The Women's History of the World

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Miles R.

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Now available as an ebook.Men dominate history because they write it. This book offers a reappraisal which aims to re-establish women's importance at the centre of the worldwide history of revolution, empire, war and peace. As well as looking at the influence of ordinary women, it looks at those who have shaped history.

Содержание

ROSALIND MILES

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Dedication

For all the women of the world who have had no history

Contents

Woman *is* and *makes* history. MARY RITTER BEARD

Preface

'What is history?' brooded Gibbon, the great historian of the Roman Empire. 'Little more than a register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of men.' At last the hand that rocks the cradle has taken up the pen to set the record straight. In history, there were women too.

It would be hard to find much support for this proposition from the historical record. When a memorial stone was carved into the quay at Plymouth to commemorate the Founding Fathers who made the historic Mayflower voyage of 1620, there was no mention of the seventeen women who sailed with them to build the new world. In general, the historians of every era have shown little interest in the female sex. In 1238, only one maidservant, 'awake by night and singing psalms' saw the assassin who gained entry to the bedchamber of the king of England, knife in hand. She changed the course of history – and the chronicler, Matthew de Paris, did not even get her name.

Yet the women of the world have had a history, and the full story has been far more rich and strange than we are ever led to think. The chief aim of this book is to assert the range, power and significance of women's contribution to the evolution of the human race, its huge-variety in both the public and the private spheres, and the massive female achievement on every level – cultural, commercial, domestic, emotional, social and sexual. Our world past is packed with countless stories of Amazons and Assyrian war queens, mother goddesses and Great She-Elephants, imperial concubines who rose to rule the world, scientists, psychopaths, saints and sinners, Brunhild, Marie de Brinvilliers, Mother Teresa, Chiang Ch'ing.

The lives of unsung heroines also have the fascination of the greatest story never told. Every historical period and place has brought a new slant on the old saga of the re-creation of the human race. From the empress undergoing a month-long accouchement attended by doctors, midwives, ladies-in-waiting, astrologers and poets laureate, to the peasant field-worker stepping aside to give birth crouched over a hole under a hedge, then returning to work with her new-born child swaddled at her back, the renewal of the species has always been the sole, whole, unavoidable and largely unacknowledged gift to the future of the female sex worldwide.

All this is lost when our view of history concentrates on men only, claiming a universal validity for the actions of less than half the human race. That view is a one-eyed sham – fractured, partial and censored. Historians have made a fetish of ferreting around in pipe rolls and laundry lists to track down the dirty linen of great men in preference to the great deeds of unfamous women. Society has glorified golden balls, orbs, swords and maces as symbols of worshipful masculinity, flashy phallic shows to elevate what men most valued about themselves. Each generation has bamboozled posterity for a thousand years with fancy-dress fictions and hollow bluster; among a forest of historical phallacies, the so-called 'Holy Roman Empire of the German People', for instance, was *none* of these things. As Jane Austen demurely remarked, 'I often think it odd that history should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.'

Women's history by contrast has only just begun to invent itself. Males gained entry to the business of recording, defining and interpreting events in the third millennium B.C.; for women, this process did not even begin until the nineteenth century. Early women's history was devoted to combing the chronicles for queens, abbesses and learned women to set against the equivalent male figures of authority and ability, creating heroines in the mirror image of heroes: Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale, Catherine the Great. This pop-up, cigarette-card version of women's history, though it has some value in asserting that women can be competent and powerful, had two weaknesses – it reinforced the false effect of male domination of history, since there were always many more male rulers and 'geniuses' than female; and it failed to address the reality of the majority of women's lives who had neither the opportunity nor the appetite for such activities.

What then should a women's history of the world do? It must fill the gaps left by conventional history's preoccupation with male doings, and give attention and dignity to women's lives in their own right. Women's exclusion from the annals represents a million million stifled voices. To recover the female part of what we have called history is no mean achievement. Any women's history therefore has to be alert to the blanks, the omissions and the half-truths. It must listen to the silences and make them cry out.

The second task is to confront the story of women as the greatest race of underdogs the world has ever known. 'Women live like bats or owls, labour like beasts, and die like worms,' wrote an English duchess, Margaret of Newcastle, in the seventeenth century. Both women and men have to accept the violence and brutality of men's systematic and sustained attacks on the female sex, from wife-beating to witch-hunting, from genital mutilation to murder, as the first step towards righting history's ancient and terrible wrongs.

As this argues, it is essential to acknowledge that the interests of women have very often been opposed to, and by, those of men. It is no paradox that historical periods of great progress for men have often involved losses and setbacks for women. If there is any truth in Lenin's claim that the emancipation of its women offers a fair measurement of the general level of the civilization of any society, then received notions of 'progressive' developments like the classical Athenian culture, the Renaissance, and the French Revolution, in all of which women suffered severe reversals, have to undergo a radical revaluation: for, as the American historian Joan Kelly drily observes, 'there was no Renaissance for women – at least in the Renaissance.'

A women's history, then, must hope to explain as well as narrate, seeking the answer to two key questions: How did men succeed in enforcing the subordination of women? And why did women let them get away with it? At the origin of the species, it is suggested, Mother Nature saddled women with an unequal share of the primary work of reproduction. They therefore had to consent to domination in order to obtain protection for themselves and their children. The historical record shows, however, that women in 'primitive' societies have a better chance of equality than those of more 'advanced' cultures. In these, male domination has been elaborated into every aspect of life, indeed strenuously re-invented in every epoch with a battery of religious, biological, 'scientific', psychological and economic reasons succeeding one another in the endless work of justifying women's inferiority to men. Traditionalist arguments of masculine supremacy have been remarkably resilient over time – all democratic experiments, all revolutions, all demands for equality have so far stopped short of sexual equality – and women, seen as biologically determined, continue to be denied the human right of full self-determination.

Given that men have sought control, why did women let them have it? As with the 'inevitability' of male dominance, the explanations interlock. Handed over as children by one man (their father) to another (as husband), they were legally, financially and physically subject to the power of males in its undisguised form for thousands of years – until very recently, men of all cultures had the right to kill a wife they even suspected was adulterous. Backing up physical force, and successfully superseding it as a technique of control, came mental violence. Commandeered in mind as well as body, women have always been subjected to a barrage of psycho-sexual conditioning to shape them up to the demands of their males. As Dora Russell remarked, 'the astonishing fact of human history is that religion, philosophy, political, social and economic thought have been reserved as the prerogative of men. Our world is the product of male consciousness.' How then could women think the unthinkable, in Virginia Woolf's words, of 'killing the Angel at the Hearth'? Finally, and this cannot be dodged, women have colluded in their own subordination – too comfortable with the accommodations they had made, too locked into the ways they had found to live with men and with themselves, too wedded to their own often pathetically ingenious and resourceful solutions, they have not only helped to sustain the systems of male dominance but have betrayed their children, male and female, into them too.

Yet – and this is the final paradox of women's history – women have not ultimately been victims either of men or history, but have emerged as strong, as survivors, as invincible. Now, freed at last from the timeless tyranny of enforced child-bearing, they are moving onto the offensive to correct these antediluvian imbalances. For patriarchy has run its course, and now not only fails to serve the real needs of men and women, but with its inalienable racism, militarism, hierarchical structures and rage to dominate and destroy, it threatens the very existence of life on earth. 'We women are gathering', declared the American women's Pentagon Action Group of 1980, 'because life on the precipice is intolerable.' As long as women go on allowing men to make history, we are responsible for the material and moral consequences of our evasion.

The effort then must be to free women from their historical shackles – from the tyranny of ancient customs like bride-burning and genital mutilation still horrifically alive in the twentieth century – and to combat those newly minted in our own time. For the struggle to set women free is far from over, as Westerners like to think. In this century, the new technologies, advances in medical science and urbanization have offered women unparalleled freedoms – but each has carried within it the seeds of its use against women, bringing new opportunities for degradation and exploitation, new forms of drudge labour, new attacks on life and hope. The amniocentesis test, for example, devised as a means of promoting the birth of healthy babies, is now widely used to detect the sex of a child as a preliminary to aborting unwanted females: one clinic in Bombay alone performed 16,000 abortions of female foetuses in 1984–5 (*Guardian*, 4.11.86).

With a subject of this magnitude, there could have been as many different histories as there are women to write them. This book does not try to be comprehensive, nor does it purport to have solved all the problems of writing women's history. Many people will feel that they could have done better. Please try – we need as much women's history as we can get. This version makes no pretence to the traditional historical fiction of impartiality. Accordingly, as with any work on women, some good ol' boy somewhere is bound to object that it is unfair to men. There is no better reply to this than the spirited self-defence of the pioneer women's historian Mary Ritter Beard: 'There is sure to be an over-emphasis in places, but my apology is that when conditions have been long weighted too much on one side, it is necessary to bear down heavily on the other.'

It will also be objected that women should not be singled out for special pleading, since both sexes suffered alike. When both men and women groaned under back-breaking labour with the ever-present scourge of famine and sudden death, the women's afflictions, it is argued, were no worse than those of men. This is another widely held belief that will not stand up to any examination of the real differences between the lives of women and men. The male peasant, however poor and lowly, always had the right to beat his wife; the black male slave, though he laboured for the white master by day, did not have to service him by night as well. Nor have changing social conditions had the same impact on men's and women's lives – the industrialization of Europe and America in the nineteenth century that improved the material quality of so many people's lives, itself depended upon the introduction of the ferocious consumerism that more than anything else has devalued women in twentieth-century society.

The future of the world, then, has to be better than its past. In finding the way to the future, our understanding of our past has a crucial part to play. As Lord Acton observed, 'history convinces more people than philosophy.' Historians create explanations, rationales, symbols and stereotypes that guide us from one era to another. Consequently, history will lead us all astray if it continues to look asquint. Women have been active, competent and *important* through all the ages of man, and it is devastating for us if we do not understand this. But history is also without meaning for men if the centrality of women is denied. Like racist myths, these one-sided accounts of the human past are no longer acceptable: intellectually spurious and devoid of explanatory power, they more and more betray the void of unknowing at their heart.

Can human beings learn from the lessons that history teaches? To move towards a fairer society in the ideal of full humanity for all, men must be ready to dispense with patriarchy's rigid orthodoxies and life-denying hierarchical systems. Women in return have to take up their share of the responsibility for the public organization of their societies, and in the private sphere, learn to love men as partners, not in the insulting traditional combination of domineering father and overgrown child. All future developments from now on must be assessed from the perspective of both sexes, since both men and women are equally important to the making of history. The hope for the future, like the triumph of the past, lies in the co-operation and complementarity of women and men.

ROSALIND MILES

I

In the Beginning

The key to understanding women's history is in accepting – painful though it may be – that it is the history of the majority of the human race.

GERDA LERNER

1

The First Women

The predominant theory [of] human cultural evolution has been 'Man-the-Hunter'. The theory that humanity originated in the club-wielding man-ape, aggressive and masterful, is so widely accepted as scientific fact and so vividly secure in popular culture as to seem self-evident.

PROFESSOR RUTH BLEIER

For man without woman there is no heaven in the sky or on earth. Without woman there would be no sun, no moon, no agriculture, and no fire.

ARAB PROVERB

The story of the human race begins with the female. Woman carried the original human chromosome as she does to this day; her evolutionary adaptation ensured the survival and success of the species; her work of mothering provided the cerebral spur for human communication and social organization. Yet for generations of historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and biologists, the sole star of the dawn story has been man. Man the Hunter, man the tool-maker, man the lord of creation stalks the primeval savannah in solitary splendour through every known version of the origin of our species. In reality, however, woman was quietly getting on with the task of securing a future for humanity – for it was her labour, her skills, her biology that held the key to the destiny of the race.

For, as scientists acknowledge, 'women are the race itself, the strong primary sex, and man the biological afterthought'.[1] In human cell structure, woman's is the basic 'X' chromosome; a female baby simply collects another 'X' at the moment of conception, while the creation of a male requires the branching off of the divergent 'Y' chromosome, seen by some as a genetic error, a 'deformed and broken "X". The woman's egg, several hundred times bigger than the sperm that fertilizes it, carries all the genetic messages the child will ever receive. Women therefore are the original, the first sex, the biological norm from which males are only a deviation. Historian Amaury de Riencourt sums it up: 'Far from being an incomplete form of maleness, according to a tradition stretching from the biblical Genesis through Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas, *femaleness is the norm, the fundamental form of life*.'[2]

How are we going to tell Father? For Nigel Calder, 'the first lords of the universe were globules of coloured slime'[3] – they may only have been protoplasmal molecules or start-up bacilli, but they were male. Yet in contradiction to this age-old bias of biology is the recent discovery that every single person on this planet is descended from the same primitive hominid, and that this common ancestor was a woman. Using the latest techniques of gene research into DNA, the molecular structure of gene inheritance, scientists working independently at the Universities of Berkeley, California and Oxford have succeeded in isolating one DNA 'fingerprint' that is common to the whole of the human race. This has remained constant for millennia despite the divergence of races and populations throughout the world – and it is incontrovertibly female. This research points directly to one woman as the original 'gene fount' for the whole of the human race. She lived in Africa about 300,000 years ago, and her descendants later migrated out of Africa and spread across the face of the globe, giving rise to all the people living today.[4]

This work on the woman who could have been our grandmother Eve is still in its infancy, and controversial in its implications. Not least of the problems it poses for the sons of Adam is its implicit dismissal of the Christian myth – for the 'gene fount mother' necessarily had a mother herself, and the identity or numbers of her sexual partners were irrelevant, since hers was the only cell that counted. Indisputable, however, is the central role of women in the evolution of the species. In terms of the DNA messages that a new individual needs in order to become a human being, the essential genetic information is only ever contributed by and transmitted through the female. In that sense, each and every one of us is a child of Eve, carrying within our bodies the living fossil evidence of the first women who roamed the African plain side by side with their men.

As this suggests, nothing could be further from the truth of the role played by early woman than the 'hunter's mate' stereotype of the dim huddled figure beside the fire in the cave. From around 500,000 B.C., when *femina erecta* first stood up alongside *homo erectus* in some sun-drenched primordial gorge, many changes took place before both together became *sapiens*. And there is continuous evidence from a number of different sites throughout the Pleistocene age of women's critical involvement in all aspects of the tribe's survival and evolution generally thought of, like hunting, as reserved to men.

The early woman was in fact intensively occupied from dawn to dusk. Hers was not a long life – like their mates, most hominid females, according to scientific analysis of fossil remains, died before they were twenty. Only a handful survived to thirty, and it was quite exceptional to reach forty.[5] But in this short span, the first women evolved a huge range of activities and skills. On archaeological evidence, as well as that of existing Stone Age cultures, women were busy with and adept in:

– food gathering
– child care
– leatherwork
– making garments, slings and containers from animal skins
– cooking
– pottery
– weaving grasses, reeds and bark strips for baskets
– fashioning beads and ornaments from teeth or bone
– construction of shelters, temporary or permanent
– tool-making for a variety of uses, not simply agricultural – stone scrapers for skins, and sharp stone blades for cutting out animal sinews for garment-making
– medicinal application of plants and herbs for everything from healing to abortion.

Of women's duties, food gathering unquestionably came top of the list, and this work kept the tribe alive. *At no point in pre-history did women, with or without their children, rely on their hunting males for food*. Certainly the men hunted, as in many 'primitive' societies they still do. Anthropologists have now surveyed around 175 hunter/gathering cultures in Oceania, Asia, Africa and America. In ninety-seven per cent of these, the hunting was exclusively dominated by the males of the tribe; in the remaining three per cent it was totally and invariably a male preserve. But these wide-ranging and well-documented studies also show how inefficient hunting is as a means of providing food. Meat from the kill comes in irregularly and infrequently – the !Kung bushmen of Botswana, for instance, hunt strenuously for a week, then do no more work for the rest of the month – and the meat, especially in hot climates, cannot be stored. As a result, only women's gathering, not men's hunting, sustains the tribe. Working unceasingly during the daylight hours, women regularly produce as much as eighty per cent of the tribe's total food intake, on a daily basis. One interpretation of these figures is that in every hunter/gatherer society, the male members were and are doing only one-fifth of the work necessary for the group to survive, while the other four-fifths is carried out entirely by the women.[6]

In earliest times, women's gathering served not only to keep the tribe alive – it helped to propel the race forward in its faltering passage towards civilization. For successful gathering demanded and developed skills of discrimination, evaluation and memory, and a range of seeds, nut-shells and grasses discovered at primitive sites in Africa indicate that careful and knowledgeable selection, rather than random gleaning, dictated the choice.[7] This work also provided the impetus for the first human experiments with technology. Anthropologists' fixation on man the hunter has designated the first tools as weapons of the hunt.[8] But since hunting was a much later development, earlier still would have been the bones, stones or lengths of wood used as aids to gathering for scratching up roots and tubers, or for pulverizing woody vegetation for ease of chewing. All these were women's tools, and the discovery of digging sticks with fire-hardened points at primitive sites indicates the problem-solving

creativity of these female dawn foragers, who had worked out that putting pointed sticks into a low fire to dry and harden would provide them with far more efficient tools for the work they had to do.[9]

Unlike the worked flint heads of axes, spears and arrows, however, very few of the earlier tools have survived to tell the tale of women's ingenuity and resourcefulness. Sticks also lacked the grisly glamour of the killing-tools in the eyes of archaeologists, and had no part to play in the unfolding drama of Man the Hunter. Archaeology is likewise silent on the subject of another female invention, the early woman gatherer's 'swag bag', the container she must have devised to carry back to the camp all she had found, foraged, caught or dug up in the course of her day's hunting.[10]

For the volume of food needed, and the range of food sources available, make it impossible that the women gatherers could have carried all the provender in their hands or inside their clothing. Their haul would have included not merely grasses, leaves, berries and roots, but also vital protein in the form of lizards, ants, slugs, snails, frogs and grubs. Eggs and fish were rare treats but not unknown, and for shore-dwellers the sea presented a rich and bottomless food store. Whatever presented itself, from dead locust to decomposing snake, the woman gatherer could not afford to pass it up; nor, with the burden of sustaining life for all on her shoulders, could she return to the home site until her bag was full, when she faced the day's final challenge, that of converting these intimidating raw materials into something resembling a palatable meal.

