

SELECTED EXCERPTS
from
Riane Eisler's book
SACRED PLEASURE:
SEX, MYTH, AND THE POLITICS OF THE BODY

Candles, music, flowers, and wine – these we all know are the stuff of romance, of sex and of love. But candles, flowers, music, and wine are also the stuff of religious ritual, of our most sacred rites.

Why is there this striking, though seldom noted, commonality? Is it just accidental that passion is the word we use for both sexual and mystical experiences? Or is there here some long forgotten but still powerful connection? Could it be that the yearning of so many women and men for sex as something beautiful and magical is our long repressed impulse toward a more spiritual, and at the same time more intensely passionate, way of expressing sex and love?

Because we have been taught to think of sex as sinful, dirty, titillating, or prurient, the possibility that sex could be spiritual, much less sacred, may seem shocking. . . Yet the evidence is compelling that for many thousands of years – much longer than the thirty to fifty centuries we call recorded history – this was the case.

In traditions that go back to the dawn of civilization, the female vulva was revered as the magical portal of life, possessed of the power of both physical regeneration and spiritual illumination and transformation. . . Far from being of a lower, base, or carnal order, it was a primary symbol of the powerful figure known in later Western history as the Great Goddess: the divine source of life, pleasure, and love.

In the south of France, where some of the earliest European art has been found, there are many images of the sacred vulva. Some of these, in cave sanctuaries near Les Eyzies in the Dordogne region, go back thirty thousand years. As archaeologists point out, the cave was symbolic of the Great Mother's womb. Its entrance was thus a symbol of the sacred portal or vaginal opening.

This association of the divine vulva and womb with birth, death, and regeneration is a major mythical theme in prehistoric art. It probably goes back all the way to the Paleolithic (or early Stone Age), is clearly present in the Neolithic (when agriculture began), and in various forms still survives in the Bronze Age and even later historic times.

Many sculptures of what archaeologists call Venus or Goddess figurines, as well as other ceremonial objects excavated from all over the ancient world, have highly emphasized vulvas. Since prehistoric art is primarily concerned with myths and rituals, there is little question that these vulvas are of religious significance. . . A six thousand-year-old Goddess figure from Bulgaria, the throned "Lady of Pazardzik," has her arms folded over her prominently etched vulva. Her sacred triangle is ornamented by a double spiral, an ancient symbol of regeneration. Strikingly similar is a Japanese Jomon pottery Goddess from approximately the same time with double spirals on her torso and a highly stylized inverted pubic triangle. . .

In ancient Indian religious tradition, the female pubic triangle was viewed as the focus of divine energy. It is to this day in tantric yoga associated with what is called *kundalini* energy, which, when awakened through the pleasures of sex, rises through the body to bring about a state of ecstatic bliss. . .

There are also indications that the male phallus was in ancient times an object of

veneration. Although the evidence for this is strongest from Bronze Age times, phalluses, and particularly depictions of the union of the phallus and vagina, are found as early as the Paleolithic, in imagery strongly reminiscent of the sacred lingam-yoni figures today still found in India. . .

One of the most beautiful examples of this artistic tradition depicting sex as sacred comes to us from Mesopotamia. It is a terra cotta plaque sometimes identified as "Lovers Embracing on Bed," probably the Goddess Inanna and the God Dumuzi about to consummate their sacred union. It was fashioned about 4000 years ago. And like many earlier Neolithic Goddess figurines, it clearly delineates, indeed accentuates, the sacred pubic triangle. . .

Our early mythical imagery reflected a worldview in which death was neither an isolated event nor a final destination in Heaven or Hell. Rather, it was part of the same cycle: a cycle of sex, birth, death, and rebirth, in which the Goddess reclaimed what was hers to give, and in which sex played a mysterious but central part. As our ancestors realized that women only give birth after sexual intercourse, they apparently concluded that the rebirth of vegetable and animal life every Spring (and even the rebirth of the sun on the Winter Solstice each year) is also generated through some kind of sexual union. So our ancestors fashioned rites through which we humans too could find union with the mysterious forces that govern the universe, which they associated with the female creative power.

For if plants could be born again and again from the earth (the womb of vegetation) one could believe, even though it was not given to humans to witness that process, that the Goddess – who recycled days and nights, barley and wheat, and Spring and Fall – would also recycle human life. And one could also believe that through erotic rites of alignment with the mysterious power of sex through which the Goddess performed her miraculous work of birth and rebirth, we humans could find not only protection and solace in our inevitable pain, sorrow, and death, but also augment our chances, generation after generation, for a joyful and bountiful life.

