

# WHAT'S FEMALE?

by Stephanie Hiller

In Cristina Biaggi's very wonderful little book, *In the Footsteps of the Goddess*, in which women write simply of their experience of the Goddess, Mary R. Hopkins tells of her quest. "I wondered what was a symbol for woman. I began tearing pages out of magazines, searched greeting card racks, and dug into art history but I found nothing that wasn't from a male point of view. That's how I discovered how pervasive the male point of view was. For ten years, I refused to read anything by a man in an attempt to discover how women think and respond to the world."

I remember when I was a girl, how much I relished books with a female protagonist. I'm sure that's why I read *A Tree Grows In Brooklyn* five times one terrible hot and boring summer when I was ten or eleven. It was just so rare to read a book from a female point of view, which meant that the intimacy of reading novels (to say nothing of the family drama) afforded me many opportunities to identify with males.

But as I reached puberty, the obvious difficulty began to haunt me. I was not going to be joining a ship's crew to discover my Treasure Island, not likely to hitchhike across the country with Kerouac, probably not even going to write the Great American Novel with tortured and poetic Thomas Wolfe. I was going to be -- damnit! -- a girl. Forever.

The images of the feminine which were presented to me did little to ameliorate the difficulty. I just didn't fit the model, not the right shape, it seemed, to start with, for straight skirts and round-collar blouses, and so adolescence was only the beginning of years of depression which revolved around my ambivalence about being a woman. I am a little ashamed to remember it still!

It was not until my own daughter reached puberty -- when I began to delve deeply into the rich material of women's writing much as Mary Hopkins did - that I realized I was not alone. Those of us "of a certain age" well remember, as Eleanor Bowman so expertly outlines in her essay in this issue, that we came of age with a certain desperate sense of loss. Approaching menopause, my reading brought me to the arms of the goddess. I'm sure I shall always remember the night I attended my first ritual where the sound of the drumming in a dark room full of women reverberated with the echo of a distant memory. I had been there before.

In *When the Drummers Were Women*, Layne Redmond writes, "Women today are on a tremendous spiritual search. About 80 percent of participants at transformational centers, continuing education classes, therapy groups, and New Age centers are women. Behind this surging feminine energy is a yearning to understand who they are and what their purpose in life is. They long to live meaningful lives in harmonious rhythm with the sacred energies of the hearth and heavens. Many have an underlying intuition that women have been dispossessed of a heritage, tradition, and sense of identity that was once uniquely their own."

Eleanor Bowman writes that women in her family sought to deny their deep female nature by hiding it in the artifice of femininity; Southern "ladies," they disdained all the processes of birthing and feeding their young from their bodies. It was the black nanny who carried all those labors for them (insofar as it was possible!); she of course was closer to the beasts of the field.

Another course was chosen by the feminists of the 60s and 70s, who preferred mind over body in a brave demonstration of equality with men. Thinking of those trenchant days, I like to recall Ashley Montague's comment, that for women, equality is a step down. Staunch feminists fervently resist the idea that our uniqueness as women resides in our capacity for giving birth. To be valued as equals with men, they have eschewed any generic difference from males because it seemed to confirm their lower status. In choosing performance and achievement over the trappings of femininity, they sought to escape the role forced on them by male privilege. But in the process, they, too, have devalued their biological femaleness.

For me, the most profound lesson of the goddess is realizing that our spiritual power resides in those very processes. In our monthly cycles, our sexual ecstasy, our bleeding and our birthing, we experience a oneness with nature that is entirely unlike the experience of males. Indeed it is the very

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experience males have been trying to achieve with all their austerities and meditations, though unfortunately with the opposite result. Seeking transcendence, they leave the body out of the picture entirely -- a fatal mistake.

Nature is radiant, she is the best thing that we could ever choose to rely on, she is the foundation of our existence, and she, too, is cyclical, stormy, juicy, all-embracing, inclusive, and completely irrepressible. She defies the mind's grasp. As women, we are inextricably linked with her wildness as well as her sweetness. The wisdom of the womb is that all living beings are so connected.

By being in relationship with us, men realize their own roots in the ground of being; the rituals of sacred marriage (hieros gamos) once practiced in the temples of the goddess were surely designed to remind men that they, too, are of the earth. They experience that connection through our bodies, both by coming out of them and going into them, and that repeated return to our shared humanity through that sacred act is their best hope for redemption.

Recognizing the power that resides in our female physicality does not mean that women are less than men unless we accept the masculine valuation on transcendence. I always remember a line in a play by Lorraine Hansberry that I saw on Broadway during the '50s. It was Sidney Poitier, I believe, who said, "A man tells a woman his dreams and the woman says, 'Eat your eggs.'" There will always be a tension between the male quest for immortality and a woman's simple knowing that life is here and now. But if men come to value that grounding in reality, there will be far fewer flights of fancy into the Great Beyond, whether on the wings of poesy or via the discharge of a nuclear missile. Men appear to be generically (and genetically!) less attached to life than we are; dreams of personal power allow them to disregard what the body needs, and that is part of the reason why we are in this terrible mess the planet is in today.

Women are different, and the difference is valuable. Amongst the Iroquois, chiefs could not declare war without the support of the women elders. Indeed, the Matrons were the ones who appointed those chiefs. Indian women know, and still remember, the power of their essential being, and we have much to learn from them. It is truly unfortunate that in some cases they have been offended by the late awakening of white women to the deception of patriarchy. Certainly cheap imitations of Native culture must be abhorrent. But many of us are, after all, sincere.

To hold that power in society, we must first nurture it in ourselves. But how do we come to reside in that place? In modern society, we are always tempted away from it, whether by male disgust at our blood or our own ambition to rise to a higher station in life by proving that we can do anything a man can do, better. We can enter the boardroom or join the military; in the uniform we don, breasts and thighs will be less visible. But we will remain women, only proving by our apparel our distrust of our own bodies. To take on the male role is not the way to equality. If we would be warriors, we would be women warriors, spear in one hand, skull dripping blood in the other, half naked if you will. If we would be athletes, images abound of the radiant Artemis, Diana of the hunt, virginal, and purely wild.

The rituals and the images of the goddess are a boon to womankind. We need them desperately in this age of media and celebrity images broadcast on the flickering screen in all our homogenized homes in subdivisions across America. We need real grit.

Sharing our stories with one another liberates us from isolation, offers us confirmation of who we truly are and the wisdom to see what we are not. Unlearning the behaviors of femininity (or feminism) takes time. We must stop trying to conform to a man's idea of how we ought to be. Therein lies our subservience. If we are wild, and irrepressible, as well as dignified -- if we really hold that pure will of woman being -- we birth the possibility of a new culture, one in which women are honored.

There are many paths back to the primeval jungle, but we go armed and fortified with the experience of modern times. Embracing what Susan Griffin has called "the Eros of everyday life," we come back to the core of our being. Life is a sensuous experience. We are here to hold that truth, and share the pleasure.

Blessed be!

[NOTE: *In the Footsteps of the Goddess* is a wonderful book, just released summer solstice. You can order it from KIT Publishers, at [www.booktrends.com](http://www.booktrends.com)]

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