VIRGIN MOTHER GODDESSES OF ANTIQUITY

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Also by Marguerite Rigoglioso

The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece (Palgrave Macmillan 2009)
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Marguerite Rigoglioso
To my grandmother Elena
my mother Marie
and my aunt Elizabeth,
with admiration and thanks.
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NOTE ABOUT CITATION STYLE

For this book, *The Chicago Manual of Style’s* author-date system of documentation has been used so that the reader may discern the sources being referenced without having to flip constantly to the endnotes. This should be particularly helpful for classical citations. Where citations contain more than two authors or are otherwise visually cumbersome, however, they have been placed in the notes section.

INTRODUCTION

The goddesses have stories to tell. One such story—far too long ignored—is that, in their original, unadulterated form, they were parthenogenetic. The word *parthenogenesis* comes from the Greek *parthenos*, “virgin,” more or less, and *gignesthai*, “to be born.” It means, essentially, to be born of a virgin—that is, without the participation of a male. For a goddess to be “parthenogenetic” thus means that she stands as a primordial creatrix who requires no male partner to produce the cosmos, earth, life, matter, and even other gods out of her own essence. Plentiful evidence shows that in their earliest cults, before they were subsumed under patriarchal pantheons as the wives, sisters, and daughters of male gods, various female deities of the ancient Mediterranean world were indeed considered self-generating, virgin creatrixes. This is the first book to explore that evidence comprehensively.

Understanding goddesses of Graeco-Roman antiquity in this way allows us to resolve the seemingly confounding paradox, noted by various observers, of the simultaneous virginity and generativity attributed to certain deities in their earliest mythological and cultic material. How can a “virgin” create life? How can a creatrix be “virgin”? The information presented throughout this volume suggests that, rather than being contradictory, these two co-existent aspects form a complex of “virgin motherhood” in which goddesses procreated despite being consortless. It allows us to see the “virginity” of various goddesses as representing not sterility, but inviolable and sovereign creative power. In revealing some of our oldest divinities in the West to be Virgin Mothers, this book offers a fresh angle on the original nature and agency of these deities, thereby complementing and, in a sense, completing earlier feminist analyses of such goddesses.

*Virgin Mother Goddesses of Antiquity* also provides evidence to support progressive feminist theories that early ancient Mediterranean cults were based in a matriarchal ethos. Moreover, by exposing a little-explored theological development—the appropriation of parthenogenetic power on the part of the divine Masculine in religious stories—the book offers
new insights about the ferocity of the gender wars that took place under the cultural transition to patriarchy. It explores the ramifications of such theological appropriation for the priestesshoods dedicated to Virgin Mother goddesses, as well as for women and culture more broadly.

**The Larger Purpose of This Book**

Why is it important to argue that goddesses originally did not need male consorts? Is it to invalidate the Masculine principle? Denigrate male gods? Insult human men by making them feel unneeded and unwanted in the cosmic scheme?

The answer to all three questions is a firm “no.”

First, we must remember that, for those of us who have grown up under patriarchal monotheisms, the tables have long been reversed—some would argue for millennia. We have been raised under the strange specter of male creator gods who, we are told, produced the universe spontaneously. I say “strange,” because even some of the ancient myths hint that, like human males, Masculine deities in fact lacked the proper apparatus for creation. Although divine, they still had to locate a “womb” for the gestation of their issue. For the Egyptian gods Atum and Re, for example, it was their mouths, into which they ejaculated semen to create the cosmos. For Zeus, it was first his belly, into which he swallowed the pregnant Metis, and then his cranium, from which he “birthed” Athena. Then, we have the case of the famous male god who simply “created” the heavens and the earth, as though by means of a giant erector set.

In short, we have been programmed with stories of male parthenogenesis that defy or contradict the very processes of birth that are woven into the fabric of the universe as we understand it on an essential level. The resulting cognitive dissonance has, I would argue, created a gross confusion within our psyches. Deep down, we sense that something is wrong from the start. From there, the stories of the father gods proceed with strains of aggression and violence particularly directed toward the Feminine. As numerous scholars, from Jane Ellen Harrison to Mary Daly to Carol Christ to many others, have argued, this has led to an unhappy state of affairs for humanity.

