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## Patriarchy and the Power of Myth: Exploring the Significance of a Matriarchal Prehistory

Grace Varada Brandmaier  
Bard College, [gb7392@bard.edu](mailto:gb7392@bard.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Brandmaier, Grace Varada, "Patriarchy and the Power of Myth: Exploring the Significance of a Matriarchal Prehistory" (2015). *Senior Projects Spring 2015*. 119.  
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Patriarchy and the Power of Myth:  
Exploring the Significance of a Matriarchal Prehistory

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
Grace Brandmaier

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2015

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my advisor, Richard Davis for being a great source of support and motivation.

I also would like to extend my gratitude towards professors Carolyn Dewald and Maria Cecire for their wonderfully engaging classes and insightful comments, which motivated to study this topic.

I could not have started this journey without Kristin Scheible; she inspired me to pursue much more than just my senior project.

Thank you to my loving, supportive family who gave me the opportunity to study at this incredible institution.

My dear friends, I could not have done Bard without you. You mean everything to me!

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## Introduction

The Hindu religious tradition I grew up with placed a strong emphasis on the value of modesty and chastity, especially for women. Over my last two years of high school I attended a small boarding school in Northern India. This school prided itself on its upholding of traditional Indian values. As extraordinary a place it was, I struggled with the many reminders that, as a young woman, I was responsible for the way people perceived me, and engaged with me, and that I had to keep all aspects of my sexuality controlled. Although I understand why the strict enforcement of rules regarding sexual expression at a boarding school might be necessary, the constant emphasis was at times stifling. The daily newspapers in India that we read between classes described the epidemic of “honor killings” in the country, these are the murder of young couples that come together outside of the system of arranged marriage. They are most often committed by the families of the couples to preserve the family honor. This practice opened my eyes to the destructive consequences of rigid sexual control.

For years I wondered, How did religion get the authority to control sex? Why should chastity be so important for women but not for men? What part did religion play in the societal institutionalization of the control of female sexuality? When did virginity/ and chastity become so important, and why only for women and not for men? If sex assignment is up to chance, why do we so highly reward the half of the population that carries a Y chromosome? How did we come to value men more?

Traditionally, a woman’s value lies not in her intellectual and creative capacity but in her biological function as a reproducer. Thus her sexuality—specifically her chastity and her reproductive capacity—define who she is and limit what she can do. This is particularly true in a

system where power is inherited, so the control of women's sexual behavior becomes the possession of power. The ability to create is powerful; men can acquire reproductive power by controlling women. Objectification is linked to the reduction of one's function as an individual and serves for the control of women.

Through myth and the institutionalization of cultural beliefs and practices, religion has created a foundation for women's subordination today. Religions worldwide have perpetuated the tradition of sexual control through time to maintain and amplify the inferiority of women. The practice of child brides, controlling virginity, women's dependence on men, female infanticide, marital control for racial purity, the indictment of female reproductive impurity, and the condemnation of women as sexually deviant have all contributed to contemporary social gender issues.

In this paper I have chosen to approach this subject by examining the works of four authors: *When God was a Woman* (1976) by Merlin Stone; *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) by Gerda Lerner; *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1989) by Riane Eisler; and *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (2005) by Rosemary Ruether. The first part of this analysis is a literature review of these four central authors and their theories that explain the story of the origins of matriarchy/patriarchy. Each theorist studies the evolution of sex-related power dynamics in religion in these selected works. For each author I explore her theory of the original social structure of human civilization, how this developed from early uncivilized mankind, and how it developed into the patriarchal one in which we live today. Finally, I look at each author's solution for female oppression under patriarchy.

I was so moved by these texts, and the more I learned, the more I wanted to understand. What is so important about the existence of an origin story where women are valued? Why are origin stories so central to constructing a world-view and a personalized self-concept?

The effects of the stories we tell do not go away, even long after we stop telling those stories. In the same way that a good novel, whether fiction or nonfiction, can have a great impact on the life of a reader, reading a history in which the circumstances of sexual social order are different than reality is powerful for the female audiences exposed to the stories. A story does not have to be real in order to make a lasting impression, and the reader does not have to believe that the story is real in order for it to make such an impression. Story serves as a tool for entertainment and education, though it frequently does both at the same time, and it is in fact through story that learning is often communicated most effectively. For whatever reason, whether among young children or a nation of peoples, narratives are powerful instruments for social conditioning.

This concept plays an important role in feminist scholarship in terms of the personal drive it evokes in bringing feminist authors to write, the topics they write about, and their intended impact on target audiences. In the course of this research there are three central points that I believe these texts underscore powerfully, and that I think provide avenues for further research on the subject. First, origin stories play an important role in society. Second, the pursuit of matriarchy is empowering. Third, women need a foundational life philosophy and system of belief, more than patriarchal mythology, as we move forward.



Merlin Stone

*When God Was a Woman*

Merlin Stone was a sculptor, an art historian, and a professor, who devoted over ten years to researching her book *When God Was a Woman* (1976). In this text Stone discusses the underlying male bias that exists in scholarship, the powerful influence of myth on society, the historical control of female sexuality, and the impact of the myth of Eve's betrayal on the Western world today. Her main argument, however, is that the patriarchal religion of the Hebrews systematically destroyed the prevailing tradition of goddess worship that came before it. She uses a variety of historical, archaeological, and textual evidence to support her arguments, but she leans most heavily on her discoveries in the interpretation of artwork.

Stone asserts that religion, culture, and civilization started much earlier than the historical periods we discuss today (Stone, 109), suggesting that Goddess worship existed anywhere from 7000 BCE to 500 CE and that it can be traced back as early as the Paleolithic Age around 25,000 BCE (Stone, xii). Stone argues that, in the Western world, patriarchy was a social structure that came after matriarchy by the systematic eradication of the matriarchal goddess-worshipping culture, and that little historical evidence remains to prove it. She finds evidence for this in the descriptions of the first holy religious attendants in Sumeria. The high priestesses were believed to be the incarnation of the Goddess Inanna, who had disposable consorts that were referred to as "kings" (Stone, 132). This practice of holy union between the divine, through the priestess, and humankind, through her lover, she interprets as an expression of female superiority. She suggests that the annual ritual death of the consort was to enforce loyalty of the young man to the priestess—a practice later replaced by a less severe form of

sexual control, castration (Stone, 148). The killing of a young man, or his emasculation, in order to control him sexually does suggest a measure of superiority. However, it is possible that this symbolic sexual control did not hold universal value. Moreover Stone's interpretation of the ritual death could be a gynocentric reversal of the myth of the annually killed and reborn king described by James Frazer. Stone supports her perspective by explaining that there is a strong correlation between cultural goddess-worship and women being well-respected in society, arguing that the gender of the deity in power would probably reflect the gender in power of the time (Stone, 4,30).

Elaborating upon her thesis, Stone describes the overtaking of Goddess culture by patriarchal culture in Greece (Stone, 52), the overtaking of advanced goddess culture in the Indian subcontinent by patriarchal Aryans who wrote the early Vedas (Stone, 70), and the relentless wiping out of idol worship—goddess worship—that was written in the Old Testament (Stone, 9). These historical cultural shifts, she says, lay the foundation for the oppressive patriarchal culture of today. Stone contends that when a supreme god creates man in *his* image, and woman *for* man, it has an effect on the society over which this god “rules”, and that even in a decidedly secular environment children grow up with an understanding of which gender is in power (Stone, xi). Stone emphasizes the power of myth (Stone, 4) and how stories teach children to emulate and avoid stories of reward and punishment, respectively (Stone, 5).

“Myths present ideas that guide perception, conditioning us to think and even perceive in a particular way, especially when we are young and impressionable. ... They define good and bad, right and wrong, what is natural and what is unnatural among the people who hold the myths as meaningful. It was quite apparent that the myths and legends that grew from, and were propagated by, a religion in which the deity was female, and revered as wise, valiant, powerful and just, provided very different images of womanhood from those which we are offered by the male-oriented religions of today” (Stone, 4-5).

The influence of religion and philosophy on a culture, the founding ideas that make up the consciousness of a society, runs so much deeper than what its members decide it to be. The impact of remembered history is very strong and very deep. This she insists.

The myth of male supremacy is reinforced with stories; the myth of the Betrayal in the Garden of Eden was the beginning of sexual shame (Stone, 218)—an explanation for sexual shame that is especially relevant for women. A section titled “Serpents, Sycamores and Sexuality” (Stone, 216) explains that the female creator Goddess taught sexual reproduction; that asherah/asherim poles were symbols of goddess worship hated by the Hebrews; and that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the provider of sexual consciousness—the secret of life (Stone, 217). Stone points out that a woman coming from a man’s rib is reverse birth—creation of woman by man. There is power in creation and she argues that there was probably a political motivation for power and control underlying this mythology (Stone, 219). The myth of Eve’s betrayal was, according to Stone, designed to continue the suppression of the goddess religion even after a historical shift occurred (Stone, 198). In this myth, the blame for the Loss of Paradise falls on Eve and subsequently upon all women forever after (Stone, xiii). There is guilt and shame in women’s identification with Eve, a dehumanization of the female through dominance. Stone discusses the cultural phenomenon of personal blame and punishment applied to women for having been born with their sex (Stone, 5). She links the establishment of the beliefs of women as foolish, inferior, and needing to be controlled to the myth of Eve’s betrayal (Stone, 6).

At the end of the book Stone cites a plethora of blatantly sexist and misogynistic verses from Jewish and Christian scripture and of eighteenth and nineteenth century feminist scholars who spoke out against this abuse. “...Eve’s sin and punishment continued universally to explain

the right of men to oppress and subjugate women” (Stone, 231). Even though we might believe that our culture is separate from religion, the present day consequences of sexist doctrine on society are prominent and often devastating. The present day victim blaming in sexual assault cases are linked to a culture whose gender ideals were structured on the myth of the Blame of Eve. “When the ancient sources of the gender stereotyping of today are better understood, the myth of the Garden of Eden will no longer be able to haunt us” (Stone, 241).

Stone criticises historians, archeologists, and scholars who have called themselves objective and have simultaneously trivialized, ignored, and disrespected goddess-worship. She points out where scholars have openly held double-standards for the sexual behavior of deities, based on gender—whereas sexually promiscuous (and blatantly aggressive or violent) gods are described as “playful,” sexually promiscuous goddesses are described as “improper,” “harlots,” and “void of morals.” Furthermore, she writes that they reduced female religion to a “fertility cult” (Stone, xix) and called its priestesses “ritual prostitutes.” (Stone, xx). Describing a deity as “void of morals” indicates a serious lack of objectivity, indicated by the scholars’ comments and the overt shaming of female sexuality, and demonstrates Stone’s argument that, even with the intention of being objective, scholars are affected by the patriarchal traditions of their culture.

Ironically, Stone is guilty of some of the same projection of modern constructs onto early Western history as the scholars she criticises. This by no means reduces the importance of the arguments she is making, however, a close look at her evidence for the existence of matriarchy reveals the complex nature of presenting a truly unbiased and objective perspective. Encouraged by an unstable foundation of evidence, because this history is so ancient, Stone has a great amount of room for interpreting her findings from the past through her own modern lens and making assumptions founded in both objective and subjective lines of thought. Having studied

the work of Leo Steinberg, an art historian who developed the term *textist* to describe scholars' dismissal of visual evidence in favor of text, I want to emphasize that Stone falls short not in her use of artwork for evidence, but in an interpretation that is not fully substantiated. Even through her critical lens, like so many of the scholars informed by androcentrism who came before her, Stone applies the limits of a modern view of divisions of the sexes into an incompatible context, especially so because of the fast nature of the changes of social reality. This isn't to say that her matriarchal structure of society is not possible. Just as we do not know if the modern androcentric model that has historically been applied to the reconstruction of early human history is applicable, we cannot know if her approach is applicable.

