

THE MOTHER EARTH



She is there, in our memories, a half-formed image on a tantalizing edge of consciousness. We see her in museums, in the faceless, pendulous stone figures of the mother earth goddess unearthed by the thousands from Paleolithic sites all over the world. We see a ghost of her today on television, in the dotty, white-dressed, girdled old woman selling Parkay margarine.

She is there when the weatherman warns us that Mother Nature may choose to rain on our Saturday picnics; when hurricanes are given female names and personalities; when timbermen refer to clearcutting "virgin" forest; when fishermen place fresh flowers at a little harbor shrine of the Lady before committing themselves to the unknown power of the sea. She appears in our fairy tales as a wise fairy godmother, a black-dressed witch who can command the forces of nature, a little girl such as Goldilocks who can speak to animals.

We meet her vividly in some contemporary fiction—such as Jean Auel's *Earth's Children* series set in central Europe of 25,000 years ago, which feature peaceable, egalitarian, hunter-gatherer tribes whose lives center around the worship of a mother earth goddess who has many names but is understood by all to be the same entity. We find her, also, in Marion Zimmer Bradley's epic retelling of the Arthurian legends, *The Mists of Avalon*, which convincingly portrays the much-maligned Morgan le Fay as the high priestess of an ancient Druidic religion that worshipped the goddess.

She was present, in a way, at an autumnal equinox celebration I attended

not long ago in rural western Massachusetts. Holding hands in a circle, fifty people sang the following words over and over to a vaguely native American tune:

The earth is our mother

She will take care of us

This sacred ground we walk upon

With every step we take

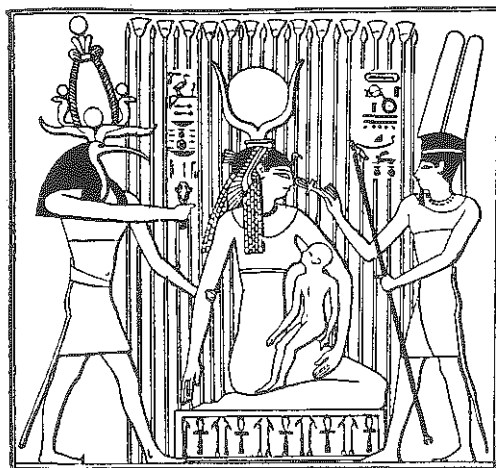
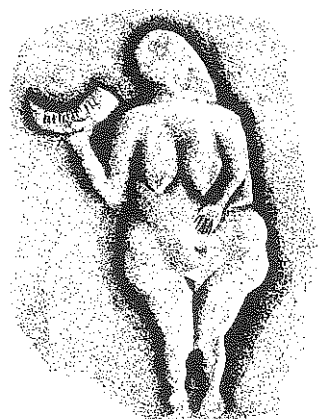
The earth is our mother

We must take care of her

Women and nature have always been linked. In symbols, myths, and traditions from cultures all over the world, women are associated with nature, night, the hidden womb, the moon, the dark fertile soil, the spider's web, the serpent, cow, cat, butterfly, sow, raven. Cultures that think of the earth as bountiful and sacred have tended to venerate both nature and women. Cultures that consider the "natural" state of the world to be evil and chaotic have treated both women and nature harshly.

Why has nature always been thought female? From prehistoric times, women have been associated with birth and reproduction, with biological cycles such as the phases of the moon, menstruation, and the changing of the seasons, and with the providing of food and nurturance. Archaeologists agree that in the early days of human history, most food came from the women's steady foraging and gathering, with hunting (usually, although not always, done by men) merely supplementing the basic diet. Women are generally credited with discovering and first implementing agriculture.

But most of all, women bore babies



—women were the mysterious source of human life itself. It is thought that our prehistoric ancestors did not understand paternity. Babies simply began to grow in the womb, aided perhaps by spirits; men had little to do with it, save for helping to provide food and protection for the mother and family. Women were thus considered closer to nature, more in touch with the mysterious rhythms of life and death.

