

CHAPTER 2

DAPHNE: FEMININE ESCAPE

In Greek mythology, Daphne was a mountain nymph pursued by Apollo. She rejected his advances and succeeded in her escape by changing into the laurel tree. Edith Hamilton, in her work Mythology, portrayed Daphne as "another of those independent love-and-marriage hating young huntresses." (1) This viewpoint is much too narrow and clearly deficient for it does not take into account why she avoids Apollo's amorous advances. Why would Daphne prefer transformation into a laurel tree than Apollo's embrace? There seems to be a deeper meaning to Daphne's flight. It is a myth which depicts an unfulfilled joining between woman and man or psychologically, an individuation process that stalls. It seems important, therefore, to understand why this myth apparently falls short. And perhaps even more important, to assess whether the myth has any relevancy for the present era.

Ovid, in his Metamorphoses, blames Cupid for preventing Apollo from joining with Daphne. (2) Cupid pierced Apollo with love's arrow but pierced Daphne with a love-spurning arrow. Behind Cupid's action is an annoyance with Apollo who boasts that he killed Python, guardian of the oracle at Delphi. Once each arrow reached its mark, the symbolic sacred marriage or psyche-enhancing merger became impossible unless, somehow, the couple surmounts the tension. Such is the way of individuation: obstacles are mastered and greater integration ensues. In this myth, however, there is no overcoming or desire on Daphne's part to overcome the tension.

Her choice is clear; she flees from Apollo but eventually is overtaken. She then cries out for assistance. According to Ovid, Daphne cried out to her father, Peneus, a river god, for assistance and he changed Daphne into a laurel tree. Robert Graves, using Apollodorus and Plutarch for sources, records that Daphne cried out to Mother Earth who spirited Daphne to Crete and left a laurel tree in her place. (3) In the Greek language, Daphne signifies "laurel" which, in turn, is associated with Apollo. After Daphne was transformed into the laurel tree, Apollo moaned, "O fairest of maidens, you are lost to me, but at least you shall be my tree. With your leaves my victors shall wreath their brows. You shall have your part in all my triumphs." (4)

To begin the analysis of this intriguing myth, it may well serve our purpose to examine psychologically the meaning found in Apollo's killing of Python. In the pre-Hellenic era, Delphi was under the rule of the earth-goddess and her priestesses presided there. Kerényi states that the goddess Gaia founded the oracle at Delphi. He also notes that the root 'delph' signifies belly or uterus. (5) Python was the mate of Delphyne and guarded the oracle at Delphi. The destruction of the serpent, Python, and occupation of Delphi by Apollo, symbolically document, on the one hand, the overthrow of the matriarchal earth-religion and on the other hand, the ushering in of patriarchal rule. The sun-god Apollo casts aside the earth-serpent-goddess. No wonder that Cupid, child of the Great Mother, Aphrodite, took offense and sought to protect Daphne, daughter of the earth, and

thwart Apollo's advances. In short, our myth has for its undercurrent themes the ascendance of the sky-religion over the religion of the earth, and the struggle of the masculine to overcome (and subsequently, suppress) the feminine.

Graves comments that Daphne was a priestess of Mother Earth. In the pre-Hellenic period, the goddess Daphne ('bloody one'), was "worshipped by a college of orgiastic laurel-chewing Maenads." (6) According to Ovid, Daphne was a follower of Diana (Artemis) and virgin (that is, belonging to no man). Her father, Peneus a river-god, wants Daphne to marry and bear children. Daphne objects. But when Apollo pursues her, Peneus proved true to his primal ties to the Great Mother and enables Daphne to escape in Mother Earth. Daphne's rejection of marriage and of Apollo suggests feminine resistance to the new sky-religion's rule.

Apollo, Zeus' son, consolidated the inroads which the sky-religion made in Greece. He played an important part in destroying the religion of the earth. Graves suggests that Apollo's name is derived from 'apollunai' which means 'destroy'. He killed Python, seized Delphi, and set his own Pythoness to give voice to the oracles. (Apollo had cause for killing Python for the latter, on Hera's command, sought to destroy Apollo's mother, Leto. And Hera acted in such a hostile manner because she wanted to thwart Zeus's mating with Leto.)