Woman's work of gathering would inevitably take on a wider and more urgent dimension when she had infants to feed as well as herself. Her first task as a mother would have been to adapt her gathering bag into a sling to carry her baby, since she had to devise some means of taking it with her when she went out to forage. As most early women did not live beyond their twenties, there would be no pool of older, post-menopausal women to look after the next generation of infants once their own were off their hands. Hominid babies were heavy, and got heavier as brains, and therefore skulls, became larger. Similarly, evolving bodies of mothers presented less and less hair for their infants to cling to. Whether she slung her baby diagonally across her breasts, or on her back in the less common papoose style of the native mothers of the New World, sling her she did. How? If only archaeology could tell us that.

Mothering the young had other implications too, equally crucial both to early women and to the future of the race. Two factors made this work far more demanding than it had been to their primate grandmothers. First, human young take far longer to grow and become self-supporting than baby apes – they consequently need far more care, over an extended period of time, and cannot simply be swatted off the nipple and pointed at the nearest banana. Then again, the mothering of human babies is not just a matter of physical care. Children have to be initiated into a far more complex system of social and intellectual activity than any animal has to deal with, and in the vast majority of all human societies this responsibility for infants has been women's primary work and theirs alone. How well the first mothers succeeded may be seen from the world history of the success of their descendants.

The prime centrality of this work of mothering in the story of evolution has yet to be acknowledged. A main plank of the importance of Man the Hunter in the history of the human race has always been the undisputed claim that co-operative hunting among males called for more skill in communication and social organization, and hence provided the evolutionary spur to more complex brain development, even the origins of human society. The counter-argument is briskly set out by Sally Slocum:

The need to organize for feeding after weaning, learning to handle the more complex socio-emotional bonds that were developing, the new skills and cultural inventions surrounding more extensive gathering – all would demand larger brains. *Too much attention has been given to skills required by hunting, and too little to the skills required for gathering and the raising of dependent young* [italics inserted].[11]

Similarly women's invention of food-sharing as part of the extended care of their children must have been at least as important a step towards group co-operation and social organization as the work of man the hunter/leader running his band. Women's work as mothers of human infants who need a long growing space for postnatal development also involves them in numerous other aspects of maternal care (sheltering, comforting, diverting), in play, and in social activity with other mothers and other young. All these are decisively shown by modern psychology to enhance what we call IQ and must have been of critical value in assisting our branching away from the great apes in mental and conceptual ability. Female parents are not the only ones who can comfort, stimulate or play. But all these activities are very far removed from the supposed role of hunting, killing, primitive man.[12]

Nor does the significance of the mother-child bond end there. In the myth of Man the Hunter, he invents the family. By impregnating his mate and stashing her away in the cave to mind the fire, he creates the basic human social unit which he then maintains by his hunting/killing. The American journalist Robert Ardrey, chief exponent of the hunting hypothesis, naively pictures the sexual division of the average primeval working day: 'the males to their hunting range, the females to their home-site (we think of it today as the office and the home).'[13] But in contradiction to this Big Daddy scenario, a mass of evidence shows that the earliest families consisted of females and their children, since all tribal hunting societies were centred on and organized through the mother. The young males either left or were driven out, while the females stayed close to their mothers and the original home-site, attaching their males to them. In the woman-centred family, males were casual and peripheral, while both nucleus and any networks developing from it remained female. These arrangements continue to operate in a number of still-existing Stone Age tribes worldwide, the so-called 'living fossils'. As anthropologist W. I. Thomas stresses, 'Children therefore were the women's and remained members of her group. The germ of social organization was always the woman and her children and her children's children.'[14]

In fact the human debt to the first women goes on and on, the more we unravel the biological evidence. It is to early woman that we owe the fact that most of us are right-handed, for instance. As Nigel Calder explains, 'handedness, the typical right-handedness of modern humans, is a female phenomenon'.[15] From time immemorial woman has made a custom of carrying her baby on the left side of the body, where it can be comforted by the beating of her heart. This frees the right hand for action, and would have been the spur towards the evolution of predominant right-handedness in later human beings. Support for the 'femaleness of handedness', Calder shows, comes in the fact that to this day infant girls develop handedness, like speech, very much more quickly and decisively than boys.

One last biological legacy of woman to man deserves more gratitude than it seems to have received. At primate level, the male penis is an unimpressive organ. So far from terrorizing any female, the average King Kong can only provoke sympathy for his meagre endowment in relation to this vast bulk. Man, however, developed something disproportionately large in this line, and can truly afford to feel himself lord of creation in the penile particular. And he owes it to woman. Quite simply, when *femina* aspiring to be *erecta* hoisted herself on to her hind legs and walked, the angle of the vagina swung forward and down, and the vagina itself moved deeper into the body. The male penis then echoed the vagina's steady progress, following the same evolutionary principle as the giraffe's neck: it grew in order to get to something it could not otherwise reach.[16] This need also dictated the uniquely human experimentation with frontal sex. The future of the species demanded that man gained entry somehow. But the ease with which most couples move between frontal and rear-entry positions during intercourse is a constant reminder of the impact of woman's evolutionary biology.

The biology of woman in fact holds the key to the story of the human race. The triumph of evolution occurred in the female body, in one critical development that secured the future of the species. This was the biological shift from primate oestrus, when the female comes on heat, to full human menstruation. Although generally unsung, indeed unmentioned, female monthly menstruation

was the evolutionary adaptation that preserved the human species from extinction and ensured its survival and success.

For female oestrus in the higher primates is a highly inefficient mechanism. The great female primates, chimpanzees, gorillas and orang-utans, come on heat rarely, and produce one infant every five or six years. This puts the whole species dangerously at risk of extinction, and the great apes today survive only in small numbers and in the most favourable environments. With twelve chances of conceiving in every year, instead of one every five years, the human female has a reproductive capacity *sixty times higher than that of her primate sisters*. Menstruation, not hunting, was the great evolutionary leap forward. It was through a female adaptation, not a male one, that 'man' throve, multiplied and conquered the globe.

And female menstruation was not merely a physical phenomenon like eating or defecation. Recent commentators have argued that women's so-called curse operated to cure not only man's shortage of offspring, but also his primeval mental darkness. In their pioneering work on menstruation, *The Wise Wound*, Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrave stress the connection made in primitive societies between the lunar and menstrual cycles, suggesting that woman first awakened in humankind the capacity to recognize abstracts, to make connections and to think symbolically. For Elise Boulding, these mental functions arise from an earlier stage in which women taught men the principles of number, calendar organization and counting: 'Every woman had a "body calendar" – her monthly menstrual cycle. She would be the first to notice the relationship between her own body cycle and the lunar cycle.'[17] Other female authorities have expressed their amusement at the naïvety of one professor, the celebrated Jacob Bronowski, who on the TV series 'The Ascent of Man' solemnly described a prehistoric reindeer bone with thirty-one scratches on it as 'obviously a record of the lunar month'. Commenting on 'The Ascent of You Know Who', Vonda McIntyre demurred: 'Do tell. A thirty-one-day lunar month? I think it a good deal more likely that the bone was a record of a woman's menstrual cycle.'[18]

Objectively this carefully notated silent witness of an irretrievably lost transaction could have been either of these; or both; or neither. But in the routine, unconscious denial of women's actions, experiences, rhythms, even of their ability to *count*, the possibility that it could have been a woman's record of her own intimate personal life was not even considered.

No attention at all, in fact, has been given to the implication for women when light and infrequent oestrus gave way to full menstruation, with bleeding in varying but substantial amounts for one week in every four. What did early woman do? Did she simply squat on a pile of leaves and leak? This is uncomfortably close to the passive female fire-watcher of the Man the Hunter myth – and it is out of the question that the tribal food-gatherers, so vital to survival, could have been out of action for twenty-five per cent of their time. But if the women moved around at all, an unchecked menstrual flow would have resulted in badly chapped and painful inner thighs, especially in colder or windy weather, with the added risk of infection in hot climates. Skin scabbing so caused would hardly have had a chance to heal before the menstrual flow was on again.

A number of indicators point to the solution. In the wild, female monkeys are observed to bunch up pads of leaves to wipe off oestrus spotting. From still-surviving Stone Age cultures it is recorded that the women weave or fashion clothes, slings for their babies, and rough bags to carry what they scavenge or garner. The first women must have devised menstrual slings or belts, with some kind of pad to absorb the heaviest flow. Even today both Maori and Eskimo women contrive pads of a fine soft moss, while Indonesian women make tampon-type balls of a soft vegetable fibre. The Azimba women of Central Africa use the same fibre as pads, which are held in place by an oval sling of soft goatskin fastened to a belt of twisted thong.[19] It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the women capable of bringing the infant human race forward into the future could also have found the way to deal efficiently with their own bodies.

But one thing is certain: that any such object, along with other examples of early woman's technology, would not have survived. Even if it had, would it have been deemed worthy of attention? Wide-ranging consideration at every level from academic investigation to wild surmise has been devoted to all aspects of the life of early man. But no attention in either scholarly or popular work has been given to what anthropologist Donald Johanson, discoverer of the early female hominid 'Lucy', dismissed as 'the oestrus argument' – that is, the importance of the female's biological shift to menstruation. As Johanson explained, 'I don't believe anything I can't measure, and I've never seen an oestrus fossil.'[20] Well, he wouldn't, would he?

Like Johanson, generations of male commentators have blinded themselves both to the facts and the significant implications of the evolution of early woman. They have insisted instead on rewriting primitive woman as no more than a sexual vehicle for man. 'They were fatted for marriage, were these Stone Age squaws,' wrote H. G. Wells. 'The females were the protected slaves of the old male, the master of all the women' – a wistful Wellsian fantasy of women on tap.[21] For Robert Ardrey, menstruation only evolved as a bonanza for the boys. When a female primate came on heat, burbled Ardrey, she 'hit the sexual jackpot', providing 'fun for all . . . and for herself a maximum of male attention.'[22] But oestrus episodes are brief and infrequent – there had to be something more to bring the hunter home from the hill. Accordingly, the first woman learned to convert primate heat into menstruation. This made her sexually available and receptive to man all the year round, as a reward for her share of his kill, in history's first known example of the time-honoured convention of *quim pro quo*.

The 'fun for all' theory of women's early sexual evolution also accounts for the physical arrangement of the modern woman's body. When Man the Hunter began to walk upright, he naturally wanted frontal sex. As Desmond 'Naked Ape' Morris so engagingly explains, woman obliged this desire 'to make sex sexier' by growing breasts. Realizing that her 'pair of fleshy hemispherical buttocks' were now quite passé as a means of attracting men's attention, she 'had to do something to make the frontal region more stimulating'.[23] Any connection between the increase in woman's breast size and the increasing size of the human baby at birth must have been purely coincidental.

For in this androcentric account of woman's evolution, every aspect of her bodily development took place for man's benefit, not her own. For him she evolved the female orgasm, as a well-earned bonus for the trail-wearied meat-provider at the end of the day. 'So female invention went on,' rejoices Ardrey. 'The male might be tired; female desire would refresh him.'[24] In the last of his evolutionary incarnations Man the Hunter now becomes sexual athlete and rutting ape while woman, receptive and responsive for 365 days of the year, awaits his return to display her new-found repertoire of fun tricks with breasts and clitoris, the Pleistocene Playmate of the Month.

In the light of all the evidence, from a wealth of scientific sources, of the centrality of woman, how do we explain the dominance and persistence of the myth of Man the Hunter? Charles Darwin's concept of the origins of the human race included no such creature – his early man was a social animal working within 'the corporate body' of the tribe, without which he would not survive. But later Darwinians like Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer ('the greatest ass in Christendom', according to Carlyle) re-interpreted the evolutionary battle for survival as taking place not between *genes*, but *individuals*. By 1925 academics were treating this idea as fact, Professor Carveth Read of London University excitedly proposing that early man should be re-named *Lycopithecu* for his wolvish savagery, a suggestion enthusiastically taken up by another thriller-writer manqué, the South African professor Raymond Dart:

Man's predecessors differed from living apes in being confirmed killers; carnivorous creatures, that seized living quarries by violence, battered them to death, tore apart their broken bodies, dismembered them limb from limb, slaking their ravenous thirst with the hot blood of their victims and greedily devouring living, writhing flesh.[25]

As this suggests, the notion of Man the Hunter unpacks to reveal a number of other elements that feed and flatter male fantasies of violence and destruction. 'We are Cain's children,' droned Ardrey. 'Man is a predator whose natural instinct is to kill with a weapon.' Lots of the boys have got off on this one, from Konrad Lorenz to Anthony Storr: 'The simple fact is that we [*who we?*] are the cruellest and most ruthless species that has ever walked the earth.'[26] Man's natural aggression found its natural outlet in subordinating those around him: 'women, boys and girls,' wrote H. G. Wells, 'all go in fear of the old male.' For Ardrey, 'dominance, a revolutionary social necessity even in the carefree forest life, became a day-to-day survival institution in the lives of the hunters.'[27] Man's 'hunting pedigree' can thus be used to justify every act of male aggression from business chicanery to wife-battering and rape, while the 'right to dominate' of 'early boss man' has proved far too serviceable to his successors to be cast aside.

In fact there is almost no aspect of modern human society, no self-flattering delusion about man's 'natural' instinct to dominate and destroy, that 'Man the Hunter' cannot be said to originate and explain. Generations of academics have joined their respectful voices to the paean of praise for him and his pals: 'our intellects, interests, emotions and basic social life,' chirped American professors Washburn and Lancaster, 'all these we owe to the hunters of time past.' Needless to say, man the hunter did not carry all before him: Donald Johanson has described the hunting hypothesis as the product of Ardrey's 'vivid imagination', and 'an embarrassment to anthropologists'. In professional circles now the whole theory has been consigned to the wasteland between revision and derision, and psychologist Dr John Nicholson is not the only academic to admit to being 'still annoyed that I was once taken in by it.'[28]

But once up and running through the great open spaces of popular belief, man the hunter has proved a hard quarry to bring down, and few seem to have noticed that for millennia he has travelled on through the generations entirely alone. For woman is nowhere in this story. Aside from her burgeoning sexual apparatus, early woman is taken to have missed out completely on the evolutionary bonanza. 'The evolving male increased in body size, muscular strength and speed, as well as in intelligence, imagination and knowledge,' pronounced a leading French authority, 'in all of which the female hardly shared.'[29] Countless other historians, anthropologists, archaeologists and biologists worldwide all make the same claim in different ways. Man, it seems, singlehandedly performed all the evolving for the rest of the human race. Meanwhile early woman, idle and dependent, lounged about the home base, the primordial airhead and fully evolved bimbo.

Yet in celebrating the achievement of early woman, and dismissing the farrago of flattering fictions that make up the myth of hunting man, it is essential not to substitute a denial of his real activities for the historic denial of hers. Man's part in the survival of the species becomes more normal, more natural, and paradoxically more admirable once the essentially co-operative nature of early human life is reasserted.

Hunting was a whole-group activity, not a heroic solo adventure.

As Myra Shackley explains, 'successful hunting, especially of large animals travelling in herds such as reindeer, horses, mammoth, bison and woolly rhinoceros meant co-operation in bands'.[30] To this day, all members of hunting societies, including women and children, join in hunting/beating activities as a matter of course. In their own right, too, women have long been known to hunt smaller, slower or safer animals. An eighteenth-century trader of the Hudson Bay Company in Canada discovered an Eskimo woman who had kept herself alive for seven months on the mid-winter icecap by her own hunting and snaring 'when there was nothing but desolation for 1000 miles around'.[31]

Hunting did not mean fighting.

