

THE MIGHTY GODDESS



WORLD
MYTHS

Sally Pomme CLAYTON

Sophie HERXHEIMER

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STORIES

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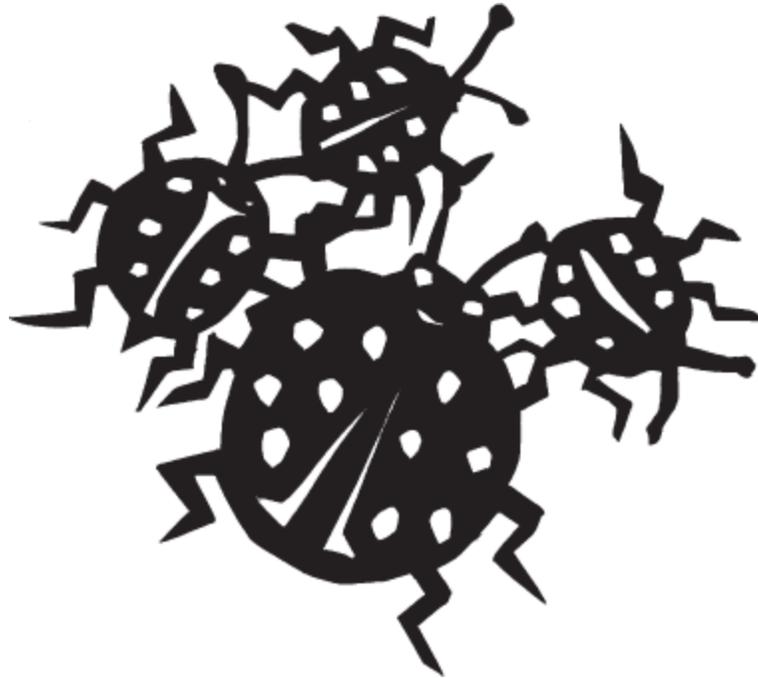
PAPERCUTS

Sophie HERXHEIMER



For my sister, and all our sisters. SPC

For my daughter, and all our daughters. SH



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Journey of the Goddess

The goddess has multiple forms that resonate across the world in one mighty being. The oldest images of the goddess were carved in bone and stone around 40,000 years ago. Myths of the goddess appear and reappear in multiple versions and are both universal and local, containing motifs that are shared by all, while taking cultural and geographically specific forms. These myths are a precious hoard that echo from eternity down into our deepest selves. By bringing these global goddesses together I hope to honour these diverse stories, allowing their images and narratives to reverberate with each other, revealing our shared cultural roots and collective preoccupations. But her myths come with a warning - these stories have not been tamed! They are about lust and greed, rape and rage, death and destruction, jealousy and murder, transformation and rebirth. I have not softened the content but respected it and responded to it, exploring some of its many meanings.

The goddess repeatedly inhabits particular roles, frequently appearing as creator, virgin, warrior, lover, mother, and crone. This book follows the journey of the goddess from creator to crone, and her manifestations in these roles across the world. I have chosen to define the goddess as a supreme deity who is, or was, worshipped. The divine goddess appears as female, both male and

female, or transcends gender. I have also chosen to focus on myth rather than fairy tale. Powerful characters, such as Baba Yaga, who have goddess aspects but appear in fairy tales, have not been included – forgive me Baba! Myths and fairy tales have distinct and very different structural patterns. Myth has tangents and back stories, like a family tree that spreads outwards. It has many possible routes through its narratives, with open beginnings and endings. It is linked to ritual and worship, and usually the narratives connect to a wider pantheon of gods and goddess and their stories.

This book is my version of the images and narratives of the one and multiple goddess. I have taken my own journey through the myths, placing the goddess at the centre of each story, not at the side or lost at the end where she often can be. I have sometimes chosen to leave out male characters or reduce their roles – there are plenty of collections where you can find their stories! By telling the myths from the point of view of the goddess I discovered new emotions, meanings and metaphoric realities.

I have been performing many of these myths for nearly forty years: starting as a young storyteller, feeling as though I was not equal to the material, trying to discover how I could bring ancient myths to contemporary audiences, both honouring the material and giving it new life. I continue this exploration. The myths in this collection arose from extensive research, finding multiple versions, looking at artefacts and locations, then weaving my own versions from sometimes disparate fragments of story and history that might not have been brought together before. Some of these versions have also been shaped through

repeated performances and by the responses of audiences across the UK and beyond. Audiences help a storyteller find rhythms and patterns in the narrative, they inspire jokes and humour and bring out the drama and characters in a story. This book is a legacy to a life of living with, loving, and performing these myths.

