

Attilio Mastrocinque

Bona Dea and the Cults of Roman Women

Alte Geschichte

Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 49

Franz Steiner Verlag

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Bona Dea and the Cults of Roman Women

POTSDAMER ALTERTUMSWISSENSCHAFTLICHE
BEITRÄGE (PAWB)

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Band 49

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über [<http://dnb.d-nb.de>](http://dnb.d-nb.de) abrufbar.

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Druck: Offsetdruck Bokor, Bad Tölz

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier.

Printed in Germany.

ISBN 978-3-515-10752-5 (Print)

ISBN 978-3-515-10754-9 (E-Book)

To my mother,
who wrote these verses:

Il vino della sposa
Profuma di mamme.
Assaporato in silenzio
a piccoli sorsi
inebria,
è il solo vero piacere della festa,
è la grazia della sposa che si dona,
il mistero
del suo fiore che inebria.

Iside Zecchini (1921–2011)

The wine of the bride
It smells of violets.
When savoured,
sipped silently,
it inebriates;
it is the only delight of the wedding,
it is the grace of the bride who gives
herself,
the mystery
of her flower which inebriates.

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I. PREFACE

This book was written in Heidelberg, at the Seminar für alte Geschichte und Epigraphik, thanks to the support of the Alexander-von-Humboldt-Stiftung. Some aspects of this work, concerning Omphale, were presented at the IX congresso della Società europea di storia delle religioni: *Religion in the History of European Culture* (Messina, 13-17 September 2009), within the Panel “Religious Experience in the Roman World”, organized by Jörg Rüpke and myself.¹

I thank my friends and colleagues of the University of Heidelberg, and especially Kai Trampedach. I thank the editor of the *Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge*, Jörg Rüpke for his suggestions and criticism. I am very grateful to Antonio Paolucci, director of the Vatican Museum, and to Kenneth Lapatin, curator of Antiquities in the Paul Getty Museum, for the permission of reproducing images of some monuments. I thank also Elsbeth Kneuper, with whom I have discussed some anthropological research, Antonio De Siena, who favoured my archaeological research in Lucania, Patricia Johnston, Simona Marchesini, and Celia Sperring, for some other suggestions.

Attilio Mastrocinque

1 “Dionysos and Religious Experiences in Bona Dea Rituals”, in: *Memory and Religious Experience in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. by N.Cusumano, V.Gasperini, A.Mastrocinque, J.Rüpke, *PawB* 45, Stuttgart 2013. Other aspects of Omphale and Bona Dea have been presented in: “Religione e politica: il caso di Bona Dea”, in: *Politiche religiose nel mondo antico e tardoantico. Poteri e indirizzi, forme di controllo, idee e prassi di tolleranza*, Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Florence, 24–26 settembre 2009, ed. by G.Cecconi and Ch.Gabrielli, Bari 1911, 165–172; and in: “Orfismo nel culto romano di Bona Dea (OF 584)”, in: *Tracing Orpheus: Studies of Orphic Fragments in Honour of Alberto Bernabé*, ed. by M.Herrero de Jáuregui et alii, Berlin - New York 2011, 259–268.

II. INTRODUCTION

Between the modern, “European” concept of marriage and that of the Romans there is a profound difference. With Christianization, an entire world of mythology and pagan rituals was forgotten. This world of fantasy, beliefs, education, rituals and social relations aimed to prepare girls and boys for marriage. It was the intricate world of initiations. For Christians, nothing is required in order to get married. Other monotheistic religions require very little. Modern society does not require any form of ritual before marriage. Even religious forms of marriage are scarcely preceded by other rituals, and no mythology surrounds this fundamental passage in human life. There are exceptions, of course, but the comparison with the extremely rich and multifaceted compound of Græco-Roman mythology and rituals makes it clear that our ancestors discarded a certain amount of social factors and simplified (or even made banal) the passage from pre-marital to marital status. The basic reason is that pagan gods were sexually active, whereas the monotheistic god is asexual; he can love, but without sex.

To Greeks and Romans it was obvious that Faunus, Mars or Hercules were looking for love and sex with women. It was also thought that several of the goddesses would look for human lovers. Eos-Aurora and Selene-Luna, for example, were famous for having human lovers. In asking how a god could have sex with a human being, the philosophers showed themselves to be much more sophisticated than the common people.¹ On the other hand, Jews (1st book of Enoch) and Christians (Justin’s 2nd apology)² merged the myth of the fallen angels (*Genesis* 6) with the Greek mythology. The pagan gods became thus angels who lusted after women and begot some wild children.

This work will deal with a specific theme, namely premarital relations between the bride and gods. Greek and Roman girls had contact with male gods, who gave them fertility and blessed their earthly union.³ Forms of first fruits offerings were made to the gods, and young women were offered as well. As we will see, ritual and imaginary forms of sexual union or love affairs with a god were thought to be necessary and beneficial for the bride.

We shall look at Rome first by focusing on one of the most important initiatory compounds: the Bona Dea, Faunus, and Bacchus rituals. Then we will select several cultic cycles in Latium, Etruria and other Italic areas, which show simi-

1 See for ex. Plut., *Numa* 4.

2 I *Enoch* 7-8 (Hellenistic age), and Iustin, II *Apol.* 5 (2nd century AD).

3 The philosophers of imperial age thought Dionysos as the lord of death and life; see L.Brisson, “Le corps dionysiaque”, in: *Orphée et l’Orphisme dans l’antiquité gréco-romaine*, Aldershot 1995, 488–9.

larities with Roman cults. We shall turn to the Greek world when necessary for a better knowledge of Roman religion.

Roman and Italic women were also accompanied by the gods in other important phases of their life, notably during pregnancy, childbirth and breast feeding. Sometimes the same gods who protected them during initiation into marital status were supposed to protect them during the subsequent phases of marriage. But the task of focusing on the initiation into marriage shall suffice for a single book.

The difference between us and the Ancients makes us deaf or blind even in face of clear information. We are naturally inclined to think of ancient mythology, rituals and iconography as mere fanciful creation. They were actually another way, a complex one, of dealing with transitions in human life.

A second factor which prevents our understanding is the secrecy that surrounded the ritual passage from virginity to adulthood. We find in the pagan authors allusions to rituals, and in the Christian authors other mentions for derogatory purposes. These rituals were for women only; male attendance was completely or almost completely⁴ excluded.

Moreover, the pagan writers were often troubled and uneasy when faced with the sexual themes at the core of such rituals and beliefs. They are, therefore, often reticent about embarrassing realities or else merely allude to them.

4 For several exceptions: Ovid., *Ars amat.* III.633–8: “When Bona Dea bars the eyes of men from her temple, except such as she bids come there herself”.