Aside from the matter of difficulty in interpreting ancient practices and attempting to apply significance without understanding them fully, Stone's work is undeniably important. In writing this book, Stone's intention was not to create a historical text (Stone, xxv), but to push for a shift in consciousness among women in order to break from the overpowering androcentrism of the past and the present. In this regard, her work has been a huge success. She wrote *When God Was a Woman* with the intention of inviting women to cut through oppressive patriarchal beliefs (Stone, xxv) and explore today's sexual stereotypes through historical context (Stone, xxvi). This text has inspired countless women, scholars and researchers operating in the world of academia, as well as lay persons, to break out of society's constructed norms for women. Stone writes to challenge the biases of Western male-dominated culture that are still undeniably prominent today. Her intention is not to create a flawless text but to open the mind of her audience to a shift in perspective—one that is no longer androcentric, but strives for equality.

Gerda Lerner

*The Creation of Patriarchy*

Gerda Lerner was a professor and historian of 19th century America who focused on the study of Women's History. She wrote *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986) after 25 years of research (Lerner, 7). In terms of the original social structure of humankind, Lerner argues not for matriarchy—rule by women, but for matriliney, lineage traced through women, and matrilocality, the social custom of newlyweds moving to the parental house of the bride. Her principal argument is that patriarchy is not a result of biology but a consequence of history and is, thus, only a temporary circumstance. Additionally, her theory, although it aims to be general and thus more widely applicable, is specifically about the Western world.

Lerner writes that the problem with feminist theory lies in its being ahistoric, which she attributes to a “conflict-ridden and highly problematic” relationship between women and history (Lerner, 3). She maintains that there is a crucial difference between the unrecorded past of humankind known as history and humankind's ‘recorded interpretation’ of the past, which we also refer to as history (this she differentiates with an upper-case “H”). Lerner explains, “...whether priests, royal servants, clerks, clerics, or a professional class of university-trained intellectuals, [historians] have selected the events to be recorded and have interpreted them so as to give them meaning and significance. Until the most recent past, these historians have been men, and what they have recorded is what men have done and experienced and found significant. They have called this History and claimed universality for it. What women have done and experienced has been left unrecorded, neglected, and ignored in interpretation” (Lerner, 4). This exclusion of women from constructing the remembered past, one that consequently “tells the

story of half of humanity only” while creating the impression of giving the whole picture, is key to Lerner’s understanding of how women came to be in a position of subordination today (Lerner, 4).

Despite their exclusion from the process of recording history, Lerner rejects the perspective that women are victims of society. “To do so at once obscures what must be assumed as a given of women’s historical situation: Women are essential and central to creating society; they are and always have been actors and agents in history” (Lerner, 5). She further dismisses the traditional patriarchal notion that women’s role as caretakers have prevented them from contributing to the theoretical world (Lerner, 6). Instead of accepting women as passive and as victims, Lerner questions women’s involvement in the construction of patriarchy.

Lerner maintains that “patriarchy as a system is historical: it has a beginning in history. If that is so, it can be ended by historical process” (Lerner, 6). In her research, however, she quickly discovered that looking for an event in history that brought about the shift into patriarchy was not productive. So she shifted her focus from a search for an “overthrow” to the process of transition into institutionalized patriarchy (Lerner, 7). Finding a variation of economic, social, and sexual power in women’s lives in the ancient Near East, Lerner decided that she had to focus more on the roots and consequences of sexual control. She attributes this process to the time between 3100 and 600 BCE (Lerner, 8) as the establishment of divinely and philosophically ordained female inferiority. “It is with the creation of these two metaphorical constructs, which are built into the very foundations of the symbol systems of Western civilization, that the subordination of women comes to be seen as ‘natural,’ hence it becomes invisible. It is this which finally establishes patriarchy firmly as an actuality and as an ideology” (Lerner, 10).

Accordingly, women's participation in the formation of the symbol system is key to their position in society.

In an analogy of men as the directors of the theatrical performance of history, Lerner expands, "men are the judges of how women measure up, men grant or deny admission. They give preference to docile women and to those who fit their job-description accurately. Men punish, by ridicule, exclusion, or ostracism, and woman who assumes the right to interpret her own role or—worst of all sins—the right to rewrite the script" (Lerner, 13). Lerner reasons that it is not in the social push for equality, alone, that equality will come about. Because history has been written, interpreted, and glorified by men, it is in the fundamental structure of society that the problem lies. The solution to sexual inequality, to patriarchy, Lerner maintains, is taking apart the system piece by piece until the structure can no longer hold itself up.

So Lerner begins the process of building an explanation for how female subjugation came about and how to take it apart. She begins by debunking what she refers to as the traditionalist explanation for male supremacy, that it is the natural state of social order because males are physically stronger, more aggressive, and can therefore protect care-oriented vulnerable females. "Feminist anthropologists have recently challenged many of the earlier generalizations, which found male dominance virtually universal in all known societies, as being patriarchal assumptions on the part of ethnographers and investigators of those cultures. When feminist anthropologists have reviewed the data or done their own field work, they have found male dominance to be far from universal" (Lerner, 18). Reinforcing Merlin Stone's argument of androcentric projection and misinterpretation in scholarship, Lerner points to the work of Peter Farb, Sally Slocum, and Michelle Z. Rosaldo, which shows that the classic argument of males as hunters and controllers of the primary food source in hunter gatherer societies is invalid evidence



for male dominance. Most of the group's nourishment in such a society comes from hunting small animals and gathering food, they explain, and these are activities performed by women and children.

Lerner uses the criticism of E. O. Wilson's "scientific" theories of how women are limited in mental capacity by their biological nature to show the flaw in logic of traditionalist thinking. She explains that they are ahistorical and that they do not take developments such as modern technology into account. "Traditionalists ignore technological changes, which have made it possible to bottle-feed infants safely and raise them to adulthood with caretakers other than their own mothers" (Lerner, 20). Advances in medicine have allowed women to give birth to as little as one child with a pretty good chance that it will survive until it can also reproduce. "Nevertheless, traditionalists expect women to follow the same roles and occupations that were functional and species-essential in the Neolithic. They accept cultural changes, by which men have freed themselves from biological necessity. The supplanting of hard physical labor by the labor machines is considered progress. Only women, in their view, are doomed forever to species-service through their biology" (Lerner, 20). Lerner exposes the fallacy that a sexual division of labor is necessary or valid in the modern world and shows the adaptability of the philosophy of male superiority.

Lerner suggests, referencing Elise Boulding's perspective on the man-the-hunter theory, that this perspective has been used to maintain male power. Lerner explains the relentlessness of scholarly justification across time and subject—history, religion, psychology, and medicine—for the inferiority of women. "Traditionalist defenses of male supremacy based on biological-deterministic reasoning have changed over time and proven remarkably adaptive and resilient. When the force of the religious argument was weakened in the nineteenth century, the

traditionalist explanation of women's inferiority became 'scientific'" (Lerner, 18). Where this was once the task of religion, the scientific world has taken over the role of explaining women's inadequacy. This adaptivity illuminates the process by which society maintains patriarchy.

Having repudiated the notion of women's natural, universal, and eternal inferiority, Lerner looks for a possible historical cause, one in which women played an active part. She examines Frederick Engels' Marxist theory: that surplus for the working man brought about private property and inheritance, which required the control of female sexuality for the assurance of true heirs. She reviews the argument of Claude Levi-Strauss: that incest taboos allowed for the objectification of women as pawns in marriage transactions. Unsatisfied, she asks, "How did this happen? Why was it women who were exchanged, why not men or small children of both sexes? Even granting the functional usefulness of the arrangement, why would women have agreed to it?" (Lerner, 25). From here, she moves into a study of early structure of the family in hope of finding an answer.

Lerner breaks down family structure to the most basic relationship: mother and child (Lerner, 38), citing modern theories of human development that credit bipedalism with premature birth of helpless hairless dependent offspring that need protection. This relationship, she claims, causes a strong bond between mother and child and could explain evidence of Neolithic goddess-worship. Lerner brings up James Mellaart's excavations of Hacilar and Catal Huyuk in Anatolia that support an alternative model to patriarchy (Lerner, 33). She struggles, however, with the use of family structure as proof of women's higher status. "Patrilineal descent does not imply subjugation of women nor does matrilineal descent indicate matriarchy" (Lerner, 30), she concludes. Unlike Stone, Lerner finds no evidence in history for matriarchy—which would require power *over* men, power to assign meaning, and control of

male sexuality. Even in anthropological studies of matriliney and matrilocality, she finds that men largely remain the authority (Lerner, 30).

Lerner reviews and pieces together a variety of arguments explaining the control of women by men. She emphasizes the importance of allowing the historical social role of women to be dynamic and a consequence of multiple simultaneous factors (Lerner, 37). Lerner maintains that 'agriculture brings about a shift from matriliney to patriliney, as well as private property' (Lerner, 49). For support, she suggests Elizabeth Fisher's theory that men discovered their importance in reproduction through the domestication and breeding of animals, which led to the sexual dominance of women (Lerner, 46). Lerner explains the drive to control women using the work of Claude Meillassoux, who claims that women are a resource of reproduction and allow for a stronger population, which causes woman theft and intergroup warfare. Whereas men might not be loyal to their new tribes, women, who give birth to new members, were more likely to stay loyal and hence were easier to control (Lerner, 48). Thus, male dominance is born.

Male domination of women, Lerner asserts, then brings about the practice of slavery (Lerner, 77). She draws attention to the position of the female slave and the standard practice of sexual violence and domination against her, an act practiced by victors of conquest for at least two millennia through to this day. Lerner remarks that this practice of sexual exploitation both dishonors the women, through removing their personal agency, and their men who are completely unable to protect them (Lerner, 80). Lerner explains that through rape, through collective traumatic psychological conditioning, the breaking, or domination, of a people is possible. "The very concept of honor, for men, embodies autonomy, the power to dispose of oneself and decide for oneself, and the right to have that autonomy recognized by others. But women, under patriarchal rule, do not dispose of themselves and decide for themselves. Their

bodies and their sexual services are at the disposal of their kin group, their husbands, their fathers. Women do not have custodial claims and power over their children. Women do not have ‘honor’” (Lerner, 80). Through the comparison of women under patriarchy to women as slaves, Lerner shows how women under patriarchy operate psychologically as though they are still slaves because they are not granted power over their own bodies. “By subordinating women of their own group and later captive women, men learned the symbolic power of sexual control over men and elaborated the symbolic language in which to express dominance and create a class of psychologically enslaved persons” (Lerner, 80). Lerner explains that the sexual domination of slave women is a crucial building block of the system of patriarchy, one which would lead to the valuing of women for their virginity.

Lerner takes a closer look at the development of this symbol system of female sexual restriction in the form of Mesopotamian law. “From 1250 BC on, from public veiling to the regulation by the state of birth control and abortion, the sexual control of women has been an essential feature of patriarchal power” (Lerner, 140). This power has reflected the message that women are inferior to men and only valuable through their sexuality. Lerner attributes the increased value of chastity among the elite to the growth of the popularity of prostitution in the ancient Near East (Lerner, 134). This rigid control of women’s sexuality was reflected in the laws of Hammurabi, which require the rapist of a virgin to buy the girl in marriage from her father, or pay for having taken her virginity. If the rapist has a wife, his punishment is additionally that his wife becomes a prostitute. Women were at the disposal of either their fathers or husbands—they were no more than property (Lerner, 117). By taking no action at all, a woman could lose all social respectability and status, and thus, protection, whereas her male counterpart was nearly infallible (Lerner, 140).

