

Neopaganism, feminism, and children's literature

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Résumé: Dans cet article, l'auteur s'interroge sur l'intérêt renouvelé en littérature pour la jeunesse pour la mythologie, celle de l'Antiquité classique autant que celle des autochtones nord-américains. L'usage de la sorcellerie, par ailleurs, lui paraît être associé plutôt à l'évolution d'attitudes féministes.

In my review of Rita Kohn's *Mythology for young people* (CCL #50, 1988) I expressed my alarm at the spread of neopaganism, occultism, and matriarchal feminism in contemporary children's literature. As a classicist, I am disturbed that mythology and history are being rewritten to reflect some rather dubious recent theories. I am concerned about the arbitrary changing of mythological characters from male to female as in Bernard Evslin's *Heraclea; a legend of warrior women*, and Anne Cameron's *How Raven freed the moon*. I wonder about the increasing presence of the supernatural and the occult as central themes in children's literature as in Cora Taylor's *Julie* (second sight, reincarnation) and Welwyn Katz's *False face* (witchcraft). I note the amount of occult material even in traditional-style fantasies such as Nancy-Lou Patterson's *Apple staff and silver crown* (which I reviewed for *Canadian Literature*, 111, Winter, 1986). The present article, therefore, attempts to locate some sources for these developments, and to suggest some reservations regarding these trends.

Anyone venturing to look into contemporary interpretations of mythology and religion will find mythology being used as both a pattern and argument for a return to paganism and matriarchy. Sigmund Freud and the psychologists have popularized mythology as an alternative Bible. Freud himself was classically educated and in spite of occasional "howlers" (e.g. confusing Zeus with his father Kronos) he used classical mythology in an intelligible way. More recent psychologists have adopted Freud's use of mythological references, but seem less able to handle the subject. These faux-pas generally go unnoticed, since the psychologist's audience is also unskilled in these areas.

Later psychologists were unhappy with Freud's explanation of neurosis as primarily Oedipal in origin. One alternative theory was that social maladjustment might spring from matriarchal-patriarchal tensions; in particular, it was claimed that problems experienced by young men growing up were connected with the patriarchal family model of Western Europe. This idea was popu-

larized in North America by Erich Fromm (among others) who argued à la Freud that a prehistoric conflict between matriarchy and patriarchy was pictured in the story of Antigone and Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Unknown to Fromm, much of the story and characterization of the *Antigone* appears to have been developed by Sophocles himself in the 5th Century B.C., when any such prehistoric confrontation would have been long forgotten. In fact, we can be quite complacent in thinking that Sophocles was referring to contemporary conflicts in politics and religion of a very different nature.

While psychologists were flooding the market with their dubious interpretations of myth, literary men also detected an area of growing public interest. In particular, it would be hard to overestimate the influence of Robert Graves. Graves in his book *The white goddess* argued that in prehistoric and early historic times the dominant deity was a Lunar Goddess, patroness of all the arts, who ruled by magical power. There were no gods, says Graves, except perhaps a mere consort of the goddess, and men were similarly considered inferior to women.¹ All "real" goddesses, including the Muse of poetry, were to be identified with this goddess. The Greeks and the Hebrews, Graves says, were guilty of overthrowing this benign matriarchal system and substituting a sinister patriarchal system in its place. In an essay, also entitled "The white goddess", Graves describes how he wrote this book by a kind of automatic writing within three weeks, under the apparent influence of African cult figurines associated with the worship of a goddess of similar attributes.² Graves himself fully accepts the worship of this goddess while acknowledging all aspects of her power. Throughout history, he says, all "real" poetry has been written during a trance inspired by this goddess.

Much of what Graves has to say about the white goddess is quite unsupportable. Most Western societies at the dawn of history were polytheistic, so that any female goddess would be only one of many deities. Moreover, Graves's tendency to make all goddesses one goddess would hardly be acceptable if applied to the gods. There was a time shortly after the development of agriculture, when a fertility or earth goddess was perhaps the dominant deity. But since agricultural societies rapidly urbanize, the dominance of an agricultural deity could not last long, except among the country people. Our earliest historical documents indicate a flourishing polytheism in which various gods and goddesses jostle for dominance, and in which none can claim it for long. Nor do contemporary primitive societies give much credence to Graves's creed. He himself admits that "except in a few scattered, semi-civilized tribes, such as those of West Africa and Southern India, the goddess is everywhere refused official recognition."³

In spite of plentiful evidence to the contrary, Graves's picture of a prehistoric matriarchy, a dominant goddess world, has been adopted whole by many contemporary feminists. In revolt against the Judaeo-Christian tradition in which God is conventionally spoken of as male (and Jesus is certainly male),

feminists have been restlessly seeking for a new religion and a new social order.