On the contrary, the whole purpose of group organization was to ensure that primitive man did *not* have to face and do battle with his prey. The first humans, as Shackley shows, worked together to avoid this, 'driving animals over cliffs to their deaths (as certainly happened at the Upper Paleolithic site of Solutre) or using fire to stampede them into boggy ground (the method used at Torralba and Ambrona)'.[32] Cro-Magnon cave paintings from the Dordogne region of France vividly depict a mammoth impaled on stakes in a pit, a practice known worldwide. This method of hunting did not even involve killing, as the animal could be left to die. Most forms of hunting did not in fact involve direct aggression, personal combat or a struggle to the death, but involved preying on slow-moving creatures like turtles, on wounded or sick animals, on females about to give birth or on carcasses killed and abandoned by other, fiercer predators.

Men and women relied on each others' skills, before, during and after the hunt.

The anthropologist Constable cites the Stone Age Yukaghir of Siberia, whose men formed an advance party to check out the traps for prey, while the women came up behind to take charge of dismembering the carcass and transporting it to the home-site.[33] Since carcasses were used for food, clothes, shelter, bone tools and bead ornaments, most of which the women would be producing, they had a vested interest in the dismemberment. As Myra Shackley reminds us:

Apart from their use as food, animals were hunted for their hides, bones and sinews, useful in the manufacture of clothing, tents, traps, and the numerous odds and ends of daily life. Suitable skins would have been dried and cured and softened with animal fats. Clothes could be tailored by cutting the hides with stone tools and assembling the garment by lacing with sinews through holes bored with a stone tool or bone awl . . . There is no reason to suppose that Neanderthal clothes were as primitive as many illustrators have made them out to be . . . The remains of ostrich shells on Mousterian sites in the Neger desert suggest the Neanderthal was using them as water containers, as Bushmen do today . . . what use was made of the exotic feathers? There is no need to suppose that because there is a lack of archaeological evidence for personal adornment no attention was paid to it.[34]

Hunting man, then, was not a fearless solitary aggressor, hero of a thousand fatal encounters. The only regular, unavoidable call on man's aggression was as protector: *infant caring and group protection are the only sexual divisions of labour that invariably obtain in primate or primitive groups*. When the first men fought or killed, then, they did so *not* for sport, thrill or pleasure, but in mortal fear, under life-threatening attack, and fighting for survival.

Because group protection was so important a part of man's work, it is essential to question the accepted division by sex of emotional labour, in which all tender and caring feelings are attributed to women, leaving men outside the circle of the camp-fire as great hairy brutes existing only to fight or fuck. In reality the first men, like the first women, only became human when they learned how to care for others. A skeleton discovered in the Shanidar caves of what is now Iraq tells an interesting story, according to anthropologist John Stewart:

The man . . . had been crippled by a useless right arm, which had been amputated in life just above the elbow. He was old, perhaps forty in Neanderthal years, which might be the equivalent of eighty today, and he suffered from arthritis. He was also blind in the left eye, as indicated by the bone scar tissue on the left side of the face. It is obvious that such a cripple must have been extensively helped by his companions . . . the fact that his family had both the will and ability to support a technically useless member of the society says much for their highly developed social sense.[35]

Whatever became of 'man the hunter striding brutally into the future'?[36] Isn't he beginning to sound like a real human being?

This is not to say that the women of prehistory were not subjected to violence, even death. A female victim of a cannibalistic murder which took place between 150,000 and 200,000 years ago was discovered at Ehringsdorf in Germany. She was an early Neanderthaler who had been clubbed to death with a stone axe. After death her head was separated from her body, and the base of her skull opened to extract the brains. Near her lay the remains of a ten-year-old child who had died at the same time.[37]

Nor was prehistory any stranger to sexual violence. An extraordinary bone carving in the shape of a knife from Isturitz in the Basses-Pyrénées shows a harpooned bison graphically vomiting blood as it wallows in its death throes. On the other side of the blade a woman similarly harpooned crawls forward on her hands and knees while a male figure crouches lecherously behind her, clearly intent on sexual penetration from the rear, although the droop of her breasts and the swelling of her belly

show that she is pregnant. In a bizarre definition of primitive man's idea of foreplay, the French anthropologist G-H Luquet interprets this gruesome object as a 'love charm'![38]

But interestingly, women of primitive societies are often far less subjugated than a modern, particularly a Western, observer might expect. Far from being broken-down slaves to their men's drives and needs, women in early societies often had a *better* chance of freedom, dignity and significance than many of their female descendants in more 'advanced' societies. The key lies in the nature of the tribe's relation to its surroundings. Where sheer subsistence is a struggle and survival is the order of the day, women's equality is very marked. Women in these cultures play too vital a role to be kept down or out of action, and their knowledge and experience are a cherished tribal resource. As the major food providers, holding the secret of survival, women have, and know they have, freedom, power and status.

Men in hunter/gatherer societies do not command or exploit women's labour. They do not appropriate or control their produce, nor prevent their free movement. They exert little or no control over women's bodies or those of their children, making no fetish of virginity or chastity, and making no demands of women's sexual exclusivity. The common stock of the group's knowledge is not reserved for men only, nor is female creativity repressed or denied. Today's 'civilized' sisters of these 'primitive' women could with some justice look wistfully at this substantial array of the basic rights of women.

And there is more. Evidence from existing Stone Age cultures conclusively shows that women can take on the roles of counsellors, wise women, leaders, story-tellers, doctors, magicians and law-givers.[39] Additionally, they never forfeit their own unique power based on woman's special magic of fertility and birth, with all the *mana* attendant upon that. All the prehistoric evidence confirms women's special status *as women* within the tribe. Among numerous representations of women performing religious rituals, a rock painting from Tanzoumaitak, Tassili N'Ajjer, shows two women dancing ceremonially among a flock of goats, richly ornamented with necklaces, bracelets and bead head-dresses, while in one of the most famous of prehistoric paintings the so-called 'White Lady' of the Drakensberg Mountain caves of South Africa leads men and women in a ritual tribal dance.[40]

From the very first, then, the role of the first women was wider, their contribution to human evolution immeasurably more significant, than has ever been accepted. Dawn woman, with her mother and grandmother, her sisters and her aunts, and even with a little help from her hunting man, managed to accomplish almost everything that subsequently made *homo* think himself *sapiens*. There is every sign that man himself recognized this. In universal images ranging from the very awakening of European consciousness to the Aboriginal 'Dreamtime' myths on the other side of the world, woman commands the sacred rituals and is party to the most secret mysteries of tribal life.

For woman, with her inexplicable moon-rhythms and power of creating new life, *was* the most sacred mystery of the tribe. So miraculous, so powerful, she had to be more than man – more than human. As primitive man began to think symbolically, there was only one explanation. Woman was the primary symbol, the greatest entity of all – a goddess, no less.

2

The Great Goddess

The Great Goddess is the incarnation of the Feminine Self that unfolds in the history of mankind as well as in the history of every individual woman.

ERICH NEUMANN, *The Great Mother*

The Mother of songs, the Mother of our whole seed, bore us in the beginning. She is the Mother of all races of men, and all tribes. She is the Mother of the thunder, of the rivers, of the trees and of the grain. She is the only Mother we have, and She alone is the Mother of all things. She alone.

SONG OF THE KAYABA INDIANS OF COLOMBIA

Around 2300 B.C., the chief priest of Sumeria composed a hymn in praise of God. This celebration of the omnipotent deity, 'The Exaltation of Inanna', is a song of extraordinary power and passion, and it has come down to history as the world's first known poem. But it has another claim to world attention – both the first God and this first known priest-poet were female.

For in the beginning, as humankind emerged from the darkness of prehistory, God was a woman.[1] And what a woman! The Sumerian inhabitants of what is now Iraq worshipped her in hymns of fearless eroticism, giving thanks for her tangled locks, her 'lap of honey', her rich vulva 'like a boat of heaven' – as well as for the natural bounty that she 'pours forth from her womb' so generously that every lettuce was to be honoured as 'the Lady's' pubic hair. But the Supreme Being was more than a provider of carnal delights. Equally relished and revered were her war-like rages – to her first priest-poet Enheduanna she was 'a dragon, destroying by fire and flood' and 'filling rivers with blood'. Enheduanna herself enjoyed temporal power as the daughter of Sargon I. But it was in her role as chief 'moon-minister to the Most High' that her true authority lay. For as poet, priest and prophet of Inanna, Enheduanna was the voice of a deity whose power and worship spanned the whole world and was as old as time itself, the first divinity, the Great Mother.[2]

The power and centrality of the first woman-God is one of the best-kept secrets of history. We think today of a number of goddesses, all with different names – Isis, Juno, Demeter – and have forgotten what, 5000 years ago, every schoolgirl knew; no matter what name or guise she took, there was only one God and her name was woman. The Roman lawyer Lucius Apuleius was skilfully recycling the whole compendium of contemporary clichés in his portrait of 'the Goddess' as she spoke to him in a vision:

I am nature, the universal mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead . . . Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me.[3]

Later ages dismissed accounts of Goddess-worship as 'myths' or 'cults'. But since Sir Arthur Evans, discoverer of the lost Minoan civilization at the turn of this century, stated that all the innumerable goddess-figures he had discovered represented 'the same Great Mother . . . whose worship under various names and titles extended over a large part of Asia Minor and the regions beyond', modern scholarship has accepted that 'the Great Goddess, the "Original Mother without a Spouse", was in full control of all the mythologies' as 'a worldwide fact'.[4]

Nor was this an isolated or temporary phenomenon. Commentators stress the prominence and prevalence of the Great Mother Goddess as an essential element from the dawn of human life. From its emergence in the cradleland of the steppes of Southern Russia her worship ranged geographically throughout the Mediterranean, the Indus Valley, and Asia as far as China, to Africa and Australia. Historically the span is even more startling:

– 25,000–15,000 B.C. – with the so-called 'Venus figurines' of stone and ivory in Europe, of Nile mud in Egypt, 'the Great Mother . . . bursts on the world of men in overwhelming wholeness and perfection'.[5]

– 12,000–9000 B.C. – in Dolní Věstonice, Czechoslovakia, and Shanidar, Iraq, ceremonial burials of bodies coated in red ochre, commonly associated with Goddess worship.

– 7000 B.C. – in Jericho, the first shrines to the Mother Goddess.

– 6000 B.C. – the village settlement of Çatal Hüyük in Turkey, a site of only thirty-two acres, contained no less than forty shrines to the Goddess, in three incarnations as maiden, mother and crone.

– 5000 B.C. – a statuette from Hacilar in Turkey shows the Goddess in the act of making love.

– 4000 B.C. – the first written language appears on the temple of the Goddess under her title of Queen of Heaven at Erech (modern Uruk) in Sumeria.

– 3000 B.C. – she now appears everywhere in the known world, in statues, shrines and written records.

– 200 B.C. – tribal Celts sent their own priests of the Goddess to the great sacred festival of Cybele in Anatolia.

– A.D. 200 – at Tralles, in western Anatolia, a woman called Aurelia Aemiliana erected a carving at the temple of the Goddess, recording that she had duly performed her sexual service (sacred intercourse in honour of the Goddess) as her mother and all her female ancestors had done before her.

– A.D. 500 – Christian emperors forcibly suppressed the worship of the Goddess and closed down the last of her temples.

As this shows, the sacred status of womanhood lasted for at least 25,000 years – some commentators would push it back further still, to 40,000 or even 50,000. In fact there was never a time at this stage of human history when woman was *not* special and magical.[6]

For as the struggle for survival eased by degrees into the far harder struggle for meaning, woman became both focus and vehicle of the first symbolic thought. The French archaeologist Leroi-Gourhan solved a riddle of the early cave paintings that had defeated anthropologists of more puritanical cultures when he revealed that the recurrent and puzzling 'double-eye' figure was a symbol of the vulva. Similarly in a remarkable sculpted frieze of animal and human figures at Angles-sur-l'Anglin, the female forms are represented by pure abstract triangles of women's bodies, with the sexual triangle prominently emphasized.[7]

How did woman assume from the first this special status? One source of it was undoubtedly her moon-linked menstruation and the mystery of her non-fatal yet incurable emission of blood. Another was her close and unique relation to nature, for as gathering gave way to planned horticulture, women consolidated their central importance as the principal food producers. But the real key lies where the exaggerated breasts and belly of the earliest images of woman direct us to look, in the miracle of birth. Before the process of reproduction was understood, babies were simply born to women. No connection was made with intercourse (to this day Australian Aboriginals believe that spirit children dwell in pools and trees, and enter any woman at random when they wish to be born). Men, so it seemed, therefore had no part in the chain of generation. Only women could produce new life, and they were revered accordingly: all the power of nature, and over nature, was theirs.[8]

So arose the belief that woman was divine, not human, gifted with the most sacred and significant power in the world; and so was born the worship of the Great Mother. The birth of new life out of woman's body was intricately related to the birth of new crops out of the body of the earth, and from the very first both were interlocked in the concept of a female divinity far more complex and powerful than conventional accounts suggest. The most ancient incarnation of the Goddess was as mother – but the number of local and national variations on this apparently straight-forward archetype in itself testifies to the maverick vigour of 'the God-Mother of the country' as Tibetans called her, and her refusal to submit to stereotypical sentimentalization. So in India, Mata-Devi is the traditional

mother, depicted as squeezing milk for humankind from her ample breasts. But other creation myths as far apart as Assyria and Polynesia have the Great Mother delivering not a race of men and women, but one mighty once-and-for-all 'world egg'. And in Greece at the most sacred climax of the most secret mysteries of Eleusis the Goddess (or her earthly representative) yearly 'gave birth' to a sheaf of corn, in an explicit link between woman's fertility and nature's, as the archetypal 'Mother Earth'.

In some versions of the Great Goddess, however, her worshippers were anxious to stress that no matter how ancient she was, the feminine principle was there before her. So Gaea, the Roman Mother Earth, emerges from a primal vagina, the abyss of all-feeling and all-knowing, while Ishtar of the Babylonians *is* the cosmic uterus, the stars of the zodiac her raiment. The historical softening or bowdlerization of the Goddess's mother role has obscured the briskly functional nature of her motherhood – Ymir, the wind god of Norse legend (i.e., the breath of life) comes 'out of the cunt of the All-Mother Ginnungagab'. And paradoxically the denial of the unblushingly physical denies also the ascent into the realms of the metaphysical, a key element of the Great Mother's godhead: 'I was pregnant with all power,' boasted the goddess Vac in a song of the Vedic nature-religion of India. 'I dwell in the waters of the sea, spread from there through all creatures, and touch the sky with my crown; I roar through all creation like the wind.' The proclamation carved on the temple of 'the Holy One', Nut of Egypt, makes an even stronger claim: '*I am what is, what will be, and what has been. No man uncovered my nakedness, and the fruit of my birthing was the sun*.'[9]

Over-emphasis on the good mother, procreative and nurturing, also denies the bad mother, her dangerous, dark and destructive opposite. These early civilizations, however, understood very well the strong association of the divine woman with death, and stress that the Goddess who brings humankind into the world is also she who kindly (or not so kindly) commands the way out of it. In the Ireland of 1000 B.C. a sinister triad of goddesses, the Morrigan, haunted battlefields, collecting severed heads and showing themselves to those about to die. In other cultures the Goddess rounds up the dead rather like a sheepdog, and takes them below: to the Greeks the dead were simply 'Demeter's people'.

In her darkest incarnation the bad mother did not simply wait for people to die, but demanded their deaths. The Persian Ampusa, her worshippers believed, cruised about the world in a blood bubble looking for something to kill. Her blood thirst might be propitiated by sacrifice – around 1500 B.C. at Hal Tarxien in Malta, the ministers of a seven-foot goddess, her belly obesely pregnant above pear-shaped legs of massive stone, caught the blood of victims in a deep vessel symbolic of the divine vagina. But the mother, and her blood-anger, endured, as in this vivid eye-witness account of the 'Black Mother' of the Hindu religion, Kali-Ma:

And Kalee-Ma'ee, the Dark Mother is there. She is luminous-black. Her four limbs are outstretched and the hands grasp two-edged swords, tools of disembowelment, and human heads. Her hands are blood-red, and her glaring eyes red-centred; and her blood-red tongue protrudes over huge pointed breasts, reaching down to a rotund little stomach. Her *yoni* is large and protuberant. Her matted, tangled hair is gore-stained and her fanglike teeth gleam. There is a garland of skulls about her neck; her earrings are the images of dead men and her girdle is a chain of venomous snakes.[10]

Wedded as we are to an all-loving, all-forgiving stereotype of motherhood, it is at first sight difficult to reconcile this terrifying image of the bad mother with the good. But both 'life' and 'death' sides of the Goddess come together without strain in her primary aspect, which is in fact *not* motherhood pure and simple, but her *sexuality*. As her primary sexual activity she created life; but in sex she demanded man's essence, his self, even his death. Here again the true nature of the Goddess and her activities have fallen victim to the mealy-mouthed prudery of later ages. Where referred to at all, they are coyly labelled 'fertility' rituals, beliefs or totems, as if the Great Goddess selflessly performed her sexual obligations solely in order to ensure that the earth would be fruitful. It is time to set the historical record straight. *The fruitfulness of crops and animals was only ever a by-product of the Goddess's own personal sexual activity*. Her sex was hers, the enjoyment of it hers, and as all

these early accounts of her emphasize, when she had sex, like any other sensible female, she had it for herself.

