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PERSEPHONE, PSYCHE, AND THE MOTHER-MAIDEN ARCHETYPE

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While the figure of the Mother Goddess has always fascinated students of Greek myth and religion (Ver-nant, 1965, 102-31), the subject has in recent years generated an enormous amount of scholarly literature which has illuminated the goddess's role from a number of perspectives (Harding, 1971).^{*} This expanding interest is due in part to exciting new developments in the fields of psychology, anthropology, and women's studies, whose findings underscore the prominence of the Great Mother in the psychic and cultural life of humanity. Among the schools of thought that have produced some of the most provocative though not unchallenged ideas about the female figure in Greek myth is that of C.G. Jung and his adherents, who have found in the image of the Mother Goddess a fruitful field for the application of their theories concerning the relationship of myth to human consciousness, the development of the feminine psyche, and the role of woman in the family.

This paper, while acknowledging that the Jungian approach to myth is only one of many and conceding that many of the school's contentions are open to question, has as its aim the examination of two narratives from classical antiquity which lend themselves very well to the Jungian mode of interpretation. The purpose here is not to argue the validity of one psychological theory over another but rather to illustrate how the application of Jungian ideas to myth can contribute to the appreciation of two familiar stories as embodied in two important works of classical literature.

The narratives under consideration here are the myth of Demeter and Persephone as told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and the Cupid and Psyche tale found in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius. These stories, though widely separated in time and in purpose, invite comparison for a number of reasons. Both of them have profound religious connections, the Demeter myth because of the Eleusinian mysteries (Mylonas, 1961) and the Apuleian tale because of its inherent mystical and perhaps allegorical elements (Tatum, 1979, 49-68). Then, too, both of the stories have been the inspiration for literary masterpieces of surpassing power and appeal through the centuries. But what is more relevant here for the Jungian analyst of literature is that both of the works feature a central mother figure as well as a maiden who is in the process of becoming bride or wife. Furthermore, both stories revolve around the conflict that emerges when time comes for the child to marry and so to break the parent-child bond—a period of great psychic disturbance

for both parent and child. Also, the two narratives provide an interesting contrast in that the Greek myth dwells on the mother-daughter relationship while the conte of Apuleius concerns that of mother and son. Viewed through the lens of Jungian theory, these stories can yield insights into feminine psychology, especially the emotional tensions which accompany the rite of passage called marriage, and into the function of myth as mirror of the human psyche.

It was Sigmund Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* who advanced the idea that myth, like dream, can provide an avenue toward probing the unconscious with its hidden wish-fulfillments, fantasies, and anxieties. However one may estimate Freud's famous interpretation of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, it is undeniable that he was correct in seeing a link between myths and dreams, even though the exact nature of that link continues to be much debated (Kirk, 1974, 72-73). C.G. Jung, who first followed Freud and then broke from him, was impressed by the recurrence of certain symbols in the myths, dreams, art, and literature of widely diverging cultures and formulated the notion of the collective unconscious. Within this collective unconscious of mankind Jung claimed to discern the existence of primordial images or universal symbols which he called archetypes (Stevens, 1982). Among the most important of these are the Old Man, the Shadow, and the Great Mother.

According to Jungian personality theory, the mother archetype occupies a central role in the unconscious life of every individual—a role which is understandable given the indelible impact of the mother on the formative stages of the child. As birth-giver, as nurturer, as the infant's means of sustaining life, the mother exerts an incalculable effect upon her offspring's conscious and unconscious development. To the child she is source of life, nourishment, warmth, and security, providing everything which is essential and salubrious. Simultaneously, however, the same mother can be a source of fear to the child, who is helpless, utterly dependent upon her, and at times anxious that the mother's nurture might be withdrawn. Thus, the same person can be for the child a channel of goodness and love as well as an occasion for anxiety and psychic discomfort. From a Jungian perspective, these polarities evidence themselves in the two opposing aspects of the archetype, the Good Mother and the Terrible Mother (Neumann, 1955). The Good Mother is all-caring, all-giving, beneficent, and generous. We see her in this guise in the benevolent figures of folklore and myth, with Demeter, of course, being a prime example. The Terrible Mother, on the other hand, is an equally familiar character in the traditional tales of many cultures and is rep-