A great deal of archaeological and mythological evidence suggests that our forebearers paid homage to a mother earth goddess who provided an abundance of fruits, animals, grains, water, fish, birds, vegetables, shelter, fuel—everything humans could want or need. Just as the womb of woman generated new human life, the womb of the Great Mother Earth was the generative source of all life.

The worship of this supreme goddess who ruled over all living things as well as over subordinate gods and goddesses was widespread over a remarkably broad area of the earth for a remarkably long period of time. Thousands of female figurines dating from the upper Paleolithic era (25,000 B.C.) to the brink of the Christian era have been found in archaeological sites in the Middle East, nearly all of Asia and Europe, and MesoAmerica. The ancient goddess went by many names and had many aspects—Gaia, Isis, Asherah, Devi, Ishtar, Hathor, Rhea, Astarte, Innana—but the customs and symbols associated with her in various cultures are very similar. She was not merely a goddess of fertility

and the earth but also went by such titles as the Queen of Heaven, Mistress of the Animals, Divine Ancestress, and Creatress of All Life. She was also the receiver of the dead and the queen of the underworld. Her perennial symbols included the snake, which sheds its skin and is thus associated with renewal, and the butterfly, which undergoes metamorphosis and appears to be reborn.

In her book *When God Was A Woman*, Merlin Stone argues that the presence of a supreme female deity was associated with greater status for women in everyday life. In many early civilizations, kinship was traced through the mother, not the father, property was passed from mother to daughter, and children took their mothers' names. The Greek historian Herodotus (484–425 B.C.) wrote that in Egypt, where the goddess was worshipped under such names as Nut, Ua Zit, Hathor, and Isis, "women go in the marketplace, transact affairs and occupy themselves with business, while the husbands stay home and weave."

Feminist historian Marilyn French points out in her book *Beyond Power* that these early goddess-worshipping cultures show little evidence of social stratification, war, violence, human sacrifice, environmental destruction, or domination over women. The ancient city of Catal Huyuk in Anatolia (Turkey), where an abundance of goddess figurines has been found, housed several thousand inhabitants in comfortable dwellings of similar size and was apparently unfortified against attack. Artwork from the ancient Minoan culture in Crete shows women

as merchants, ship captains, farmers, chariot drivers, and priestesses of the goddess.

But somewhere between five and ten thousand years ago things began to change. A transition took place from a world view that emphasized the sacredness of an immanent earth mother goddess to one that emphasized the sacredness of a transcendent heavenly father god. With this transition came drastic social re-organization, diminishment of women's status and, eventually, attitudes toward the earth that permitted and even encouraged its exploitation.

Why this change took place is unknown. Some have theorized that men began to worship male hunting gods and to exclude women from their rituals. Some attribute it to the discovery of paternity; men realized that they, too, played a crucial role in the creation of life, and that without them women would be barren. The metaphor used to describe the world shifted from a female earth capable of independent procreation to a "great marriage" of a male sun fertilizing a female earth to bring forth life.

Merlin Stone asserts that the peoples who worshipped a great goddess in the Middle East were gradually dominated by warlike tribes of Indo-Europeans who swept in from the north in a series of invasions, bringing with them the concept of a male warrior god of the heavens associated with light, mountaintops, and fire. The transition was the result of centuries of often bloody struggle between the ad-

herents of the older religion and those of the new, a struggle that she finds much evidence of in the Old Testament.

Indeed, Stone argues that the Old Testament itself was written during times when the transition was anything but assured and maintains that it was explicitly designed, among other things, to demean the old worship of the goddess and prophesy disaster to all—especially women—who followed the old ways. It is no accident, Stone says, that the Garden of Eden story and the description of the Fall centers around a disobedient woman who takes the advice of a serpent and eats the fruit of a forbidden tree of knowledge. Both the serpent and the tree of life were widespread symbols of the goddess.