But not *by* herself. In every culture, the Goddess has many lovers. This exposes another weakness in our later understanding of her role as the Great Mother. To the children of patriarchy, 'mother' always includes 'wife'; mother is the woman who is married to father. That puts a further constraint on the idea of the *good* mother. The good mother does not fuck around. She does not even choose the one man she does have, but is chosen by father. Hence the insoluble paradox of the Goddess for the custodians of succeeding moralities – she was *always* unmarried and *never* chaste. Among Eskimos, her title was 'She Who Will Not Have a Husband'. But there was more to her sexual freedom than this. As the source and force of life, she was timeless and endless. In contrast males came and went, their only function the service of the divine 'womb' or 'vulva', which is the Goddess's name in most cultures.[11]

Yet the lover of the Goddess did not simply have the kind of crudely functional experience that this might suggest. Some representations of her sexuality stress its power and terror: on seal-engravings from Babylon she puts scorpions to flight with the ritual display of her awe-inspiring pudenda, while in the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh from before 2000 B.C., the goddess Ishtar, thwarted in her unbridled sensuality, threatens to burst gates, tear down houses and 'make the dead rise and overwhelm the living'.[12] Far more common, however, are the tender, almost girlish poetic tributes to the skill of the lover and the delights of his body, like this song of Inanna, over 4000 years old, yet as fresh as this morning's loving:

My brother brought me to his house,
Laid me down on a fragrant honey bed,
My precious sweet, lying on my heart,
My brother did it fifty times,
One by one, tongue-making.[13]

Further north in the legendary city of Nineveh, the unknown poet made the goddess Ishtar croon like a mother as she beds the Assyrian king Ashur-bani-pal:

My face covers thy face
As a mother over the fruit of her womb.
I will place thee as a graven jewel between my breasts
During the night will I give thee covering,
During the day I shall clothe thee,
Fear not, oh my little one, whom I have raised.[14]

Brother? Little one? Who were these lovers of the Goddess, and why are they described in such terms? The answer to this question leads to the clearest indication of the undisputed power of the Goddess that historical evidence affords.

For the Great Mother originally held the ultimate power – the power of the undisputed ruler, that of life and death. Where woman is the divine queen, the king must die. Mythologically and historically, too, the rampant sensuality of the Great Goddess and her taste for blood unite in the archaic but undisputed practice of the killing of the king. 'King' is in fact an honorary tide for the male chosen to fuck the Queen-Goddess in a simple re-enactment of the primal drama subsequently described by historians and anthropologists as 'the sacred marriage', with the male 'acting as divine consort' to the Goddess. But the savage, inexorable logic of the ritual could hardly be more opposed to this weak and anachronistic attempt to dignify the male's part in the proceedings. For when *all life* was thought to flow into, through and out of the female, the highest hope of the male was to escape the fate of all the other disposable drones and associate with the deity, even at the price of then being returned to earth.

Mythologically, the ritual sacrifice of the young 'king' is attested in a thousand different versions of the story. In these the immortal mother always takes a mortal lover, not to father her child (though children often result) but essentially in exercise and celebration of her womanhood. The clear pattern is of an older woman with a beautiful but expendable youth – Ishtar and Tammuz, Venus and Adonis, Cybele and Attis, Isis and Osiris. In the story of Demeter, the functional motif of the story is even clearer: the bold Iasion 'lies with' the corn goddess in the furrow of a cornfield, and dies by thunderbolt immediately afterwards. The lover is always inferior to the Goddess, mortal where she is immortal, young where she is ageless and eternal, powerless where she is all-powerful, and even physically smaller – all these elements combine in the frequent representation of the lover as the Goddess's younger brother or son. And always, always, he dies. The fate of the lovers of the Great Goddess was well known when Gilgamesh resisted the command of 'glorious Ishtar' with the reproach, 'Which of your lovers did you love for ever? What shepherd of yours pleased you for all time? . . . And if you and I should be lovers, should not I be served in the same fashion as all these others whom you loved once?'[15]

Within recorded history, versions of the killing of the king frequently occur. The goddess Anaitis of Nineveh annually demanded the most beautiful boy as her lover/victim: beautiful with paint, decked with gold ornaments, clothed in red and armed with the double axe of the goddess, he would spend one last day and night in orgiastic sex with her priestesses under a purple canopy in full view of the people, then he was laid on a bed of spices, incense and precious woods, covered with a cloth of gold and set on fire. 'The Mother has taken him back to her,' the worshippers chanted.[16] In Ireland, the chief priestess of the Great Goddess of the Moon killed the chosen male with her own hands, decapitating him over a silver 'regeneration' bowl to catch his blood. The 'Jutland cauldron', one of these vessels now in the Copenhagen Museum, gives a graphic illustration of the goddess in action at the height of the sacrificial ceremony.[17]

Historic survivals of the killing of the king continued up to the present day. As late as the nineteenth century, the Bantu kingdoms of Africa knew only queens without princes or consorts – the rulers took slaves or commoners as lovers, then tortured and beheaded them after use. The last queen of the Ashanti, according to the outraged reports of British colonial administrators of the Gold Coast, regularly had several dozen 'husbands' liquidated, as she liked to wipe out the royal harem on a regular basis and start again. Even where kingship was established, African queens had the power to condemn the king to death, as Frazer recorded, and the right to determine the moment of execution. Other cultures, however, gradually developed substitute offerings: first, the virility of the young male in place of his life, in a ritual castration ceremony widely practised throughout Asia Minor (though note that the Aztecs in Meso-America never made this an either/or, until the end of their civilization insisting on *both*); then in place of men, taking children, animals, even doll-figures of men like the 'mannikins' the Vestal Virgins drowned in the Tiber every spring.[18]

In real terms, however, the average man does not seem to have had much to fear from the Goddess or her worship. In a culture where the supreme deity is female, the focus is on women, and society draws its structures, rhythms, even colours from them. So, for instance, the special magic of women's sexuality, from her mysterious menstruation to her gift of producing new life, is expressed in the widespread practice throughout the period of Goddess-worship of treating certain sacred grave-burials with red ochre. Strong or bright red is associated in many religions with female genital blood, while the link between red ochre and blood is clearly indicated by its other name of 'haematite'. With the red ochre, then, the worshippers of the Goddess were invoking for their dead a symbolic rebirth through the potent substance of menstruation and childbirth. The literal as well as symbolic value of women's menstrual blood, their 'moon-gift from the Goddess', is demonstrated in the ancient Greek custom of mixing it with seed-corn for the annual sowing, to provide 'the best possible fertilizer'.[19]

This open veneration of women's natural rhythms and monthly flow contrasts strangely with the secret shame and 'curse' they later became. But when God was a woman, all women and all things feminine enjoyed a higher status than has ever been since in most countries of the world. Where the Goddess held sway, women did so too. Does this mean then that there was ever a time when women ruled men – when the natural and unquestioned form of government was matriarchy?

'The age of queens' – what is the historical truth behind the persistent myths of women holding power over men? Approaches to this question have been dogged by historians' search for societies where women had total control, and where the men were downgraded and oppressed as an inevitable consequence – for a mirror-image of every patriarchy, in fact. Not surprisingly, this process of going backwards through the looking glass has failed to produce any concrete results. Another will o' the wisp was the conviction of nineteenth-century scholars that matriarchy had once been a *universal* stage in world culture, when, the argument ran, as human society emerged from animal promiscuity, women succeeded in bringing about matriarchy through the defeat of their lustful males. In the social order thus created, woman held primacy at every level from human to divine, and the excluded males, uncivilized and violent, lurked about on the fringes of each individual 'gynocracy' plotting furious revenge. For matriarchy was only a *stage* of human ascent towards civilization. Ultimately (and quite logically to the mind of the male historian) the males contrived to overthrow matriarchy and institute patriarchy, the ultimate stage of civilization and its finest flower.[20]

Feminist historians could hardly be expected to take all this in the missionary position. Simone de Beauvoir explosively put the boot in as early as 1949:

The Golden Age of woman is only a myth . . . Earth Mother, Goddess – she was no fellow creature in his eyes; it was beyond the human realm that her power was confirmed, and she was therefore outside that realm. Society has always been male; political power has always been in the hands of men.[21]

Recent orthodoxy dismisses any idea of a primeval rule of women, stressing that the myth of women in power is nothing but a useful tool for justifying the domination of men.

But in the nature of things, matriarchy could not be a system of political rule like that developed later by men, since patriarchy evolved subsequently and from previously unknown ideological roots. Nor can we reasonably look for any one universal system in a world whose societies were developing at such a wildly divergent rate that one might have stone, iron, pottery or village organization some 30,000 years ahead of one another. To return to our indisputable mass of evidence both on the Goddess and on the social systems of which she was the prop and pivot, 'matriarchy' is better understood as a form of social organization which is woman-centred, substantially egalitarian, and where it is not considered unnatural or anomalous for women to hold power and to engage in all the activities of the society alongside the men. On that definition, in the 4000 years or so between the emergence of the first civilizations and the coming of the One God (as Buddha, Christ or Allah), matriarchies abounded; and even societies clearly under the rule of men displayed strong matriarchal features in the form of freedoms since lost and never regained by the vast number of women in the state of world 'advancement' that we know today.

What were these freedoms? The commandment carved on the base of the giant statue of the Egyptian king Rameses II in the fourteenth century B.C. is quite uncompromising on the first: 'See what the Goddess-Wife says, the Royal Mother, the Mistress of the World.'[22]

Women held power to which man habitually deferred.

As women, they 'were' the Goddess on earth, as her representative or descendant, and little distinction was made between her sacred and secular power – the Greek historian Herodotus describing the real-life reign of the very down-to-earth Queen Sammuramat (Semiramis), who ruled Assyria for forty-two years during which she irrigated the whole of Babylon and led military campaigns as far as India, interchangeably calls her 'the daughter of the Goddess' and 'the Goddess' herself. As this indicates, the power of the Goddess was *inherited*, passed from mother to daughter in a direct line. A man only became king when he married the source of power; he did not hold it in his own right. So in the eighteenth dynasty of the Egyptian monarchy the Pharaoh Thutmose I had to yield the throne on the death of his wife to his teenage daughter Hatshepsut, even though he had two sons. The custom of royal blood and the right to rule descending in the female line occurs in many cultures: among the Natchez Indians of the Gulf of Mexico, the high chief of Great Sun only held rank as the son of the tribe's leading elder, the White Woman. When she died, her daughter became the White Woman and it was *her* son who next inherited the throne, thus retaining the kingly title and descent always in the female line. This tradition was still evident in Japan at the time of the Wei dynasty (A.D. 220–264) when the death of the priestess-queen Himeko led to a serious outbreak of civil war that ended only with the coronation of her eldest daughter.

The power of the queen was at its most extraordinary in Egypt, where for thousands of years she was ruler, goddess, wife of the god, the high priestess and a totem object of veneration all in one. Hatshepsut who like Sammuramat fought at the head of her troops, also laid claim to masculine power and prerogative, and was honoured accordingly in a form of worship that lasted for 800 years after her death: 'Queen of the north and south, Son of the Sun, golden Horus, giver of years, Goddess of dawns, mistress of the world, lady of both realms, stimulator of all hearts, the powerful woman'.[23] But the frequent appearance of the queen as ruler, not simply consort, was by no means confined to the Egyptian dynasties. Queenhood was so common among the Celtic Britons that the captured warriors brought in triumph before Claudius in A.D. 50 totally ignored the Roman emperor and offered their obeisance instead to his empress, Agrippina. Perhaps the most interesting of all, however, is Deborah, leader of the Israelites around 1200 B.C.; in *Judges* 4 and 5, she holds evident and total command over the male leaders of the tribe, whose dependency on her is so total that their general, Barak, will not even take to the field of battle without her. Early Jewish history is rich in such powerful and distinguished women:

A Jewish princess? Judith, who saved the Jewish people; she flirted with the attacking general, drank him under the table; then she and her maid (whose name is not in the story) whacked off his head, stuck it in a picnic basket and escaped back to the Jewish camp. They staked his head high over the gate, so that when his soldiers charged the camp they were met by their general's bloody head, looming; and ran away as fast as their goyishe little feet could run. Then Judith set her maid free and all the women danced in her honor. *That's* a Jewish princess.[24]

Nor was female power and privilege at this time confined to princesses and queens. From all sides there is abundant evidence that 'when agriculture replaced hunting . . . and society wore the robes of matriarchy', *all* women 'achieved a social and economic importance',[25] and enjoyed certain basic rights:

Women owned and controlled money and properly.

In Sparta, the women owned two-thirds of all the land. Arab women owned flocks which their husbands merely pastured for them, and among the Monomini Indians, individual women are recorded as owning 1200 or 1500 birch bark vessels in their own right. Under the astonishingly egalitarian Code of Hammurabi which became law in Babylon about 1700 B.C., a woman's dowry was given not to her husband but to her, and together with any land or property she had it remained her own and passed on her death to her children. In Egypt, a woman's financial independence of her husband was such that if he borrowed money from her, she could even charge him interest![26]

Marriage contracts respected women's rights as individuals, and honoured them as partners.

A number of Codes akin to that of Hammurabi explicitly contradict the 'chattel' status that marriage later meant for women. In Babylon, if a man 'degraded' his wife, she could bring an action for legal separation from him on the grounds of cruelty. If divorce occurred, women retained care and control of their children, and the father was obliged to pay for their upbringing. The Greek historian Diodorus records an Egyptian marriage contract in which the husband pledged his bride-to-be:

I bow before your rights as wife. From this day on, I shall never oppose your claims with a single word. I recognize you before all others as my wife, though I do not have the right to say you must be mine, and only I am your husband and mate. You alone have the right of departure . . . I cannot oppose your wish wherever you desire to go. I give you . . . [here follows an index of the bridegroom's possessions][27]

Another, stronger indication of the warm intimacy and forbearance that an Egyptian wife could expect from her husband is to be found in the 'Maxims of Ptah Hotep', at more than 5000 years old possibly the oldest book in the world:

If you're wise, stay home, love your wife, and don't argue with her.
Feed her, adorn her, massage her.
Fulfil all her desires and pay attention to what occupies her mind.
For this is the only way to persuade her to stay with you.
If you oppose her, it will be your downfall.[28]

Women enjoyed physical freedoms.

The respect accorded to women within marriage mirrors the autonomy they frequently enjoyed before it. In the early classical period Greek girls led a free, open-air life, and were given athletic and gymnastic training to promote both fitness and beauty. In Crete, chosen young women trained as *toreras* to take part in the ritual bull-leaping, while Ionian women joined in boar-hunts, nets and spears at the ready. Across thousands of Attic vases ('Grecian urns' to Keats), girl jockeys race naked, or dance and swim unclothed through millennia of silence and slow time. The freedom of the young unmarried women was so marked in Sparta that it even caused comment in the other city-states of Greece. Euripides was not the only Athenian to be scandalized:

The daughters of Sparta are never at home!
They mingle with the young men in wrestling matches,
Their clothes cast off, their hips all naked,
It's shameful!

The strength and athletic ability of these young women was not simply fostered for fun, as the story of the Roman heroine Cloelia shows. Taken hostage by the Etruscan king Lars Porsenna during an attack on Rome in the sixth century B.C., she escaped, stole a horse and swam the Tiber to get back safely to Rome. Even though the Romans promptly handed her back, Cloelia's courage won the day; for Lars Porsenna was so impressed by this feat that he freed her and all her fellow hostages as a mark of honour.[29]

Regiments of women fought as men.