So why is it important to show that the goddess doesn’t—or didn’t—need a man? As a male-honoring woman, I continue to ponder this question. What I have arrived at is this: It is necessary for us to turn the conceptual tables back to the idea of a virgin female creator deity, even if only for a moment, because in the process we may spark something evolutionary. By acknowledging the autonomous capacity of the Feminine, which the ancient stories indicate was primarily benevolent, not violent,
we restore and honor a critical piece of our psychology and our world that has gone missing. A point made by three contemporary Greek writers, Neoklis Georgopoulos, George Vagenakis, and Apostolos Pierris (2003) is particularly apt here. In discussing the notion of duality in the female-centered universe depicted in the myth of Demeter and Persephone, they note, “One pole in the pair of opposites enjoys a certain priority, in that it better expresses the original unity.” That is, in origin stories in which the goddess is a Virgin Mother, the “whole” is understood to be “Feminine,” even though the Masculine is included as an equal part. Or, as the contemporary Hindu mystic Ammachi says, “Is God a Man or a Woman? The answer to the question is Neither—God is That. But if you must give God a gender, God is more female than male, for he is contained in She” (in Canan 2004, 169).

Georgopoulos et al. echo that in a cosmos in which god is a Virgin Mother, “malehood emerges from the womb of Ur-femininity”—that is, from original, primordial femininity. It is important to note that in this condition the Masculine is not annihilated, but rather understood to be contained within the Feminine and to function as a cosmic emanation of it (as, in fact, biological reality reminds us each time a boy is born). Allowing ourselves to embrace the concept of a universe in which the Feminine, rather than the Masculine, is seen to “better express the original unity” may help us to right our relationships with one another and inspire us to adopt new models of relating that establish harmony and respect among the genders and between humans, Mother Earth, and all her creatures. Stimulating such thinking is my ultimate aim in restoring awareness about the original parthenogenetic nature of goddesses of Western antiquity.

**Outline of This Book**

I begin the study with the oldest divine entities described in Hesiodic and Orphic theogony—Chaos, Nyx/Night, and Ge/Gaia (Earth)—highlighting details of their autogenetic (self-creating) and parthenogenetic (self-generating) activities. I discern in their stories an older subtext in which such goddesses held positions of primacy in cult, which I argue corresponded with an earlier period of matriarchal social structure. I move to Athena, the goddess who most famously held the epithet Parthenos, “Virgin.” I offer a pioneering examination of her relationship to the Greek Metis and the Egyptian Neith to show that Athena was originally not the sterile, father-serving deity of classical Greece, but rather a parthenogenetic creatrix in her own right. My extended analysis of the mythology associated with Athena’s “mother” Metis highlights material
generally ignored or glossed over in the scholarly literature, particularly
details suggestive of Metis’s own parthenogenetic powers, as well as of
her masculinization as the god Phanes in Orphic theology. My analysis of
Neith’s autogenetic/parthenogenetic nature similarly serves as one of the
more comprehensive portraits of this Libyo-Egyptian goddess to date. In
short, it reveals the tremendous original power and cultic importance of
this goddess and exposes the arrogation of her self-generative capacities
to the male sphere in Egyptian theogony, and the corresponding shift
from matriarchy to patriarchy during the pharaonic era.

By detailing Athena’s identification with Neith, I not only restore
the lost “motherhood” of this Greek goddess in her earliest phase, but
also provide the most detailed argument to date attesting to her African
origins, a topic that has been sidestepped by all but a few scholars. This
work includes laying out important evidence attesting to the possible
historicity of the female warrior Amazons who venerated Neith/Athena
in North Africa. In my treatment of Athena’s “Grecization,” I further
expose the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy in Greece, which
most likely occurred during the Mycenean period, as the independent
goddess was made the “daughter” of the new universal creator god, the
male Zeus.

I then analyze a second Greek goddess who possessed the title *Parthenos*:
Artemis. I explore her mythology to argue that she, like Athena, origi-
nally was considered a parthenogenetic creator deity. In doing so, I resolve
the seeming paradox of Artemis’s dual role as a goddess who rejected het-
erosexual eroticism yet protected women’s birthing process. I also exam-
ine her connections with Athena/Neith, looking at her relationship as
the goddess of the Thermadon Amazons and their links, in turn, with
the Libyan Amazons. I introduce here consideration of the possible emer-
gence of the West Asian/Thermadon Amazons from the North African/
Libyan Amazons, thereby opening the door to future study about possible
links between the cults of Artemis and Athena.