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^{*}I would like to thank The Fortnightly (The Women's Literary Club of Chicago) for inviting me to present to them the original version of this paper.

resented in the witch, the wicked stepmother, and the Gorgon. Finally, to round out the variations of the archetype, there is the maiden or *Kore* figure who is not yet, but is soon to become, a wife or mother. Damsel or bride, she is innocent, beautiful, and ripe for marriage, as, for example, in the cases of Persephone and Psyche. The psychic significance of these three feminine incarnations, which occur with great frequency in myth and literature, is well summarized by W.I. Thompson (1981, 145):

The three images of the goddess—maiden, matron, and old crone—present us with the three archetypal relationships of the female to the male: she is huge and calls us from the womb; she is beautiful and calls us to her bed; she is old and ugly and calls us to the tomb.

The interplay of these three archetypes in the stories of Persephone and Psyche is material for an intriguing exercise in Jungian hermeneutics.

Turning to the story told in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, we see that from the very beginning of the poem we are in the world of women. Persephone is a maiden playing among maidens in a scene of tenderness and girlish innocence—a scene brutally shattered by the harsh intrusion of the male who takes the girl by violence. The poet tells us that as the girl is being abducted her thoughts are focused on her mother (33-37; citations are from Thelma Sargent, trans., *The Homeric Hymns*, 1973):

For so long as the goddess looked upon earth
and starry heaven
And the strong-flowering sea full of fish and the
light of the sun,
And hoped still to see her dear mother and the
tribes of the gods everlasting,
So long did hope stifle the fear in her heart.

And, as the eyes of the maiden are upon her mother, so Demeter feels only for Persephone (40-44):

Sharp pain stabbed at the heart of Demeter
And her hands tore at the veiling over her
ambrosial hair;
Then tossing around her shoulder her dusky
blue shawl,
She sped like an eagle in flight over dry land and
water,
Frenzied in search of her child.

The emotional resonance vividly captured by the poet is emblematic of the intimacy between the two goddesses—an intimacy which to the reader of Jung is full of psychological meaning. The reason for this is that, according to Jung and Kerenyi in their *Essays on a Science of Mythology* (1969, 101-83), the figures of Demeter and Persephone represent not two separate characters but rather the two archetypal aspects of feminine consciousness, motherhood and maidenhood. As Jung observed (1969, 162):

We could . . . say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. . . . A woman lives earlier as a mother, later as a daughter.

In the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* the intimacy of the divine pair is so deep and exclusive that in a real way Persephone is the daughter of Demeter and hers alone; even the etymology of Demeter's name underscores her quintessential motherhood. Father Zeus, to whom ironically the maiden appeals for help (verse 21), is a distant, unsympathetic figure, the one who in fact engineered the abduction of his own child in order to gratify his brother (Richardson, 1974, 138).

The dissolution of the mother-maiden union at the hands of the male has been interpreted in a number of ways. Marilyn Arthur (1977, 11) sees it as "a statement of domination by the male, Olympian order over the female world." Desmonde (1952, 210-14) sees a connection with the defloration ceremonies of primitive female puberty rites, while Lincoln (1979) speaks of Persephone's rape in terms of initiation into mature womanhood. While all these views are to some extent correct, in the language of the Jungian school the separation between mother and daughter may be read as individuation. According to this notion, the child who is born undifferentiated and with an identity closely fused to that of the parent will in the natural course of events develop into a unique and independent personality. Through this process of individuation the child lessens his ties with the parent in order to grow into his own identity. Rites of passage are part of this process, and it is natural to understand these passages from one state of being into another as types of death (Jacobi, 1967, 62). Marriage is a central rite of passage in the life of a woman and one that holds repercussions not only for herself but also for her mother (Vernant, 1965, 103). For it goes without saying that the bride's union with her husband necessitates a separation or at least a distancing between mother and daughter. On this point the observation of Helen Luke is relevant (1982, 30):