Besides killing Python, Apollo opposed other aspects of the Great Goddess. In one account, Apollo coaxed Pan to disclose the secrets of prophecy and later, triumphed over Pan in a music contest. (7) Pan, the primal servant of Mother Earth associated with the creative arts and primitive wisdom of the goddess, in short, was displaced by Apollo. The root of Apollo's name does not only relate to 'destroyer', but also to 'apple-man' (he who ate the apple) (8) In this latter guise, Apollo links with the apple of knowledge and with the principle of "know thyself." He tamed the muses' former wildness (connected to the orgiastic cults of the Goddess) and promoted the path of "nothing in excess." In the classic period of Greek civilization, Apollo ruled the fields of music, poetry, mathematics, medicine and science. (9) He was later worshipped, particularly in the Roman religion, as the personification of the sun and masculine creative spirit.

Graves noted that Apollo's priests "usurped the functions of the [sacrificed] sacred king who, legitimately and ceremonially, had always killed the predecessor." (10) Symbolically, Apollo incarnates the king-consort who rebels against the practice of having to kill his predecessor and the earlier practice of the consort being sacrificed. From the matriarchal viewpoint, Apollo is destroyer, but from the patriarchal perspective, he tames the volatile and excessive aspects of the feminine and thereby frees the masculine from its former entanglement in the primal web of feminine fertility. Apollo represents the archetypal masculine urge that strives to free itself from embeddedness in the Mother, and from the role of sacred king-consort of the goddess who is annually killed in accord with fertility rites. (11)

Once Apollo triumphed, the sacred king-consort no longer was victim. Rather, youths, animals, or females were substituted as victims. One may speculate that after this triumph, Apollo became identified with the sacred king who ate the apple (of knowledge). Kerényi noted that the creative spirit of Apollo was in opposition to the creative spirit of nature. Apollo's cult was

"supernatural-istic" and worshipped in a manner separate from the life of nature. (12) By the time he abandoned his destroyer task and became associated with the higher solar creative principle, the former earth-religion had been vanquished and the feminine, in turn, became vulnerable to masculine excesses. The creative spirit of the feminine had escaped in nature. No joining was possible in the one-sided reign of the solar spirit.

Although Apollo never was able to possess Daphne, he still "won" Daphne by appropriating the laurel. Rather than allow it to be chewed by Maenads in an orgiastic and probably prophetic manner, the laurel henceforth became associated with masculine victory. Whether the competition was armed or peaceful, the victor received the laurel wreath. Interestingly, Apollo allows the Pythoness at Delphi to chew the laurel. This linkage between the "voice" of the oracle (Pythoness) and laurel chewing indicates that a connection exists between the laurel and prophecy. Apparently, its leaves contain a substance which inspire and apparently only a few knew of this secret. De Vries noted that the laurel leaf was used as an intoxicant to induce poetry. (13) The exploitation of the laurel to crown and glorify masculine "ramming," in effect, suppressed the feminine secrets of prophecy. No wonder so little prophecy exists in the patriarchal solar system.

Daphne, as a devotee of the ancient ways of the Great Goddess, would have preferred to dwell in the forest and remain loyal to the earth religion while the sky-religion ruled. Since she was not free to do so, Daphne escaped to the primitive roots of the Great Goddess and psychologically, cut herself off from human intercourse. Collectively, this means that the feminine spirit is only partly present in the community; the deep recesses of her soul hide in the folds of Mother Earth. Daphne experienced what women often have felt: the absence of space to be free outside of masculine dominance. Many contemporary women await, in the metaphoric forest, a more congenial era before wholeheartedly re-emerging in society, and many wait in seething rage toward the masculine. Daphne sought the only "liberating" act left to her: total rejection of the sky-religion and total immersion in Mother Earth. No wonder that even back in the Middle ages the answer to the riddle, "What do women want most?" was "sovereignty."

If Daphne escaped masculine excesses, Mother Earth's daughters, who did not escape, suffered from the cruelties of the sky-religion as witnessed in the Christian religion that destroyed feminine wisdom. The wise women (that is, Mid-wives, Witches and Hags/Wise Women) were burn and slaughtered. Feminine fertility was bound to reproduction and the feminine spirit succumbed to a masculine yoke. Daphne's rejection of this fate is the symbol, par excellence, of resistance to masculine dominance. The myth, in short, represents not only feminine resistance to the emergence of the sky-religion that destroys the earth-religion, but more important, resistance to its excesses. An engaging novel, The Mists of Avalon, (14) concerns the Druid priestess, Morgaine, who resigns herself to the triumph of the Christian sky-religion. In the end, she disappears with the isle of Avalon into the mist to await a more propitious day for re-emergence.