I next turn to the third Greek goddess known as *Parthenos*, Hera, and
probe her myths to provide evidence that, before she was made the wife
of Zeus in Olympian mythology, she was considered a virgin creatrix,
as well. These include stories of her parthenogenetic birthing of Ares,
Hephaestus, and Typhon, and legends associating her with the apples of
the Hesperides, which, I argue, were symbols of virgin birth. My analysis
allows for a unique interpretation of the famous myth of the “Judgment
of Paris” as representing a theological moment in which the goddess Hera
“lost” her parthenogenetic power as the sought-after “apple” migrated
to the realm of Aphrodite, where it became forever fixed as a symbol
of heterosexual eroticism. Further, I offer an original argument that the
accounts of several of Heracles’ famous twelve labors, which involved what I propose were symbols with parthenogenetic associations (such as the hydra, lion, stag, and woman’s zônhê, or “belt”), represented a male theological attack on human female parthenogenetic ability. I also show that they quite possibly referred to an aggression against what I argue was an entire priestesshood dedicated to divine birth, a topic upon which I have elaborated in my first book, *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009).

Having explored the three goddesses known as *Parthenoi*, I consider two other Greek goddesses with parthenogenetic stories: Demeter, the goddess of the grain, and Persephone, her daughter and Queen of the Underworld. I provide evidence that their myth encodes a story of female self-replication. I further posit that this element served as the great “mystery” associated with the two goddesses’ oldest cult, one that found expression in the rituals dedicated to them, among them the Thesmophoria and the Eleusinian Mysteries. By applying various aspects of the theory that a cult of divine birth existed in ancient Greece, I am able to offer the most coherent reconstruction of these rites to date, one that explicates their purpose, meaning, and function in startling new ways.

I elucidate, in particular, that the Thesmophoria was originally a celebration of the parthenogenetic capacity of not only the two goddesses, but also their virgin priestesses. I argue that Persephone’s rape served as the cosmic paradigm for the interruption of women’s mysteries in this regard and corresponded with the transfer of divine birth practices in service of producing holy males, literally considered to be the sons of gods, who ushered in the patriarchal era. I detail evidence that the installation of this new phenomenon was the *raison d’etre* for the Eleusinian Mysteries but show how the rite nevertheless retained its roots in female-centered reality. By carefully sifting through mythological motifs and the testimony of ancient writers, I present the case that both male and female initiates of the Mysteries had to undergo an altered-state descent into the underworld that involved their experiencing the rape of Persephone through the ritual use of an artificial phallus. The experience, I show, forced initiates to confront the violence of the Masculine and resolve the “inner” gender war through a journey into paradox and, ultimately, wholeness.

The book concludes with a chapter by Angeleen Campra on the goddess Sophia as portrayed in Gnostic texts. Exploring the Valentinian creation story, the *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, and *On the Origin of the World*, Campra offers a feminist critique of the Gnostic framing of various parthenogenetic motifs in Sophia’s mythologem, including the goddess’s spontaneous generation of the demiurge Ialdabaoth. She argues that the
rendering of such female generativity as “transgressive” and the transferring of “legitimate” parthenogenetic capacity to the male creator god signaled a final theological moment in the demotion of the Virgin Mother as primal creatrix in the West.

Readers familiar with my first book, *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece*, will recognize some overlap between it and the present volume. In that book, I also discuss the parthenogenetic nature of Athena/Neith, Artemis, and Hera. However, the explorations in the present study are far more comprehensive. Moreover, the new material on Demeter, Persephone, and Sophia, goddesses who were given only a passing mention in the earlier work, fleshes out this book and makes a unique contribution to the literature on goddesses of antiquity.

**Who’s Missing?**

This book might have included chapters on the great mother goddess Cybele, worshipped in ancient Anatolia and West Asia, as well as Anat/Anath, popular in West Asia from Ugaritic times into the Roman era, but space would not permit it. It might also have discussed the beautiful Aphrodite, who, despite her late and circumscribed role as a goddess of sexuality, has roots as a Great Mother and even a virgin (see Harrison [1903] 1957, 307–14; Baring and Cashford 1991, 349–64). I do not include her here because the focus in this volume is on goddesses whose virginity and/or miraculous birth aspect was seen as primary to their identity in the ancient Mediterranean world and who were connected with priestesshoods that, as I argue in *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece*, attempted virgin birth. I have left Hestia, an avowed virgin in the Greek pantheon, for consideration in a forthcoming volume, *Miraculous Birth across the Ancient Mediterranean World*, where I will discuss her Roman manifestation as Vesta, the hearth goddess associated with the Vestal Virgins. In that book, I will also discuss Isis, another goddess with a divine birth story, as well as the most famous Virgin Mother of all, Mary.

**Critical Concepts from The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece**

Given that in this book I frequently refer to my previous volume, *The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece* (hereafter, *CDB*), it is important to review the main thesis of that study, as well as a few relevant concepts. Readers who do not subscribe to the theories I put forth in *CDB* will still find the present book useful as a text that illuminates our understanding
of various ancient goddesses. Familiarity with some of those earlier theoretical points, however, will afford a fuller appreciation of the nuances of the current work.

