

Book Reviews

Marguerite Rigoglioso.
The Cult of Divine Birth in Ancient Greece.
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

The claim that “this is the first scholarly book to explore the theme of divine birth in ancient Greece in an in-depth and comprehensive fashion” (5) might sound rather bold, but can a feminist critic such as Marguerite Rigoglioso state otherwise?

Based on archaeological, historical and literary records, she describes prehistoric Mother goddesses as parthenogenetic creatrices who were worshipped in order to give birth to divine progeny. In various rituals, their priestesses probably achieved a similar conception themselves and often delivered offspring in the form of an oracle at various locations, for example at Delphi or Dodona, after inhaling divine emanations in the form of vapours through their vaginas. Another effective means was a trance induced by entheogens¹, which were widely used to invoke “profound non-ordinary states of consciousness” (16).

The phenomenon of such a birth is described as the consequence of “autoerotic desire.” “The process is one whereby the woman must become *as one* with the generative power of the universe [...], she must ‘become androgynous’” (26). This actually excludes *hieros gamos*, a sexual act between a godhead and a mortal that frequently appears in the later patriarchal mythology. For this reason, we might presume that the mythic figures of Theseus, Heracles or Perseus’s stature were not the by-products of rape but the offspring of a Mother Goddess.

The author reconstructs the history of divinities through various techniques of reading: feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, neo-euhemerism² and esotericism. These approaches help to see selected phenomena from various perspectives. In many regards, her conclusions are questionable and even outrageous. However, the main issue is not resolved straightforwardly: Is parthenogenetic birth possible on the human plane?

The phenomenon is not quite uncommon in the contemporary world. As a reminder, the author speaks about *dermoid cysts* or *benign teratomas*, which are “jumbled masses of embryonic tissue that contain teeth, bones, hair, skin, and other recognizable human features. These strange interior growths in women are indeed the result of the spontaneous parthenogenetic division of the egg within the ovary” (38). Furthermore, she gives examples of certain animal species which can reproduce in a similar fashion and give birth parthenogenetically. Among many others, for example, is the queen bee. “The queen bee produces males – drones – spontaneously out of her own body without the need for fertilization by sperm” (193). There is only one case when she concedes to copulate with male drones, and this is the union out of which worker bees are produced.

The author’s main research focuses on Athena, Artemis, Hera, and priestesses from Dodona and Delphi who belonged to “pre-Greek antiquity” (118). These pythons, she assumes, were mortals who later became apotheosised in various myths. The term *nymph*

or *heroine*, which was later conferred upon them, “was a posthumous cultic marker for the priestess who was believed to have borne the child of a god” (19).

Another interesting piece of knowledge M. Rigoglioso shares is the origin of the Olympic Games, which might have had divine birth origins as the priestesses of Hera took part in diverse kinds of foot races. “The memory of this may well be preserved in the ritual of the opening of the games. For Greek women, now ‘playing’ the role of the Elean priestesses, still light the sacred torch at the altar to Hera at Olympia in front of her temple during this event” (138).

The author is very apt at linking mythology with astrotheology, astrology, asterism and cult practices. For instance, she traces the connection of Dodona priestesses with doves and Pleiades. The priestesses were, in the author’s view, communicating with the star cluster. The stars were conferring upon them “divinity and immortality” (157). The received *power*, which they afterwards transmitted, has often been described as speaking in tongues. According to the critic, this sound was not so dissimilar to humming, and it symbolizes “an entry point to the knowledge of the cosmos by means of a specific sound frequency accessed on the subtle realms” (201).

Besides the aforementioned issues, M. Rigoglioso hints at the possibility of receiving goddess-like power and spiritualizing contemporary humanity. By doing this, she wants to establish the link with the tradition that was cut off its origins and almost obliterated by patriarchy. It is to be acknowledged that some findings are surprising, but early *unsettlement* disappears before the end of the work, which reads delightfully well. We can accept, at least for a while, that it is really “the first scholarly book to explore the theme of divine birth in ancient Greece in an in-depth and comprehensive fashion” and value its contribution to women studies and interpretation of Ancient Mythology generally.

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Notes

¹ The word *entheogen*, a neologism, was derived from the Ancient Greek words *entheos* (ἔνθεος) meaning “G-d within” and *genesthai* (γενέσθαι) “to generate.” We can translate it as a means that generates G-d or godly inspiration within a person. *Entheogens* commonly refer to psychotropic substances.

² In the author’s own words: “The term *neo-euhemerism* derives from the name of the fourth century B.C.E. writer Euhemerus, who, by investigating the actions and places of birth and burial of the divinities of popular religion, claimed the gods were simply deified human beings, great heroes who were revered because they had benefited mankind in some important way” (8).

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