A close look at myths from various cultures reveals earlier versions showing female goddesses ruling peaceably, and later versions where the females were overthrown by trickery or force by male gods. In still later versions this takeover by men is rationalized because the women had brought some great evil or sin into the world; in other versions the original female goddesses are simply erased or so transformed as to be unrecognizable. Pandora's name means "giver of all gifts," but her myth was gradually transformed so that she, instead, became a symbol of the giver of all ills. Medusa, evil goddess of later myths whose head writhed with snakes and whose glance could turn men into stone, was originally a fertility goddess.

Across the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, myths were rewritten so that the son or husband of the mother goddess replaced her as the ruler and creator of the universe. The Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish* tells how a lesser god, Marduk, "the son of the sun," murdered the serpent creator goddess Tiamat to become supreme ruler of all the deities. Hera, whose temples long pre-date those of Zeus and who was once worshipped in her three guises as the Child, the Full-Grown Woman, and the Widow, is eventually reduced by Homer and Hesiod to an ill-tempered, shrewish wife.

By the time of classical Greece, the new order was firmly established. Aristotle, whose thinking would have such a great influence on the development of Western culture, based his biological theories on the concept of the male providing the "active principle" and the female the "inert matter." In Plato's



Symposium, women are placed midway in a hierarchy between men and beasts.

During the Middle Ages, the Christian church put a heavy emphasis on a split between matter and spirit, between the sinful and fallen world below and paradise in the heavens above. A sixteenth



century French priest, Bossuet, put it this way: "May the earth be cursed, may the earth be cursed, a thousand times be cursed because from it that heavy fog and those black vapors continually rise that ascend from the dark passions and hide heaven and its light from us." In similar terms, women were commonly thought to "bewitch" men and lure them into earthly and sexual temptations.

But the transition was not absolute; traces of reverence for Mother Earth can be found in many classical and medieval writers. The dominant image of the world up to the time of the Scientific

Revolution was that of an organic, living system. Plato portrayed the world as a living thing and gave it a female soul in *Timaeus*. Neoplatonist Christians in the twelfth century personified nature as a female goddess but portrayed her as subservient to a male god, an intermediary creator of the material world acting on the god's behalf.

Some influential Romans used the concept of the sacred flesh of an Earth Mother to argue against environmentally destructive practices. Pliny (A.D. 23–79) condemned mining passionately and asserted that earthquakes were "expressions of the indignation felt by our sacred parent! We penetrate her entrails, and seek for treasures . . . as though each spot we tread upon were not sufficiently bounteous and fertile for us!"

The Roman poet Ovid also deplored mining iron as a vice that had led to corruption, greed, murder, and war, none of which had existed in the prior Golden Age when "the Earth, untroubled, unhurried by hoe or plowshare, brought forth all that men had need for, and those men were happy." Seneca added that mining created "a sight to make [the] hair stand on end—huge rivers and vast reservoirs of sluggish waters."

Although the earth was still characterized as female throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, she was literally shoved to the side in importance when Copernicus revived the notion of a heliocentric universe. Bernard Fontanelle wrote with evident satisfaction in 1686 that Copernicus's theory "snatches up the earth from the center of the universe, sends her packing, and places the sun in the center, to which it did more justly belong."

Science historian Carolyn Merchant, in her book *The Death of Nature*, suggests that during the Renaissance, the organic metaphor of the earth as a living organism began to crumble during the social and intellectual upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries caused by new scientific discoveries, the transition from feudalism to a market-oriented economy, and the discovery of the New World. What emerged instead, says Merchant, was "a world view and a science that, by reconceptualizing reality as a machine rather than a living organism, sanctioned the domination of both nature and women."

According to Merchant, Francis Ba-

con, "the father of modern science," played a key role in helping to transform the earth from "a nurturing mother and womb of life into a source of secrets to be extracted for economic advance." The most noble ambition of man, according to Bacon, was "to endeavor to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe." In Bacon's view, nature was not a kindly, nurturing parent but rather a mindless, submissive body that it was man's duty to explore and manipulate.

