

The Three Faces of the Goddess in Ben Jonson's Masque of Queens

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Throughout the world people have associated the moon with the eternal feminine, for the moon's monthly cycle is a reminder of the rhythms of womanhood. The moon represents the ebb and flow of birth, growth and death, a pattern of perpetual renewal that is made visible in the three phases of the Goddess as Maiden, Mother and Crone.

Adele Getty: *Goddess: Mother of Living Nature*.

The great majority of the scholars who have devoted the best part of their lives to the study of the remote eras when humanity worshipped a Mother Goddess seem to agree that, as the cult of the female deity was progressively overruled by that of a male God, the memory of its secret rites lingered on, hidden away in the, what is known as magic lore, kept alive first through oral tradition and, later on, in the texts of the many writers who thought this material worthy of their attention.¹

Although Jonson, in view of the high moral standards he wished his work to be known by, never allowed himself much scope in this area (at least not in his comedies where, for corrective purposes, he depicted life with the harsh crudeness of the satirist) he, nevertheless, deigned to explore this field in his masques, the elaborate plays written for the entertainment of the court. This was a genre he excelled in to the great pleasure of James I who, for his good services, awarded him the title of King's Poet.

Among such theatrical pieces, *The Masque of Queens* deserves to be singled out because its magic lore, in spite of the scarring left on it by centuries of male-oriented religion, still bears the stamp of the primeval rites that gave it shape and form.

This recurrent underlying trait can be easily perceived in the description of the witches at the beginning of the play. Although their names - Slander, Rage, Excretion, Malice, Suspicion - link them up with the Seven Deadly Sins of the Christian Doctrine and, consequently, with the vices of the Morality and the hellish powers, some details of their physical appearance trace their origin back to the third theophany of the Great Mother Goddess as Hag, a word Jonson uses without realising its real implications, the Dispenser of Death and the Lady of the Underworld:

¹ Vide Baring, Anne., Cashford, Jules 1991: *The Myth of the Goddess*. London, The Penguin Book, Arkana: 648, 655-658, 656-657; Campbell, Joseph 1959: *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*. vol.I. London, The Penguin Group, Arkana: 161 ff., 431 ff.; Gimbutas, Marija 1989: *The Language of the Goddess*. New York, Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, St. Louis, London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Harper & Row: 321.

[These Witches] all differently attir'd; some wth rattes on they^r heads; some, on they^r shoulders; others wth oyntment-potts at they^r girdles; All wth spindells, timbrells, rattles, or other *veneficall* instruments, ...²

Though the rat is not an animal commonly associated with the divine female being, it nevertheless, cannot be denied that it is a creature of the dark which, if the need arises, feeds on carrion. As for the ointment, it probably consists of a misconstruction of the sacred intoxicating beverage the devotees of the Goddess drank in certain ceremonies which took place on predetermined days of the lunar month or year. But the «spindells, timbrells or rattles» have always been directly associated with the female deity, who was often depicted holding them in her divine hands. Besides, all these instruments are round, or rather, circular like the concept of the passing of time in the matriarchal communities where death, mating and birth/rebirth matched the cycles of Nature.

As with the description of the witches, so with that of their Dame, whom the poet, through the symbolism of the snake, seems to have inadvertently given the role of High Priestess of this strange cult:

At this, the *Dame* enterd to them, naked arm'd, barefooted, her frock tuck'd, her hayre knotted, and folded wth vipers; In her hand, a Torch made of a dead-Mans arme, lighted; girded wth a snake. (H & S: 286).

The symbiosis between woman and reptile, which is clearly alluded to in the text, dates back to the remote eras when the Goddess was revered. In fact, in contrast to what happened later on after Jewish and Christian teaching identified the serpent with the Tempter of the Garden of Eden, this ophidian was always the faithful companion of the female deity and even her partner in the Act of Creation, a concept that gave rise to the Pelasgian Creation Myth, one of the most beautiful that human mind has ever brought forth:

In the beginning, Eurynome, the Goddess of All Things, rose naked from Chaos, but found nothing substantial for her feet to rest upon, and therefore divided the sea from the sky, dancing lonely upon its waves. She danced towards the south, and the wind set in motion behind her seemed nothing new and apart with which to begin a work of creation. Wheeling about, she caught hold of this north wind, rubbed it between her hands, and behold ! the great serpent Ophion. (H & S 286).

But the presence of the Goddess as Cronos, or in any of her other two theophanies, is not restricted solely to the details concerning the outward appearance of the witches or hags. It also makes itself felt in the magic formulas they chant and the dialogue going on among themselves. These texts thus seem to provide all the necessary clues to fully appreciate the extensive and rich lore of this ancient cult that derived its strength and substance from its very special bond with Nature.