But if in a more partnership-oriented era the sacred marriage of the Goddess symbolized both the union of female and male and our oneness with the life-and-pleasure-giving powers of the universe, what kind of sacred union could be celebrated in a world where the worship of the Goddess and her divine son or lover would become ever more subordinate to the worship of violent and warlike gods? . . .

In such a world, both the worship of the Goddess and the sacred marriage as an ecstatic religious rite would have to acquire very different forms and meanings. . .

A fascinating case in point is the famous story of Theseus, Ariadne, and the Minotaur. According to this popular Greek myth, which tellingly takes place on the island of Crete, there was once a wicked king by the name of Minos, who every year required a tribute from the Athenians of seven young women and seven young men to be sacrificed to a monstrous creature, half bull and half man, called the Minotaur. When the action opens, the young Athenians (including Theseus, son of the king of Athens) have just arrived in Crete. Through promises of love, Theseus quickly tricks Minos' daughter, the priestess Ariadne, into giving him a secret only she knows: how to safely enter and leave the underground labyrinth where the bloodthirsty Minotaur dwells. Armed with Ariadne's magic thread and his trusty sword, Theseus descends into the labyrinth, catches the Minotaur by surprise, and speedily dispatches him to Hades (the Greek realm of the dead).

One interesting feature of this story is its vilification of the Mycenaean King Minos. In earlier accounts, Minos is far from evil. Homer, who writes glowingly of Mycenaean times, identifies him as the son of Olympian Zeus himself. Hesiod describes him as the most inspired

and just law-giver of the ancient world. So undoubtedly what the vilification of Minos reflects is the end of Mycenaean control of the Mediterranean and the gradual ascendancy of Athenian power.

Even more interesting, if we look at this story in light of what we know about the important roles played by Cretan women as late as Mycenaean times, is how this myth deals with Ariadne – who, like Queen Arete in the Mycenaean Phaeacia of Homer's *Odyssey*, was probably still worshipped by her people as the earthly representative of the Goddess. Even in this Athenian legend, Ariadne is still a woman possessed of great power. It is she, who like Inanna in the Sumerian Hymns, holds the secret to the labyrinth, to an initiation-like journey such as Inanna and Dumuzi took to the underworld of death. It is also she who has the knowledge of how to return.

Only now that knowledge and that journey are no longer part of a mythical cycle involving sex, death, and rebirth. Nor is it any longer a journey in which a female deity plays the major role. Instead, it is a journey taken alone by a male hero. And it is not a journey to the realm of a chthonic or underworld Goddess, as in the Hymn of Inanna, where her older sister Ereshkigal is queen. Rather, it is to a place under the earth where a hooved and horned male monster (much like the later devil of Christian iconography) devours human flesh.

Most tellingly, in sharp contrast to the story of Inanna and Dumuzi, in which Inanna returns from the underworld to continue to govern her people, the story of Theseus and Ariadne has a very different ending. For him, it ends with a triumphant hero's journey home to rule as a king. For her, it ends with her people's defeat, the betrayal of her love by Theseus, and her abandonment far away from home on the isle of Naxos.

Just as Greek gods such as Zeus, Apollo, and Ares were Indo-European imports, mythical Greek heroes such as Theseus, Hercules, and Perseus were idealized representations of the men who were now everywhere taking over the ancient world. The qualities these archetypal heroes embodied were not so different from those of the epic he-men of our time, of a Rambo or James Bond. They were consummate killers, noted for their power not to give, but to take life. They did not hesitate to use lies and thievery to advance their ends. And, in a world where (eventually, even in Crete) women were gradually becoming male properties, they were frequently not only rapists and seducers, but also abductors or thieves of women.

Moreover, as in James Bond and other contemporary macho adventure films, sex with women was for these ancient Greek heroes merely incidental. For rather than a sacred act associated with the worship of the Goddess, sex was now associated with kingly ambition to conquer and to rule – and above all, with violence.

Probably because of the tenacious hold that the institution of the sacred marriage as a legitimization of royal rule still had even by his time, Theseus eventually marries Ariadne's little sister Phaedra. But like Ariadne, she too is no longer described as the representative of the Goddess. Instead, we are simply told she is also a daughter of King Minos.