The hardening of young women's bodies by sport and the regular practice of nudity had wider implications than these sporadic acts of personal daring. Throughout the ancient world there is scattered but abundant evidence of women under arms, fighting as soldiers in the front-line engagements that conventional wisdom decrees have always been reserved for men. Ruling queens led their troops in the field, not as ceremonial figureheads but as acknowledged and effective war-leaders: Tamyris, the Scythian warrior queen and ruler of the Massagetae tribe of what is now Iran, commanded her army to victory over the invading hordes of Cyrus the Great, and had the great king put to death in revenge for the death of her son in battle. Ruling women also commanded military action at sea, as the Egyptian queen Cleopatra did at the battle of Actium, where her uncharacteristic failure of nerve cost her the war, the empire, her lover Antony and her life. Warrior queens were particularly celebrated in Celtic Britain, where the great goddess herself always bore a warlike aspect. The pre-Christian chronicles contain numerous accounts of female war-leaders like Queen Maedb (Maeve) who commanded her own forces, and who, making war on Queen Findmor, captured fifty of the enemy queen's women warriors single-handed at the storming of Dun Sobhairche in County Antrim.[30]

The fighting women of the Celts were in fact legendary for their power and ferocity – an awestruck Roman historian, Dio Cassius, describes Boudicca, queen of the Iceni, as she appeared in battle, 'wielding a spear, huge of frame and terrifying of aspect'.[31] The same belligerence was remarked in the female squaddies: another Roman chronicler who had seen active service warned his compatriots that a whole troop of Roman soldiers would not withstand a single Gaul if he called his wife to his aid, for 'swelling her neck, gnashing her teeth, and brandishing sallow arms of enormous size she delivers blows and kicks like missiles from a catapult.'[32]

Stories of women fighters have always been most persistent around the Mediterranean and the Near East, and from earliest times written and oral accounts record the existence of a tribe of women warriors who have come down to history as the Amazons. The absence of any 'hard' historical data (archaeological remains of a city, or carved inscriptions detailing famous victories, for instance) means that these accounts have been treated as pure myth or legend, 'nothing more than the common travellers' tales of distant foreigners who do everything the wrong way about', as the Oxford Classical Dictionary dismissively explains. Feminist historians of the twentieth century have also been uneasy with the Amazon story, finding it an all-too-convenient reinforcement of history's insistence on the inevitability of male dominance, as the Amazon women were *always* finally defeated and raped/married by heroes like Theseus. Another problem lies in the evidently false and fanciful interpretation of the name 'Amazon', from Greek *a* (without) and *mazos* (breast). This is now known to be linguistically spurious as well as anatomically ridiculous – how many women have a right breast so large that they cannot swing their arm? – and consequently the whole idea of the tribe of women who amputated their breasts in order to fight has been discredited.

But wholesale dismissal of the subject is to throw out the baby with the bathwater. The written accounts, ranging from the gossip of story-tellers to the work of otherwise reliable historians, are too numerous and coherent to be ignored; and anything which could engage the serious attention and belief of writers as diverse as Pliny, Strabo, Herodotus, Aeschylus, Diodorus and Plutarch holds a kernel of hard information that later generations have too readily discarded. The body of myth and legend also receives historical support from the numerous rituals, sacrifices, mock-battles and ceremonials of later ages confidently ascribed to Amazon origins by those who practised them, as commemorations of key episodes of their own past history.[33]

As with the wider question of matriarchy, to which the concept of a self-governing tribe of powerful women so clearly relates, the way forward lies in the synthesis of myth and legend with the incontrovertible events of 'real' history. Women fought, as war-leaders and in the ranks; women fought in troops, as regular soldiers; and the principal symbol of the Great Goddess, appearing widely throughout the Mediterranean and Asia Minor, was the double-headed battle axe or *labrys*. There are, besides, innumerable authenticated accounts like that of the Greek warrior-poet Telessilla, who in the fifth century B.C. rallied the women of Argos with war-hymns and chants when their city was besieged. The Argive Amazons took up arms, made a successful sally and after prolonged fighting, drove off the enemy, after which they dedicated a temple of Aphrodite to Telessilla, and she composed a victory hymn to honour the Great Mother of the gods.[34] Marry this and the mass of similar evidence of Amazon activity among women, and it is clear that, as with matriarchy, there may have been no *one* Amazon tribe, but the historical reality of women fighting can no longer be doubted.

Women claimed the ultimate freedom.

The physical autonomy expressed by these women through sport and military activity speaks of a deeper freedom, and one that later ages found most difficult to tolerate or even adequately explain. Customs varied from country to country and tribe to tribe, but it is evident that women at the birth of civilization generally enjoyed a far greater freedom from restraint on their 'modesty' or even chastity than at any time afterwards. For many societies there was no shame in female nakedness, for instance, and this did not simply mean the unclothed body of a young girl athlete or gymnast. Adult women in fact practised regular cult-nakedness, frequetly disrobing for high ceremonials and important rituals either of a solemn or a joyful kind. The evidence of Attic vases dating from the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. shows that women mourners and usually the widow herself walked naked in the funeral cortège of any Athenian citizen.

With this physical freedom went certain key sexual freedoms of the sort one would expect to find in a matriarchal society. Where women rule, women woo; and of twenty erotic love-songs from the Egypt of the thirteenth century B.C., sixteen are by women. One shamelessly records, 'I climbed through the window and found my brother in his bed – my heart was overwhelmed with happiness.' Another is even more frank: 'O my handsome darling! I am dying to marry you and become the mistress of all your property!'[35] Customs elsewhere in the world were less flowery and more basic. When Julia Augusta, wife of the Roman Emperor Severus, quizzed a captive Scots woman about the sexual freedoms British women were reputed to enjoy, the Scot reproved her with, 'We fulfil the demands of nature much better than do you Roman women, for we consort openly with the best man, while you let yourselves be debauched in secret by the vilest.'[36] Fulfilling the demands of nature did not apply only to human beings, as Elise Boulding explains:

The free ways in which Celtic women utilized sex come out in the stories of Queen Maedb, who offered 'thigh-friendship' to the owner of a bull for the loan of it [to service her cows]. She also offered thigh-friendship in return for assistance in raids and battles. Apparently all parties, including her husband, considered these deals reasonable.[37]

Equally reasonable, apparently, were the rights and dues that women claimed not in pursuit of their own pleasure but for the honour of the Great Goddess. These were extensive, ranging from ritual self-exposure to far darker mysteries whose disclosure brought the risk of death to the betrayer. At the simplest level, the worship of the Goddess seems to have been conducted naked or only half-clothed: a cave painting from Cogul near Lerida in Catalonia shows nine women with full pendulous breasts clad only in caps and bell-shaped skirts performing a ritual fertility dance around a small male figure with an unpropitiously drooping penis, while Pliny describes the females of ancient Britain as ritually stripping, then staining themselves brown in preparation for their ceremonials.[38] Sacred, often orgiastic, dancing was a crucial element of Goddess worship, and the use of intoxicants or hallucinogens to heighten the effect was standard practice: the Goddess demanded complete abandon.

The Goddess also demanded in some cultures a form of sexual service that has been deeply misunderstood by later historians, who as a consequence have misrepresented it under a frankly misleading label. Writing in the fifth century B.C., Herodotus described the ritual as follows:

The worst Babylonian custom is that which compels every woman of the land once in her life to sit in the Temple of Love and have intercourse with some stranger. The men pass by and make their choice, and the women will never refuse, for that would be a sin. After this act she has made herself holy in the sight of the goddess, and goes away to her home.[39]

This is the practice which wherever it occurs throughout the Near or Middle East is always described as 'ritual prostitution'. Nothing could more comprehensively degrade the true function of the *Gadishtu*, the sacred women of the Goddess. For in the act of love these women were revered

as the reincarnation of the Goddess herself, celebrating her gift of sex which was so powerful, so holy and precious that eternal thanks were due to her within her temple. To have intercourse with a stranger was the purest expression of the will of the Goddess, and carried no stigma. On the contrary the holy women were always known as 'sacred ones', 'the undefiled', or as at Urek in Sumeria, *nu-gig*, 'the pure or spotless'.[40]

This unhistorical projection of anachronistic prejudice (sex is sin, and unmarried sex is prostitution) fails to take account of historical evidence supporting the high status of these women. The Code of Hammurabi, for instance, carefully distinguishes between five grades of temple women and protects their rights to continue in the worship of their mothers. It also makes a clear division between sacred women and secular prostitutes – for it is an interesting assumption embedded in the very phrase 'ritual prostitute', that somehow these people did not have the real thing.

They did, of course; and the perennial commercialism of the true 'working girl' comes through strongly in one recorded anecdote of the most celebrated courtesan of the Egyptians, Archidice. The fame of her sexual skill was so great that men ruined themselves for her favours. One suitor, rejected because he could not afford her price, went home and dreamed that he had enjoyed her instead. The enraged Archidice took him to court, alleging that, as he had had the pleasure of sex with her, he should pay her normal fee for it. The court admitted the legality of her claim, but after much debate finally adjudicated that as the client had only *dreamed* he had enjoyed her, she should *dream* she had been paid.[41]

Poets, priests, queens, mothers, lovers, athletes, soldiers and litigious courtesans, as the first individual women emerge to take their place in human history, they present an impressive spectacle. No one had yet told them that women were physically weak, emotionally unstable or intellectually ill-equipped; consequently they throng the annals of Minoan Crete, for example, as merchants, traders, sailors, farmers, charioteers, hunters and ministers of the Goddess, in apparent ignorance of the female inability to perform these roles that more advanced societies had yet to discover. At every level women made their mark, from the brilliant Aspasia, the courtesan-scholar-politician who partnered Pericles in the Athens of the fifth century B.C., to her contemporary Artemisia, the first-known woman sea-captain, whose command of her fleet at the battle of Marathon was so devastating that the Athenians put a huge bounty on her head; sadly, she survived the Persian wars to die of love, throwing herself off a cliff in a passion of grief when rejected by a younger man.

These were real women, then, vividly alive even at the moment of death: women who knew their strengths. These strengths were recognized in the range of social customs and legal rights known to be women's due from a mass of historical evidence: physical and sexual freedom, access to power, education, full citizenship, the right to own money and property, the right to divorce, custody of children and financial maintenance.

The value placed on women in the legal codes and customs of the day traced back to their special female status; and this derived directly from their link with, and incarnation of, the Great Goddess. Though localized, since every country, tribe, town or even village had its own version of 'Our Lady', she was universal. To her worshippers, after so many thousand years, she seemed eternal:

I am Isis, mistress of every land. I laid down laws for all, and ordained things no one may change . . . I am she who is called divine among women – I divided the earth from heaven, made manifest the paths of the stars, prescribed the course of the sun and the moon . . . I brought together men and women . . . *What I have made lam can be dissolved by no man*.[42]

Was this the challenge man was driven to take up? For where was man in the primal drama of the worship of the Great Mother? He was the expendable consort, the sacrificial king, the disposable drone. Woman was everything; he was nothing. It was too much. Man had to have some meaning in the vast and expanding universe of human consciousness. But as the struggle for understanding moved into its next phase, the only meaning seemed to lie through the wholesale reversal of the existing

formula of belief. Male pride rose to take up the challenge of female power; and launching the sex war that was to divide sex and societies for millennia to come, man sought to assert his manhood through the death and destruction of all that had made woman the Great Mother, Goddess, warrior, lover and queen.

3

The Rise of the Phallus

Holy Shiva, Divine Linganaut,
Heavenly Root, Celestial Penis,
Phallus Lord, thy radiant *lingam* is so large that neither Brahma nor Vishnu can reckon its extent.
HINDU PRAYER
He let fly an arrow, it pierced her belly,
Her inner parts he clove, he split her heart,
He destroyed her life,
He felled her body and stood triumphant upon it.
King Marduk overthrows the Great Mother in the Babylonian *Epic of Creation, c.* 2000 B.C.
Men look to destroy every quality in a woman that will give her the powers of a male, for she is in their eyes already armed with the power that brought them forth.
NORMAN MAILER

'In the beginning,' writes Marilyn French, 'was the Mother.' That mother, as her 'children' saw her, is still with us today – her outsize breasts, bulging belly and buttocks, flaring vulva and tree-trunk thighs survive in the familiar figurines found in their tens of thousands in Europe alone. Against this massive, elemental force the human male cut a poor figure indeed. Every myth, every song in praise of the Great Goddess stressed by contrast the littleness of man, often in caustically satiric terms – the illustrated Papyrus of Tameniu of the twenty-first Egyptian dynasty (1102–952 B.C.) shows her naked, over-arching the whole world, flaunting her star-spangled breasts, belly and pubic zone, while the boy-god Geb, flat on the ground, reaches up to her in vain with a phallus that although exaggerated, plainly is not man enough for the occasion. Nor was this the limit of the sexual humiliations the Great Mother would exact. Among the Winnepagos of Canada, a brave who dreamed of the Goddess, even once, knew himself singled out for a terrible fate, that of becoming *cinaedi*, a homosexual compelled to wear women's garb and to submit in every way to the sexual demands of other males. There are countless similar examples from widely different cultures of the Goddess's dreaded and inexorable power: as Robert Graves explains, 'under the Great Mother, woman was the dominant sex and man her frightened victim.'[1]

For when all meaning, all magic, all life lay with woman, man had no function, no significance at all. 'The baby, the blood, the yelling, the dancing, all that concerns the women,' declared an Australian Aboriginal: 'men have nothing to do but copulate.' Into this vacuum, as consciousness deepened, came envy, the 'uterus-envy of female-protest within men awed by the apparently exclusive female power of creation of new life'. Resentful of the women's monopoly of all nature's rhythms, men were driven to invent their own. In origin, however, these male-centred rituals consisted of no more than attempts to mimic the biological action of women's bodies, a debt openly acknowledged by many still-surviving Stone Age cultures: 'in the beginning we had nothing . . . *we took these things from the women*.'[2]

Typical of numerous such imitations worldwide was the hideous Aztec rite of dressing a sacrificing priest in the skin of his human sacrifice. He would then 'burst from the bleeding human skin as the germinating shoot from the husk of the grain', becoming both the new life and the one who gives birth by the power of his magic.[3] More horrific still was the fate that befell every boy initiate in the Aranda tribe of Australia:

. . . the ritual surgeon seizes the boy's penis, inserts a long thin bone deep into the urethra, and slashes at the penis again and again with a small piece of flint used as a scalpel. He cuts through the layers of flesh until he reaches the bone, and the penis splits open like a boiled frankfurter.[4]

This hideous ceremony, christened 'sub-incision' by the white settlers, tormented their civilized minds – what possible purpose could it serve? Had they understood Aranda, all would have been clear. The Aboriginal word for 'split penis' derives from the term for the vagina, and the title 'possessor of a vulva' is the honorific bestowed on all boys who undergo the ordeal. Later rituals also included the regular re-opening of the wound to demonstrate that the initiate could now 'menstruate'.[5]

It was, in Margaret Mead's words, 'as if men can only become men by taking over the functions that women perform naturally.'[6] For Jung, the secret of all male initiation rituals lay in 'going through the mother again', embracing the fear, the pain and the blood in order to be born anew not as a child but as a man and a hero. 'Through the mother', though, does not imply any sympathetic identification with the female. On the contrary, the key element is the takeover of birth as a male mystery, the first 'weapon in the men's struggle to shake off the feminine domination created by the matriarchy'.[7] This struggle of men not merely to imitate and outdo, but to usurp women's power of creating new life took place on every level; Zeus giving birth to Athene from his head is a classic reversal of the primal creation myth that finds a parallel in many other mythologies. It was nothing less than a revolution: of the weak against the strong, of the oppressed against their oppression, of value structures and habits of thought.

And human thought was itself progressing along lines that eased the way towards the domination of males. As human beings crossed the mental threshold between interpreting events in symbolic and magical terms, and the dawning realization of cause and effect, man's part in the making of babies became clear. Now women's rhythms were seen to be human, not divine, and the knowledge that man determined pregnancy completed the revolution that his resentment and resistance had already set in train. Historian Jean Markdale sums it up:

When man began to assert that he was essential to fertilization, the old mental attitudes suddenly collapsed. This was a very important revolution in man's history, and it is astonishing that it is not rated equally with the wheel, agriculture, and the use of metals . . . As the male had been cheated for centuries . . . equality was not enough. *He now understood the full implications of his power, and was going to dominate . . .*[8]

And what better weapon of dominance was there to hand but the phallus? As man began to carve out some meaning for himself to set against woman's eternal, innate potency, what would serve his turn better than man's best friend, his penis. In its fragile human form, prey to unbidden arousal, stubborn refusal and unpredictable deflation, it could not challenge women's unfailing power of birth. But elevated above reality into symbol, transformed into 'phallus' and enshrined in materials known to be proof against detumescence like metal and stone, it would do very well.

At a stroke, then, the power was there at man's bidding. Now he was transformed from an unregarded afterthought of creation whose manhood held no magic for any except himself, to the whole secret and origin of the Great Mother's life force. The power was not hers, but his. His was the sacred organ of generation; and the phallus, not the uterus, was the source of all that lived. Power to the phallus became the imperative (to, from, by, in and of the phallus); and so a new religion was born.

This is not to suggest that the penis and its symbolic equivalent the phallus were unknown to these early societies before the discovery of biological paternity began to sweep the world around the beginnings of the Iron Age, some 3500 years ago. Phallic emblems made their appearance in the earliest recorded living sites, and from the time of the 'Neolithic Revolution' (around 9000–8000 B.C. in the Near East), they occur in impressive size and profusion. At Grimes Grave in Norfolk, England, for example, an altar discovered in the bowels of the abandoned Neolithic flint mine workings bore a cup, seven deer anders, and a mighty phallus carved in chalk, all set out as offerings to the figure of the Great Goddess reared up before it. For whatever their proportions (and some of the lovingly wrought models in clay or stone display a truly impressive capacity for wishful thinking), these emblems were only fashioned as part of the worship of the Goddess, and were not sacred in themselves.