In CDB, I make the case that certain specialized priestesses in ancient Greece attempted to conceive children in various non-ordinary ways as an elevated form of spiritual practice. I show that the intended purpose of this practice was to give birth to a hero or heroine, gifted spiritual leader, or purported supernatural being—an individual who, it was believed, could not enter the human stream through “normal” sexual channels. This miraculously born individual was considered a special soul capable of benefiting humanity significantly in some way or of heralding or reinforcing particular value systems (sometimes highly spiritual, often patriarchal) for the human race.

I argue that attempting to produce offspring through various asexual and/or magical methods was thought to be a specialized sacerdotal activity for women and that those who believed that the phenomenon was real considered it the most advanced form of magico-spiritual achievement possible. Its intended purpose was to transport the human race to a new level of functioning and awareness through the influence of the incarnated individual. I also provide plentiful evidence that the purported birth of a specially conceived child was thought to result in the apotheosis, or literal divinization, of the priestess herself, and led to her corresponding veneration. I show that, similarly, the child of this conception was considered to be of a divine nature and likewise became the focus of worship.

A key piece of my argument is my contention that the cult of divine birth proceeded in stages as matriarchal social conditions gave way to patriarchy. In CDB, I present the case that in the earliest practice of the cult, under matriarchy, priestesses were focused on achieving parthenogenetic conception of female-only offspring—what I call “pure parthenogenesis.” What is important to the present book is the concept that these holy women attempted to mimic the parthenogenetic ability of goddesses they served. Thus, the idea of the Virgin Mother goddess goes hand in hand with that of the virgin birth priestess: the woman was the human representation of the Great Mother, who could conceive without the interaction of the male. I posit that this priestesshood initially focused on producing female avatars—that is, manifestations of the goddess on earth in human form. In a later stage, perhaps as male gods started to come to ascendancy, it began to produce male holy children as well. I return to this idea again and again throughout the book.

Another critical piece of the book is the argument that, as the parthenogenetic power of the goddesses was usurped or interrupted by forced
or coerced intercourse on the part of the male gods on the cosmic level, so the parthenogenetic power of the virgin priestesses was appropriated by male priesthoods and channeled into a different type of miraculous birth activity. This new activity involved the priestesses engaging in sexual relations with male gods in a trance state for the purpose of conceiving the gods’ progeny on the planet. Put another way, the “stealing” and denigrating of goddesses’ parthenogenetic capacity corresponded with the seizing of the divine birth priesthoods by male religious authorities, who pressured priestesses into attempting to give birth miraculously to male heroes as a means of fueling the patriarchal enterprise. I call this stage of the practice divine birth through *hieros gamos*, or “sacred union”—that union taking place between the human priestess and what was believed to be a disincarnate male entity. As mentioned briefly previously, in this present book I assert that Persephone’s rape by Zeus symbolized the transition of these priestesshoods from pure parthenogenesis to what I term divine birth through *hieros gamos* with male gods. The last stage of the taxonomy proposed in *CDB* is what I call *hieros gamos* by surrogate. This involved priestesses engaging in sexual unions with gods through the medium of human males, who served as receptacles for the spirits of particular deities during trance rituals. It is through this type of practice that ancient Egypt, for example, claimed to generate its pharaohs.

A critical point I make in *CDB* is that several terms used to describe girls and women in ancient Greek myths, legends, and historical texts originally were titles denoting “virgin priestess of divine birth.” One was *parthenos*, which later came to refer a girl, particularly an adolescent, who had not had sexual relations or was unmarried. (To avoid any ambiguity, I use “holy parthenos” to make it clear that I am referring to a priestess of virgin birth.) Another was *nymph*, which was the name for particular class of female deity usually associated with nature. Yet another was *heroine*, often used to describe a major figure or ancestress in Greek legend. I show how all of the difficulties and contradictions in the current definitions of such terms are resolved if we understand them to have been titles in the cult of divine birth. I refer to these terms liberally throughout this book and argue, in my discussion of Persephone in chapter 5, that another such title should be added to the list: *kore*.

The methodological approaches I use in *CDB* are also worth noting, as they are relevant to my analysis in this book, as well. I first and foremost analyze ancient materials from a feminist hermeneutical perspective. I critically read primary and secondary texts to discover where women and the Feminine have being ignored, misrepresented, diminished, or distorted so as to reconstruct meanings about female agency that are hidden
in such writings. In doing so, I attempt to draw a more accurate portrait of ancient goddesses and the priestesses who served them.