The 1st. «Charme» discloses all the whereabouts of the witches before they were, somehow, magically summoned to this meeting:

From the lakes, and from the fennes,
From the rockes, and from the dennes,
From the woods, and from the caues,
From the Church-yards, from the graues,
From the dungeon, from the tree,
That they die on, here are wee. (H & S: 284).

The places alluded to do not come as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with the myth of the Goddess. In fact, they are highly symbolical and part of the whole pattern.

² Herford, C. H., Simpson, Percy and Evelyn eds. 1970: *Ben Jonson*. vol VII. Oxford, At the Clarendon Press: 283. All quotations from *The Masque of Queens* will be taken out of this volume of the Critical Edition of Ben Jonson's Works in XI volumes. So, henceforth, it will be just mentioned as H & S followed by the number of the page where the quotation in question can be found.

The lakes or fountains stand for the purifying water where the female deity used to submerge her sacred body to recover her virginity, that is to say, the potential of her fertile matrix to generate new beings.

The caves epitomize her divine reproductive organs, moist, dark, secluded, awesome in their seemingly never-ending fruitfulness.

As for the trees of the forest with their branches striving to reach the sky and their roots firmly hugging the soil, they represent the projection in this world of the famous Tree of Life which, usually depicted with two snakes coiling round its trunk, spanned all the realms under the rule of the Goddess - air, earth/fire and nether regions.

If the 1st charm deals basically with the many abodes of the female deity, the 2nd. focus primarily on an animal that civilizations based on Judaism and Christianity always equate with the devil himself - the Goat.³ Originally the Ram, a sexually strong but not lecherous animal, unlike his successor, this horned beast, or some others with antlers, is a trusted companion of the divine woman and quite often an emblematic representation of her partner.

However, this living creature is not the only one to enjoy a privileged relationship with the Goddess. Many more do so, as can be inferred from the 3rd. «Charme»:

The Owle is abroad, the Bat, and the Toade,
And so is the Cat-à-Mountaine;
The Ant, and the Mole sit both in a hole,
And Frog peeps out of the fountayne;
The Dogges, they do bay, and the Timbrells play,
The Spindle is now à turning;
The Moone it is red, and the starres are fled,
But all the Skye is à burning ... (H & S: 285).

Although all the animals mentioned in the text can boast of a special link with the female deity, the Owl, later on referred to as «screeching Owl», stands out among the rest. In fact it was believed that there were times when the divine being, in her capacity as Hag, would use its body to soar ominously in the night sky, as befitted the true harbinger of Death.

Also rating very high in the scale of values is the Leopard to which Jonson alludes as «Cat-à-Mountain» The importance of this feline can be assessed by its presence at a very momentous event: while the Goddess was giving birth, two of them flank the chair she is sitting on their heads providing a resting place for her divine hands.

Of all the other animals still mentioned in the 3rd. «Charme», the ant fares almost on equal terms with the big wild cat but for different reasons. In fact, what matters most in relation to this insect is the sometimes highly developed social organization of its female-oriented colonies. Since the dominant role is held by an exceedingly fertile queen, it matches that of the human matriarchal communities.

The last animal worth to be considered separately is the dog. Although, his most famous widely known forefather is Cerberus, the three-headed dog which guarded the Greek patriarchal Hades, its importance as a mythical figure dates back to the times when humanity worshipped a Goddess and not a God. Within the structure of her myth he played a very definite role: he was the hunter of her forests and as such he bayed (as it happens in Jonson's text) while hounding his victim, and howled when he finally killed it. Since in matriarchal societies hunting was the only area of activity in which men had their say, the dog sometimes stood for the emblematic representation of the human predator who was also the divine woman's companion or, occasionally, even her partner.

³ Graves, Robert 1960: *The Greek Myths: 1*. London, The Penguin Group: 27.

However, the wealth of symbols found in the 3rd charm, which can be traced back to the myth of the Goddess, does not confine itself to the boundaries of this earth. It reaches up to the sky where the female deity, like any other divine being, has her very own celestial body. And, as she is a woman, only the Moon - the Sky Woman - with her whimsical moods, her waning, her «pregnancies» and sudden unaccounted-for disappearances can impersonate her. That is why the witches, as descendants of the Goddess, allude to that planet in the 3rd «Charme», endowing it with a reddish hue that has spread to the whole darkness above. Could it be that both Moon and sky reflect the colour of the blood spilt by the dogs which are about hunting?