Paradoxically then, it was the Great Goddess herself who first established the cult of the phallus. In the myth of Isis, whose worship spread from the Near East throughout Asia and into Europe, the Goddess ordered a wooden *lingam* of Osiris to be set up in her temple at Thebes. Subsequently the worship of the Goddess involved making offerings to her of phallic emblems or tokens; the women of Egypt carried images of Osiris in their sacred processions, each one equipped with a movable phallus 'of disproportionate magnitude', according to one disgruntled observer, while a similar model in the Goddess-worship of Greek women had a phallus whose movements the celebrants could control with strings. In this state of ecstatic animation, the god was conveyed to the temple, where the most respected matrons of the town waited to crown the phallus with garlands and kisses in honour of the Great Goddess, as a sign that she accepted the tribute of phallic service.[9]

But once promoted from jobbing extra to leading man in the primal drama, the penis proved to be hungry for the smell of the greasepaint, the roar of the crowd. In Greece, phalluses sprang up everywhere, like dragon's teeth; guardian Herms (phallus-pillars) flourished their potency on every street corner, while by the third century B.C., Delos boasted an avenue of mammoth penises, supported on bulging testicles, shooting skyward like heavy cannon. Across the Adriatic in Italy, the god Phalles was familiar to every family as one of its regular household deities, and many cities like Pompeii were entirely given over to the worship of the phallus-god, Priapus – a fact that disapproving later sages were quick to connect with its destruction by Vesuvius in A.D. 79. In Dorset, England, the ancient Britons poured the pride of their creation into the huge hill-figure of the Cerne Abbas Giant – forty feet tall, he glares out to history brandishing a chest-high erection and a massive phallic club to ram home the message of his mightiest member.

No country in the world, however, embraced phallus worship with more enthusiasm than India. There, as its mythologizers insisted, was to be found 'the biggest penis in the world', the 'celestial rod' of the god Shiva, which grew until it shafted through all the lower worlds and towered up to dwarf the heavens. This so overawed two other principal gods of the Hindu pantheon, Brahma and Vishnu, that they fell down and worshipped it, and ordered all men and women to do likewise. How well this commandment was obeyed for many thousands of years may be gauged from bewildered Western accounts of a long-standing custom. Traders, missionaries and colonial invaders recorded that every day a priest of Shiva would emerge naked from the temple and proceed through the streets, ringing a little bell which was the signal for all the women to come out and kiss the holy genitals of the representative of the god.[10] To the average Victorian Englishman, it must have seemed like phallus in wonderland.

With its rise to sacred status, the phallus increased in significance, as well as in size and sanctity. From this epoch onwards, male superiority becomes vested in and expressed through this one organ, as an ever-present reminder of masculine power. By extension, and the extension was limitless, the phallus then becomes the source not only of power, but of all cultural order and meaning. For men, clasping and invoking the penis validated all greetings and promises; among the Romans the *testes* underwrote every *testament*, while an Arab would declare 'O Father of Virile Organs, bear witness to my oath,' and as a mark of respect suffer any sheikh or patriarch to examine his genitals on meeting.[11]

Over women the power of the sacred phallus began to make itself felt in a number of ways. In the temples of Shiva, a slave girl specially chosen for her 'lotus-beauty' was consecrated to 'the divine penis' and tattooed on her breasts and shaven groin with the emblem of the god. Worldwide, both historical records and archaeological evidence confirm women's practices of imprecating, touching, kissing or even mounting sacred phalluses of wood or stone as a cure for infertility from the 'phallus lord', who may well have been also the original recipient of their virginity. In the remote villages of southern France, to the deep embarrassment of the Catholic church, the Provençal 'Saint' Foutin was worshipped in all the pride of his priapic magnificence as late as the seventeenth century. This was under constant threat from the women's habit of scraping shavings from the wooden end to boil

into a potion to promote conception; but it was always renewed by the priests, who sustained the saint's reputation as 'the inexhaustible penis' by surreptitious mallet-taps to the other end behind the altar.[12] Perhaps most sinister of all was the Celtic ritual still in use in Wales as late as the reign of Hywel Dda (Howel the Good), 909–950 A.D.. There, if a woman wanted to prosecute a man for rape, she had to swear to the offence with one hand on a relic of the saints, while with the other she grasped 'the peccant member' of her offender[13] – to prick his conscience, perhaps? This reminder that the male organ can be a weapon of war as well as an instrument of love is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the monumental phallus at Karnak erected by King Meneptha of Egypt in 1300 B.C.; its inscription records that the king cut off all the penises of his defeated enemies after a battle and brought home a total of 13,240.

As the date of this episode shows, the rise of the phallus did not mean the immediate overthrow of the Great Goddess. On the contrary it is fascinating to observe how the myths, stories and rituals of her worship were adapted over a considerable period of time to accommodate the accelerating rhythms of the male principal in its thrust towards full centrality. The devolution of power from Goddess to God, from Queen to King, from Mother to Father, took place in stages, which may be as plainly detected in world mythology as strata in rock. In the first phase, the Great Mother alone *is* or *creates* the world; she has casual lovers and many children, but she is primal and supreme. In the second, she is described or illustrated as having a consort, who may be her son, little brother or primeval toy-boy; originally very much her junior, he grows in power to become her spouse. At the third stage, the God-King-Spouse rules equally with the Goddess, and the stage is set for her dethronement; finally the Man-God kings it alone, with Goddess, mother and woman, defeated and dispossessed, trapped in a downward spiral which humankind has only recently begun to arrest, let alone reverse.[14]

Mythologies are never static, and even to divide this development into phases is to suggest an organizational logic that historical processes rarely possess. Different developments occurred over different times in different places, and even when men had made themselves into kings and held gods and goddesses under their sway, they found it still advisable to honour the old customs and pay the Great Mother her due. 'The Goddess Ishtar loved me – thus I became king,' declared Sargon of Assyria in the eighth century B.C.[15]

Other records of religious and political rituals in these early kingdoms abundantly testify to the fact that the king's power, however great, was not absolute; a king of Celtic Ireland had to perform the *banfheis rígí*, or 'marriage-mating', with 'the Great Queen', the spirit of Ireland, before he could be accepted as king by the people. For the kings of Babylon, this duty was literal, not symbolic. Their power had to be renewed every year, and was only confirmed when the royal embodiment of the sacred phallus was seen to consummate his 'divine marriage' with the high priestess of the Great Mother in a public ceremony on a stage before all the populace.[16]

The Great Goddess still had some power, then, and the evidence suggests that the ruling men neglected the due observances at their peril. On the wider horizon, however, an interlocking series of profound social changes combined to shake these early civilizations to their foundations, and the force of events conspired with the new aggressive phallic impetus to drive out the last remaining elements of the power of the Goddess and the accompanying 'mother-right'. Broadly, these changes arose from the population growth that resulted from the first successful social organization. They derived from the most basic of imperatives, the need for food. Nigel Calder explains the nature of the development that helped to push women from the centre of life to its margins:

From Southern Egypt 18,000 years ago comes the earliest evidence for cultivation of barley and wheat in riverside gardens . . . feminine laughter no doubt disturbed the water-birds when the women came with a bag of seed to invent crops. Perhaps it was a waste of good food and nothing to tell the men about – yet it took only moments to poke the seeds into the ready-made cracks in

the mud . . . The women knew little of plant genetics, but the grain grew and ripened before the sun parched the ground entirely, and when they came back with stone sickles they must have felt a certain goddess-like pride.[17]

This 'goddess-like' control of nature by women continued, Calder judges, for 10,000 to 15,000 years. But from about 8000 years ago, an upsurge in population enforced changes in the way that food was produced. By degrees *agriculture*, heavier and more intensive, replaced women's *horticulture*. Where previously women had worked with nature in a kind of sympathetic magic as her natural ally, now men had to tame and dominate nature to make it deliver what they determined. The new methods involved in agriculture found an equally damaging symbolic echo in the male/female roles and relationships, as a Hindu text, *The Institutes of Mana* from around A.D. 100, makes plain: 'The woman is considered in law as the field and the man as the grain.' Where the Goddess had been the only source of life, now woman had neither seed nor egg; she was the passive field, only fertile if ploughed, while man, drunk with the power of his new-found phallocentricity, was plough, seed, grain-chute and ovipositor all in one.

As planned husbandry and domestication of land replaced casual cultivation, the more the role of the male strengthened and centralized. Paradoxically, this was also true of those groups who failed to produce enough from the land to live on. For those tribes, any shortage or failure of crops brought enforced migration, which also necessarily involved warfare, as groups already established on fertile territory banded together to resist the invaders.[18] Both in the group's nomadic wanderings and in any fighting which resulted, men had the advantage, as they had superior muscle power and mobility, over women encumbered with children. All women's earlier hard-won skills of cultivation became useless when the tribe was on the move. Meanwhile, men driven by the darker side of phallicism seized the upper hand through aggression and military organization. As these clashes of force inevitably produced dominant and submissive groups, winners and losers, determining rank, slavery and subjection, it was not possible for women to escape from this framework. Caught between the violence of ploughshare *and* sword, women had to lose.

There could be only one outcome. However, wherever, and whenever it came in the millennia immediately before the birth of Christ, all the mythologies speak of the overthrow of the Great Mother Goddess. In the simplest version of the story, like that of the Semitic Babylonians, the god-king Marduk wages war on Ti'amat, the Mother of All Things, and hacks her to pieces. Only after her death can he form the world, from the pieces of her body, as it rightfully should be. This motif is astonishingly consistent through a number of widely separated cultures, as witness this Tiwi creation myth from central Africa:

Puvi made the country the first time. The sea was all fresh water. She made the land, sea and islands . . . Puriti said, 'Don't kill our mother.' But Iriti went ahead and killed her. He struck her on the head. Her urine made the sea salty and her spirit went into the sky . . .[19]

In other versions of the story, the Great Goddess is defeated, but lives. Celtic folk myth relates how the Three Wise Ones (the Goddess in her triad form), Emu, Banbha and Fódla, meet the sons of Mil the war god in battle, but after many violent clashes are subdued and humbled to the power of the invader. *Whatever form it takes, the fundamental power-shift from female to male is reflected in all mythologies.* Among the Greeks, Apollo took over the Goddess's most sacred oracle at Delphi; the Kikuyu of Africa still relate how their ancestors overthrew their women by ganging up in a scheme to rape all their women on the same day, so that nine months later they could overmaster the pregnant women with impunity; while for the Aztecs, Xochiquetzel the Earth Mother gave birth to a son Huitzilopochtli, who killed her daughter the Moon Goddess and took her place as the ruler of heaven, killing and scattering all her other children in his rage for domination.

This pattern of defeat and partial survival finds a frequent expression in the motif employed here, the victory of the sun god over the moon, who is always female. In the Japanese version, the

goddess Ama-terasu, the supreme deity of the Shinto pantheon, is attacked by the god Susa-nu-wo, who destroys her rice fields and pollutes her sacred places with faeces and dead flesh. Although she fights him, he 'steals her light', and she only regains half her previous power, and so may only shine by night.[20] Just as in the historical shift from horticulture to agriculture, this apparently natural development masked some profound and irreversible changes in the relations between men and women, even in the ways of thought:

The divinity of the sun, lord of time and space, was essentially masculine – the phallic sunbeams striking down on Mother Earth – a maleness whose rays impregnate the earth and cause the seeds to germinate. From Spain to China, the prehistoric sun stood for maleness, individual self-consciousness, intellect and the glaring light of knowledge, as against the moon ruler of the tide, the womb, the waters of the ocean, darkness and the dream-like unconscious . . . *solarization*, the victory of the male sun god over the female moon goddess . . . implied the collapse of the female-oriented *cyclical* fertility cults and the rise to supremacy of the male concept of *linear* history, consisting of unrepeatable events . . .[21]

Nor was the overthrow of the female simply a mythological theme. Women of power in real life came under attack, as men sought to wrest from them their authority in a number of different ways. Where royalty passed through the female line, a bold adventurer could commandeer it by enforcing marriage on the queen, or seizing possession by rape – Tamyris the Scythian ruler fought off a 'proposal' of this sort from Cyrus the Great of Persia in the sixth century B.C. Others were not so lucky. When Berenice II of Egypt refused to marry her young nephew Ptolemy Alexander in 80 B.C., he had her murdered. The violence of this outrage is demonstrated by the fact that the loyal Alexandrians then rose up and killed him.[22] But in general kings were more successful in retaining the powers they usurped. From this period of aggressive male encroachment on female prerogative comes the introduction of royal incest, when the king who was unwilling to vacate the throne on the death of his wife, would marry the rightful heir, her daughter. Alternatively, he would marry one of his sons to the new queen; this had the double benefit of keeping the monarchy under male control, and by degrees weaving sons into the fabric of inheritance until their right superseded that of any daughter.

Under these circumstances, ruling women rapidly became pawns in male power-games, their importance only acknowledged by the lengths men went to to possess or control them. Galla Placida, daughter of the Roman Emperor Theodosius the Great, was captured by the Visigoth Alaric at the sack of Rome, and after his death taken over by his brother. On the murder of the brother, she was handed back to the Romans, and forcibly married to their victorious general Constantius, who designated her Augusta, and as 'Augustus' ruled as her co-emperor. When Constantius died, her brother exiled her to Constantinople and took the throne, and only when her son became emperor in 425 A.D. did she achieve any peace or stability.

There are countless historical examples from all countries of royal women, through whom inheritance or claim to the throne would pass, being exploited as pawns in the power game, and then disposed of. A classic story is that of Almasuntha, queen of the Ostrogoths: made regent on behalf of her son when her father King Theodoric died in A.D. 526, Almasuntha was forcibly married by the late king's nephew when her son died, and then, as soon as the usurper had secured his power, put to death.

Women of royal blood were not alone in experiencing men's rage to dominate, to downgrade and destroy. With written records come the first in a series of orchestrated attacks on women's nature, their rights in their children, even their right to full human existence. The sun-moon dualism now becomes extended into a cosmic system of polar opposition; whatever man is, woman is not, and with this imposition of the principle of sexual contrast comes the gradual definition of man as commanding all the human skills and abilities, woman as the half-formed, half-baked opposite. By the fourth

century B.C., Aristotle's summary of the sexual differences in human nature said no more than any man or woman of his age would have accepted as fact:

Man is active, full of movement, creative in politics, business and culture. The male shapes and moulds society and the world. Woman, on the other hand, is passive. She stays at home, as is her nature. She is matter waiting to be formed by the active male principle. Of course the active elements are always higher on any scale, and more divine. Man consequently plays a major part in reproduction; the woman is merely the passive incubator of his seed . . . the male semen cooks and shapes the menstrual blood into a new human being . . .[23]

Once articulated, the denigrations of women flood forth unchecked as war-leaders, politicians and historians like Xenophon, Cato and Plutarch worry away at the 'woman problem':

The gods created woman for the indoors functions, the man for all others. The gods put woman inside because she has less tolerance for cold, heat and war. For woman it is honest to remain indoors and dishonest to gad about. For the man, it is shameful to remain shut up at home and not occupy himself with affairs outside.[24]

You must keep her on a tight rein . . . Women want total freedom, or rather total licence. If you allow them to achieve complete equality with men, do you think they will be any easier to live with? Not at all. Once they have achieved equality, they will be your masters . . .[25]

I certainly do not give the name 'love' to the feeling one has for women and girls, any more than we would say flies are in love with milk, bees with honey, or breeders with the calves and fowl they fatten in the dark . . .[26]

As Plutarch here reminds us, for the Greeks there was 'only one genuine love, that which boys inspire'. The homosexuality of ancient Greece in fact institutionalized the supremacy of the phallus, denying women any social or emotional role other than childbearing. But to the emerging male, newly born into consciousness and thinking with his phallus, it seemed inescapable that such a creature should have as little part as possible in his children: and in the famous 'Judgement of Apollo' at the climax of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, the sun god obligingly pronounced:

The mother is not the parent of that which is called her child: but only nurse of the newly planted seed that grows. *The parent is he who mounts*.

In this simple, brutal *diktat* phallic thought reversed the primeval creation beliefs of thousands of years. Woman was no longer the vessel of nature, creating man. Now man created woman as a vessel for himself. As the sun overthrew the moon, the king beat down the queen, so the phallus usurped the uterus as the source and symbol of life and power.

Under the new dispensation women's rights went the way of their rites, and in cities and states from Peking to Peru women dwindled into little more than serfdom. They became property; and found that truly property was theft. The new social and mental systems robbed them of freedom, autonomy, control, even the most basic right of control over their own bodies. For now they belonged to men – or rather, to one man. At some unidentified but pivotal point of history, women became subjected to the tyranny of sexual monopoly – for once it was realized that one man only was necessary for impregnation, it was a short step to the idea of *only one man*.