Moreover, I frequently explore literary artifacts through a neo-euhemeristic lens. That is, I look to mythology and legends as sources of important clues about historical events and ancient cultural and cultic practices. The term *neo-euhemerism* derives from the name of the fourth-century B.C.E. writer Euhemerus, who concluded that gods were merely ancestors who had been divinized because they brought some great benefit to humanity. I do not go so far as to reduce deities completely to human status, but rather posit that myths of gods “walking the earth” reflect beliefs that these beings could have (sometimes successive) human incarnations—namely, by being birthed through the bodies of specialized priestesses of virgin birth, as mentioned earlier. Indeed, the ancient Greeks themselves wrote of there being “several versions” of various divinities who entered the terrestrial plane, such as Dionysus, whom I discuss in more detail in this regard in chapter 5. Seen in this light, stories of immortals’ “interactions” with human beings in some cases may be read as accounts of the actions of the supposed avatars of such deities on earth. In other cases, they may be read as accounts of the actions of specific priests or priestesses, who, as I argue in CDB, were at times understood to assume the identity of the deities themselves. In general, I take myths seriously as a repository for relics or traces of genuine historical events and cultic practices.3

### The Meanings of Matriarchy

Critics of the theory that a matriarchal phase of human history preceded patriarchy will no doubt deride the fact that I am even considering such a concept as basis for this book. Haven’t we thoroughly trounced the notion and shown it to be archaeologically and anthropologically untenable or unprovable, after all? Haven’t we shown, in fact, that matriarchies never existed?4

I would argue, no.

Continued research on human societies, past and present, in the burgeoning field of matriarchal studies clearly indicates that the idea of ancient matriarchy should hardly be dismissed. Three master volumes by Göttner-Abendroth (1995, 1999, 2001) and an anthology entitled *Societies of Peace* (Goettner-Abendroth 2009) featuring contributions by numerous scholars, including some who were raised in contemporary matriarchal cultures, provide plentiful evidence that matriarchies have long persisted—and that they have deep roots in prehistory. Such study has also been cultivated through two world congresses on matriarchal...
studies, in 2003 in Luxembourg and 2005 in Austin, Texas, as well as related conferences on the gift economy and motherhood studies.\textsuperscript{5}

An important part of the work of matriarchal studies has involved defining \textit{matriarchy} appropriately, for misunderstandings about this term have continued to provoke acrimony in academic circles. The problem stems in part from the popular notion that a matriarchy is the flipside of a patriarchal dictatorship, the simple reverse of a male-oriented “power-over” culture in which women now dominate and abuse men. However, extensive historical and anthropological studies by Göttner-Abendroth (1987, 1995, 1999, 2000, 2001) and others\textsuperscript{6} have revealed that this has never been the case. The very persistence of the notion that matriarchy is simply the mirror reverse of patriarchy, has, in part, led to its obfuscation. According to Göttner-Abendroth (2001), classical matriarchy is a sophisticated system possessing specific traits at four levels: the economic, social, political, and cultural. It is worth detailing them briefly here, given the importance of the concept of matriarchy to the present volume.

At the economic level, a matriarchy is characterized by reciprocity. Women have the power of distribution of goods, and inheritance is passed down through the mother’s line. Yet the society is egalitarian and includes mechanisms for distributing wealth to prevent goods from being accumulated by special individuals or groups. At the social level, a matriarchy is matrilocal; people live in large clans, and kinship is acknowledged exclusively in the female line.

At the political level, decision making in a matriarchy is communal, consensual, and characterized by leadership that is shared in complementary fashion between the genders. Decisions begin in the clan house and are carried to the village level by delegates, either the oldest women of the clan or the brothers and sons they have chosen as representatives. At the cultural level, a matriarchy is characterized by religious traditions in which divinity is seen as imminent in the earth, nature, and the cosmos, and there is no separation between sacred and secular. Everyday tasks take on ritual meaning, the cycles of the seasons and other astronomical events are celebrated, and frequently the universe is conceived as a female, divine Mother.

In essence, a classical matriarchy is an egalitarian society in which the female principle is considered foundational and central. Thus, Peggy Reeves Sanday (1998, para. 2) has proposed the term \textit{matriarchy} itself be redefined as “mother origin,” since it derives from the Greek \textit{mêtêr} (mother) and \textit{archê}, which can mean “beginning,” “origin,” or “first principle.”