In conclusion, the myth of Daphne holds that there can be no joining, no sacred bonding between man and woman so long as masculine dominance and excesses continue; true individuation within the framework of a one-sided patriarchal order becomes more difficult. The

reason for Cupid's actions holds the key for understanding the psychological and cultural significance of the myth. Apollo's boasting of his mighty arrows angered Cupid. Had Apollo not boasted but gone on with his task to extricate the masculine from an imperiled psychological situation, symbolized by the status of consort and subsequent sacrifice, Cupid might not have opposed Apollo's joining with Daphne.

The feminine spirit itself might have recognized the need for a change in the matriarchal oriented consciousness, and created a climate to foster the masculine spirit to express itself in a Sky-Father format but in harmony with Mother Earth. Such did not occur and thus it matters little whether or not the earth-religion was or was not open to change, or whether the emerging sky-religion wanted only parity or superiority. In the end, Apollo introduced the era of masculine dominance and excesses, and humanity missed the chance to create balance. Mother Earth, therefore, protected Daphne but in doing so, solidified the split: Daphne became rooted to the earth and Apollo identified with the sun (which, in being too solar, barred clear vision of solar-masculine excesses).

Contemporary humanity continues to suffer from Apollo's boasting that he killed Python, and from Daphne's escape. The soul of the feminine turned away from the main-stream of humanity and we have paid a great penalty first, in that feminine nurturing has not been able to operate freely and prevent masculine excesses, to wit, the masculine madness of nuclear weaponry and the technological advances that have cause an ecological nightmare. Second, great discord exists between the masculine and the feminine precluding their psychological joining which in turn, prevents the process of individuation from breaking out of a collective thwarted state. To end this predicament, it may be necessary for Apollo to say "sorry" for causing Python's death. It might also help if Apollo's sons were to say "sorry", for subjugating the feminine and her oracular prowess, free the laurel from signifying "triumph", and return it to Daphne and her daughters so that the clarity of prophecy can again be heard.

Without feminine nurturing and clarity, humanity functions as though it is indeed partly blind. As we await Daphne's return, there already are hints that the creative feminine is re-emerging. A riveting work, The Great Cosmic Mother: Rediscovering the Religion of the Earth, (15) records how arduous this re-emerging process is. The prime issue is not re-emergence itself, but that the creative feminine spirit re-emerge with its rage and former excesses integrated. Similarly, the excesses of the masculine creative spirit should be checked and tamed if Daphne is ever to embrace Apollo. The sons of Apollo need to heed his Delphic maxim "Know Thyself" if amiable and sustainable male and female joining is to occur.

Notes

1. Hamilton, Edith. MYTHOLOGY. New York: Mentor Books, 1969; p. 114.
2. Ovid, METAMORPHOSES. New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1976.
3. Graves, Robert. THE GREEK MYTHS. Vol. 1. London: Penguin Books, 1960, p. 78.
4. Hamilton, op. cit., p. 115.
5. Kerényi, Karl. APOLLO. Dallas: Spring Publications, 1983; p. 42.
6. Graves, op. cit., p. 81.
7. Ibid., p. 77.
8. Ibid., p. 57.
9. Ibid., p. 82.
10. Ibid., p. 81.
11. Graves comments that Leucippus ('white horse'), the sacred king of a horse cult, was "annually torn in pieces by the wild women, who bathed after his murder to purify themselves." Leucippus also was a rival suitor of Daphne. He disguised himself as a girl in order to participate in Daphne's mountain revels. Apollo advised the mountain nymphs to bathe naked to insure that all present were female. Leucippus was discovered and torn to pieces. Ibid., p. 82.
12. Kerényi, op. cit., p. 54.
13. De Vries, Ad. DICTIONARY OF SYMBOLS AND IMAGERY. Amsterdam: N. Holland Publishing, 1976; p. 292.
14. See Bradley, Mary. THE MISTS OF AVALON. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982.
15. See Sjo, M. and B. Mor. THE GREAT COSMIC MOTHER: REDISCOVERY OF THE RELIGION OF THE EARTH. New York: Harper & Row, 1987.