Even though the legal system reflected the subjugation of women, goddess-worship remained part of the culture for a long time (Lerner, 141). Lerner does not accept the worship of a female deity as a certain sign of women's empowerment, noting that the devaluation of women was a more complex process. "One cannot help but wonder at the contradiction between the power of the goddesses and the increasing societal constraints upon the lives of most women in Ancient Mesopotamia" (Lerner, 144). The pattern Lerner discovers, like that of agriculture leading to more defined sex roles, is that the establishment of monarchy has an effect on religious ideology. "The observable pattern is: first, the demotion of the Mother-Goddess figure and the ascendance and later dominance of her male consort/son; then his merging with a storm-god into a male Creator-God, who heads the pantheon of gods and goddesses. Wherever such changes occur, the power of creation and of fertility is transferred from the Goddess to the God" (Lerner, 145). Lerner's analysis of religious ideology reveals a development from female superiority to male superiority. However, she resists the interpretation that this shift is a natural mythical shift that reflects social structure. Instead, she suggests that governing forces might have used religion to exert social control. "The shift from the Mother-Goddess to the thunder-god may be more prescriptive than descriptive. It may tell us more about what the upper class of royal servants, bureaucrats, and warriors wanted the population to believe than what the population actually did believe" (Lerner, 158). Whether or not this change in symbols, the shift from female power to male power, was a cause or an effect, there was nonetheless resistance to the change. Evidence of innumerable goddess figurines found in ancient Near Eastern homes leads Lerner to speculate a resistance to male gods (Lerner, 159).

This same symbolic shift to male supremacy, Lerner says, is evident in Genesis in the Old Testament—written by many people, over 400 years, starting around 1000 BCE—which

recount and therefore teach the devaluation of women (Lerner, 162). The biblical description of matrilineal marriage, in the story of Jacob's escape from Laban, reveals a tradition that once gave women more freedom, such as the right to divorce (Lerner, 168). Both Hebrew and Mesopotamian men were sexually unrestricted in marriage, however, women were not — Jewish law was harsher than Hammurabic law for women, because women could not request a divorce and were more vulnerable in incidents of rape accusation, and were forced to marry and unable to be divorced in the case of rape (Lerner, 170). Lerner points out that the story of Lot in Genesis, where Lot offers his virgin daughters to the angry mob threatening to attack his house guests— an action which does not require an explanation before resulting in divine deliverance—reveals the value (or lack thereof) of his daughters' lives. Additionally, it shows how utterly at the mercy of their master, a man, they were (Lerner, 172).

Another such story is told in Judges where a traveller is threatened with attack from a mob. The host offers his virgin daughter and his guest's newly wooed wife/concubine, who they accept and ultimately kill. This story ends with a sense of injustice done to the traveller that Lerner decides reads more as disapproval for the damage of a traveller's property, not because of any emotional value, as the traveller remains unperturbed during her abuse and the host, again, requires no explanation for volunteering his daughter (Lerner, 173-4). There is so much that can be understood from the use of language. The authors of Genesis condemn socio-political disloyalty in such a way that normalizes shame and aggression toward female sexual disloyalty (Lerner, 166). Often the law serves as a set of ideal practices that are not necessarily an accurate reflection of the practices of a certain period. Nonetheless, Lerner argues that the law can be better understood by looking not at what *is* said but by observing what goes *unsaid*, what is taken for granted and thus is understood as not *needed* to be said (Lerner, 171-2).

Lerner continues this argument by pointing out where the authors of Genesis leave out an explanation—in this case for why women, referred to as daughters born of *men*, are not born from women. Not only is lineage tracked from male to male, Lerner explains, but the female part of reproduction is no longer even mentioned (Lerner, 187). Power over a woman's ability to conceive, formerly controlled by goddesses of fertility, is in Genesis controlled by the male god (Lerner, 187-8). "The decisive change in the relationship of man to God occurs in the story of the covenant, and it is defined in such a way as to marginalize woman. ...the ritual of the covenant, circumcision, symbolizes the rededication of each male child, each family to the covenant obligation. It is neither accidental nor insignificant that women are absent from the covenant in each of its aspects" (Lerner, 188). Once again, Lerner emphasizes what is not written in the story of Genesis to show significance. Yahweh brings Sarah up passively as an object of reproduction but excludes her from active participation from his compact, giving all the power of family control to Abraham, the patriarch (Lerner, 190).

Lerner calls given explanations for the invention of circumcision "uniformly unenlightening" (Lerner, 189). A visual depiction from 2300 BCE, which includes a flint knife, suggests that circumcision was a practice that came before the Bronze Age. The practice has been attributed to cleanliness, puberty ritual, symbolic religious sacrifice, and as a marker of difference. Lerner, unsatisfied with these reasons, asked why, in Israel, the practice changed from sexual coming of age to newborn ritual; if it was for differentiation, why was it not in a more noticeable place, and if for hygiene, why was a health practice chosen that was only applicable to men. She concludes that the covenant of circumcision was a symbolic political tool used to unite twelve tribes under an oath of loyalty and patriarchal solidarity (Lerner, 191). "Nothing could better serve to impress man with the vulnerability of this organ and with his

dependence on God for his fertility (immortality). The offering of no other part of the body could have sent so vivid and descriptive a message to man of the connection between his reproductive capacity and the grace of God” (Lerner, 192). In line with Stone’s conjecture, Lerner maintains that circumcision was probably an adaptation of an ancient Mesopotamian practice in which religious devotees gave up their sexuality (either through castration, abstinence, or active ritual service) to the fertility goddess Ishtar.

Lerner maintains that the attribution of creation lies at the heart of the structure of religious ideology. Hence a shift in the power of creation, the power to give life, from a female Goddess to a male God, is significant. The story of Creation in the Garden of Eden shares many similarities with Sumerian creation stories. Compared to the Barton Cylinder, both feature eating of forbidden fruit, creation of a woman associated with the rib who is to be the future source of life, and a knowledgeable snake, but instead of God-the-Father the Sumerian myth features the Mother Goddess (Lerner, 185). In another Mesopotamian creation story in “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” a holy woman’s sexuality has the power to civilize uncivilized man. Additionally the fertility goddess is associated with fruit trees; and a serpent protects the secret of immortality (Lerner, 195). In the context of these symbols, Lerner argues that Adam and Eve are punished for their pursuit of the secret of immortality, which, as a result, is taken from them in return for the ability to reproduce. However, Eve must birth in pain, be subservient to her husband (give in to patriarchy), and become an enemy of the serpent—an act that Lerner interprets as the abandonment of the worship of the fertility-goddess (Lerner, 197). “We need not strain our interpretation to read this as the condemnation by Yahweh of female sexuality exercised freely and autonomously, even sacredly” (Lerner, 197). Lerner is in favor of David Bakan’s conclusion that Genesis is about men’s coming to understand their part in reproduction, and thus, creation,



formerly believed to be a power only of the gods. The symbol of the seed was taken from agricultural metaphor by the Genesis authors to add significance to the male part (Lerner, 189). It allowed for women to be pushed out of the picture where men could then replace women as the central parental figure (Lerner, 185-6).

It is Lerner's belief that the abstract form of creation on the part of the Abrahamic god, through naming and commanding, unlike quite literal creation through the process of childbirth, is inseparable from the construction of the cultural symbol system. God gave Adam the power to name all the animals of the world, including Eve, implying the authority of man over all living things including women who, like all living beings, were created to serve man (Lerner, 181). "The most powerful metaphors of gender in the Bible have been those of Woman, created of Man's rib, and of Eve, the temptress, causing humankind's fall from grace. These have, for over two millennia, been cited as proof of divine sanction for the subordination of women. As such, they have had a powerful impact on defining values and practices in regard to gender relations" (Lerner, 182). Regardless of whether or not the word for humankind, "adam", was supposed to be neutral, implying power given to both men and women, Lerner explains that the masculinization of Adam is now so much a part of the Biblical tradition that it would be hard to separate it from the traditional reading. The primary creation story of Genesis, Lerner insists, blames women for the creation of evil, villainizes female sexual freedom through the serpent, and forces men to be the intermediary between women and the divine (Lerner, 198). This establishes a stable symbolic system, founded in a narrative illustrating the deviance of female sexual and personal freedom, which allows males supreme control.

When "Western civilization rests upon the foundation of the moral and religious ideas expressed in the Bible and the philosophy and science developed in Classical Greece" (Lerner,

199), women have no place, no voice with which to contribute to the construction of what is meaningful. Once left out of creating the story of Creation, women are left without a significant path to pursue their fulfillment.

“Jewish monotheism and Christianity, which built upon it, gave man a purpose and meaning in life by setting each life within a larger, divine plan which unfolded so as to lead man from the Fall to redemption, from mortality to immortality, from fallen man to messiah. Thus, in the Bible we see the development of the first philosophy of history. Human life is given meaning through its unfolding in the historical context, which context is defined as the carrying out of God’s purpose and God’s will. ...Women’s access to the purpose of God’s will and to the unfolding of history is possible only through the mediation of men. Thus, according to the Bible it is men who live and move in history” (Lerner, 201).

Women have no such divine structure to their lives; they are restricted by their lack of higher purpose, dependent upon the ideal of man to make meaning for themselves, valuable only in relation to men. And from this, the first symbolic event in religious “history,” women learn that they are not valuable as individuals but as subjects of, and servants under, men.

Lerner argues for the same permeation of gender symbolism in Classical Greek culture, where women are not counted as citizens and do not participate in constructing symbolism. She contrasts Aristotle’s influential and aggressively misogynistic sexual philosophy against that of Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*, which takes men to be no different from women in any aspect other than the ability to bear children (Lerner, 210). “[Aristotle’s] definitions of women as mutilated males, devoid of the principle of soul, are not isolated but rather permeate [his] biological and philosophical work” (Lerner, 207). Moreover, his reasoning follows that a woman must, because of her physical inferiority, be lacking in intelligence. “With the Bible’s fallen Eve and Aristotle’s woman as mutilated male, we see the emergence of two symbolic constructs which assert and assume the existence of two kinds of human beings—the male and the female—different in their essence, their function, and their potential” (Lerner, 211). Lerner credits these notions, of

women's innate sinfulness and inferiority, as pervading the philosophy of Western society such that they sustain lasting control over women's potential. And because women are not aware of the invisible system that oppresses them, they are powerless against it.

The hidden message of female inferiority sustained through myth and philosophy is, from Lerner's perspective, the reason for women's compliance with patriarchy. She charges misogynistic religious rhetoric; control of women's knowledge through restriction from education and the misrepresentation of history; shaming of female sexual freedom while rewarding female obedience; economic dependence; and force with contributing most directly to women's participation in their own domination (Lerner, 217). "Women have for millennia participated in the process of their own subordination because they have been psychologically shaped so as to internalize the idea of their own inferiority. The unawareness of their own history of struggle and achievement has been one of the major means of keeping women subordinate" (Lerner, 218). Without a concept of the possibility of living differently, Lerner insists, women have not been able achieve one.

Furthermore, in the patriarchal system, women are permanent dependents. Unlike boys, who grow out of their reliance on the father for support, women are simply transferred from one man to the next (Lerner, 218). With this limited history of experience, women could not know their potential. Lerner refers to ardent family loyalty as the greatest motivator in slave rebellion. "'Free' women, on the other hand, learned early that their kin would cast them out, should they ever rebel against their dominance. ... Most significant of all the impediments toward developing group consciousness for women was the absence of a tradition which would reaffirm the independence and autonomy of women at any period in the past" (Lerner, 219). Women had no knowledge of their ability for independence. All of their social conditioning told them that they

could not be independent beings, that they could not support themselves. The narrative of women's dependence, the importance of her sexual control, and the lack of knowledge supporting her capability have served as the strongest obstacles to women's liberation.