June Singer in *Androgyny: toward a new theory of sexuality* adopts Graves's views almost verbatim, including a Graves concoction called the "Original Pelasgian Creation Myth", in which Graves describes the "Goddess of All Things, Eurynome" as the creative force behind the universe.⁴ This myth is neither "original" nor "Pelasgian" (i.e., pre-Greek), but post-dates rather than pre-dates the Greek writings of Homer and Hesiod. According to M.L. West, it is based on one of a set of theories about origins (often called the "Orphic Writings"), which were composed during the two and a half centuries following Homer and Hesiod.⁵ If Graves himself is hardly an impeccable scholar, his followers and imitators are much less so. Bernard Evslin's *Heraclea; a legend of warrior women* (in which Hercules and his legends are feminized) only avoids utter absurdity by being somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Nonetheless the book was taken seriously by reviewers and librarians as a vindication of "true history."

In such an atmosphere credulity flourishes. The problem is that most adults and all children have no way of checking out the ideas presented to them. Many librarians are too fearful of "censorship" to question the publishers' blurbs extolling the virtues of "untraditional scholarship". Few people seem to know or care that the world-views on which ideas such as astrology and reincarnation depend have no support from modern science. Not many seem to realize that nearly all occult ideas are incompatible with orthodox Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and, therefore, would pose problems for such households.

Mythology is an important vehicle for teaching about religious ideas. North American Indian mythology reflects the animistic beliefs and ritual practices of native people. As with most societies, these encompass a wide range from very positive affirmations of God and life itself to practices of witchcraft and sorcery. The interpreter, therefore, has a free rein either to paint Indian religion in glowing colours or to see it as an oppressive bondage. As is usual, most interpretations reflect the viewpoint of the author and his society quite subjectively, which today often leads to praise of any perceived "matriarchal" tendencies and to feeling comfortable with a variety of psychic references and experiences.

Anne Cameron's retellings of West Coast native myths are sufficiently feminist in that they change the character Raven from a male to a female. The publisher tells us that this reflects the traditional Indian matriarchal view of things. But this is not the case. As in the Middle East, only those Indians involved in the agricultural revolution were likely to be matriarchal to any extent. In fact, some hunting and gathering tribes treated women with scant respect.

In general, men and women are valued for their sexual natures when their specialized roles are seen as important. Groups which depend on hunting, herding, or warring for wealth or survival favour the male sex while early agricultural societies tend to give a relatively high position to women. It is doubtful if, in any society, except perhaps our own, women can be said to be the politically and socially dominant sex. Where women play a particularly important role some atypical conditions usually exist. For example, the perception that the Iroquoian Indians of North America were matriarchal seems to reflect the relocation of these people to reserves where males lost some of their traditional functions and prestige. Women, therefore, became more important as maintainers of the family and tribal traditions.⁶ In our own society it is possible to point to many unprecedented conditions which account for the relatively high status of women today.

It is important to remember also that "status of women" is an ambiguous term. Feminists use it to mean social, political, and economic power. It could also refer to the prestige attached to particularly female functions such as being a daughter, wife, mother, grandmother, etc. A society which values the feminine as such may nonetheless be a society in which women have comparatively little direct political power, while in a society where women have political power (such as our own) the feminine as such may be virtually despised (as in the feminist attack on housewives). The veneration of the Virgin Mary in Southern Europe does not mean that women there have more political power than in Northern Europe where Mariolatry is in disrepute. It may, however, mean that certain aspects of femaleness are more highly regarded.⁷

The contemporary interest in witchcraft, on the other hand, reflects rather a preoccupation with power than with femaleness. Witchcraft and sorcery may be seen as a kind of spiritual fascism--a desire for power without responsibility. It, therefore, complements well the terrestrial desires of those who wish to revolutionize society in their own image. There is a curious linkage among neopaganism, radical feminism, homosexualism, and occultism, both in political cooperation and as religious components of a new belief system. This mixture, or parts thereof, also provides subject matter for an increasing number of children's books.