All these myths were once spoken or chanted, some still are. Some of the myths exist as 'urtexts' - an earliest version, written on stone walls, clay tablets, papyrus or palm leaf. Most of the myths exist as multiple written versions, collected and transcribed or developed from oral sources, turned into books, translated, made into operas and films, rewritten, then turned back into performances on street corners. I continue this endless process.

I have been shocked to find how little narrative exists for some goddesses. Their stories are absent from even recent collections. I have found that goddesses who are part of major pantheons tend to have more narrative, more has been collected and written down, and more artefacts linked to them exist. While local or household goddesses who are on the edges of pantheons have less narrative, less has been written down and less remains. These goddesses were, and some still are, part of private rituals rather than public worship, they might have important shrines in the home or local landscape, but their lower status seems to mean less has passed from oral to written traditions. I hope their stories will be collected for future generations. For some goddesses very little narrative exists, instead there might be potent images, a few prayers or rituals. Some of these goddesses are so important I wanted to include them here. I looked at statues, patterns on shards of pot, textiles,

songs or prayers to find fragments of narrative. Examining what a goddess holds and wears, the gestures she makes, what blessings she confers and what she represents are all clues to her story. Goddesses usually have several epithets (names) that describe her energies and powers. Epithets are a feature of myths, repeated in prayers and praise songs, inscribed on shrines and objects. They are useful in discovering more about a goddess and I have included some of her multiple names to evoke her different attributes.

The goddess often appears in multiple roles, all at the same time, in one myth! I chose which section to place each myth, according to which role was the most dominant. In the 'Creator' myths, the goddess often appears in all roles simultaneously. Grandmother Spider is both creator and crone, who spins the world. Sedna is lover, mother, warrior, but, most of all, creator - all the sea creatures are born from her body. The 'Creator' myths often have a violent aspect, body parts are cut away, goddesses are destroyed, sky is separated from earth, light from darkness, water from earth, so that something can be born. While the myth of Tiamat, 'Primal Mother of the Deep', describes a cosmic battle between male and female power that ends with the goddess's own body becoming the Earth.

In the 'Virgin' myths the goddess often appears as a warrior, passionately choosing virginity, then fiercely defending it. Virgin goddesses often suffer rape and the loss of their precious virginity and then turn to righteous fury and warrior rage. Virgins Arianrhod, Changing Woman and Mary miraculously become mothers. Many of the virgin

goddesses are linked to the education of young girls, passing on the values and skills of the virgin.

In the 'Warrior' myths the goddess is born from anger that flashes out of an eye, turning into Durga or Sekhmet. Athena is born from Zeus's head then goes to war with him. Goddesses Lilith and Isis both steal the unknown magic name of the 'father' god and gain ultimate power. The power and rage of these goddesses often cannot be stopped, as they defend their people, their land, the planet and the universe.

In the 'Lover' myths the goddess becomes creator, her desire and satisfaction spreading fertility across the world. In the myths of Isis, Ishtar and Venus dried sticks burst into blossom, bodies become flowers and trees. As a lover the goddess often becomes a warrior too. Lovers lose their beloved and undertake impossible quests and battles to get them back, while desire turns to vengeance for Freyja and Aphrodite.

In the 'Mother' myths the goddess is often the life-giving Earth itself. The mother goddess can also be a virgin, or eternally young, possessing the secret of immortal life. The mother merges with warrior as Isis furiously protects her son, and Demeter's search for her daughter turns into a curse that punishes the world. The mother goddess, Cybele, transcends gender and all roles, and I have honoured Cybele with no pronouns.

The 'Crone' myths link old age with both birth and death, the crone is a mother and her birth canal becomes a tomb. Goddesses Asase Yaa and Hine-nui-te-pō are midwives who cradle the dying soul like a baby, so it can be born again.

The crone is also a virgin, giving birth to herself endlessly, as winter becomes spring. Both Mexican Cihuacóatl and Ashanti Asase Yaa are connected to snakes who shed their skin and give eternal life.

Look out for the sparks that flash between these myths! I still find it thrilling and mysterious that so many parallel images, motifs and narrative elements reappear again and again across different cultures, languages and continents. These ancient stories connect us all. You will meet some goddesses and pantheons more than once as the journey of the goddess continues through the collection. I hope this book is a resource that leads you to explore other versions, to find the bits of narrative I have left out, and seek out the many, many other goddess myths I have not told here.