With slight variations, the symbols that can be dated back to the remote epoch of the Goddess are picked up throughout the play by all the witches, even when they are just describing in detail how they spent their time before meeting the Dame. However, the 4th. Hag concentrates on an issue which had not yet been raised, at least not in so many words:

And I ha' bene choosing out this scull,
From Charnell-houses, that were full;
From private grotts; and publique pitts;
And frighted a Sexton out of his witts (H & S: 290).

Although the witches were supposed to collect bones for purposes of their own, the real interest of this passage lies in the word «scull». It is believed that certain ceremonies in honour of the female deity included drinking the sacred beverage out of crania, even if it is impossible to establish the origin of such skulls with absolute accuracy. In fact, they might have belonged to human beings, animals or either. That does not necessarily mean that, when Jonson wrote this Masque, the witches were still using them as before but, since they might be said to conjure up reminiscences of bygone eras, they are worth mentioning.

Far off dim memories also seem to pervade the statements of the 5th. Hag. In it, she describes how she relates to babies:

Vnder a cradle I did creepe,
By day; and, when the Child was à-sleepe,
At night, I suck'd the breath; and rose,
And pluck'd the nodding nurse, by the nose. (H & S: 291).

It is impossible to determine with precision if in Jonson's age women accused of witchcraft were supposed to kill infants or not. But in aeons of old when the cult of the Goddess was prevalent, whenever there was a birth, the baby had to be carefully examined and any deviation from the «norm», whatever that might mean, implied that it should be disposed of. A similar principle seemed to justify some form of euthanasia when senility set in and people could no longer take care of themselves.

Another indication that the cult of the female deity was still alive is the emphasis on the number three, which reaches its highest peak in the invocation of the Dame:

You that haue, oft, bene conscious of these sights;
And thou, *three-formed Starre*, that on these nights
Art only power-full, to Whose triple Name
Thus we incline; *Once, twise, and thrise-the-Same*: (H & S: 295).

As Jonson himself explains in his notes, this «*three-formed Starre*» is Hecate, «*tria virginis ora Diana*». However, this interpretation falls already within the parameters of a male-oriented religion. Most probably, Hecate is the three-faced Goddess of old - virgin, lover/mother and Cronos, the female trinity - who had the Moon as her visible celestial counterpart.

However, the dark face of the female deity as Cronos is not the only one that pervades the text. Her two other theophanies are also present but will only emerge when the Age of Gold is restored by

Heroique Virtue and Fame much against the innermost wish of the Dame who had shared with her Hags the hope of defeating her opponents once and for all:

Vertue, else, will deeme
Our powers decreas't, and thinke vs banish'd earth,
No lesse then heauen. All her antique birth,
As *Iustice*, *Fayth*, she will restore: and, bold
Vpon o^r sloth, retrieve her *Age of Gold*. (H & S: 288).

But the supreme powers prove too strong for the forces of havoc and chaos: with the same indomitable spirit that, in times of old, the Goddess would rescue her son/lover from the evil clutches of the nether regions, so Heroique Virtue and Fame banish the withches from the sight of men (or should it be women?) and show the glory of their House through the undefiled characters of the Queens that are worthy of figuring in it. And in these dauntless women the Goddess is alive either as a Virgin or as a Mother/Lover, something which can be better understood not from the text of the mask itself but from the extensive explanations that Jonson gives afterwards. Two examples will suffice:

The sixth, that famous Wife of *Mithridates*, and *Queene of Pontus*, *Hypsicratea*, no lesse an example of *Vertue*, then the rest: Who so lou'ed her Husband, as she was assistant to him in all labors, and hazards of the Warre, in a Masculine habite. (H & S: 309).

The eleuenth was that braue *Bohemian Queene*, *Valasca*, Who, for her courage, had the surname of *Bold*. That, to redeeme her selfe, and her *sexe*, frō the *tyranny* of Men, w^{ch} they liu'd in, vnder *Primislaus*, on a night, and at an hower appoynted, led on the Women to the slaughter of they^r barbarous *Husbands* and *Lords* ... (H & S: 312).

So, both witches and queens who, apparently, have nothing in common partake of the divine essence of the Goddess: they have minds of their own, pursue their ideals without relenting and share of the then called and even today considered masculine attributes. Stephen Orgel affirms as much in his book *Impersonations* although the pervading influence of the Goddess could not be further from his thoughts:

So conceived, witches and queens are two sides of a single coin; the fearsome and the admirable share the same attributes of masculine vigour, strength and independence - the withches are the queens in reverse, literally, etymologically «preposterous». Indeed, in the structure of the masque, the witches, defining themselves as «faithful opposites / To fame and glory», *produce* their heroic antitheses.⁴

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⁴ Orgel, Stephen 1996: *Impersonations: The performance of gender in Shakespeare's England*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 110.