"The image of nature that became important in the early modern period was that of a disorderly and chaotic realm to be subdued and controlled," says Merchant. Since women were perceived to be midway between the men and beasts, they were considered more likely to exhibit the wild, disorderly passion of nature. It was generally believed that women had a far greater sexual drive than men and that their lust, uncontrolled, would drag men down into corruption and vice.

Nowhere was this panicked sense that both women and nature needed to be violently controlled more apparent than in the witch-burning mania that swept Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although a few men were also tried and burned as witches, the vast majority of those killed were women; estimates range from 100,000 to nearly 9,000,000 (if those who died of torture, starvation, and disease in prisons are included in addition to those directly executed) over a period of two centuries. In 1585, two villages in Germany were left with only one female inhabitant each after a spate of witch-burnings.

Witches were associated with the night, animals, the forest, the moon, and sex. Witchcraft was considered to be an "extraordinary" crime where the usual rules of evidence did not apply; any woman, particularly a lower-class woman who did not have powerful male relatives to protect her, could be accused of being a witch on the slightest of provocations. Talking back to a man, refusing to do a man's wishes, oddity in dress or behavior, and independence of mind or spirit were all signs of witchery. Under the rack and the brand, these women were forced to make extraordinary confessions: that they had had intercourse with the devil



in the forest, that they had cast spells on children, and that they had flown through the night on the backs of animals.

The advent of modern science is often credited with bringing the era of witch trials to an end. But the Scientific Revolution was also responsible for declaring that the Mother Earth, revered since the dawn of humanity, was dead. The earth, according to Descartes, Newton, Hobbes, Locke, and Leibniz, was "merely" matter. Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) wrote to a friend in 1605: "My aim is to show that the celestial machine is to be likened not to a divine organism but to a clockwork." Once the world was considered dead, spiritually, it could without qualms be investigated, exploited, and owned; no restraints existed on thinking of it merely in terms of human resources and human gain. The way was clear for forests to be viewed in terms of board feet, canyons in terms of vertical drop for powerhouses, prairies in terms of bushels per



acre, and wetlands in terms of dollars per acre of waterfront property.

The dualism was no longer between a male god associated with light and the heavens and a female goddess associated with darkness and the earth; it was between an abstract god of "spirit" and a spiritless, mechanical world of matter. Descartes's famous formulation, "I think, therefore I am" could be interpreted to mean "Those things that don't think, aren't." As contemporary poet Robert Bly puts it, "Descartes's ideas act so as to withdraw consciousness from the non-human area, isolating the human being in his house, until, seen from the window, rocks, sky, trees, and crows seem empty of energy, but especially empty of divine energy."

Still, tenaciously, the idea of a mother earth goddess has remained alive in our culture. She is still there on the periphery of our language and symbols, and today, many people dissatisfied with contemporary attitudes toward women, the earth, or both, are actively trying to revive her in their lives.

From the overt paganism of present-day covens of "witches" to the scientifically based Gaia theories of J.E. Lovelock and others, the concept of Mother Earth and the values she represents—interdependence, nurturance, connection to all living things, reverence for life—is being rediscovered as a source of power and hope. As the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin wrote in 1798, "Mother of Nature, if a word with immense/Energy is needed, people remember yours." △

Gale Warner

Gale Warner lives in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and is a frequent contributor to Sanctuary.

Recommended Reading:

- Auel, Jean. *Earth's Children* series. New York: Bantam Books. 1980, 1982, 1985.
- Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *The Mists of Avalon*. New York: Knopf Publishers. 1983.
- Downing, Christine. *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine*. New York: Crossroad. 1984.
- French, Marilyn. *Beyond Power*. New York: Summit Books. 1985.
- Griffin, Susan. *Women and Nature*. New York: Harper and Row. 1978.
- Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. New York: Harper and Row. 1983.
- Starhawk. *Dreaming the Dark*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1982.
- Stone, Merlin. *When God Was A Woman*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. 1976.