In writing *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Lerner contributed to what she held to be a direct solution to the emancipation of women from the bonds of patriarchy. As a professor of Women's History, Lerner taught what patriarchal scholarship had "observed and neglected." The purpose of her writing, she explains, came from her "observation of the profound changes in consciousness which students of Women's History experience. Women's history changes their lives. Even short-term exposure to the past experience of women, such as in two-week institutes and seminars, has the most profound psychological effect on women participants" (Lerner, 3). This, she credits to the human need to explain reality in order to conceptualize potential and possibilities for the future (Lerner, 35). A fantastical vision of matriarchy is therefore unhelpful and unnecessary to her model of social evolution. Lerner supports Michelle Rosaldo's argument that focusing on origins discredits the importance of our social evolution and fixes gender systems as static (Lerner, 37). "To give the system of male dominance historicity and to assert that its functions and manifestations change over time is to break sharply with the handed-down tradition. This tradition has mystified patriarchy by making it a historic, eternal, invisible, and unchanging" (Lerner, 37). Focusing on the historical development of patriarchy assigns it a place in time, and by giving it a beginning, allows for an end.

More important to Lerner than the construction of a myth of matriarchy is the deconstruction of the myth of androcentrism and women's marginality. "Adding women" to the picture is not enough for her. "What it demands for rectification is a radical restructuring of thought and analysis which once and for all accepts the fact that humanity consists in equal parts

of men and women and that the experiences, thoughts, and insights of both sexes must be represented in every generalization that is made about human beings” (Lerner, 220). Lerner demands that women be made central to the human experience in the same way men are.

Lerner’s solution to patriarchy is for society to temporarily move to the other end of the spectrum, to be “woman-centered,” rejecting every impression of women’s insignificance (Lerner, 228). “The basic assumption should be that it is inconceivable for anything ever to have taken place in the world in which women were not involved, except if they were prevented from participation through coercion and repression” (Lerner, 228). This at first, understandably, strange-sounding notion must be true. Women must always have existed and participated actively in society, in history. Women’s contribution is valuable; even their struggle is valuable. In her final words, Lerner calls women to let go of a trait she refers to as the least stereotypically feminine, that is the fear of “intellectual arrogance” (Lerner, 228).

Raine Eisler

*The Chalice and the Blade*

Raine Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade* (1989), is a feminist scholar whose focus is on peace studies. “Weaving together evidence from art, archaeology, religion, social science, history, and many other fields of inquiry into new patterns that more accurately fit the best available data, *The Chalice and the Blade* tells a new story of our cultural origins” (Eisler, xv). Eisler rejects both matriarchy and patriarchy as possibilities of original human social structure. In what she has named her “cultural transformation theory,” Eisler argues for an original system of *partnership* in Western civilization, which shifted into the dominator model of patriarchy with which we are so familiar today. In an approach characteristic of Lerner, Eisler uses new archaeological discoveries to paint a bold and vivid picture of her most convincing version of prehistorical reality. Her approach breaks the problematic dualistic process of pinning matriarchy and patriarchy against one another by thinking with an approach that sets egalitarianism before hierarchy in social evolution.

Eisler holds that patriarchy originated from a sociocultural shift, of the idealization of the power of creation to the idealization of the power of destruction. “The underlying problem is not men as a sex. The root of the problem lies in a social system in which the power of the blade is idealized — in which both men and women are taught to equate true masculinity with violence and dominance and to see men who do not conform to this ideal as ‘too soft’ or ‘effeminate’” (Eisler, xviii). This social system, brought about by Western cultural transformation, emphasizes the differences between the sexes and what qualifies as masculine (hard, rational, independent, destructive, strong) and feminine (soft, irrational, dependent, creative, emotional, weak).

Eisler argues that, unlike many feminist authors before her who focus on the reevaluation of social structure in prehistory, her theory discloses the importance of the subject for society as a whole (i.e. including men). Eisler maintains that “...the roots of our present global crises go back to the fundamental shift in our prehistory that brought enormous changes not only in social structure but also in technology. ...technologies designed to destroy and dominate. This has been the technological emphasis through most of recorded history” (Eisler, xx). In historically “rigidly male-dominated societies” there is a pattern of (large-scale) violence and strict social control (Eisler, xix). Eisler distinguishes between two meanings of “evolution” which, although two very separate concepts are often used as one and the same; these are (1) progress in the direction of improvement, and (2) biological and cultural history (Eisler, xxi).

Eisler indicates the problematic nature of scholarship, which so frequently projects modern androcentric concepts into prehistory. “As a result of what has been quite literally ‘the study of man,’ most social scientists have had to work with such an incomplete and distorted data base that in any other context it would immediately have been recognized as deeply flawed” (Eisler, xviii). She argues that this male-heavy distortion not only affected the first conceptualization of prehistoric peoples, but continues to distort our image of early history despite the addition of new information, which is just adapted to the original model (Eisler, 3). “In keeping with this bias, Paleolithic wall-paintings were interpreted as relating to hunting even when they showed women dancing. Similarly... the evidence of a female-centered anthropomorphic form of worship — such as finds of broad-hipped and pregnant female representations — had to either be ignored or classified as merely male sex objects: obese erotic ‘Venuses’ or ‘barbaric images of beauty’” (Eisler, 4).

Eisler asks why the connections between the prehistoric foundation for a complex system of goddess worship and the tradition of the worship of countless goddesses throughout history have not been recognized. “Again, the question arises of why if these connections are so obvious they have for so long been downplayed, or simply ignored, in conventional archaeological literature” (Eisler, 7). Her first answer is that “they do not fit the proto- and prehistoric model of male-centered and male-dominated form of social organization” (Eisler, 7); her second answer, that most of the supporting evidence was not discovered until after the second World War, well after the concepts had taken root.

This leads Eisler to her follow-up question: Why should someone accept the existence of a social structure other than patriarchy? “One reason is that the finds of female figurines and other archaeological records attesting to a gynocentric (or Goddess-based) religion in Neolithic times are so numerous that just cataloging them would fill several volumes. But the main reason is that this new view of prehistory is the result of a profound change in both methods and emphasis for archaeological investigation” (Eisler, 8). Because of new technologies such as radiocarbon dating, what was once speculation of when certain prehistoric cultural developments occurred are now better understood — and further back than was formerly predicted. Eisler gives the example of the Neolithic period, described as the dawn of agriculture and animal husbandry, as having taken place between 9000-8000 BCE (Eisler, 11). She also emphasizes that although Sumer is, in the general public’s understanding, still the birthplace of civilization, that there were many other such centers that started much earlier than was previously thought (Eisler, 11).

Eisler expresses her surprise at the lack of attention, outside of feminist circles, that has been given to the discovery of the gynocentrism of earliest human society. “Indeed, the prevailing view is still that male dominance, along with private property and slavery, were all



by-products of the agrarian revolution. And this view maintains its hold despite the evidence that, on the contrary, equality between the sexes — and among all people — was the general norm in the Neolithic” (Eisler, 12). Eisler’s evidence for sexual equality and gynocentrism come from the discoveries of feminist archaeologist Marija Gimbutas (whose theories I discuss more fully in the section on R. R. Ruether). Gimbutas’s interpretations of findings support the existence of a complex Neolithic culture in Old Europe, one complete with art, writing, social organization, and technological development (Eisler, 13).

Eisler stresses the harmonious nature of the Old European peoples, citing evidence of 1500 years of peace — without male dominance (Eisler, 14). She uses Neolithic artwork to provide support for the existence of a non-violent culture, emphasizing that what is not present in the pictures reveals as much as what is shown. “In sharp contrast to later art, a theme notable for its absence from Neolithic art is imagery idealizing armed might, cruelty, and violence-based power” (Eisler, 17). There are no scenes of war or conquest and no slavery or domination. Moreover she finds no evidence for graves indicating social hierarchy, and no evidence for weapons in the graves (Eisler, 17-18). Instead, the settlement of Catal Huyuk is filled with representations of the Labrys, serpents, bulls, and bull skulls, all associated with the Goddess; there are also explicit depictions of a pregnant and birthing Mother Goddess, one who is sometimes giving birth to a bull (Eisler, 18,19,22,23). Often she is accompanied by powerful animals such as leopards and particularly bulls (Eisler, 19). Eisler interprets these symbols as revealing an ideology of nurturance and abundance. “And if the central religious image was a woman giving birth and not, as in our time, a man dying on a cross, it would not be unreasonable to infer that life and the love of life — rather than death and the fear of death — were dominant

in society as well as art” (Eisler, 20-21). Beyond a harmonious religious model, she maintains that this Neolithic artwork indicates a peaceful civilization and high social status for women.

Eisler holds that societies with supreme male deities are expressive of patriliney and patrilocality, whereas supreme female deities represent matriliney and matrilocality (Eisler, 24). She recognizes that when scholars could not find enough evidence to support matriarchy, they went back to an assumption of patriarchy. She, however, argues that prehistory was neither matriarchal or patriarchal, but egalitarian and gynocentric. Although women certainly had more authority, “...there is little indication that the position of men in this social system was in any sense comparable to the subordination and suppression of women characteristic of the male-dominant system that replaced it” (Eisler, 25). The greatest evidence of their lesser rank, other than their relative marginality to women, that she can find is that men had smaller sleeping quarters than women (Eisler, 25). Eisler argues that despite a culture showing evidence of matriliney, Goddess-worship, and women in authoritative or leadership roles, it does not have to be matriarchal. Moreover, she holds that men did not have to be inferior just because women were valued. Using the example of their clothing that revealed breasts and male genitalia, she explains that the approach to sexuality centered around appreciating differences (Eisler, 39).

Like Catal Huyuk, the well-developed culture of Minoan Crete, which began around 6000 BCE, featured the Supreme goddess and rule by a female intermediary to the Goddess (Eisler, 30). Again, the hunting, scenes of war, male deities, and male rulership, indicative of kingship are all absent from Minoan art (Eisler, 37). Eisler does, however, insist that just because the ideology of Neolithic times might have been more peaceful does not mean that it was completely void of expressions of aggression, pointing to the possibility of the practice of human sacrifice (Eisler, 74). Eisler draws attention to scholars who have noted the link between Crete’s

history of peace and the lack of interest in depicting violence in art (Eisler, 37). Scholars point out that peace and sensitivity were of the utmost importance to Cretan society, and that women were well valued throughout society for their participation, but it is not presented as though it is of any importance. Eisler makes the observation that just as the black ethnicity of Egyptian pharaohs was trivialized by white male scholars, so has been the value of women in Crete (Eisler, 40).

Eisler follows Gimbutas's explanation for a sudden overtaking of the peaceful goddess-worshipping society of Old Europe by the Kurgans, a violent group of patriarchal northerners who possessed metal weapons and rode horses (Eisler, 46). "At the core of the invaders' system was the placing of higher value on the power that takes, rather than gives, life. This was the power symbolized by the 'masculine' Blade, which early Kurgan cave engravings show these Indo-European invaders literally worshipped. For in their dominator society, ruled by gods — and men — of war, this was the supreme power" (Eisler, 48). This violent overwhelm of Gimbutas's peaceful Europeans was the reason for the shift from partnership to dominator model of society throughout Western civilization (Eisler, 47). This is then reflected in a shift in religious symbolism — of the sacred blade. "Perhaps most significant is that in the representations of weapons engraved in stone, stela, or rocks, which also only begin to appear *after* the Kurgan invasions, we now find what Gimbutas describes as 'the earliest known visual images of Indo-European warrior gods'" (Eisler, 48-49). Eisler argues that the worship of the brutal blade, backed up by archaeological evidence, indicated regular practices of violence, large-scale bloodshed, and ownership of other humans (Eisler, 49).

