HERA: GODDESS AND WIFE

Louise Cowan

Hera is the most difficult of all the Olympians to comprehend. Homer depicts her as moved by such savage wrath that her consort Zeus must from time to time rebuke her. "Dear lady," he protests in Book IV.

"what can be all the great evils done to you
by Priam and the sons of Priam, that you are thus furious
forever to bring down the strong-founded city of Ilion?
If you could walk through the gates and through the towering ramparts
and eat Priam and the children of Priam raw, and the other Trojans, then, then only might you glut at last your anger.

Something monstrous seems to be the outcome of Hera's vengeful ire. Hesiod too portrays this queen-goddess as uncomfortably close to the monstrous; she it is who nursed the Lernaean Hydra and the Nemean lion, both of whom Heracles has to confront in his ordeals. The most appalling account of her wrath, however, is given in the Homeric hymn to Apollo, in which it is said that she gives birth to the monster Typhaon out of her rage against her husband. Furious at his having borne from his own head Athena, daughter of Metis, Hera goes to the realm of the Titans, strikes the earth with her hand and prays for a child of her own, stronger than Zeus. Thus, the story goes.
In time,

she bore dreadful and baneful Typhaon, a scourge to mortals,
whose aspect resembled neither god's nor man's.
Forthwith cow-eyed, mighty Hera took him and, piling evil
upon evil, she commended him to the care of the she-dragon.

Hera's mysterious and ungovernable wrath indicates a dark force that places the goddess in
a different category from the other Olympian deities. She knows her interior worth as queen and
she is familiar with the unlit regions of darkness as well as light. The Orphic hymn addressed to
her views this somberness as something gracious and beneficent:

You are ensconced in darksome hollows and airy is your form,
O Hera, queen of all the blessed, consort of Zeus.
You send soft breezes . . . such as nourish the soul,
. . . you nurture the winds and give birth to all.
Without you there is neither life nor growth:
and, mixed as you are in the air we venerate, you partake of all,
and of all you are queen and mistress.

Hera is here conceived of as a benevolent mother goddess and "queen of all the blessed." She is
present in the very air we breathe, a kind of life-spirit of nature and, as well, a ruling deity.
"queen and mistress" of all.

Two sets of myths are thus associated with her—those stemming from her cultic worship as
earth goddess and the others from stories recounted by later collectors such as Hesiod, in which she
is named in the divine genealogy as daughter to Kronos and Rhea and sister to Zeus.

There is no doubt that Hera was originally a queen in her own right, the primeval great
goddess of the Minoan people, whose way of life was matriarchal. Her first cults were probably at
Argos, her temples at Samos and Olympia, and, as Jane Harrison tells us, her status as queen is
marked in all her archaic representations. She became the tutelary priestess of heroes: her name is
the feminine form of hero; and heroes — the spirits of dead warriors — were consecrated to her.
But even early traces of the Lady (the literal signification of her name) show her to be not so much the primal earth mother as an incarnation of that power, regal and independent, governing all things and retaining her connection with earth. Fulfilling the nature of woman, she is, as Bachofen has written of the feminine in general. "unable to cast off materiality, [while] the man becomes wholly removed from it and rises to the incorporeality of the sunlight."

One account has it that Zeus, the intruding young sky-god, desiring her, caused a storm to break out on Mt. Thornax, where, taking the form of a cuckoo, he flew wet and bedraggled to her breast for comfort. Out of pity, Hera tenderly received him and held him close to her bosom, where he soon resumed his true shape and characteristic demeanor. Hera insisted upon marriage to preserve her honor, and so resulted the union of earth goddess and sky god in the sacred marriage, the hieros gamos. When we encounter Hera among the Olympians, she has assumed a different mythic identity. She still possesses her native authority, but has allied herself with another majestic divinity -- her brother Zeus, who, having taken over from his father Kronos, brings intellect to the governance of the cosmos. Kerenyi speaks of the pair as "the archetypal couple whose two components belong to one another like the halves of a unity." But Hera retains her essential character in the union: each year she regains her virginity by bathing in the spring at Kanathos -- a ritual that in permitting her to bestow herself afresh in marriage is a sign of her independence as well as her freedom. She does not belong to Zeus, but gives herself to him anew each year in a free act.

