth must have been considered to be profoundly erotic experiences. I posit that in the case of pure parthenogenesis, conception was thought to be a condition achieved through the most true form of *entheos* possible: *the literal becoming as one with the goddess*. This, I contend, was thought to be a powerful sensual/sexual experience in which

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<sup>23</sup> For evidence that Egyptian queen mothers similarly engaged in *hieros gamos* by surrogate to conceive pharaohs, see Rigoglioso 2007: 70-94.

the woman aligned herself with what was arguably considered to be the ontologically sexual nature of cosmos itself. I will even go so far as to speculate that the orgasm was considered the critical event thought to instigate the meiosis of the woman's ovum.

We find evidence for this line of reasoning in the aforementioned excerpt from the Gnostic *Revelation of Adam*. There we see affirmation of an ancient belief that women's practice of pure parthenogenesis involved a highly erotic component. As we will recall from that tractate, the woman who sat on the mountain to conceive the saviour entered a state in which she "desired her own body in order to become androgynous." The text goes on to tell us that "[s]he fulfilled her desire and became pregnant from her desire."<sup>24</sup> In other words, it is indeed autoerotic desire that is the critical element believed to create the condition in which parthenogenetic conception could occur. But what is described here is much more than mere masturbation. Rather, the process is one whereby the woman must become *as one* with the generative power of the universe, as I suggested above: as the text conveys this, she must "become androgynous." That process, according to the author of this description, involves the "fulfilling" of desire—the experience of sexual ecstasy.

In cases of *hieros gamos* divine birth, the idea of impregnation by a god implies some form of sexual contact between human female and divine male, as the numerous myths to be explored make plain. Anthropologically, the intensely sexual nature of women priestesses' relationships in situations of so-called "spirit possession" by male deities has been amply attested across a wide array of cultures in contemporary times, for example, Lewis. Quoting Ernest Jones, he writes, "the notion that sexual intercourse can occur between mortals and supernatural beings is one of the most widespread of human beliefs."<sup>25</sup> As to *hieros gamos* by surrogate, in which an actual human male may have been involved, the erotic element is clear.

Thus I am proposing that divine conception, far from having been considered a non-erotic act, may have been thought to include an embodied dimension, indeed, in which spirit and matter, human and divine, sexuality and the sacred were thought to be related and interacted in ways that are, by and large, no longer considered possible or viable outside of certain esoteric circles. In this way, my argument may provide new theoretical avenues for resolving the spirit/body dualism more fully than before. Rather than emphasizing restrictive and polarised ideas of

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<sup>24</sup> In Barnstone and Meyer: 187.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis: 57-64. More recently, Donald Tyson has written of his own purported sexual encounters with disembodied entities, which he describes as intensely erotic.