There is an immense difference between the mother-son and the mother-daughter experience. . . . In the natural pattern of development the boy will feel his separateness from his mother by reason of his masculinity much sooner than the girl and will begin striving for achievement. Everywhere, however, before the twentieth century, the growing girl remained at home contained in the orbit of her mother until the time came for her to become a mother herself and so to reverse the role.

When this intimate union between parent and child is shattered by the intruding husband, the emotions, which are often not consciously recognized, are those experienced by Persephone and Demeter, namely, grief, fear, and rage. For marriage, normally thought of as a festive and joyous event for all concerned, does indeed require that previously established relationships in the family structure undergo some adjustments. These are not always easy or painless. In Demeter's case they have cosmic repercussions, as Zeitlin points out (1982, 148): "In fact, the initiation of the daughter into the mysteries of sexuality provokes the angry response of the mother which affects the fertility of the land." It is this darker, more painful aspect of marriage which is the focus of the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.

Another element in the poem worth commenting upon is the identity of Persephone's husband and the manner of her introduction to married life. It is no accident that the husband here is the god of death and that the marriage is initiated by violence. What we have in this narrative element is what Neumann calls one of the central archetypes of the feminine mysteries—the marriage of death (1971, 62). This is the motif in which either a maiden dies on her wedding day or a maiden's marriage is an encounter with death. Another common variation of the story is the maiden who becomes, not a bride, but a sacrificial victim to some monster or beast. Greek myth abounds with examples: Eurydice, the wife of Orpheus, who died on her wedding day; Alcestis, whose fate was determined the day she married Admetus; Iphigenia, lured to her death by her father's promise of marriage; and Antigone, whose marriage to death received sublime poetic expression at the hands of Sophocles. This list, which is by no means exhaustive, illustrates the frequency of the theme and has prompted many to see in it a universal significance.

A partial explanation for the recurrence of the marriage of death motif in Greek myth lies, no doubt, in the primitive custom of acquiring brides by abduction—a practice well attested in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Bruce Lincoln (1979, 228) has analyzed its significance in the context of male-centered and misogynist cultures. According to the Jungian school, however, the roots of the image lie not merely in this historical phenomenon but rather in the essential nature of the feminine psyche and its development when the woman undergoes the passage from maidenhood to wifehood. We can appreciate better the psychological impact of this change if we consider the situation of women in ancient Greek society, where girls were often given in marriage at age twelve or thirteen to men two or three times their age (cf. Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 7-10). We need only recall those examples of Greek dedicatory verse in which we hear of young girls dedicating to Artemis the dolls and toys of their childhood as a prelude to entering married life. One can understand that for girls like these the change from maiden to wife must have been drastic and, in many cases, accompanied by trauma. Says Neumann (1971, 64),

It becomes particularly clear how decisive the transition from maiden-flower to fruit-mother must be in the life of the feminine, when we consider how quickly women age under primitive conditions, how quickly the strength of the fertile mother is consumed by hard work. The transition from girlhood to womanhood is always felt more keenly where, as so frequently happens, a carefree youth is immediately followed by the constraint and regularity of adulthood and marriage.

Marriage as a type of death, then, is a perfectly comprehensible image for this particular rite of passage which spells death for one phase of life and the birth of another. And so it was with Persephone who in one shattering moment was transformed from a carefree maiden picking blossoms with her companions into the wife of the Lord of the Dead.

It is a significant element in the story that the relationship between groom and bride does not have a

happy ending. They never develop into a loving couple and time does not heal the girl's resentment. When Hermes goes down to the underworld this is what he sees (342-44):

He came upon Hades, lord of the realm, inside
his palace,
Seated upon a couch with his unwilling bride,
A tender maiden who longed for her mother.