Eisler calls attention to the discovery that sometimes the majority of the women in a Kurgan group were from a different group, likely captives from battle, a practice she compares to

the Old Testament tradition of keeping virgins girls alive as sex slaves after battle (Eisler, 49). Hierarchical burial evidence appeared along with the Kurgans, complete with lower ranking women-property: “Among these contents, for the first time in European graves, we find along with an exceptionally tall or large-boned male skeleton the skeletons of sacrificed women — the wives, concubines, or slaves of the men who died. ... [This practice] appears for the first time west of the Black Sea at Suvorovo in the Danube delta ” (Eisler, 50). Along with the buried warrior-men, a variety of weapons, pig tusks, bull horns, and dog skeletons can be found (Eisler, 50-51).

“After the initial period of destruction and chaos, gradually there emerged the societies that are celebrated in our high school and college textbooks as marking the beginnings of Western civilization” (Eisler, 56). As Eisler reviews the development of Western civilization, she notes the growing celebration of the increasingly explicit depictions of violence in artwork: “The extent of their barbarity can still be seen today in the bas reliefs commemorating the ‘heroic’ exploits of a later Assyrian king, Tiglath-pileser. Here what look like the populations of whole cities are stuck alive on stakes running through the groin and out the shoulders” (Eisler, 57). She further mentions the appearance of the new tradition of Western violence in the verbal artwork of Hesiod in Greece. He describes an earliest peaceful agrarian people, who are taken over by a more brutal “silver” race, dominated by a ferocious “bronze” race (believed to be the Mycenaeans), a more peaceful race, and finally the most ruthless (thought to be the Dorians) (Eisler, 61-62).

Like Hesiod’s description of the earliest peaceful group, Eisler calls the story of the Garden of Eden a mythological folk memory of the beginning of agrarian society (Eisler, 63). She recounts the illuminating name of the Goddess worshipped in Mesopotamia, “Queen of Heaven/Creatress/the Mother who gave birth to Heaven and Earth” which indicates her still-powerful purpose of controlling and producing life. Eisler refers to Mesopotamian tablets showing women who were not yet subjugated by men: “For example, even as late as 2000 BCE we read in a legal document from Elam (a city-state slightly east of Sumer) that a married woman, refusing to make her bequest jointly with her husband, passed her entire property on to

her daughter” (Eisler, 64). She cites the work of H. W. F. Saggs, who notes that just as goddesses formerly played a large role in religion of Sumer, women also held higher positions in Sumerian society (Eisler, 64).

Eisler explains that, “Religion supports and perpetuates the social organization it reflects” (Eisler, 67). Thus, a woman participating in a religious tradition that reflected a significant amount of her sex, was likely to be valued more in her society. This idea, however, is a difficult one to apply to the modern patriarchal world because it goes so completely against the teachings of female inferiority and male supremacy. “But in societies that conceptualized the supreme power in the universe as a Goddess, revered as the wise and just source of all our material and spiritual gifts, women would tend to internalize a very different self-image. With such a powerful role model they would tend to consider it both their right and their duty to actively participate and to take the lead in developing and using both material and spiritual technologies” (Eisler, 67). The importance of women’s identification with their symbolic — and in this case religious — potential, which Lerner so passionately argues for, Eisler also defends. She adds that many of the technologies once attributed to technologies arising from dominator societies as tools for more effective control, archaeology reveals to have been around since pre-dominator societies. She lists agriculture, architecture, clothing, tools, law, government, trade, religion, dance, literature, art, and education as some of the major ones, using James Mellaart’s discoveries of Neolithic Catal Huyuk as a central source for evidence (Eisler, 66-67).

Eisler moves to new feminist anthropological theories to facilitate the normalization of woman’s societal value, from her beginning. She presents a new explanation for bipedalism, “that the erect posture required for the freeing of hands was not linked to hunting but rather to the shift from foraging (or eating as one goes) to gathering and carrying food so it could be both

shared and stored” (Eisler, 67). The enlargement of the human brain, she continues, was not developed for organized hunting but for a closer mother-child connection, and the first tools were not created for hunting but for feeding and caring for children. Mothers who could find enough food to feed themselves and then share it with their children, in a form the children could consume, were more likely to survive. Mothers were also the most likely people to have domesticated animals, after learning to care for their own children (Eisler, 67-69). These reinterpretations of early human development include not only a more convincing theory, but they also do not revolve around an androcentric model that assumes the preeminence of man-the-hunter.

Eisler, thus far, establishes a theory of cultural evolution in which male aggression and supremacy are not natural or universal, but are pieces of social structure that developed out of a time when women once had more authority. Eisler uses the example of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* to better understand the effects of this change in Greek culture. This three-part play tells the story of a king, Agamemnon, who sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia, in exchange for fair winds for his fleet on his way to the Trojan War. Upon his return home, Agamemnon is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra to avenge the murder of their daughter, and Clytemnestra is in turn murdered by their son, Orestes, to avenge his father. In a recently invented court of law featuring Athena, Orestes is found innocent from committing any crime. Eisler agrees with sociologist Joan Rockwell that the explanation of the *Oresteia* as an introduction to a new judiciary system is absurd, specifically because it justifies the murder of Clytemnestra by claiming that a son is not related to his mother—more absurd when Clytemnestra is murdered for avenging her daughter’s murder by her own father. Rockwell interprets the play as the indicator of a cultural and

institutional shift in power dynamics, which Eisler more specifically draws back to evidence the shift from a partnership to dominator model of society (Eisler, 79-80).

Eisler maintains that, “The *Oresteia* was designed to influence, and alter, people’s view of reality. The striking thing is that this was still necessary almost a thousand years after the Achaeans took control of Athens in the fifth century BCE” (Eisler, 81). This means that, despite existing in a patriarchal culture for hundreds of years, Athens still needed to be convinced of the superiority of patriarchy. However,

“...it was now possible at a great ceremonial occasion to publicly proclaim that the wrongs of men against women, even the killing of a daughter by her own father, should simply be forgotten. So fundamentally had people’s minds already been transformed that it could now be said that in truth a mother and child are not related: that matriliney has no basis in reality, that, by contrast, only patriliney does” (Eisler, 81).

This play, from Eisler’s perspective, argues for the higher truth of a child’s relation to its father, as well as the disposable nature of daughters, who have become just another piece of property under patriarchy. The story of the *Oresteia* shows Clytemnestra’s fall from grace, murder by her own son left unavenged, because of her decided insignificance as a mother. This line of thinking, Eisler argues, has allowed for the widespread practice today of naming children after their father’s family alone, officially ignoring their connection to their mother (Eisler, 81).

This is just one of the many stories that reflected patriarchal domination throughout the ancient Western world. “It was a process that, as we have seen, entailed enormous physical destruction that continued well into historic times. As we can still read in the Bible, the Hebrews, and later also the Christians and Muslims, razed temples, cut down sacred groves of trees, and smashed pagan idols” (Eisler, 83). Eisler largely credits priesthoods of male elites for bringing about this cultural shift, using myth as their greatest tools for change: “Their most powerful weapons were the ‘sacred’ stories, rituals, and priestly edicts through which they systematically

inculcated in people's minds the fear of terrible, remote, and 'inscrutable' deities" (Eisler, 84). Through exposure to and participation in these stories, Eisler holds that people learn to accept their messages as true (Eisler, 84).

Eisler holds that, upon invasion of the androcentric groups up until 400 BCE, priests in Old Europe and the Middle East were rewriting the region's myths. She refers specifically to the groups—the Priestly, Elohim, Yahweh, and Deuteronomist schools—who reworked the stories in the Old Testament "to suit their purposes," leaving inconsistencies along as clues to their editing process (Eisler, 85). "Indeed, the part the serpent plays in humanity's dramatic exit from the Garden of Eden only begins to make sense in the context of the earlier reality, a reality in which the serpent was one of the main symbols of the Goddess" (Eisler, 86). Eisler links the serpent motif to Crete, Greece, Rome, Canaan, India, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, as well as goddesses Athena, Hera, Demeter, Atargatis, Dea Syria, Ashtoreth/Astarte, and Ua Zit (Eisler, 86). It is found on a statue around the neck of a Mesopotamian Goddess statue as far back as 2300s BCE (Eisler, 87), and depicted in early Sumerian art showing the "Goddess of the Tree of Life" as far back as 2500 BCE. 'Too important to be ignored,' Eisler explains that the serpent had either to be appropriated by the new system of religion, or villainized out of popularity (Eisler, 87).

The Greeks, she writes, reappropriated the serpent to add to their power, but also—like many other cultures—include the killing of the serpent in many of their myths (Eisler, 88). According to Joseph Campbell, it was, in the form of the bronze serpent, even worshipped in Jerusalem along with the Goddess Asherah until as recent as 700 BCE (Eisler, 88). The serpent was so central to goddess symbolism that, Eisler argues, Eve's acceptance of advice from a snake can only be understood in its historical context. "The fact that the serpent, an ancient



prophetic or oracular symbol of the Goddess, advises Eve, the prototypical woman, to disobey a male god's commands is surely not just an accident" (Eisler, 89). Interestingly, the story of Eve's Betrayal in this context, Eisler continues, would require Eve's violation of sacred law to abstain from following the guidance of the serpent.

"But while this part of the story of the Fall only makes sense in terms of the old reality, the rest makes sense only in terms of the power politics of imposing a dominator society. ...a clear warning to avoid the still persistent worship of the Goddess" (Eisler, 89). Eisler argues that the Goddess's snake in the Hebrew myth of creation, like the Goddess's bull horns in earlier symbolism come to represent the Christian devil, becomes a symbol of utter corruption. Eisler interprets Eve's betrayal of Yahweh in her obedience to the serpent as "her refusal to give up that worship. And because she — the first and symbolic woman — clung to the old faith more tenaciously than did Adam, who only followed her lead, her punishment was to be more dreadful" (Eisler, 89). Her *greatest* punishment for association with the worship of the Goddess was her subjection to man.

In order for society to accept the new order of man's superiority, says Eisler, the powerful and influential Goddess had to be replaced with deities that represented the power of force. This can frequently be seen in myth through demoting a goddess to the role of wife of another deity; attributing the aspects once associated with a goddess to a god; and instead, in Sumer, through myths of the Goddess's rape, humiliation, and murder; and in Canaan and Anatolia, through turning the goddess into a patron of war (Eisler, 93). Eisler remarks that only in the stories of the Old Testament is the Goddess omitted completely. She mentions the prophets who abhor the "adulterous" worship of other deities, especially the Queen of Heaven (Eisler, 93).

“But other than such occasional, and always pejorative, passages, there is no hint that there ever was—or could be—a deity that was not male” (Eisler, 94).

Eisler’s analysis of the Bible reveals an instruction book to create a patriarchal culture of total domination, where the power of the Goddess is nowhere to be found. “For symbolically the absence of the Goddess from the officially sanctioned Holy Scriptures was the absence of a divine power to protect women and avenge the wrongs inflicted upon them by men” (Eisler, 94). The words that are missing from this text speak the loudest to Eisler — these are the lack of any clear powerful female deity. Not only does this text tell a story where women have no powerful beings to emulate, from which to develop a concept of worthiness, but beginning with Adam’s rule over Eve, it tells a story where women do not have agency over their own bodies. “Most critically, as we can still read in the Old Testament, the laws fashioned by this male ruling caste defined women, not as free and independent human beings, but as the private property of men. First they were to belong to their fathers. Later on, they were to be owned by their husbands or their masters, as were any children they bore” (Eisler, 95). In the context of this explanation, the lack of goddess-symbolism becomes clear; if the law was working to exert control over women, leaving out a model for female spiritual freedom and independence is the way to go.