There is every reason to use this broader, more expansive understanding of “matriarchal” when referring to the matrifocal, matrilineal
social system that seems to have characterized the earliest substratum of Greek culture, according to prominent scholars of ancient Greek religion such as Jane Ellen Harrison, Karl Kerenyi, and Lewis Farnell. These classicists assert that this older system was indeed matriarchal. Before the Greeks as we know them existed, a series of invaders from the east and northeast successively overran the Greek peninsula throughout the second-millennium B.C.E. Such invasions culminated with the Indo-European Dorians, who entered Greece about 1100 B.C.E. and brought what became the language of Greece. They also brought a patriarchal social structure and religion. As Harrison ([1903] 1957, 261) notes, “In historical days in Greece, descent was for the most part traced through the father…. [P]rimitive goddesses reflect another condition of things, a relationship traced through the mother, the state of society known by the awkward term matriarchal.”

The idea that Greek mythology preserves hints of the older matriarchal substratum in which a Great Goddess was the primary deity prior to the installation of the Olympian pantheon, as codified by Hesiod and Homer, forms the basis of much twentieth century scholarly interpretation, and is the thread I pursue in this book. Guthrie (1967, 52–53), for example, writes, “the contrast between [the earlier] Aegean and [the later] Homeric cults was, generally speaking, a contrast between a religion of the soil, a worship of the fertility of the earth [Ge/Gaia] not unmixed with magical practices to secure its continuance, and a religion of the sky, whose chief god [Zeus] was the sender of thunder and lightning upon those who displeased him.”

Gimbutas (1982, 1989, 1991, 1999) has provided archaeological evidence to support the theory that an earlier civilization that was not only based on a Great Goddess, but also held women in high positions of cultural leadership in tandem with men, predated that of patriarchal civilization in Old Europe and surrounding regions. She dates the beginnings of the transition between the late fifth and early fourth millennia B.C.E. Following Gimbutas (1989, xx–xvi), I assume that, as Guthrie, Harrison, and others posited, patriarchal peoples invaded the Greek peninsula from the east or northeast throughout the second millennium B.C.E. to create the beginnings of Greek civilization. I further assume that these peoples encountered pre-existing hybrid societies in which matriarchal traits were still prominent. The second-millennium invasions would have intensified the patriarchal nature of such societies and systematically erased the vestiges of matriarchy.

As I show time and again in this book, as well as in CDB, there is plentiful evidence in the ancient legendary and historical texts to support the idea that matriarchy was forcibly dismantled in ancient Greece and beyond.
I will mention here just one major indicator that Greece emerged out of an earlier matriarchal culture: the motif of “resistance to marriage” that persisted in ancient Greek wedding rites into the Hellenistic period. Details along these lines include the custom of women trying to “rescue” the bride and being “roared at” by the doorkeeper of the house (Pollux *Onomasticon* 3.42), the burning of the axle of the wagon that carried the newly married woman to her house in Boeotia, and wedding songs expressing her resistance to marriage and her reluctance to lose her virginity or leave her mother (Catullus 62.21–22, 24, 39–48, 59; see Foley 1994, 81n8). These elements, I posit, express symbolic resistance to forced patrilocality, which would have reversed the condition under matriarchy of women staying on their own homestead. Such resistance was also encoded, I propose, in the shared common features of marriages and funerals, such as garlands, ritual ablutions, the cutting of hair, songs, a feast, and the emphasis on passage from the house (of the bride or deceased) to a particular destination (the bride’s new house or the deceased’s grave) (Foley 1994, 81n8). Equating marriage with death represents what I suggest was an embedded grieving over the massive cultural shift that had taken place to reduce women’s autonomy. Preserved in the mock dramatizations of old customs, such resistance and grief motifs served as a vague memory of an earlier, more female-empowered way of life.

**The Primordial Parthenogenetic Goddess**

Key to the present study are the plentiful signs in the archaeological, historical, and literary record that, concomitant with Greek social matriarchy, female deities enjoyed a far greater prominence and stature in pre-Greek culture than they did in Olympian religion. Again, what becomes apparent, as I explicate in the chapters that follow, is that nearly all such pre-Greek goddesses were understood to be both generative mothers and virgins simultaneously.

