

Rigoglioso, Marguerite, *Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010) 267 pp., \$110 (cloth), \$36.00 (soft-cover), \$24.99 (ebook).

Rigoglioso's thesis is that many of the great goddesses of antiquity were creatrixes in their own right and as such predate the male deities of the Classical Greek period we are all so familiar with. She points to several mother-daughter goddesses and suggests that the daughter is actually the parthenogenic creation of the mother, a near version of a clone.

This volume starts with the primordial Greek goddesses – Chaos, Nyx (Night) and Ge/Gaia (Earth). Next comes an examination of the classical trio of Athena, Artemis, and Hera. Rigoglioso links Athena to Metis (her mother) and then the Egyptian Neith, suggesting movement of the goddess across time and cultures. The discussion of Hera is most interesting, creating a portrait of the goddess before she came to be characterized as the ill-tempered wife of Zeus. The author returns several times to the details of the relationship between Hera and her stepson Hercules, with specific reference to his twelve labors and his ascension into godhood. Rigoglioso posits that many of his labors can be interpreted as illustrations of the process of patriarchy attacking and subduing matriarchy. She also identifies Hera as the sole parent of several of male deities – Ares, Hephaestus and Typhon.

The longest section of the book focuses on Demeter and Persephone, examining their relationship to each other and interpreting details of various versions of the kidnapping and Demeter's search for a way to reclaim her daughter.

Building on details from multiple variants of the tale of Persephone being snatched by Hades from the field of spring flowers, Rigoglioso suggests that Persephone was possibly in the act of preparing for her own act of parthenogenic creation. Given this premise, I am surprised she does not discuss the significance of Persephone's consumption of pomegranate seeds while in the underworld. This specific fruit has been used as an early-term abortifacient for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. If Persephone's parthenogenesis was compromised by Hades, then Hades' patriarchal imposition of sons upon a previously autonomous creatrix could provide an

opening to understand Persephone's use of pomegranate as an attempt to abort a parthenogenic offspring. Rigoglioso goes on to use her rereading of Persephone's narrative as a tool to fill in some of the gaps regarding the rationale and rituals of the Eleusinian mysteries. She links the Eleusinian rituals to those of Theosomorphia, as rituals involving Demeter, the rape of Persephone and parthenogenesis. Her interpretation of the known details of these rituals and her suggestions about the missing information are powerfully persuasive.

Throughout the book Rigoglioso stresses that when a virgin mother creates a child it is necessarily of the same sex. She points out a small number of stories about goddesses giving birth to flawed children, and points out that in every instance the imperfect child is male and flawed in some fashion. The examples she uses are Hera's children Hephaestus, often described as ugly, and Typhon, a storm giant with serpents for legs, half serpent. Holding to this specific detail of her thesis Rigoglioso includes a chapter by Angeleen Campra which discusses the Gnostic goddess Sophia and her virgin conception of the demiurge who although flawed became the "Creator" we are familiar with through the Christian myth of creation.

Her theory is interesting and the arguments presented in this book are persuasive. It is easy to get involved in the idea and start looking for additional examples in other cultures. That makes the extremely tight parameters of this book a little frustrating, and the prospect of further discussion in the next book tantalizing. That said, this book does have some difficulties. Too many times Rigoglioso assumes knowledge on the part of the reader. She references the twelve labors of Hercules several times but only fleetingly expands on her interpretation of certain labors as aggressions against the matriarchical status quo. Similarly she relies on the reader being familiar with The Homeric Hymn.

This book is number two of an anticipated trio. There are constant references to her previous book *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece* (2009) and occasional promises about what will come in the next volume. Together, the author promises, they will knit together an encompassing feminist vision of ancient goddess worship in cultures that venerated female deities to the point of allotting them full generative power over all forms of life, human and divine. This volume would have benefited from a more substantive synopsis of first book so the reader was not left suspecting they were missing information previously covered.

The most challenging aspects of this book are Rigoglioso's suggestions regarding the possibility that the high priestesses of these powerful parthenogenic goddesses were themselves intent on producing special daughters without the contribution of a male partner. It is a far stretch beyond mainstream contemporary beliefs concerning conception. She also suggests that in some instances the mothers of the classic Greek heroes were originally priestesses dedicated to the creatrix goddesses, and that their roles as mothers to sacred daughters were circumvented into that of mothers of specifically male heroes. These elements are less convincing.

Anyone who enjoys Classical Greek mythology as more than fables and stories will find the goddesses in this book intriguing. The book is written in very academic prose and lacks any illustration to break up the chapters and long passages. However Rigoglioso writes in a casual (but thorough) fashion and that makes the content eminently readable. Graphics such as family trees and maps might have added to her theories. Overall Rigoglioso's book is thoroughly researched, well written and will be of great interest to anyone interested in a feminist re-visioning of the past, including scholars working in Pagan studies.

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