Commenting on the law in Deuteronomy that says if a man has sex with a virgin he must pay her father for her virginity and marry her, Eisler writes, “The impression we have been given is that this kind of law represented a great advancement, a moral and humane step forward in the civilization of immoral and sinful heathens” (Eisler, 96). She clarifies, however, saying that “in the social and economical context” it reveals itself to be not in the highest interest of the women but of the men, ensuring the protection of their private, albeit living, property.” Eisler elucidates

further, “What this law says is that since an unmarried girl who is not a virgin is no longer an economically valuable asset, her father must be compensated” (Eisler, 96).

In relation to the edict that commands the stoning of a married girl sold as a virgin, for the shame she brings to her family and all of Israel, Eisler asks, “What injury or damage did the loss of the girl’s virginity actually cause her people and her father?” To this question, she replies, “The answer is that a woman who behaves as a sexually and economically free person *is* a threat to the entire social and economic fabric of a rigidly male-dominated society. Such behavior cannot be countenanced lest the entire social and economic system fall apart. Hence the ‘necessity’ for the strongest social and religious condemnation and the most extreme punishment” (Eisler, 97). Eisler explains that the murder, or disposal, of the no longer valuable daughter, or property, is the most sensible system for the fathers, who may keep their reputation and additionally no longer have to care for or ‘protect’ their now worthless piece of property. “But the men who made the rules that would maintain this socioeconomic order did not talk in such crass economic terms. Instead, they said their edicts were not only moral, righteous, and honorable but the word of God” (Eisler, 98). This framing of economic laws in terms of morality creates an utterly nonsensical basis for the meaning of “moral” or “right.” It requires, not the kindest action, or the fairest, but the most blindly obedient to the word of God-the-Father, no matter how inhumane the deed. She gives the example of Moses’ command—from God—in Numbers 31, after the massacre of Midian men, to additionally kill all male children and all non-virgin women, and to keep all the virgin girl-children for themselves as slaves for sex.

In the story of the Levite traveller from the Book of Judges, that Lrner discusses, Eisler comments, “Nowhere in the telling of this brutal story of the betrayal of a daughter’s and a mistress’s trust and the gang rape and killing of a helpless woman is there even a hint of

compassion, much less moral indignation or outrage” (Eisler, 99). Eisler calls out the complete lack of violation of any law or practice or norm that giving up *both* the lives of one man’s daughter and another’s female companion caused (Eisler, 99-100). “In short, so stunted is the morality of this sacred text ostensibly setting forth divine law that here we may read that one half of humanity should legally be handed over by their own fathers and husbands to be raped, beaten, tortured, or killed, without any fear of punishment—or even moral disapproval” (Eisler, 100). Eisler compares the message of male dominance to that of totalitarianism: “Don’t think, accept what *is*, accept what *authority* says is true. Above all, do *not* use your own intelligence, your own powers of mind, to question us or to seek independent knowledge. For if you do, your punishment will be horrible indeed” (Eisler, 101). Under the name of “moral superiority,” patriarchal ideals reveal the frame of mind needed to thrive in a society based on mass murder, terrorization, and exploitation.

Eisler calls this the reversal of what is good and bad, where killing and torturing become good and something as vital and beautiful as giving life becomes bad. Leviticus 12 requires ritual purification of a new mother, a practice that demands the vulnerable woman’s isolation and payment for her sins (Eisler, 101-2). “Now, perhaps nowhere as poignantly as in the omnipresent theme of Christ dying on the cross, the central image of art is no longer the celebration of nature and of life but the exaltation of pain, suffering, and death” (Eisler, 103). The stigmatization of the power to give life, and the replacement of the images of a fertile and birthing goddess with the dying son of God on the cross, is the ultimate sign of the triumph of a war-loving culture.

Eisler proposes use of the term androcracy (rule by men) to describe the system of dominance that exists in the Western world today. She offers a new word, gylany, in contrast to gynarchy (rule by women), to represent a new partnership system of government needed instead

(Eisler, 106). Having had to flee from the Nazi party as a child, Eisler grew up questioning humankind's disposition for cruelty towards others (Eisler, xiii). This drive for understanding the idealization of brutality explains her dedication to studying the culture of male domination with the hopes of finding a solution.

The main problem with androcracy is that it must ignore all non-male issues in order to maintain male-dominance, since its first priority is to maintain dominance (Eisler, 179). It is a system that, as Theodore Roszak notes, reacts to feminist resistance with a peak in brutal violent crimes against women, both in the home (in domestic relationships) and in public (Eisler, 154). Eisler explains that androcracy cannot exist in a world where women have power and agency. “And if this violence—and the incitements to violence through the revival of religious calumnies against women and the equation of sexual pleasure with the killing, raping, and torturing of women—is mounting all over our globe, it is because never before has male dominance been as vigorously challenged through a global, mutually reinforcing, synergistic women's movement for human liberation” (Eisler, 154).

Rosemary Radford Ruether

*Goddesses and the Divine Feminine*

Rosemary Radford Ruether, a professor of feminist theology, is the author of *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine* (2005). A cumulation of fifty years of contemplation, this book both criticizes patriarchal theory and endeavors to support the movement it produced (Ruether, 7). Although she does not find conclusive evidence for patriarchy, even in the figures of powerful goddesses, Ruether extensively reviews the literature that supports this view, drawing important conclusions about the work of their writing. “In order to have [goddesses] become resources for feminism, we need to come to terms with the way these goddesses and female divine symbols reflect male constructions of the female, at least in the form they have come down to us” (Ruether, 8). This exploration is largely the work of her book.

Ruether’s skepticism for the idea of the original value of voluptuous “fertility goddess” figurines, such as the Venus of Willendorf, came from responses from her students, doubtful that these feminine statuettes indicated respect for women. “The students argued that these prehistoric images depicted a woman as all buttocks, breasts, and belly, not as a person with facial features who saw, thought, or spoke, not as a person who moved around on her own two feet and took charge of things with her hands” (Ruether, 3). This experience led her to the realization that, whether positive or negative, such reactions are more about projecting people’s ideas of the present backwards to make ahistorical assumptions without enough context. “Prehistory—precisely because one can say so little about it or about the inner life of its people with certainty—easily becomes a tabula rasa on which to project our own theories about what humans necessarily are or should be and hence must once have been” (Ruether, 14).

The dominant perspective, Ruether explains, maintains that gender differences are determined by biology and are unaffected by cultural development. In this model, men are primary providers of food, the primary food source is meat, men leave the home to hunt, men created complex social structures, and men are responsible for technological advancement (Ruether, 14-15). This androcentric model of archaeology, projecting the sexual division of labor of the nineteenth century Western middle class from whom the interpretation came, would assume that a “rounded implement is likely to be interpreted as a mace used by males to kill animals, rather than as a pounding tool used by women to process grain or nuts” (Ruether, 15). Through this line of argument, Ruether exposes the ease with which even a founding “scientific” myth is established.

One proponent of natural division of labor, Elman Service, theorized that, because the sexuality of women was year-round, they had to be protected from men, by men. Women were weaker, solitary, often pregnant, and stayed with their children, while men developed complex relationships as they hunted for food and protected their territory (Ruether, 17). Women anthropologists in the later mid-twentieth century, who were able to integrate more naturally in the communities they were studying, came up with different findings. “Their studies of foraging societies showed that female gathering of plants, nuts, and berries not only was an equal source of food for many communities but for some supplied the predominant food source. In addition, related females and their children generally gathered as a group, not in isolation” (Ruether, 17-18). Women are discovered to form close relationships, make tools, and labor despite caring for children simultaneously (Ruether, 18).

Ruether cites the discovery of the resilience of matrilineal matrilocal cultures by M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies, particularly among foraging peoples (Ruether, 18). She notes the

conclusion from “a 1965 symposium on ‘man the hunter,’” of the remarkable abundance of food sources in foraging societies “much more successful than the way of life initiated by the agricultural revolution and industrialization, which the writers saw as bringing humans to the brink of annihilation in the second half of the twentieth century” (Ruether, 18-19). Despite the large scale farming that modern technological advances offer, the older models are noninvasive and sustainable. But it requires effort. So, Ruether concludes, “[t]he basic rule of foraging societies is that no one, except the very young, is a passive, dependent nonproducer. The work involved in procuring and processing food demands the skills of both male and female, beginning at an early age” (Ruether, 19). The active participation of women does not exempt them from being subject to violence or coercion. In fact, Martin and Voorhies argue that women’s usefulness make them vulnerable to subjugation by men (Ruether, 20). Ruether attributes class hierarchy and worker exploitation to controlled surplus of wealth, and male dominance to men taking control over food supply through plow agriculture, growing crops having previously been women’s work (Ruether, 39).

From the anthropological and archaeological evidence Ruether accepts the existence of a variety of primitive social structures. However, she finds the revival of professionally disproven theories of matriarchy from nineteenth century scholarship, on part of the second-wave feminists, troubling. Ruether explains that, “Women archaeologists became increasingly concerned with the way in which archaeology was being cited as proof of this story of original matriarchy. They wanted to clearly distinguish their own carefully scientific studies, which vindicated larger roles for women in early human societies, from such revived matriarchal theory” (Ruether, 21). Where feminist archaeologist struggled to create a compelling case, their association with matriarchalism complicated their task. “The emotionality of this debate indicates the high stakes



it involves” (Ruether, 21). Many women who have found liberation through their celebration of a matriarchal myth are unwilling to let it go.

After Merlin Stone’s evidence for matriarchy is found unsubstantiable, the work of archaeologist Marija Gimbutas is largely cited as proof for matriarchy. Ruether suggests that members of Western society find comfort in the story of their matriarchal origins. “By imagining a time—indeed, the primeval time—before this culture of violence and domination, one can also imagine a time after it, a day when Euro-Americans can reclaim their original and more authentic mothering, peaceful, ecologically sustainable cultural selves” (Ruether, 22). This vision allows the destruction caused by the Western world to be viewed as a temporary and aberrant phenomenon.

Ruether uses Cynthia Eller’s line of thought to elucidate the potential harmfulness of relying on an ahistorical myth for a foundational spiritual model. “If we tell the story of our past in a way that significantly distorts the knowable evidence, we may not understand how we got to be the way we are and, more important, what we really need to do to change” (Ruether, 22). Ruether emphasizes that the myth of matriarchy, though appreciated for its potential to liberate people from the constructs of a repressive and violent patriarchal social structure, could strengthen parts that are destructive and not yet seen or understood. Nonetheless, I would personally caution against the overemphasizing of the rejection of a matriarchal past; just because we don’t know a significant amount about our early past, does not mean that we can safely assume that androcentrism was the default social structure.

To better understand the consequences of Gimbutas’s theory, Ruether teases it apart. She first questions Gimbutas’s conclusion of how she understood certain animals, “fish, bears, or birds,” as representations of the Goddess (Ruether, 23). “We are told dogmatically that this was a

female-dominated culture, but the author cites little to prove this assertion, other than the assumption that the existence of many female images means a female-dominated culture” (Ruether, 23). Ruether points to the pervasiveness of female goddesses in India and Mother Mary in medieval Christianity as a counter-argument. Gimbutas largely demonstrates Ruether’s initial notion about early history—that we see what we want to.