These goddesses were no doubt in the lineage of female creatrix deities who originated in the Paleolithic period of Old Europe, where the concept of a parthenogenetic goddess appears to be encoded in the archaeological record. As Gimbutas (1989, xix) writes, “Symbols and images cluster around the parthenogenetic (self-generating) Goddess and her basic functions as Giver of Life, Wielder of Death, and, not less importantly, as Regeneratrix, and around the Earth Mother, the Fertility Goddess young and old, rising and dying with plant life.” Following Gimbutas’s work, Reis (1991, 34–53) also discerns the conjunction of vulva and phallus appearing on some ancient figures as indicative of the European Paleolithic goddesses’s perceived parthenogenetic nature.
A handful of authors have already discerned the parthenogenetic power of ancient Mediterranean goddesses, but their treatment is sporadic and fleeting. Davis (1971, 33) may have been the first to characterize Greek goddesses as originally parthenogenetic in her passing mention that the Greek goddesses Metis and Gaia represented the original creative principle, which generated the world without a male partner. Spretnak (1978, 20) also briefly notes that pre-patriarchal Mediterranean goddesses were always understood to reproduce parthenogenetically. Looking to religious systems farther east, Ruether (1992, 18) gives a nod to the idea that the Babylonian creation story recounting the battle between the mother goddess Tiamat and the patriarchal hero Marduk depicts a “matriarchal” world in which “the earliest model of generation is parthenogenetic gestation.” A comprehensive analysis of the virgin motherhood of female deities is long overdue, however, and this volume is a beginning step in that direction.9

The conclusion that all of the goddesses discussed in this volume were originally Virgin Mothers leads us to the natural question: Were all goddesses originally one, as Gerhard (in Harrison [1903] 1957, 266n1), in pondering the Greek pantheon, posited more than a century and a half ago? A consideration of this possibility, although interesting, is beyond the scope of this book. I am content to present evidence for the parthenogenetic nature of multiple goddesses without trying to tether them in any kind of monotheistic sense. What I feel is more useful, and perhaps more reflective of regional variances in ancient times, is simply to show that each one was considered a universal creatrix in her own right before she was assigned a more circumscribed role under the patriarchal schema. Although one could argue that assigning a personified aspect to the great forces of life and nature is a modern, Western distortion that misconstrues how European ancestors conceived of the cosmos, I follow Harrison ([1903] 1957), who asserts that the earliest Greeks conceived of the generative forces as a “Great Mother of the dead as well as the living” (266), that each area had its own localized version of this Great Mother, and that from this great constellation the familiar goddesses of the Greek pantheon emerged (257–321). The European archaeological record, with its abundance of images of the sacred female in human and animal form (see, e.g., Gimbutas 1989), indeed suggests that the great cosmic forces were personified going back deep into Paleolithic times.10

With these theoretical and philosophical underpinnings established, let us proceed to the analysis of some of our ancient divine Virgin Mothers in the West.
CHAPTER 1

IN THE BEGINNING: CHAOS, NYX, AND GE/GAIA

In discussing the earliest divinities named in the Greek pantheon, most literature glosses over the fact that three of the most primordial—Chaos, Nyx, and Ge/Gaia—were parthenogenetic. The lack of commentary on the tremendous female power embedded in some of our oldest religious stories has rendered virgin motherhood essentially invisible from the start. In this chapter, I attend to the details of these stories and analyze their theological significance from a feminist perspective.

I show that Chaos, the deity representing the first state of the universe, parthenogenetically produced Erebus and Nyx. Nyx/Night similarly bore a number of offspring without male assistance, including the nymphs known as the Hesperides, and also, possibly, in an earlier iteration of Orphic theogony, the god Phanes. I provide textual evidence that Ge/Gaia was, like Chaos, considered to be an autogenetic (self-generated) being who bore offspring independently, including the Ourean mountains and their nymphs, and the Pontus sea. She is also credited in various traditions with having parthenogenetically produced all life on earth, including human beings. Moving to Orphic myth, I posit that Phanes’ identification as “male,” despite his bisexual nature, as well as his being assigned creator god status, may mark a theological moment in which parthenogenetic power was no longer considered the exclusive province of the female deity.

Chaos

I begin with Chaos, the first divine entity described in Hesiod’s Theogony (116–20). Chaos was one of four divinities who were spontaneously generated without source or cause, the others being Ge/Gaia, Tartarus,
and Eros. Thus these four divinities were first and foremost autogenetic beings—that is, they were self-generated, having been created out of themselves/the void/nothingness/the All.\textsuperscript{2} Chaos, whose name literally means “Opening” or “Gap,” was the void, the abyss, the infinite space and darkness, unformed matter. Caldwell (in Hesiod 1987, 35) notes that the etymology of the verb to which Chaos’s name is related, \textit{chaskó} (“open, yawn, gape”), “may suggest a womb [that] opens to bring forth life.” I would therefore argue that despite the fact that in Greek \textit{chaos} is a Masculine noun, in the divine entity of Chaos, the first state of the universe, we have an intimation of a specifically female goddess of the void. Chaos as “cosmic womb” continued to reproduce parthenogenetically, bearing the male Erebus (Darkness) and his sister, Nyx (Black Night). In the Hesiodic account, these children were fatherless; it was not until Nyx joined in love with Erebus that divine “sexual” reproduction began.