Hades does not succeed in displacing Demeter from the center of his wife's affections; Persephone finds joy again only when reunited with her mother (434-36):

Then all day long, with their hearts in
agreement, they basked
In each other's presence, embracing with love
and forgetful of sorrow,
And each received joy from the other and gave
joy in return.

This restoration, however, is not without encumbrance. It is the result of a compromise which, like all such solutions, satisfies neither party completely and at best achieves a *modus vivendi*. Persephone will spend only two-thirds of the year with her mother and the rest with her husband. That is because Hades tricked her into eating seeds of the pomegranate, a fruit highly symbolic of both male and female sexuality (Kerenyi, 1967, 143-49; Arthur, 1977, 29; Lincoln, 1979, 234). Having once experienced the marriage of death and having tasted of the fruit that brings new knowledge, she cannot revert to being simply the naive and innocent daughter of Demeter. Husband and mother now have a claim on her and she must divide herself between the two. There is, however, a great irony in the marriage of Persephone and Hades in that their union remains forever barren. While nearly all marriages and even the most casual sexual encounters in Greek myth produce offspring, the union of this couple will be childless—a fact all the more striking given that Persephone is a fertility goddess. She becomes fruitful only when she is apart from Hades and in the company of her mother—and there on a cosmic scale.

The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, for all its beauty and exultation at the prospect of the maiden's return, dwells in large part on sorrow, loss, and resentment, in short, on the shadow side of marriage and individuation. These tensions, often difficult to admit consciously and even more difficult to resolve, receive sensitive and candid expression in the poem. We see here myth serving one of its many possible functions, the palliation of tensions (Kirk, 1974, 74). By giving shape to these feelings in mythic terms, by projecting them onto the gods, human beings can experience a catharsis. Thus, the story serves both as a reflection of genuine human emotions and as an anodyne for them.

One may profitably compare the story of Demeter and Persephone with that of Cupid and Psyche. This latter tale, as related by Apuleius, has often been interpreted as an allegory—a natural interpretation, given the names of the principal characters and the course of the story's development. Properly classified as a folktale (Walsh, 1970, 193), the story bears a number of resemblances to the account in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, especially when viewed from a Jungian per-

spective (an approach whose groundwork has been laid by Erich Neumann's *Amor and Psyche* [1971], where, however, as Walsh cautions [p. 220], the interpretation "relates more to the wellsprings of the original folk-tale than to any conscious aims of Apuleius himself"). Both tales treat basically the same problems and tensions. In the Cupid and Psyche story we see again a central mother figure resisting the marriage of her child; the child (in this case, a son) is in the process of individuation from the parent; and again the focus of the story is on a girl making the transition from maiden to wife. As the events of the narrative unfold, the characters find themselves coping with the same emotions of anxiety, grief, and resentment. In contrast to the hymn, however, this tale has a very different denouement—a happy ending. It will be instructive to explore the interplay of the archetypes which lead to this result.

When the story opens we see Psyche at exactly the same point of development as Persephone. She is young, beautiful, nubile, and, though she has no intimation of it, she is on the threshold of a rite of passage. The remarkable element in the narrative is that, even though Psyche's husband will be the very god of love, a deity as different as possible from Hades, her marriage nonetheless like that of Persephone's will be a marriage of death. Apuleius's handling of the story highlights this motif from the outset, for the oracle to Psyche's father expressly predicts the girl's wedding in funereal terms (4.33):

montis in excelsi scopulo, rex, siste puellam
ornatam mundo funerei thalami
nec speres generum mortali stirpe creatum,
sed saevum atque ferum vipereumque malum.

O king, dress the girl in the garb of the deadly marriage-chamber and place her on the crag of a high mountain. Nor hope for any son-in-law born of mortal stock, but rather a snaky monster, savage and wild.