Thus, by the time we really come to know Hera, in Homer's Iliad, she has the identity of both sets of myths; but she has in effect relinquished some of her cultic status to be part of a higher society: the family of gods on Mt. Olympus. With a kind of composite identity, both sister and
spouse, Hera is the wedded consort of the father God, Zeus -- but, as Kerenyi points out, without herself really being the mother goddess. In fact, her status as mother is somewhat dubious: Hephaestus, Ares, and Hebe are her children, the first two considered in some sources to be her own alone, along with the monstrous Typhaon, produced parthenogenetically. Kerenyi advances the idea that "the patriarchal triangle was not properly completed in the Olympian divine family. . . . What is missing is the "son" who might unite this couple in a patriarchal sense as a worthy first-born."

Nevertheless, Hera is recognized as the queen of Olympus. In his hymn to her, Homer speaks of her golden throne and names her immortal queen, the most eminent of figures, the sister, "even the wife, of Zeus thunderer." Her basic equality to Zeus is acknowledged: "All the gods of Olympus revere her. They honor her even equal to Zeus, the lover of lightning."

The Hera of the cult had her own compelling beauty, manifested, as Pausanias tells us, in three stages of life, to conform with the phases of the moon: Hera Parthenos (the virgin); Hera Teleia (Hera Fulfilled, or Hera Perfected -- the wife); and Hera Chera (Hera separated from the husband). This scenario gives us a clue to Hera's autonomy: she is protagonist in her own drama, having her own quest for meaning. In her story, Hera does not exist for the male but the male for Hera.

Her status in The Iliad, however, seems somewhat paradoxical and even dubious. Though she is recognized as the Queen of Heaven and sits on her golden throne, she is by and large portrayed as simply one of the contending gods who take sides in the battles between the Achaians and the Trojans. Homer describes her as "white-armed," a tribute to her nobility, and "ox-eyed," a remnant of her connection with the sacred cow ceremonies at Euboeia and Boeotia; she is
recognized as possessing great beauty, though she does not flaunt it and -- except in one instance-- seems unaware of it. This one instance is the fateful story of the golden apples, in which Paris, the Trojan prince, chooses not Hera but Aphrodite as the most beautiful among goddesses. Both Aphrodite and the other contender, Athena, are inferior to Hera in station; neither has been a goddess-queen; neither is sister and consort to Zeus. It is this affront to her honor that Hera cannot forgive. Her grudge against the Trojans and their city is one of the angers fuelling the Trojan War. Like Achilles, who also cannot overlook a slight to his honor, Hera exhibits a *cholos*, a wrath, that, though excessive, has its own beauty and nobility.

Zeus seems somewhat afraid of Hera and apparently controls her only by threats and, at least once, outright force. She accepts his authority; and his numerous infidelities excite her vengeance not so much against him as his sexual partners. It is her rank and station as queen and goddess that are insulted, not her sexual standing. Yet the galling effect of Zeus' infidelities remain: in her outrage Hera periodically flees to the ends of the earth to seek solitude. One of the ways in which she differs from her husband stems from her having been one of the children swallowed by Cronos, an indignity to which Zeus was not subjected. She therefore has a knowledge of the shadowy, cavernous underworld (not the chthonic region) where everything is hidden away, lost and forsaken. It is to this realm that she descends when her sense of insult proves insufferable. And it is in one of these times of seclusion that she gives birth to the monster Typhaon out of her jealousy and resentment against Metis. Hera is convinced that she should be supreme among women on all counts and is offended and vengeful if she is not given her due.

Leader of the opposition on Olympus, she is cohort of Athena on the battle-field, sponsor of
the Achaians, hater of the Trojans, maternal confederate to Hephaistos, bargainer with all the gods, jealous wife, conniving rebel, in general -- or so Zeus himself seems to think -- troublemaker.

(Zeus once hung her by her wrists in the sky, with golden anvils at either ankle.) She has been blamed by readers for centuries for her destructive anger, her jealousy, and her deceitfulness. But the worst charge of all against her is the one made by many scholars to the effect that she has relinquished her own authority and depends only on her consort for identity. Even the great mythologist Kerenyi writes, "Zeus does not need the marriage, but Hera does." What Hera needs, on the contrary, I would maintain, is an unbiased reading, avoiding the stereotypes that sometimes obscure her character.