At a time when television actresses talk regularly to magazines and newspapers about their experiences with psychics and "channels", we should perceive that the occult is pervasive in our society. Scaryness and occultism on television seem to have escalated in the last five years. This involves the widespread portrayal of monsters (space monsters, aliens, dinosaurs) and occult entities (witches, wizards, ghosts) on programmes and commercials aimed at pre-schoolers and primary students. This reflects in part the great success of the *Star wars* series with its combination of monsters and occult interests. There seems, however, something obsessive about the way writers and producers are now turning to monsters and the supernatural as a basis for child-

ren's programming. The programme *Care Bears* features a Darth Vader-type wizard without a face called "No Heart", who is bent on destroying the Care Bears and everyone else. The *My little pony* series regularly features witches, wizards, and fierce warfare between good and evil. Disney's *Duck tales* has a strange assortment of occult personages combined with often scary adventures. There is hardly a programme for children on American commercial television which is completely free from these overtones. Thus there is concern that young children are being attracted to the occult as a means of gaining incredible power without responsibility. As one three-year-old told his mother after watching the *Masters of the Universe* movie, "Mommy, I want to be a god when I grow up."

It is important that some warning should be given to children about the danger of dabbling in the occult. Supposedly harmless pursuits such as acting out roles from *Dungeons and dragons* have ended in suicide, while, at the other end of the spectrum, the Church of Satan is implicated in a widespread criminal network of Satanic ritual, mass murder, and child abuse. Although many representations of the occult are probably the work of unhappy writers simply trying to give some excitement to their feeble efforts, parents and students of children's literature should be aware that there are also "pushers" trying to hook young readers before their critical faculties are developed.

While the past has seen many writers for children whose lives may not have been exemplary, the sexual habits of people like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear were not openly expressed in their books. Nowadays many authors feel free to at least introduce their enthusiasms into works for younger readers. There seems to be an effort at present to make homosexuality an acceptable topic for teen exploration as in the American novel *Annie on my mind* (which treats lesbianism sympathetically) and in the Canadian play *David for queen* (which deals with a high school student who declares himself homosexual). The increasing introduction of witchcraft, radical feminism, bizarre violence, reincarnation, and sexual innuendo into books aimed at children and pre-teens is a matter for concern. Some of these books might be more acceptable if rewritten for a slightly older age-level (preferably adults) while others have in fact "no redeeming social or moral value." Since children's literature has sometimes been a profitable market with an uncritical readership, it has been tempting for writers to turn adult concerns into children's writing. This tendency should be resisted.

Parents and teachers cannot trust that any randomly chosen "children's book" will be edifying or even sane. At a time when teenagers are reliably said to be the major consumers of pornography, some may think that concern about morally unsavoury themes in children's books is secondary to some larger issues. The point is that what seems bad now will inevitably become worse unless the trend is resisted, and it is, after all, the role of parents and

teachers--and even of book reviewers--to give some direction to the younger generation.

NOTES

- 1 Graves summarizes his main tenets in the Introduction to *The Greek myths*, vol. I, p. 13 ff.
- 2 See "The white goddess", collected in *On poetry: collected talks and essays*, pp. 232-3. Also *The white goddess*, especially "Postscript 1960", p. 488: "my mind ran at such a furious rate all night, as well as all the next day, that it was difficult for my pen to keep pace with it. Three weeks later, I had written a seventy-thousand-word book, called *The roebuck in the thicket*."
- 3 Graves, "The white goddess", p. 237
- 4 Pages 56-64 of Singer's book are substantially borrowed from Graves's *The Greek myths*, vol.I, pp. 27-30, etc.
- 5 See M.L. West, *The Orphic poems*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, p. 127.
- 6 Bruce G. Trigger, *The Huron: farmers of the north*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969, pp. 124-5.
- 7 Much feminist thinking on matriarchy is based on two very shaky generalizations: (1) that the sex of the dominant deities in a given society reflects its patriarchal or matriarchal nature; and (2) that the sex through which descent is reckoned in a society is a clear indication whether that society is patriarchal or matriarchal.

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