\textbf{Nyx/Night}

In Orphic theogony,\textsuperscript{3} Nyx/Night was the mother of Ge/Gaia and Uranus, that is, of Earth and Heaven (frag. 109 in Guthrie [1952] 1993, 138). Although scholars have generally interpreted the Orphic fragments to indicate that Nyx/Night conceived her children through sexual union with the god Phanes (e.g., Guthrie, 80; Cook 1914–40, 2.2: 1020), in fact such fragments do not specify this. The primary fragment in question (frag. 109 in Guthrie, 80) merely reads, “She in her turn bore Gaia and broad Ouranos [Uranus],” leaving the door open, in my view, to the possibility that she was understood to have done so parthenogenetically. In Hesiodic theogony, Nyx/Night unequivocally possessed parthenogenetic powers. She produced a great number of children parthenogenetically, despite the fact that her first progeny, Aether (Brightness) and Hemera (Day), were born of her sexual union with Erebus (Darkness) (Hesiod \textit{Theogony} 211–32). Nyx/Night’s parthenogenetically conceived children were personifications related to death, sleep, and other abstract qualities and conditions: Moros (Doom), Ker (Destiny), Thanatos (Death), Hypnos (Sleep), Oneiroi (Dreams), Momos (Blame), Oizys (Pain), Hesperides (Daughters of the Night), Moirai (Fates), Keres (Death Spirits), Nemesis (Retribution), Ape (Deceit), Philotes (Love), Geras (Old Age), and Eris (Discord). The Hesperides, the “nymps” who guarded the tree of golden apples that Ge/Gaia gave to the goddess Hera, become important in relation to the discussion about Hera’s own parthenogenetic nature in chapter 4.

In the Orphic theogony, it is clear that Nyx/Night initially held sway over all the gods (frag. 111 in Guthrie [1952] 1993, 138). She reared
Cronus, or Time (frag. 129 in Guthrie, 139), who, with Rhea/Demeter, subsequently became the father of Zeus (frags. 144, 145 in Guthrie, 139). In a cosmogony attributed to Epimenides of the seventh century B.C.E., it was Nyx/Night who produced the “wind-born” World Egg (Guthrie, 92–93). The fact that “wind-born” eggs were thought to be produced without male fertilization suggests that Nyx/Night was understood to have produced the World Egg parthenogenetically. Aristophanes (Birds 693ff.) presents a fragment of a presumably Orphic theogony that it was this egg from which Eros, creator of gods and men, was born (see Guthrie, 92–93). As Guthrie (95–96, 102–4) notes, the “Eros” of this fragment may be identified with the Orphic god Phanes (whose name means “Light”). Guthrie thus posits the existence of an older, pre-classical version of the Orphic theogony in which Nyx/Night was the progenitor of this principal Orphic deity. This contrasts with another, presumably later, Orphic fragment (frag. 98 in Guthrie, 138) that may imply that she was his daughter.

The extant Orphic fragments present a number of threads indicative of this earlier theogony. Fragment 86 (in Guthrie, 138), for example, states that when Phanes first emerged “none saw [him]…unless it were holy Night alone.” Nyx/Night would of necessity have preceded Phanes in order to be able to “see” the new god. Nyx/Night’s older, first-place status in the Orphic theogony is also indicated in the later-born god Zeus’s referring to her reverently as “Mother, highest of the gods” and “immortal” (frag. 164 in Guthrie, 139). Even Homer (Iliad 14.259) presents Nyx/Night as a formidable power who was superior to the gods. Moreover, that Nyx/Night (darkness) would precede Phanes (light) in the procession of cosmological developments corresponds with the order of events in other neighboring cosmogonies (see, e.g., Genesis 1:1–5).

I would further argue that one of Phanes’s epithets, Protogonos (Guthrie, 96), or “First Born,” indicates that (1) he was understood to have been born, as opposed to autogenetically brought into existence (again, implying the pre-existence of Nyx/Night as birth mother), and (2) he was the first such being born. Phanes was famously pictured as a hermaphroditic entity, uniting in himself the characteristics of both sexes (frag. 81 in Guthrie, 137). As such, he represented the first division into male and female. Hence Phanes’s other epithet “Eros,” the force of erotic attraction and love, perhaps demonstrates that Phanes represented a transition from parthenogenetic creation to sexual procreation in the order of the universe. Another important aspect of Phanes is that, although he was bisexual, he specifically took on a “male” identity. This stands in contrast to his probable mother Nyx/Night, who, although she was parthenogenetic, retained “female” status. I submit that Phanes’s characterization as