Ruether remains unsatisfied with Gimbutas’s claim that Neolithic Europe was matrilineal and matricentric. “Men apparently were satisfied to ply their trades while ceding religious and political rule to women. It is hard to imagine males who have control of the sources of wealth in their hands yielding religious and political power exclusively to women for thousands of years (Ruether, 25)” primarily because none such exclusively female-lead groups can be found in existence today. I agree that, this order of reality, in the context of androcracy, is hard to imagine. However, I find it perplexing that, in her attempt to be objective, after five pages earlier having described an acceptable view of a structure of early patrilineal patrilocal agrarian society in which women are accumulated by men through polygamy for wealth as laborers, Ruether is skeptical of a society in which one gender is arbitrarily oppressed despite being an important source of wealth for the society of which they are a part. She is describing a reality women have been living for thousands of years, whether representing “the female as helpless dependent” (Ruether, 20) or as unrespected exploited laborer.

Ruether insists that, “No society gives women all the public power roles in government and religion. Moreover, relative egalitarianism does not in itself prove that a society is matrilineal and matrilocal” (Ruether, 25). Gimbutas’s societies are, non-foraging and therefore less likely to be egalitarian. “Such a society allows accumulation of surplus wealth, a situation in which one would expect some class hierarchy to develop. Patrilineal and patrilocal patterns

generally predominate these societies” (Ruether, 26). As well as avoiding the possibility of patterns of male descent, Ruether criticises Gimbutas of overly interpreting symbols as female, while largely ignoring and explaining away male ones. “By transferring bucrania from the male to the female sphere, Gimbutas conveniently redefines what was probably the most central symbol of male virility in her cultural artifacts” (Ruether, 27). Ruether argues for the masculinity of bull representation using evidence of the bull’s association with maleness in groups that raise cows (Ruether, 26).

Ruether rejects evidence suggesting that Catal Huyuk was a peaceful and matricentric civilization centrally concerned with fertility. Ruether points to Mellaart’s argument that because of the structure of the buildings, without doors, requiring ladders for entrance into the city, the survival of any attackers, with the help of weapons, would be unlikely. Moreover, despite outsider attacks not being likely, damage to skeletons reveal violence inside the walls of Catal Huyuk, showing that it was not quite the peaceful society some feminist interpreters would have believed (Ruether, 29). Three main symbols dominate artwork in Catal Huyuk; these are bulls, likely a symbol of male power, flying/leaping/‘birthing’ goddesses or female figures, and vultures, representing the practices of disposing of dead bodies (Ruether, 32). Ruether maintains that few of the plethora of Paleolithic and Neolithic ‘fat’ female statuettes have been found related to children or childbirth, thus they were more likely associated with something other than reproduction. “The location of such figurines in grain bins or in proximity to hearths and ovens might suggest a focus on food rather than birth” (Ruether, 35).

Ruether criticizes the way Gimbutas stretches her interpretation to conform to her matricentric model. Gimbutas’s reading too far into her evidence, making assumptions is clumsy practice that threatens the reputation of other feminist archaeologists. “They needed to make

clear their own critique of such work as professional archaeologists, while at the same time defending the appropriateness of raising feminist questions in archaeology, albeit in a way that would not be confused with Gimbutas's approach" (Ruether, 36). Somehow as feminist scholarship, as opposed to normal scholarship, Gimbutas's work cannot be taken as just another theory. "Feminist archaeologists are fighting to defend the standing of their own work in a male-dominated field in which feminist questions are likely to be dismissed in advance" (Ruether, 37). Because nineteenth century scholarship on the subject of matriarchy was disproven, feminists working to gather credible evidence to support the existence of societies in which women were highly valued and respected is considerably more difficult. This, however, just goes to show what an important task it is. As Ruether says, the stakes *are* so high.

Despite her extensive criticism of Gimbutas's over-interpretations, Ruether does emphasize the importance of Gimbutas's non-interpretive archaeological findings. What Gimbutas did, according to Ruether, was create a 'big picture' concept based on her discoveries. The problem, however, was not the story Gimbutas created, but the way in which she constructed her evidence around the story instead of crafting her story around the evidence. Ruether calls attention to the way "...feminist archaeologists usually do not try to define the 'big picture' that many long for in order to understand 'how we got the way we are.' This leaves a large void, which myth-makers such as Gimbutas step in to fill" (Ruether, 37).

Ruether follows with her central idea that goddesses served in the establishment of power among the elite ruling classes. The Sumerian creation myth tells a story of how humans were formed from clay to perform labor for the gods. "This myth reflects the basic Sumerian view of the relation of humans to gods as one of servant to master. Rulers also portrayed themselves as servants of the gods. The myth reflects but also masks the emerging relationship of subjugated

workers to a leisured aristocracy” (Ruether, 43). Records of the estates of aristocrats show that women were ranked as secondary citizens regardless of class, but that upper class women were given a significant amount of responsibility (Ruether, 44). “Another social metaphor for the relationships among the gods was based on the administrative staff of great temple estates. ...The entire cosmos, then, could be seen as the extended estates of a divine royal family, with various deities appointed to specific offices” (Ruether, 46). This use of social metaphor to explain the heavenly order worked to legitimize the actions of the ruling elite. “Another key metaphor for relations among the gods was the political assembly...the gods themselves were imagined as kings, warriors, and judges” (46-47). Ruether suggests the theory of Thorkild Jacobsen, which argues these metaphors evolved to adapt to a changing social structure, as hierarchy increased, the roles of women, reflected in the goddesses, became less and less central to the myths (Ruether, 47).

The reduction of women’s importance is evident in Sumerian myths—with Ninhursag and Enki, Ereshkigal and Nergal, Tiamat and Marduk—in which a previously superior goddesses are overthrown (sometimes violently) by male gods who assume their positions of power (Ruether, 47-48). In the Hebrew Bible, the myth of creation involving the Sumerian Mother-Goddess is replaced with God-the-Father. “The original shaping of humanity from the clay of the earth—the role of the Mother Goddess Ninhursag in Sumerian myth—is transferred to Yahweh in Genesis” (Ruether, 79). Yahweh additionally carries the Mother Goddess’s powers of fertility, to allow for the creation of life (Ruether, 80). The overpowerment of the goddess occurs, too with the Sumerian-Akkadian goddess, Inanna, or Ishtar: “The figure of Inanna is fascinating to contemporary feminists seeking ancient goddess role models because of her autonomy, sexual enjoyment, and power. Some have asked whether she represents some prepatriarchal time when

women enjoyed such power and vitality. But I believe that this is the wrong question” (Ruether, 54). Ruether argues, instead, that kings engaged in a sacred marriage with Inanna in order to connect with the divine. “[T]hrough marriage to Inanna, kings could imagine themselves to be like gods, sharing in their power and glory. It is this boundary role of Inanna that helps to explain not only her contradictions but also her centrality for Sumerian royal mythology” (Ruether, 56). The mythology of the goddesses were a powerful tool for the institution of a class of royalty over the people.

The continuation in later Western civilization of the story of women’s dependent, giving, serving role stunted their growth as individuals, keeping them locked in the home. Various feminist pushes against this system of control have allowed for women’s increased emancipation. Ruether explores the significance of spiritual Goddess movements in the modern world. She gives the perspective of Starhawk, a leader of the movement of goddess-worship in Wicca, on the system of hierarchy that allowed for male domination: “Key to the patriarchal revolution was the development of systems of domination by a few and oppression of others, ratified by a worldview of dualistic hierarchies. The inner core of patriarchal culture is estrangement, the estrangement of mind from body, men from women, thought from feeling, humans from the earth” (Ruether, 284). A philosophy based on dichotomy—“the superiority of rational over irrational, mind over body, transcendence over immanence” (Ruether, 256)—that places man above woman, West above East, and spiritual above sensual, quickly becomes one that, not only endorses the domination of “lesser” peoples, but also encourages an approach to life centered around self-rejection—two models that are far from sustainable.

Although Ruether is skeptical of the matriarchal model of society, she is sympathetic to those who find value in it. “[Carol] Christ believes that the symbol of the Goddess has the

metaphorical power to unsettle deeply rooted cultural symbolisms that enshrine and perpetuate these patterns of violence, hierarchy, and domination. This belief gives urgency to her decision to focus the energies of her life on the rebirth of the Goddess in contemporary Western culture” (Ruether, 292). On the subject of matriarchy, Ruether concludes, “Its validity, like that of the myth of the Garden of Eden on which it is built, is theological rather than historical. For this reason, this symbol of a utopian prepatriarchal past to be recovered today speaks powerfully and convincingly to many people’s intuitive feelings, even as it arouses skepticism from others when it is defended as literal history” (Ruether, 307). ‘Women have reinterpreted patriarchal religion; converted to a religion without a deity, without a gendered deity, or with many deities; and have looked to a religion of matriarchy to find religious fulfillment’ (Ruether, 307). Her ideal solution is that of reinterpretation and re-appropriation of preexisting religion.

“That we are not likely to clearly identify feminist goddesses and cultures from prepatriarchal histories means that reclaiming goddesses from the ancient Near East, such as Inanna, Isis, or Demeter, or Kali and Durga from India, is also a work of feminist reinterpretation for today, not a ready-made feminist spirituality that we can lay hold of literally and reproclaim in its ancient historical form. This means taking responsibility for our own work of reinterpretation and new myth-making today...” (Ruether, 307).

## The Power of Myth

While writing and researching for this project I stumbled upon a painting by Edwin Long called “Babylonian Marriage Market,” a painting based on the descriptions of Babylonian culture written by Herodotus. The painting showcases a row of beautiful girls waiting to be sold to the highest bidder. I read a translation of the original description from Herodotus. It was not until hours later, once I had abandoned any hope of writing more that I realized this painting and its custom were still lingering in my mind. I felt bad. After all of the learning I had done, for months, years even, I was struck by how bad this story made me feel about *myself*. I couldn’t help thinking: This could have been me, a few thousand years ago, being sold to the highest bidder, or—if I was deemed one of the ugly ones—some man would have been paid to take me home.

How could so little change over so many years? How can we still live in a culture where looks—the looks of just women, really—matter so much? Or how could we not? If the stories little girls learn is that the prettiest girl in the land becomes the queen, has the most power, how else are we supposed to learn to value ourselves? On our abilities? On our wittiness? On our intelligence? On the relationships we form? On our strengths? No. We learn that we have to be beautiful. So after a long day of working, after eighteen years of academic instruction, I stand in front of my mirror and value myself not based on the kind-hearted, well-intended person I am, or the resilience I demonstrate every day of my life, but on the physical form I see looking back at me in the mirror with tired eyes. Stories make an impact. Real stories, interpreted stories, fictional stories, they all have an impact, not just on children, but on adults too.



So many people have written about the power of story, because stories affect people, deeply. Whether or not they are true, they allow for an emotionally-charged thought experiment that gives insight into the human experience and allows people to make decisions about realities they need never even experience. When a young woman reads, in a history book, that only men have ever been in charge of ruling a country, this information it affects her. When she learns that powerful women are an exception to the norm, it affects her. When a mother tells her child, “Women can be doctors too,” the child hears, “Women are, except for rare cases, not doctors.” Children are brilliant learners; they take in information at a startling rate; they internalize patterns of behavior and soak up contextual social clues like sponges; so, the odds are, that even if you try to alter the information you give them, they have likely already caught on.

Now, when someone is *trying* to instill a piece of information in a young impressionable mind, chances are the child does not require more than a suggestion to understand the message. When a child feels that she has been treated unfairly, she will rebel. But as she matures into an adult, using her socialized conditioning of self-control, she learns no longer to react. This, however, does not mean that she is not affected by the perceived unfairness. Humans are incredibly adept at picking up on social cues, and when they—a race, a class, or a subclass of people—pick up on cues indicating that they are worth less as individuals than another group of human beings, the emotional damage is extremely negative. For thousands of years, well into the modern age, a huge number of women have been treated as second-class citizens, without much variation through class or culture. Growing up identifying with a history of oppression teaches girls to limit themselves in terms of possibilities for who they are and can be. This is the importance of story and the power of recorded history. Where past myth has helped construct how human civilization got to where it is today, new myths help construct a different future.

