

Book Review

Ayers, Mary Y. *Masculine Shame. From Succubus to the Eternal Feminine.* London and New York: Routledge, 2011. ISBN 9780414390392.

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Suppose that human history were driven not so much by power or money as the cultural materialists would have it, but by images and myths. These symbols and narratives contain, and in turn are contained by, raw psychic energy from the generation of being. Suppose that after thousands of years of dis-jointed culture we cannot tell whether the myth shapes the energy into its form, or whether the primal energy makes and re-makes the myth. "Symbols grow out of changing communal situations and experience, and are enacted in myth," as Mary Y. Ayers puts it with superb simplicity. Her *Masculine Shame From Succubus to the Eternal Feminine* is a stunning and persuasive analysis of how changes in ancient religious myths implanted toxic gender conflicts at the heart of Western religions, philosophy, history, and even in depth psychology itself.

Prehistory, the archaeological evidence suggests, sees the move from "mother" centered religions of the earth as sacred, nurturing, and generative, to "father" dominated religions of a creator who alone, *without woman as a generative power*, created matter, earth, nature and "man" as separate from himself. The move from matriarchy to patriarchy was profoundly traumatic because of the perverse matter of *founding* involved. A male sky god creating without woman and without the body of the earth (now defined as woman) is shamed. Rejection of the feminine is rejection of origins in mother (earth), and the resulting shame is projected onto women in the form of the succubus, Lilith, Medusa, the "mother" that devours instead of creates.

The succubus is the feminine demon that steals men's potency at night. "She" haunts and wounds the Western psyche as Lilith, the sexually aggressive first wife of Adam in Hebrew myth, in Eve as the origin of sin and sex, today in *femme fatale* and bimbo, stereotypes of females preying sexually upon males. What is at the heart of Ayers's incisive examination is the thesis that the succubus is not a native

of the human psyche. Rather she is a deformed creature, *created* by the traumatic and violent rise of prehistoric patriarchy. To be precise, the succubus is monstrous because she is the projection of masculine shame at the repudiation of the feminine as sacred mother. *She* is the hideous progeny of the fantasy of masculine-only reproduction.

Consequently, the succubus is a symbol and myth of *unnatural* nurturing within Western culture. In patriarchal societies, there is no space for the mother, or (m)other, as creative source of psychic being. Boys especially are trained to reject the feminine as pre-Oedipal in their infancy. They too inherit the shame of that rejection and discover the succubus as the fear of the other as feminine predatory sexuality. Patriarchy's deep myths shape the nascent rejection of the feminine in the mother as sacred and generative to masculine being. In turn, a male psyche is formed whose deep trauma and fear of the feminine supports the maintenance of such mythic expressions of shame.

Fascinating and challenging to depth psychology is Ayers's excavation of the succubus as inhabiting (and even distorting) the work of Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung. Here is a provocative blending of psychological critique and case history. Shaped by the intenser patriarchy of nineteenth-century Europe, Freud and Jung both succumb to extra-marital affairs. Shame drives them close to psychic fragmentation under the impact of the succubus narrative. "She" gains territory within their theories. Freud renounces his notion of sexual abuse in childhood in the etiology of hysteria, preferring to retreat into the Oedipus myth *as fantasy*, with a predatory feminine monster in the sphinx. Jung refuses (as Freud would do later) to acknowledge a theoretical debt to Sabina Spielrein; he conceals her role in his story of the generation of the anima. Spielrein as Jung's lover is transposed, Ayers suggests, into an anima portrayed negatively as abject. With the shame of his treatment of Spielrein etched into the formation of his theory of the feminine as the "other" of masculine consciousness, Jung remains unable to explore the radical edge of his notions of gender.

So how might the succubus be defeated? Is depth psychology forever tainted by the twist of shame in its origins? Ayers demonstrates the potential in both the work of Freud and Jung for the tormenting succubus to be redeemed. If the pre-Oedipal (m)other in psychoanalysis can be re-imagined as the creative force of the primal sacred mother, if Jung's passionate adherence to the collective unconscious as *source* of meaning and feeling can be recognized as a tribute to the earth mother, then depth psychology may heal itself and tend to the wounded masculine of the world.

The far-reaching implications of Ayers's thesis are embedded in her reading of the story of Jesus. For Jesus is the new masculine hero, the one who refuses to turn shame into violence. God cannot let go of his projected shame without ceasing to

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be God. The assertion of the masculine as sufficient alone is the very structure of monotheism; that is, the perversion that generates the succubus. However, in being born of a woman, Mary, God-as-Jesus fully accepts body and earth by "turning the other cheek" to proffered violence, and embracing his death. Jesus is the new hero because he does not project his bodily weakness onto the other. He does not try to escape his incarnation by striking the flesh of another. Defining masculinity as a violent warrior is following the psychodynamic Oedipal pattern of rejecting the (m)other as flesh and making it meaningless.

Jesus dies into his masculine shame and thereby redeems it. Moreover, even more than the fate of western Christendom depends upon the imperative to overcome the succubus and masculine shame. In a powerful epilogue, Ayers shows how the rejection of other as mother at the heart of our myths and our codes of being are no longer tenable in the twenty-first century. In a world with many intersecting religious traditions, which is also afflicted by human-generated climate change, the (m)other is not quiescent. Rather, new ideas in evolution such as the Gaia hypothesis proposed by James Lovelock indicate that mother earth as a self-sustaining system may be unable to tolerate the human-produced succubus.

Our survival as a species depends upon reconciling our deep desires incarnated through gender, and renouncing the dangerous fantasy that masculinity is self-generating. Only conjunction will save us from destroying the planet that sustains all life in the name of destroying the succubus. *Masculine Shame* reveals that war on the succubus is an attempt to annihilate earth as nurturing mother.

This book is part of the movement to save humanity from a warrior code of masculinity that belongs in a former era. I highly recommend it to all students of gender, religion, the arts, myth, ecology, and depth psychology.