The imagery of the marriage of death receives further elaboration with the rite that fulfills the oracle's command. For when the maiden is led out for the funeral which should have been a wedding, Apuleius says (4.34), *vivum producitur funus et lacrimosa Psyche comitatur non nuptias sed exequias suas* ("A living funeral goes forth and in tears Psyche attends not her marriage but rather her own burial rites"). In addition, Apuleius in this passage emphasizes all the ironies inherent in the situation: funereal wedding torches, ululation replacing the hymeneal, and the bridal veil used to wipe away tears.

Besides the archetype of the marriage of death another common denominator in the two stories is the element of abduction. Even though Cupid's methods of securing a bride are very different from those of Hades, Psyche's marriage nonetheless has its beginnings in an act of rape. And just as Persephone's first encounter with male sexuality held for her associations

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of fear, so Psyche's pre-nuptial anxieties receive concrete expression in her imaginings that her lover is a snaky monster. Of the sources of this image Barchilon aptly observes (1959, 27):

The very existence of the monster in the Psyche myth and in the fairy tale has a meaning. There must be a reason for the human mind to associate sex with bestiality. The idea of falling in love has dangerous connotations; it is tainted with the taboos and prohibitions from childhood. For the child consciously thinks that sex is terrible. And as he grows, he cannot quite readily reconcile himself to the simple truth that sex is not terrifying. This belief is prohibited by conventions which cannot allow that sex is "normal." Thus it is no wonder that in fantasies, dreams, and fairy tales sex is presented as dangerous and readily symbolized as "the monster."

Psyche's marriage then has much in common with that of Persephone: both are abductions represented as the death of maidenhood and in each instance the maiden experiences fear of the mysterious male. The difference, however, is that, while Persephone's relationship with Hades remains frozen as a marriage of death, Psyche's union with Cupid develops and undergoes a profound transformation. For Psyche outgrows her anxieties and changes from the helpless victim into a mature woman able to love freely and even to endure suffering for the sake of her spouse. At one point she says to her invisible lover (5.6), *sed prius centies moriar quam tuo isto dulcissimo conubio caream* ("I would sooner die a hundred deaths than give up the sweetest of marriages with you"). This is an astounding reversal on the part of Psyche and one unimaginable in the relationship between Persephone and Hades. The vow Psyche makes with these words she later fulfills in her act of *catabasis* when she faces the supreme test and for the sake of her husband braves death itself. It is this courage of hers which brings the rite of passage to a triumphant conclusion, as she in her own right wins the love of Cupid and even the blessing of his mother. The transition comes to completion with the conception of her child Voluptas or Pleasure, a name especially significant to those who interpret the story as allegory (Tatum, 1979, 89, n. 78). Thus, what began as a marriage of death gives way in the end, after a number of vicissitudes and trials, to a celebration of life.

The mother in the story is Venus. Like Demeter she is distressed at the prospect of losing her child. Her nature is otherwise very different, however, from that of her counterpart in the Homeric Hymn. Jealous, enraged, cruel, and manipulative throughout most of the story, Venus represents what Jungians mean by the Terrible Mother and has parallels with what Walsh (1970, 200, n. 4) calls "the folk-tale queen whose hitherto peerless beauty is excelled by that of a simple maiden." Toward her son she is possessive and intrusive as she attempts to enlist him in order to dispose of her supposed rival. Her rage reaches a pitch of frenzy when she discovers that her *paelex* has become the very object of her son's affections. There is even a hint of the oedipal as she uses her maternal love to manipulate Cupid (4.31). Thus her request to her son to kill Psyche is tinged with incestuous eroticism (*osculis hiantibus*

filium diu ac pressule saviata: "kissing her son long and hard with open lips"). Threatened by the loss of control over her son, who is himself in the process of individuation from her, she vents her anger upon the maiden in a show of pettiness and jealousy. Hence the series of tasks which she imposes on her future daughter-in-law. The psychology of the mother at work in this situation is well summarized by Bettelheim (1982, 57):

A mother's love for her son and her jealous rage against the girl he prefers to her can be openly acknowledged. That the young girl surpasses the mature woman in beauty, that a son turns away from his mother to embrace his bride, that a bride has to suffer from the jealousy of her lover's mother—all this, although extremely troublesome, accords with normal human emotions, and is in line with the natural conflict of the generations.