Yet the exclusive possession of a woman and the monopoly of her sexual service could always be waived when a greater need arose. In Eskimo tribes, for instance, wife-lending is endemic. For the Eskimo husband, this is 'a wise investment for the future, because the lender knows he will eventually be a borrower', when he needs a woman who 'makes the igloo habitable, lays out dry stockings for him . . . and is ready to cook the game he brings back'. Nor was this all – the extent of the obligations of the borrowed wife can be judged from the special term by which Eskimo children refer to any man who does business with their father: 'he-who-fucks-my-mother'.[27]

As their property, women of these early societies were at the disposal of men; and when women were no longer the struggling tribe's prime resource, nor the sacred source of life and hope for the

future, nothing inhibited men's use of force against them in the struggle for control. Among the ancient Chinese, the Greek writer Posidippus noted in the second century A.D., 'even a poor man will bring up a son, but even a rich man will expose a daughter.'[28] On the other side of the world, a chieftain of Tierra del Fuego told Darwin during the voyage of *The Beagle* that to survive in a famine they would kill and eat their old women, but never their dogs.[29] From written records, epics and chronicles, and from anthropological and archaeological evidence, come countless examples of sexual hostility in action, frequently carried to extremes: women are traded, enslaved, ravished, sold in whoredom, slaughtered on the death of their lord or husband, and in every way abused at will.

One poignant story from an Anglo-Saxon settlement of pagan England puts some flesh on the bones of this stark generalization. Two female skeletons of the pre-Christian period were discovered lying together in one pit grave. The older woman, in her late twenties, had been buried naked and alive; the position of the skeleton after death showed that she had tried to raise herself as the earth was thrown on to her. The younger of the two, a girl about sixteen years old, had previously sustained injuries 'typically the result of brutal rape, which was strongly resisted by the victim', including a cavity in the bone behind her left knee where she had been prodded with a dagger to make her draw her legs up for the rapist. She had survived for about six months after the attack, and the fact that she was buried naked, bound hand and foot and possibly alive like her sister-inhabitant of the same grave suggests that her death was the result of her unchastity coming to light, most probably through pregnancy, as the archaeologists conclude:

We can only guess what crime and punishment enmeshed the older woman . . . But for the young girl, naked, bound, lacerated and perhaps still alive, with the howl of human jackals in her ears, her passport to a merciful oblivion is likely to have been the slime and mire of this chalky trench.[30]

No longer sacred, women became expendable. One Aztec ceremony of death was indeed a direct mockery of women's former power; every December a woman dressed up as Ilamtecuhtli, the Old Goddess of the earth and corn, was decapitated and her head presented to a priest wearing her costume and mask, who then led a ritual dance of celebration followed by other priests similarly attired. This was only one of a number of Aztec rituals of this kind. Every June a woman representing Xiulonen, Goddess of the young maize, was similarly sacrificed, while in August a woman representing Tetoinnan, Mother of the Gods, was decapitated and flayed, her skin being worn by the priest who played the role of the Goddess in the ensuing ceremony. The 'strike-the-mother-dead' motif is even clearer in one detail of this grisly procedure – one thigh of the woman victim was flayed separately, and the skin made into a mask worn by the priest who impersonated the *son* of the dead 'mother'.[31] But similar customs obtained worldwide – in pre-feudal China a young woman was annually selected to be 'the Bride of the Yellow Count', and after a year of fattening and beautifying, was cast adrift to drown in the Yangtse Kiang (Yellow River).[32] From ritual sacrifice to the enforced suttee of unwanted child-brides, the destruction of women spread like a plague virus through India, China, Europe and the Middle East to the remotest human settlements – anywhere in fact where the phallus held sway.

As societies evolved, male control through brutal force was gradually supplemented by the rule of law. In Rome, the paterfamilias held undisputed power of life and death over all members of his family, of which he was the only full person in the eyes of the law. In Greece, when Solon of Athens became law-giver in 594 B.C., one of his first measures was to prohibit women leaving their houses at night, and the effect of this was to confine them more and more to their homes by day. In ancient Egypt, women became not simply the property but legally part of their fathers or husbands, condemned to suffer whatever their male kindred brought down on their heads. As the horrified Greek historian Diodorus recorded in his *World History* (60–30 B.C.), innocent women even swelled the ranks of the pitiful slaves whose forced labour built the pyramids:

. . . bound in fetters, they work continually without being allowed any rest by night or day. They have not a rag to cover their nakedness, and neither the weakness of age nor women's infirmities are any plea to excuse them, but they are driven by blows until they drop dead.[33]

Not all women, however, lived as victims and died as slaves: it would be historically unjust as well as inaccurate to present the whole of the female sex as passive and defeated in the face of their oppressions. Even as Aristotle was earnestly discoursing to his students on the innate inferiority of women, a woman called Agnodice in the fourth century B.C. succeeded in penetrating the all-male world of learning. After attending medical classes she practised gynaecology disguised as a man, with such success that other doctors, jealous of her fame, accused her of seducing her patients. In court she was forced to reveal her sex in order to save her life, at which new charges were brought against her of practising a profession restricted by law to men alone. Eventually acquitted of this, too, Agnodice lived to become the world's first known woman gynaecologist.[34]

As this suggests, even under the most adverse circumstances, women have never been wholly subordinate. As a sex, the female of the species has taken a lot of treading down, and the greater the efforts of the emerging phallocrat, the more resourceful and sustained was the resistance he produced. It did not take much female ingenuity, for example, to subvert the systems that men had themselves set up: the worldwide system of menstrual taboo, for instance, by which menstruating women were excluded from society so that they should not infect men, pollute food, or, as Aristotle believed, tarnish mirrors with their breath, in fact provided ample and perfect opportunity for women to develop alternative networks of power, all the more effective for being invisible, unseen. What went on in the menstrual huts or women's quarters when the women foregathered to bring food, news or messages to a menstruating sister would be beneath the ken of the males; but it would make itself felt in their lives nevertheless.

Not infrequently women's resistance to masculine control was expressed directly, even violently, as the Roman senators found to their cost in 215 B.C., when to curb inflation they passed a law forbidding women to own more than half an ounce of gold, wear multi-coloured dresses or ride in a two-horse carriage. As the word spread, crowds of rioting women filled the Capitol and raged through every street of the city, and neither the rebukes of the magistrates nor the threats of their husbands could make them return quietly to their homes. Despite the fierce opposition of the notorious anti-feminist Cato, the law was repealed in what must have been one of the earliest victories for sisterhood and solidarity.

For in the game of domination and subordination, women have not always been the losers: the annals of nineteenth-century explorers were rich in accounts of primitive African tribes where the women had fought off the challenge of the phallus and continued to rule the men. Most of these have now vanished, like the Balonda tribe of whom Livingstone noted that the husband was so subjected to his wife that he dared do nothing without her approval. Yet even today records continue to document tribes like that of the cannibal Munduguma of the Yuat River of the South Seas, whose women are as ferocious as their head-hunting men, and who particularly detest having children. This age-old resistance to the traditional wifely role is echoed in a Manus proverb of the same region: 'Copulation is so revolting that the only husband you can bear is the one whose advances you can hardly feel.'[35]

As this suggests, women did not fall easily into the subservient supporting role for which the lords of every known phallocracy have insisted they are 'naturally' fitted. Many and varied in fact have been the ways that women have found to subvert and convert the power of men, asserting their own autonomy and control as they did so. For the new political systems of male domination were not monolithic nor uniform; there were plenty of cracks through which an enterprising female might slip. In addition, the phallus supreme might count himself king of infinite space, but in real life, willy-nilly, men had to marry and father females. Taken together these factors provided a number of bases from which women could operate in much the same way as men:

Women could win membership of the ruling élite.

This classic route to power derived from access to the men who wielded it, in a direct reversal of the previous rule of the matriarchies. One of the clearest indications of its scope comes from the impressive careers of 'the Julias', a powerful female dynasty of two sisters and two daughters who ruled in Rome during the third century A.D. The elder sister, Julia Domna, first struck into Roman power politics when she married the Emperor Severus. After her death in 217, her younger sister Julia Maesa took over, marrying her two daughters, also Julias, with such skill that they became the mothers of the next two emperors, through whom the three women ruled with great effect until 235. Another mistress of this game was the Byzantine Empress Pulcheria (A.D. 399–453). Made regent for her weak-minded brother when she was only fifteen, Pulcheria later fought off a challenge to her supremacy from her brother's wife, and after his death ruled in her own right, supported by her husband, the tough General Marcian: husband in name only, Marcian was never allowed to break his wife's vow of chastity which after her death enabled her to be canonized as a saint.

Women could excel in political skill.

As Pulcheria's story shows, women learned very early on how to operate the machinery of power, how to manoeuvre successfully within frameworks which may have constricted their actions but never prevented them from achieving their deeper goals. So the magnificent Theodora, one-time bear-keeper, circus artiste and courtesan who fulfilled every Cinderella fantasy when she married the Prince Justinian, heir to the Byzantine Empire in A.D. 525, proposed her measures to the Councils of State, 'always apologizing for taking the liberty to talk, being a woman'.[36] Yet from behind this façade Theodora pushed through legislation which gave women rights of property, inheritance and divorce, while at her own expense she bought the freedom of girls who had been sold into prostitution, and banished pimps and brothel-keepers from the land.

Unlike Theodora, who used her borrowed power with magisterial altruism, other women displayed an appetite for *realpolitik* in its cruellest forms. The Roman empresses Drusilla Livia (*c*.55 B.C.–A.D. 29) and Valeria Messalina (A.D. 22–48) were among many who engaged in endless violent intrigues, including the free use of poison on any obstacles to their designs. Poison was also one of the weapons of the legendary beauty Zenobia. This Scythian warrior queen routed the Roman army, went on to capture Egypt and Asia Minor, and, when finally defeated by the Romans, escaped death by seducing a Roman senator. She later married him, and lived on into a gracious retirement until her death in A.D. 274.

Unquestionably though, the female Bluebeard of dynastic power games must be Fredegund, the Frankish queen who died in A.D. 597. Beginning as a servant at the royal court, she became the mistress of the king, whom she induced to repudiate one wife and murder another. When the sister of the dead queen, Brunhild, became her mortal enemy as a result, Fredegund engineered the death of Brunhild's husband and plunged the two kingdoms into forty years of war. Fredegund's later victims included all her stepchildren, her husband the king, and finally her old enemy Queen Brunhild, whom she subjected to public humiliation and atrocious torture in the face of the army for three days before Brunhild's death put an end to her sport: after which she died at last peacefully in her own bed.

Personal achievement was always possible.

The work of many gifted women known to history by name is a salutary reminder that, as the majority of the human race, women have always commanded over half of the sum total of human intelligence and creativity. From the poet Sappho, who in the sixth century B.C. was the first to use the lyric to write subjectively and explore the range of female experience, to the Chinese polymath Pan Chao (Ban Zhao), who flourished around A.D. 100 as historian, poet, astronomer, mathematician and educationalist, the range is startling. In every field, women too numerous to list were involved in developing knowledge, and contributing to the welfare of their societies as they did so: the Roman Fabiola established a hospital where she worked both as nurse and doctor, becoming the first known woman surgeon before she died in A.D. 399.[37] In various fields, too, women emerged not simply as respected authorities, but as the founding mothers of later tradition: Cleopatra, 'the alchemist of Alexandria', an early chemist and scholar, was the author of a classic text *Chrysopeia* (Gold-making), which was still in use in Europe in the Middle Ages, while the Chinese artist Wei Fu-Jen, working like Cleopatra in the third century A.D., is still honoured today as China's greatest calligrapher and founder of the whole school of the art of writing.

Not all women everywhere were destined to make their mark on history. This does not mean, however, that they were inevitably lost in the great silence of the past. Folk stories from all cultures preserve accounts of the heroines of ordinary life who tamed brutal or stupid husbands, outwitted rapacious lords, schemed for their children and lived to rejoice in their children's children. Occasionally these tales have a peculiarly personal ring, like the Chinese folk tale of the early T'ang dynasty (A.D. 618–907), in which the little heroine, desperate for education, is presented as setting out for her first day's schooling disguised as a boy, 'as happy as a bird freed from its cage'. Even more poignant is the earlier story, 'Seeking her Husband at the Great Wall' (*c.* 200 B.C.), which tells of a wife who succeeded in making a long and terrible journey in order to find her husband, surviving every danger and disaster in vain, since her beloved had been dead all along.[38]

For there was love between men and women; the new lords of creation may have been engaged in urging that 'a man is just a life-support system for his penis',[39] but no man is a phallus to his wife. In the mysterious intimacy of the marriage bed, bonds were formed which outlasted time, like this extended grieving epitaph erected by a distraught Roman husband, which almost 2000 years later reads as directly as a letter to his dead wife:

It was our lot to be harmoniously married for 41 years . . . Why recall your wifely qualities, your goodness, obedience, sweetness, kindness . . . why talk of your affection and devotion to your relatives when you were as thoughtful with my mother as with your own family? . . . When I was on the run you used your jewels to provide for me . . . later, skilfully deceiving our enemies, you kept me supplied . . . when a gang of men collected by Milo . . . attempted to break into our house and pillage it, you successfully repulsed them and defended our home . . .[40]

Set this against the mysogynistic posturing of the majority of Roman commentators, and it is difficult to believe that the subjects under discussion are one and the same creature – woman. It becomes in fact increasingly clear that experience on the micro-level of what real women were doing contradicts the macro-dimension of what men were insisting should and did happen.

Yet there is no denying the growth of the threat to women, as phallus-worship swept the world from around 1500 B.C. The accumulated force of men's resentment of women, their struggle for significance and the recognition of the male part in reproduction had brought an irresistible attack on women's former prerogative. The Mother Goddess lost her sacred status and the power that went with it; and in this violent downgrading queens, priestesses and ordinary women at every stage of their lives, from birth to death, shared in the loss of the 'mother-right'. The phallus now separating out from the

rites of mother-worship becomes a sacred object of veneration in itself, then the centre of all creative power, displacing the womb, and finally both symbol and instrument of masculine domination over women, children, Mother Earth and other men. When all life flowed from the female, creation had been a unity; when the elements became separated out, male became the moving spirit, and female was reduced to matter. With this god-idea of manhood, Mesopotamian males fought through their fears of being slaves of the woman-god by destroying her god-head and making slaves of women.

What this meant for women may be illustrated by the story of Hypatia, the Greek mathematician and philosopher. Trained from her birth in about A.D. 370 to reason, to question and to think, she became the leading intellectual of Alexandria where she taught philosophy, geometry, astronomy and algebra at the university. She is known to have performed original work in astronomy and algebra, as well as inventing the astrolabe and the planisphere, an apparatus for distilling water, and a hydroscope or aerometer for measuring the specific gravity of liquids. Adored by her pupils, she was widely regarded as an oracle, and known simply as 'The Philosopher' or 'The Nurse'. But her philosophy of scientific rationalism ran counter to the dogma of the emerging religion of Christianity, as did her womanhood and the authority she held. In a terrorist attack of the sort with which women were to become all too familiar, Cyril, the patriarch of Alexandria in A.D. 415, incited a mob of zealots led by his monks to drag her from her chariot, strip her naked and torture her to death by slicing her flesh from her bones with shells and sharpened flints.[41]

Hypatia's infamous murder signified more than the death of one innocent middle-aged scientist. In Cyril and his bigots, every thinking woman could foresee the shape of men to come. The aggressive rise of phallicism had revolutionized thought and behaviour; but it was not enough. Domination was not absolute, systems were imperfect, there was still too much room for manoeuvre – control could not be based on an organ that men could not control. There had to be more – an idea of immanent, eternal maleness that was not physical, visible, fallible; one that was greater than all women because greater than man; whose power was omnipotent and unquestionable – one God, God the Father, who man now invented in his own image.

All men allow women to have been the founders of religion.
STRABO (64 B.C.–A.D.21)

Behind man's insistence on masculine superiority there is an age-old envy of women.
ERIK ERIKSON

II

The Fall of Woman

Is it perhaps in a spirit of revenge that man has for so many centuries made woman his slave?
EDWARD CARPENTER
4

God the Father

The birth of a man who thinks he is God is nothing new.
TURKISH PROVERB
As a man is, so is his God – this word
Explains why God so often is absurd.
GILES AND MELVILLE HARCOURT, *Short Prayers for the Long Day*
Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, that Thou hast not made me a woman.
DAILY PRAYER OF HEBREW MALES

'In the beginning was the Word,' declared St John, 'and the word was God.' In fact the word was a lie. In the beginning, God was not. But as history unfolded in different nations and at different times it became necessary to invent him.

For the assumption of divinity and power from a purely physical base had certain crucial limitations. The human penis, even when inflated to magico-religious status, falls short of godhead. Up to a point, the rising phallocrat had carried all before him. Women's traditional power based on creation and nature had been systematically whittled away. The Sacred King had stolen from the Great Queen her selective technique of man-management on the Kleenex principle of 'use and throw away', and applied it wholesale to the female sex. But brute force could only go so far. So long as women still retained their atavistic power of giving new life, they could not be stripped of all association with the divine.