In goddess myths across the world humans often make the same great mistake: they do not recognise the goddess, and they are punished for it, losing the goddess's blessing and gifts. So, keep alert, the Mighty Goddess is everywhere and in us all. May her images and narratives give us courage, inspiration, and hope.

CREATOR



Maiden of the Air, Mother of the Water

Finland

Forever has always existed. Darkness was always there. And the sea and sky were there too. There was no earth yet or light, just dark sky and rolling sea. In that time there was one girl, one girl all alone. She was Ilmater, Aires, Maiden of the Air. She lived by herself in the smooth, spacious fields of the air. The Wide-Wandering Goddess blew this way and that. For a long time, Aires played in the open meadows of the sky. Then she got bored, something was lacking. Ilmater was all alone and there was nothing for her to rest her feet on!

The Maiden of the Air swooped down and landed on the billows below. Ilmater floated on the empty sea, drifted on dark water without end. Then a blast of wind circled Ilmater. It was a hot wind, a lusty wind and it wrapped around her, pulled her close and squeezed her tight. The wind raised the sea into a foam and rocked the maiden. The wind kept rocking the girl. The wind blew through her, the wind blew into her, the wind blew Ilmater pregnant.

Maiden of the Air became Mother of the Water. She swam through the sea looking for land. She swam north, swam

south, swam east, swam west. She was looking for a place to rest, looking for somewhere to give birth. There was nothing but water, no land, no home, nowhere to give birth. Ilmater floated in the darkness carrying her baby for a long time, a very long time. She swam across the sea for seven hundred years, seven hundred years passed and nothing was born.

Then a little bird came. It fluttered about looking for land. The bird flew north, flew south, flew east, flew west. The bird was looking for a place to rest, looking for somewhere to build her nest. There was nothing but water, no land, no home, nowhere to lay her egg. The lonely mother knew just how the bird felt so she raised her knee from the sea. The little bird saw something rise up out of the waves and thought it was a grassy hillock. The bird swooped down and made her home on the knee of the Wide-Wandering Goddess. The bird pulled long strands of hair from Ilmater's head and wove them into a nest. And there she laid her egg. A golden egg!



The bird sat on the egg, brooded the egg, turned the egg, warmed the egg. The egg grew hot. Ilmater felt her knee warming, her skin smouldering, her blood boiling, her sinews scorching, her bones melting. She could not help herself, she twitched her knee and the egg fell into the sea. The egg cracked. The golden egg broke into bits, and the bits turned into beautiful things. The universe tumbled out. The egg shell became the land. The egg yolk glowed as the sun. The white of the egg gleamed palely as the moon. The spots on the egg became the clouds. The speckles on the egg became the stars. And so the world was made!

Ilmater pulled herself out of the sea onto dry land. At last Maiden of the Air had found a place to rest, Mother of the Water had a home. The Wide-Wandering Goddess could give birth. We are all the heirs of Ainess and that first egg.



This creation myth is from the Finnish epic The Kalevala. This poetic epic contains a series of spells, chants, myths, remedies and stories. It is sung as a duet between two singer-storytellers, one leads and the other follows repeating the last words and phrases. This repetition gives the performance an incantatory feeling.

Grandmother Spider

Hopi, Southwestern United States of America

Grandmother Spider thought, 'make something!' She was Thought Old Woman and whatever she thought came into being. She wove things out of nothing, pulling creation out of herself. She thought, 'Earth is empty, silent, still.' Grandmother Spider's thoughts fluttered. She thought of green. She scooped up mud with her slender fingers and spat on it. She mixed soil with saliva and formed her thoughts into the shapes of trees. She thought of orange and blue and shaped birds. She thought of brown and white and formed crawling creatures. She moulded her thoughts into existence and laid the shapes out on the muddy ground. The shapes were silent and still.

Grandmother Spider began to spin, twirling her pointed fingers so silvery threads appeared. She wove lacy capes from her threads, fleecy and soft as clouds. She covered each shape with a white cape, wrapping the shapes in her web of existence. Then she began to sing, murmuring the song of life. The shapes stirred, breathed, rustled, grew, croaked, growled, squealed, cooed, crawled, swam, ran, flew.

Grandmother Spider's thoughts flickered. She thought of hugging and holding hands, of laughter and song. She took

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