Like Demeter in the hymn, Venus here resists an accommodation with the child's spouse because it threatens to disrupt the parent-child relationship. While Demeter's antipathy toward her son-in-law remains unmitigated, Venus, for all the intensity of her hatred throughout most of the story, ultimately works through her negative emotions and comes to terms with the inevitable. In fact, her acceptance of Psyche goes beyond mere resignation to a joyous embracing of her daughter-in-law—a transformation which signals her own change from the Terrible Mother into the Good Mother. How appropriate then the story's final vision of Venus dancing at the wedding feast of her son and his wife—a touch of Alexandrian burlesque, which Apuleius uses to good advantage (Walsh, 1970, 216).

Such is the story of Cupid and Psyche from the perspective of the mother. From the viewpoint of her son it is clear that the marriage is a journey into maturity which he can achieve only at the cost of individuation from his mother. At the beginning of the tale he is a child, irresponsible, immature, and subject to maternal whim (4.30):

et vocat confestim puerum suum pinnatum illum et satis temerarium, qui malis suis moribus contempta disciplina publica, flammis et sagittis armatus, per alienas domos nocte discurrens et omnium matrimonia corrumpens impune committit tanta flagitia, et nihil prorsus boni facit.

She calls at once her winged son, a wanton boy, who flouting public decency because of his naughty character, visits others' houses by night, armed with fire and shafts, and corrupts everyone's marriage with impunity. He perpetrates so many outrages, all the while never doing anything good.

But Cupid, like all the other principals in the story, does not remain a static character. As his intimacy with Psyche matures and his dependence on his mother decreases, he changes from the impish brat familiar from Hellenistic art and literature into a responsible and independent adult. By the end of the story he is a fully differentiated person capable of being a loving husband to Psyche and a good father to his child. We recall that when he first abducted Psyche he was an invisible lover who kept her in his palace as a captive

object of pleasure. But as Psyche changed from passive victim to mature, loving woman a parallel process was taking place in Cupid, so much so that he was willing to keep on loving Psyche even after being wounded by her, even after having his trust violated. Schooled by the suffering love can bring, Cupid in the end is an adult capable of genuine emotional and spiritual intimacy with his wife. No longer his mother's minion, no longer the faceless nocturnal visitor, he is a loving husband and father who allows his wife to see him face to face. And, happily for all concerned, he is also at peace with his mother.

The Cupid and Psyche tale and the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* deal in large part with the same universal themes of rites of passage and the psychological dynamics in changing familial relationships. The Greek myth, despite the ultimate reunion of mother and daughter, dwells on the shadow side of marriage, since Persephone's union with Hades remains a marriage of death from beginning to end. Apuleius's tale, though recognizing the darker elements, depicts all the major characters as passing beyond their pain, grief, and immaturity into an acceptance of the rite of passage and its consequences. It is, therefore, a more dynamic and more satisfying story psychologically because what began as a marriage of death is eventually transformed into what a marriage should be, a source of life. In both stories the maiden and the mother are of central importance, and when seen in Jungian terms as archetypes, they illustrate one reason why the traditional tales of classical antiquity endure: they are universal symbols illuminating our own human experience.

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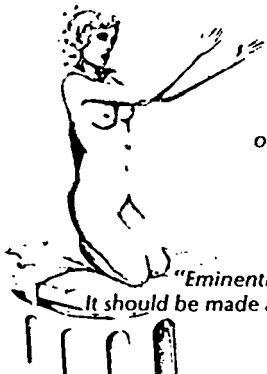
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