Joseph Campbell says that, “Myths are clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life” (Moyers, 5). They frame the human experience in such a way allows insight into what is possible. Merlin Stone’s contributions to scholarship, though perhaps overzealous, have inspired a countless number of feminist scholars to continue her work for the emancipation of women and men all over the world from stories that limit the perception of personal ability. Although Stone’s conclusions may have been historically unconvincing, her discoveries were important and her perspective, valuable. The answer to why so have many scholars have written about the topic of myth is that it is one of the most powerful subjects. Paula Webster’s insight is helpful, here: “I would not encourage women to confuse myth with history or exchange vision for science, for the creative energy that each affords the other should not be lost. Thus, even if feminists reject the existence of matriarchy on empirical and/or theoretical grounds, we should acknowledge the importance of the vision of matriarchy and use the debate for furthering the creation of feminist theory and action” (Webster, 156). Discovering a story of matriarchy allows women to—in many cases for the first time in their lives—accept the concept that women can, on a large scale, be strong, intelligent, independent, and powerful, because they already have been, through the women that came before them. Knowledge of one’s history transforms not only how a woman/student/person *thinks* about history, it has the potential to change how they feel, behave, and define themselves. This knowledge is empowering.

“Though the matriarchy debate revolves around the past, its real value lies in the future: not as a model for a future society... but in its rejection of power in the hands of men, regardless of the form of social organization. It pushes women (and men) to imagine a society that is not patriarchal, one in which women might for the first time have power over their lives. Women have been powerless, and have had their reality defined for them, for so long that imagining such a society is politically important. Because the matriarchy discussion uncovers the inadequacies of old paradigms, it encourages women to create new ones” (Webster, 155).

The conclusions that feminists in support of matriarchal theory have come to, just because they were inspired by myth, just because they might be inspired by the possibility of the unknown, are not dismissible. They are important. It is easy, in a philosophical world that pursues objectivity above all, to dismiss the words of these women because they are largely about a personal process exploring a subject that has been proven unlikely. But their personal process is as real as any, and one that reflects the struggle of many women, the search for a place to belong, in a culture that has marginalized women—as far as they have been taught—since the dawn of civilization.

Alison Jaggar's reasoning on emotion in epistemology is an insightful exploration of the implications of the higher value placed on reason over emotion in Western philosophy, and the inherent misogyny in the veneration of rational thought. She discusses the dichotomy of rational and emotional—our association of reason with the mental, cultural, universal, public and the masculine as compared to our association of emotion with the irrational, physical, natural, particular, private, and feminine. This observation leads her to the conclusion that, in modernity, because emotion disrupts objectivity, emotions have been rejected as untrustworthy. Whereas thinking is accepted as an active and controllable process, emotions are a controlling and uncontrollable force. She criticizes Western thought and modern science for failing to recognize the importance of emotion to survival (Jaggar, 198-190).

“Several feminist theorists have argued that modern modern epistemology itself may be viewed as an expression of certain emotions alleged to be especially characteristic of males in certain periods, such as separation anxiety and paranoia or an obsession with control and fear of contamination” (Jaggar, 190). Jaggar maintains disinterested inquiry, the rigid exclusion of emotion in the scientific method, is an impossible ideal, one that promotes a conception of epistemological justification for silencing the politically, socially, and culturally subordinate, as

they are considered more emotional, subjective, biased and irrational and therefore classist, racist, and especially misogynistic. Plato's treatment of emotions as a chaotic force that need to be controlled by reason, parallels the traditional patriarchal argument of the need for control of female sexuality: women are a powerful (creative) force that need to be controlled by men. Jaggar suggests, in place of an oppositional system of knowledge, one that takes human emotion, experience, perspective, value, action, and location into consideration, holistically, focusing on the the outside world *as well as* the human experience in the context of the world.

My conclusion about the significance of feminist reworking of myths, lies not in the historicity of any of the arguments but in the feelings they produce. The problem with the need for historical proof, data, and evidence—the contingent missing information that ultimately cannot be proven either way, whether one assumes in the direction of matriarchy or patriarchy—is a restriction, I maintain, caused by patriarchal thought. If the conclusion of each of the theorists on whom I have focused, is that the pursuit of female empowerment through myth, or reinterpretation of religion, or whatever it might be, is rewarding to the point of being *life-changing*, isn't that enough? Isn't it okay to take different paths if the end is equally positive, equally remarkable?

What is ironic about this whole exploration of matriarchy is that, because it seeks to break free from a system that it is inevitably an integral part of, it is subject to the same rules that the system lays out. The radical feminist scholarship of Mary Daly rejects the world of androcentric scholarship in which it exists, of not only through unapologetically bold arguments but all the way down to her use of grammar. She adds copious amounts of italics for personal emphasis, she creates new words, she redefines words, she writes with anger—this evidence of her practicing the reclaiming of scholarship for *herself* is powerful. In order to understand, to

break out of, androcentric patterns of thought, one must continually *back up* in an attempt, not only to see the system as a whole, but to obtain a sense of self-awareness—to understand how the system plays on the perceiver/analyzer *and* to see how the perceiver/analyzer functions in the system, as a part of the system. Perhaps such a kind of self-consciousness/self-awareness/backing up is not fully possible. More likely is that it can only be understood in little pieces. I hope for this work, my contribution, to be one of those little pieces of the puzzle.

It is not the proof of matriarchal origin itself that is necessarily important, but the application of the information gathered from pursuing those origins. This information is (1) that women have played a crucial part in all of human history even though it has not been recorded, (2) that the construction of a theological/theological female principle with whom to identify is crucial for the development for women, and (3) that the breaking from the tradition of androcentric and misogynistic ideology is a process that takes constant self-awareness, requires continual reflection.

Women have been taught that their place—in a society obsessed with independence—is in a position of dependence and they have accepted this position. Women are expected to be selfless in a society obsessed with the pursuit of personal ends. Women are assigned mundane labor where the freedom to pursue creativity and abstract thought is idealized. In a social structure where women are the “other” and men are the protagonists; where, despite being under half the population, men are the “majority;” men’s privilege is invisible because men are, “he” is, normal and complete, without a need for an explanation for their existence, and without a need for dependence upon a woman. A woman in the structure of is incomplete without a man. A woman is imagined with a child, as a mother, as a wife, and as a widow—even when a woman is alone, she is understood by, defined by her association with another. A woman is incomplete on

her own. She needs a reason to be. Only a man can stand alone, unquestioned, without the need of an explanation for his independence.

Luce Irigaray insists that women need an all-powerful female representation of the divine in order to embrace their completeness and, from there, her worthiness. She explains, “as long as woman lacks a divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own. She lacks an ideal that would be her goal or path in becoming” (Irigaray, 63-64). Girls are so restricted by what they don’t see, in that they learn to limit themselves based on what society tells them they can and cannot do. When a girl is raised learning about the recorded history of the male elite, she learns in her limited exposure to the past, a gross misrepresentation of actual history, that she will not be an outstanding member of society. Lerner gives a significant amount of attention to these causes and origins of women’s subordination; however, she contends, “What is more important to my analysis is the insight that the relation of men and women to the knowledge of their past is in itself a shaping force in the making of history” (Lerner, 7). Recorded history is utterly subjective. It is a collection of stories. It is completely androcentric. It cannot be objective or unbiased or an accurate universal representation of any period of time. The background of the author, the event’s context, and the intention for the writing all must be taken into account in every piece of recorded history. Thus, “Women’s history is indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women” (Lerner, 3).

## Conclusion

How does patriarchal sexual control relate to matriarchal theory? Patriarchal religion controls female sexuality in order to control women. This is made possible through myth, which teaches submission. The point, at the end of all of this, is that the power is not legitimate. Those who intended to control the subservient women and men have no right to do so. These stories affect us every day, but they shouldn't. They do not have to any longer. The stories of humankind's origins have an effect on daily life in society.

The United States is in the middle of a national crisis where girls my age, at institutions like the one I attend, are finally getting the courage to step up and report cases of sexual assault. These universities are not just doing nothing about it, they are repressing the information for their reputation. When I started this project, I recognized that there might be a link between the outbreak of victim-blaming and the dominant origin story of the Western world, the story of Eve's betrayal.

One must stretch the myth of Eve's Betrayal to make it a positive reflection of women. One must stretch the stories in the Old Testament and the New Testament in order to make them positive in terms of women. Some parts cannot be stretched; some parts are too overtly misogynistic; some parts can only be overlooked. What value is a philosophical groundwork that so blatantly villainizes, devalues, and argues for the inferiority of half of the population, that requires the overlooking of countless unexplainably embarrassingly offensive "parables," that promotes violence inspired by blind obedience? Patriarchy has limited women so much by giving them the status as the weaker sex; it has promoted the dependence of women upon men to the point of infantilization. Patriarchy, and patriarchal myth, have set up a tradition where a

woman's value lies in her biological function as reproducer. Thus, first, her chastity, next, her reproductive capacity, and, always, her sexuality define who she is and limit what she can do. This is particularly true when power is inherited through males so the control of women's sexual behavior is the same as the possession of power.

When I started this work, I was under the impression that patriarchy wanted to control female sexuality because of the power reproduction holds, that *Creation is power* and that men can acquire reproductive power by controlling women. I had trouble making any further conclusions from this premise. It was not until I came back to this idea at the end of my writing that I understood its importance. I adjusted the premise with my new information, which is: *Creation itself is not necessarily power but control of ideas is power*. Control of people's beliefs about themselves is powerful. Control of people's understanding of their place, their role, their worthiness, their capabilities, their limits, their allowances, what makes them good or bad, *that* is power. If you can control what people believe about themselves, you control them completely. This is the power of myth.

The sexual control of women is a violation of human rights. It is a violation of the right to control over one's body. Looking at the stories that define the basic structures of the Western world, of society, reveals the messages sent to women: that women under patriarchy do not have the right to control their own bodies—that women's bodies belong to men. When a culture accepts as a norm that control of the sexuality of women belongs to men, a culture of victim-blaming is made possible. When boys are raised in a society that glorifies dominance and violence, with the narrative that they have the right to women's bodies, the causes of the widespread issue of rape and sexual violence against women becomes understandable. It is not the myth of Eve's Betrayal, alone, that has done the damage, for this myth is not unique, not in the Old Testament or in religious texts



worldwide. It is the rhetoric of misogyny and male entitlement to women that has made its way into the fundamental abstract structuring of society that I believe is the issue.

I end with this conclusion of Gerda Lerner: “The system of patriarchy is a historic construct; it has a beginning; it will have an end. Its time seems to have nearly run its course—it no longer serves the needs of men or women and in its inextricable linkage to militarism, hierarchy, and racism it threatens the very existence of life on earth” (Lerner, 229). A growing tension exists between the philosophy of androcentric society and the modern woman. In a world where women work in the same way men do, a double standard of supremely valuing physical—sexually pleasing—appearance cannot simultaneously exist. In a world where a single woman must care for her children, emotionally support her children, financially support her children, feed her children, intellectually guide her children, protect her children from harm, or carry out any or more of these responsibilities for herself or another dependent, there cannot exist a condition that says she is an object to be obtained, controlled, and used. In a world where women are becoming independent, where they are expected to think, act, and provide for themselves, there is no more room women’s for dependence, on men.

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