In other words, the powerful ancient archetype of the Goddess and of the priestess who was her earthly representative has by now been radically altered. And so also has the institution of the sacred marriage, which now no longer takes place, as all ancient sacred marriages did, in the land of the priestess or queen – as tracing descent through the mother and a husband coming to live with his wife would require. Rather it takes place in Theseus's homeland, to which he has taken the little girl Phaedra, who is then brought up as a member of his household: a clear reflection of the shift from matrilineal to patrilineal descent and of the Athenian custom of child-marriage for girls.

But these radically altered sexual relations, first between Theseus and Ariadne, and then between him and Phaedra, are not the only way in which the ancient sacred marriage is coopted and debased in this myth revolving around the exploits of a Greek prince/king. Even more dramatic – as I suddenly realized when I reread the part of this story focusing on the Minotaur – is how the sacred marriage is debased, distorted, and in essence parodied, in the account of his birth.

What we are told is that the Minotaur is the child of King Minos's wife, Queen Pasiphae. However, he is not the child of Minos, but of a beautiful white bull with whom, in punishment of Minos for not sacrificing the bull to him, the Greek sea god Poseidon made Pasiphae fall in love.

The bull as a symbol of male potency goes back all the way to the Paleolithic – as most probably does the myth of a sacred sexual union of the female creative principle with a bull, since in a Paleolithic cave we find an otherwise inexplicable painting of a horned animal standing over a pregnant woman. This association of the male principle with the bull is still very clear in the hymn of Inanna (where she refers to Dumuzi as her "wild bull") and even much later in Minoan and Mycenaean Crete (where the horns of consecration or bull horns were prominent religious symbols everywhere associated with the worship of the Goddess). So there seems little question that the sexual union of Pasiphae and the white bull is still the sacred marriage of the female principle represented by the Goddess and the male principle represented by the ancient Bull God.

But now, rather than being a rite of central religious significance, it is presented to us as the illicit, and unnatural, affair of a king's wife. Moreover, rather than bringing forth new life in the Spring – or a divine child symbolizing the Goddess's power over birth, death, and regeneration – what this sexual union produces is a monster with an unquenchable appetite for human blood.

In short, just as in medieval Christian dogma sex is linked with sin, in the Theseus legend the sacred marriage between Pasiphae (as the representative of the Goddess) and the white bull (the ancient Bull God) becomes an adulterous act by an unfaithful wife. To top it all off – and in complete reversal of earlier myths and archetypes – the product of this once sacred union is now an evil and bloodthirsty demon, curiously prefiguring the familiar horned and hooved devil that in later Christian myth endlessly torments humans in his underground Hell. . .

Yet even to our day, the earlier melding of the sexual and spiritual is evident in both Eastern and Western mystical traditions. This is one reason many people in the so-called New Age spiritual movement look to mysticism for clues to a more satisfying spirituality and sexuality. Many of these people are particularly drawn to Eastern mystical traditions, as they often preserve more of the prehistoric view that a balanced union of female and male is the essential foundation for balance and harmony in all aspects of our world.

But both Eastern and Western mystical writings are a mix of partnership and dominator elements. So precisely because there is today so much interest in alternatives to religions where our bodies (and particularly our sexuality) are supposed to be base and evil, it is important that we try to untangle the various strands of these two completely contradictory points of view. . .

Certainly the earlier, more partnership-oriented societies of our prehistory were not ideal. But they were societies where our most intimate connections – the connections of women and children through birth and of women and men through sex – were still understood as sacred rather than profane. And they were societies where even at the dawn of human civilization, women and men already seem to have sensed the wisdom that lies at the core of our most exalted mystical and religious traditions: that it is only through connection, through love (be it of a

divinity or another human) that we can attain our highest potentials.

The search for this lost wisdom by mystics – and by women and men throughout the ages – is the search for reconnection with our partnership roots. It is the search for a way of relating that is the antithesis of the dominator mode, where in both reality and myth polarization and strife, conflict and separation, winning and losing, dominating and subduing, dismembering and disembodiment, conquering and controlling, in short, force, fear, and violent disconnection, are the central themes. And its very essence, as mystical writings have so often brought out, is the search for a means of healing what was so brutally rent asunder with the shift to a dominator world: the fundamental erotic, and with this also spiritual, connection between women and men.

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