Additionally, with the discovery of agriculture and the consolidation of tribes into townships, human societies became increasingly sophisticated, requiring structures, systems and administration. Once survival was assured, surplus became *property*, and man awoke to the glory of being lord and master. To secure ownership and protect rights of inheritance in a more complex society called for something subtler than the indiscriminate deployment of man's bluntest instrument. And with the increase of organizational structures came greater opportunities for subversion or resistance; every tribe, township, throne-room or temple held women of ingenuity and resource eager to demonstrate that, whatever men's claim to power, it would not automatically be accepted. These women could not all be destroyed like Berenice or Boudicca, thrown to the dogs and ravens, or hurried to unmarked graves. Achieving *power*, man reached out for the secret of *control*; and as he began to look beyond the end of his penis, he found a stronger lord, a greater master – God.

Male divinity, of course, was nothing new. Isis had her Osiris, and Demeter had been forced to bow to the vengeance of the Lord of the Underworld. Indeed, as phallomania swept the world, male godhead found a new measurement in lost maidenhead; Zeus, king of the immortals, demonstrated his supremacy by the numbers of young women he raped. The new gods of power were equally aggressive and rapacious. The difference was that now each one insisted that he *alone* was God – he was the *One* God, the *only* God, and no one else could play.

For within the short millennium or so that separates the forging of Judaism from the birth of Islam, all the world's major religions made their début one by one. Immediately each set about the twin tasks of carving out their own community of believers, and annihilating all opposition. Where other male deities were targeted for extinction, what price female divinity? Walking in the garden that had been Eden, Mother Nature met Father God and her doom. In the duel for possession of the soul of humanity she lost her own, as the father god, in Engels' phrase, brought about, 'the world historic defeat of the female sex'.

Not all these new religions were god-systems. Judaism offered the paternalistic prototype, once it had succeeded in elevating the petty tribal godlet Yahweh into quite a different order of being after the trauma of the Exile just before 600 B.C. Islam likewise patented the slogan 'There is no God but God' following the birth of its prophet Muhammad just before A.D. 600. And straddling the

period between the two, lodged at its pivotal mid-point, was the reformed Judaism called Christianity formulated when the old God of the Jews gave birth to a son in whom, as a junior version of himself, he was naturally well pleased.[1]

Equally important, though, to India and China respectively, were Buddhism and Confucianism, both of which arose with the birth of their human founders and spread far and fast from these deceptively modest origins. Neither Buddha nor Confucius ever claimed to be divine, and their teachings are properly understood as value-systems rather than as religions proper. But the foundation of their beliefs was uncompromisingly patriarchal; the founders themselves have been worshipped as gods by their followers throughout history; and the ideologies of both these systems have had a remarkably similar impact on women's lives to that of religions organized around a central concept of a Father God. To women, therefore, the effect was broadly the same, however the message of male supremacy came packaged. All these systems – Judaism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam – were presented to them as holy, the result of divine inspiration transmitted from a male power to males empowered for this purpose, thereby enshrining maleness itself as power.

Historians, both male and female, have not always resisted the temptation to see the rise of monotheism as a plot against women, since the after-effects have been so uniformly disastrous for the female sex. But attractive though the notion of a cosmic conspiracy is to women's learned feelings of weakness and helplessness, it overlooks the fact that many of the elements of these early religions held a strong appeal for both sexes, and often for women in particular. Organized religion may have been a root cause of the historic defeat of womankind – Eve did not fall, she was pushed – but it did not begin with that aim. Seen in the wider context of the struggle of human beings of different races towards a deeper understanding of the meaning of their lives and of their growing spirituality, these five patriarchal systems readily reveal why in the first instance they were so attractive.

To begin with, each offered a clarity, a certainty, a synthesized world view that carried a fresh and profound conviction after the pluralistic muddle and overlap of the old gods, and of goddess-worship too. An Athenian woman in labour praying for a safe delivery in the fifth century B.C., for example, had to choose between the Great Mother Cybele, Pallas Athene, or even the virgin huntress Artemis (Diana to the Romans), all of whom had a special care of women in childbirth. Her husband, sacrificing for the birth of a son, could propitiate Ares for a little warrior or Apollo for a poet or musician, but neglected Zeus the king of the gods at his peril. Once all these rival divinities had been caught up into one all-powerful father, whose eye was on every sparrow let alone each of his human creations, or into a firm framework of 'the Enlightenment', 'the One Path', there was a security that had previously been sought in vain.

For the newcomers were wonderfully confident. 'I am the Lord your God,' Jehovah told the Jews, 'and thou shalt have none other gods before me' – the same message, delivered with the same assurance, as that of the gods of Christianity and Islam. But this apparent simplicity masked a rich complexity that succeeded in harmonizing the universe, offering its believers a patterned metaphysical framework in which each individual, however lowly, was guaranteed their own snug niche. In this confidence, not previously available to them, women could find a terrible strength. The Christian slave Felicitas, martyred with her mistress Perpetua in the Roman persecutions of A.D. 203, on the night before her ordeal gave birth to a baby in prison. When she cried out in labour, the guards mocked her with the taunt, 'You suffer so much now – what will you do when you are tossed to the beasts?' But when Felicitas faced the lions in the amphitheatre the next morning she was calm, even joyful, and died without a sound.[2]

As this shows, these early believers could find through pain and suffering an answer to the pain of the human predicament itself, a meaning to the apparent meaninglessness of life. With belief came, therefore, an enhanced sense of self as the faithful were liberated from being the helpless slaves either of the Mother Goddess or of her phallic supplanters, the petty, disputatious male divinities. Now the individual mattered, to a god who cared about her and her potential: 'I am thy God', declared

Jehovah, 'walk before me and be thou perfect.' And for the believer – but *only* for the believer – the reward was nothing less than paradise. This is the triumphant boast of the virgin martyr Hirena in a play of the First European dramatist, the Saxon writer Hrotsvitha, who as a woman seems to identify strongly with her tough, jeering heroine:

Unhappy man! Blush, blush Sisinnius, and groan at being vanquished by a tender little girl . . . You shall be damned in Tartarus; but I, about to receive the palm of martyrdom and the crown of virginity, shall enter the etherial bedchamber of the eternal king.[3]

This combination of revenge psychology with the satisfaction of sublimated sensuality must have been intensely comforting to downgraded women. In a reward-and-punishment system, too, the more women submitted and suffered, the greater the final pay-off.

Interestingly, the more sophisticated of the women under the early monotheisms speedily grasped that her God in fact offered a post-dated cheque, and no one had ever come back to complain that it had bounced. Consequently they plunged into less-than-godly behaviour with extraordinary vigour, only making sure to build into their lives a final phase of high-profile godliness to ensure their passage to eternity. Mistress of this technique was the Russian Queen Olga. Becoming regent after the assassination of her husband Igor I, she first instituted a reign of terror in revenge for his murder, scalding the leading rebels to death and executing hundreds of others. After twenty years of iron-hearted cruelty she devoted herself to Christianity with such good effect that she became the first saint of the Russian Orthodox church.

The confidence with which the women of the early churches adopted, even manipulated, the dictates of the new patriarchies provides another pointer to the reason for their success. At their origins, they were all only a breath or two away from the goddess-religions they had usurped, and there is abundant evidence that for many hundreds of years women worshippers of the Father Gods continued with their traditional female rituals alongside the new observances. The prophet Ezekiel, a founder of the elevation of Judaism from its scattered tribal beginnings, was horrified to witness Jewish women of the fifth century B.C. 'weeping for Tammuz', mourning the death of the sacrificial king, who as Tammuz, Attis or Adonis was remembered every year on the Day of Blood at the end of March (later colonized by Christianity as Good Friday). And not only the women: to the scandalized eyes of the prophet Jeremiah, every man, woman and child was guilty of the same offence:

Seest thou not what they do in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead their dough to make cakes to the Queen of Heaven [the Great Goddess] that they may provoke me to anger.[4]

All patriarchies, in fact, only succeeded by colonizing, indeed cannibalizing the forms, emblems and sacred objects of the Goddess they were purporting to root out. Much recent theological scholarship has been devoted to recovering what in ages past every schoolgirl knew: that the Great Goddess in her three-fold incarnation (maiden, mother and wise woman) lies behind the Christian trinity, that her immature aspect of moon maiden became the Virgin Mary, and so on. To this day modern events like May Day and Lady Day commemorate her special festals, especially the first, when at the celebration of the vernal equinox, maidens wreathed in flowers symbolizing the Earth Mother's powers of fecundity and growth dance round a maypole, a phallic evocation of the boy-king/sacrificial lover of the woodland (Tammuz, Attis, Adonis, Virbius) who has been cut down. This continuity is even to be observed in the ethical systems that make no overt use of the Father God; the Chinese character denoting 'ancestor' had an earlier meaning of 'phallus' which, even earlier, found on the most ancient and sacred bronzes and oracle bones, had meant 'earth'. Chinese ancestor-worship, then, embodying patriarchal supremacy (only a son can perform the ritual sacrifices which set his father's soul free to join his ancestors) grows out of the Great Goddess/Mother Earth worship which promoted fertility and secured offspring for the first male 'ancestors'.[5]

Of all religions, however, Islam most clearly reveals this hijacking process at work. From the crescent moon on its flag to the secret of its most sacred shrine, the Goddess is omnipresent, as Sir Richard Burton observed on his travels:

Al-Uzza, one aspect of the threefold Great Goddess of Arabia, was enshrined in the Ka'aba at Mecca, where she was served by ancient priestesses. She was the special deity and protector of women. Today the Ka'aba still survives and is the most holy place of Islam.[6]

Even when the priestesses of the Great Goddess were replaced by priests, her power lingered on. These male servitors were called *Beni Shaybah*, which means 'Sons of the Old Woman', one of the Great Mother's more familiar nicknames. In an even clearer link, what they guard is a very ancient black stone, sacred to Allah, and covered with a black stuff pall called 'the shirt of the Ka'aba'. But underneath the 'shirt' the black stone bears on its surface a mark called 'the impression of Aphrodite', an oval cleft signifying the female genitals: to one eye-witness 'it is the sign of . . . the Goddess of untrammelled sexual love, and clearly indicates that the Black Stone at Mecca belonged originally to the Great Mother.'[7] When her women worshippers knew that 'the Lady' was still in her stone, and her stone was still in her shrine, it would not at first have mattered that she gained another name, she who had 10,000 appellations, nor that now she was served by different acolytes. In embracing the new father gods, therefore, women did not have to abandon all contact with their first mother, and this undoubtedly enabled the struggling patriarchies to consolidate their hold.

In these early struggles of each of the male-centred systems lies another reason for their initial success with women. In the fight for recognition and survival, any ideology seizes on and makes use of whatever recruits come to hand – it is no accident that the first devotees of both Buddha and Muhammad were their wives. Women were, as a result, well to the fore in all these foundations, which offered them a central role and opportunity. It seems clear, for instance, that Khadijah, the brilliant businesswoman and prominent member of the leading Meccan tribe of the Quraish, actually discovered Muhammad when at the age of forty she gave the ill-educated, epileptic shepherd boy of twenty-five regular employment, took him as her husband and encouraged his revelations.

The early annals of Judaism are similarly stiffened with strong-minded women, even in extremes of terror, pain and loss. A well-known figure is that of the mother of the Maccabees, who stood by her seven sons while each in turn was tortured and burned to death in the holocaust of 170 B.C., urging them to stand firm. But for this, it is agreed, the God of the Jews could have been wiped out: 'the blood of the Maccabean martyrs . . . saved Judaism'.[8] In early Christianity likewise, women found not merely a role, but an instrument of resistance to male domination; in choosing to be a bride of Christ they inevitably cocked a snook at lesser male fry. Thousands of young women helped to build the church of God with their body, blood and bones when frenzied fathers, husbands or fiancés preferred to see them die by fire, sword or the fangs of wild beasts rather than live to flout the duty and destiny of womanhood.

Just as important as the fearless witness of the virgin martyrs was the work of the women who put their time, their money, their enthusiasm, their houses and their children freely at the disposal of the struggling founders. Even St Paul, later the unregenerate prophet of female inferiority, was forced to acknowledge the help he received from Lydia, the seller of purple dyes in Philippi. Indeed the very first Christian churches in Rome and elsewhere were houses donated by wealthy widows, and all the Christian communities in the Acts of the Apostles are recorded as meeting under a woman's roof: 'the church in the house of Chloe, in the house of Lydia, in the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, in the house of Nympha, in the house of Prisca . . .' Most significant of all, as a leading theologian shows, of the common offices of the church in its pioneer days (teaching, prayer and prophecy, thanksgiving over bread and wine, and administering the gifts and discipline of the faith), '*there is none that a woman could not do*.'[9]

Early Christianity, in fact, claimed through its prophets that it liberated women from their traditional subservience and gave them complete sexual equality with men. 'In Christ,' wrote St Paul, 'there is neither bond nor free, neither male nor female . . .' Buddhism, too, at its beginnings held out to its female adherents a delusive promise of equality; the threefold reality, 'all is suffering, all is impermanence and there is no soul', was as available to women as it was to men. Additionally, Buddha taught that life, or form, was only one of twenty-two faculties that composed a person; sex, therefore, was of minimal importance. And, like Christianity, Buddhism also had its early heroines, idealized examples of passion, purity and sublime faith:

Subhā puts the thought [of Buddha] into action [when] a rogue inveigles her into the forest and tries to seduce her. Subhā responds by preaching the doctrine to him. But the rogue sees only the beauty of her eyes and ignores her lofty words. So to demonstrate the irrelevance of both her beauty and sex to the inner life, Subhā plucks out one of those lovely eyes and offers it to him. He is converted at once . . .[10]

Of all the early patriarchies, though, perhaps the most surprising in its attitude to women is Islam; the gross oppressions which later evolved like veiling, seclusion, and genital mutilation (the so-called 'female circumcision') were brought about in the teeth of the far freer and more humane regime of former times. From pre-Islamic society, for instance, women had inherited the right to choose their own husbands – husbands in the plural, for the old 'mother-right' still flourished throughout the tribes and townships of the Arab states, as the feminist historian Nawal El Saadawi explains:

Before Islam a woman could practise polyandry and marry more than one man. When she became pregnant she would send for all her husbands . . . Gathering them around her, she would name the man she wished to be the father of her child, and the man could not refuse . . .[11]

When a Bedouin woman wanted to divorce one of these spare husbands, she simply turned her tent around to signal that her door was no longer open to him. In later generations Muslim women must have considered folk tales or memories of those freedoms either a cruel joke or the purest fantasy. Yet the proof that they existed lies in the marriage story of the founder of Islam, the prophet Muhammad himself. When the self-assured Khadijah wanted him, she despatched a woman with instructions for Muhammad to propose to her – and he did.

Even more remarkable than this free right of sexual choice was the readiness with which the women of early Islam took up arms and fought in pitched battles alongside the men. One honoured heroine and war-leader was Salaym Bint Malhan, who with an armoury of swords and daggers strapped round her pregnant belly fought in the ranks of Muhammad and his followers. Another is credited with turning the tide in a fierce fight against the Byzantines, when the wavering forces of Islam were rallied by a tall knight muffled in black and fighting with ferocious courage. After the victory, the 'knight' was reluctantly exposed as the Arab princess Khawlah Bint al-Azwar al-Kindiyyah.

Even losing in battle could not defeat Khawlah's spirit. Captured at the battle of Sabhura, near Damascus, she rallied the other female captives with the passionate challenge, 'Do you accept these men as your masters? Are you willing for your children to be their slaves? Where is your famed courage and skill that has become the talk of the Arab tribes as well as the cities?' A woman called Afra' Bint Ghifar al-Humayriah is said to have returned the wry reply, 'We are as courageous and skilful as you describe. But in such cases a sword is quite useful, and we were taken by surprise, like sheep, unarmed.' Khawlah's response was to order each woman to arm herself with her tent-pole, form them into a phalanx, and lead them in a successful fight for freedom. 'And why not?' as the narrator of their story concludes, 'If a lost battle meant their enslavement?'[12]

Another woman warrior of Islam, as potent with her tongue as with a sword, was the celebrated 'A'ishah. Although the youngest of the twelve wives of the polygamous prophet, married to the aged Muhammad when she was only nine and widowed before her eighteenth birthday, 'A'ishah became

famous for her courageous intelligence and resistance to the subordination enjoined on virtuous Islamic wives. She had no hesitation in opposing or correcting Muhammad himself, arguing theology with him in front of his principal male followers with such devastating logic and intellectual power that Muhammad himself instructed them, 'Draw half your religion from this ruddy-faced woman.' Her courage extended even to resisting the will of the Prophet when it came through the hotline of a revelation from Allah himself. When in answer to his desire to take another wife Muhammad was favoured with a new batch of Koranic verses assuring him that Allah permitted his prophet to marry as many women as he wished, she hotly commented, 'Allah always responds immediately to your needs!'[13]

What else would a father god do? And how were women to respond? 'A'ishah, still only a girl of eighteen when Muhammad died, outgrew this rebellion and went on to become a leading figure in Islam, where her active political power and influence on Muslim evolution and tradition were enormous. But the challenge she had thrown down remained unanswered. It could only gain in immediacy and urgency in the years that followed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.