What we have to do in order to come to terms with Hera is, as with any of the gods and goddesses: to see the form, in Hans Urs van Balthasar's phrase. For the clues provided by artifacts, fables, remnants of myths, comments by scholiasts, and, above all, the magnificent poems of Homer and Virgil must all be put together -- and then surmounted. The spirit of a thing cannot be apprehended by the process of accumulating facts; one needs to sense the intention (the telos) behind the evidence. Hence, a chief clue to the interpretation of Hera will come from Homer; for it is he who has given poetic form to the Olympian gods; and though his focus is not on Hera, one can nevertheless discern the form of Hera's mission from the shape Homer has given to his material.

For the other, hidden side of Hera's story is that, in order to be where she is, she has made an affirmation -- Fiat mihi: "Be it done to me." And, though she rebels at times against Zeus and opposes him frequently, she never rebels against the marriage. Her fiat was spoken, of course, not to Zeus, but to that power over both which the Greeks called Destiny, or Fate. But there is
another force connected with Fate -- Charis, grace -- with which Hera works, a force that invisibly yet unmistakably reanimates events and persons and brings them to a different conclusion. Hera’s fury is connected with her divinity. She has her own authority and identity, then, not so much as an earth mother image as a prefigurement of what the feminine is in its own right: not what woman was in the past but what she is to be.

Despite what one first thinks of her -- that as wife she has no identity of her own and that she behaves selfishly and ignominiously -- one must admit on closer examination that Hera follows deeper purposes and not just her own whims. She is in touch with something beyond the immediately visible and therefore has her own mind about things, pursuing her own prerogatives. And though she has bound herself in wedlock, she is not dependent in her own mind upon a masculine world for her identity. She is complete in herself: enough to stand as an equal to almighty Zeus. Her espousal to him is both a conjugal and a sibling union, this latter establishing her equality.

Far less than the other Olympian goddesses, in fact, does she define herself in terms of the male. Athena, for instance, might be considered, as Rene Malamud has pointed out, a manifestation of the masculine anima image. And, one must admit, that great tutelary goddess is born of the masculine, chooses to be like the masculine, and does indeed excel in the masculine world -- in deeds of martial valor and practical wisdom. Other feminine divinities, too, could be construed as anima images, arising from the depths of the masculine soul. The winsome Aphrodite relies on the pull of the erotic, the male desire for an opposite of charm and delight. Artemis exercises a strange attraction on the masculine, though she flees it, shuns it, fears it. Demeter defines herself as "other," substituting her own female cycle of fertility for any divine far-off event
toward which the universe might tend.

Unlike these goddesses, Hera confronts the masculine in her own person, stands before its manifestation as herself, as the fully formed, complementary aspect of existence that does not depend on the male to confer value. Hera is the female in all its power, with political authority as well as closeness to the earth and nature. The world with which she contends is no longer a region, but the cosmos itself. She refuses to rule over a mere portion of it. A queen over all of being, she sits on a golden throne, the consort of Zeus, and cannot in any sense be construed as an anima of the masculine psyche. Hence she is the only feminine aspect of the psyche that can make a successful marriage. She becomes, therefore, the representative goddess for anyone seriously attempting the married life.

Why do we not like her, then? First of all, precisely because she is not a projected exemplary image. She does not fit our ideas of what the model wife should be. And second, we feel distanced from her because she is not a person of relationships. She is in herself -- and this independence is always annoying to gods and men. But can one say that she is not a person of relationships if she defines herself in marriage? So extreme a statement can be made only in light of the proposition that marriage is not a relationship; marriage is a new entity which (ideally) can take place only between two beings who are in themselves whole -- and who will bring that wholeness fully to bear in a coniunctio, a union. When such a conjunction occurs, it initiates what Eric Voegelin has called "a leap in being": a new cosmos, a new epoch, a new polis, or a new metaphysical entity.

Hera, then, represents--she is--that other side of being which can hardly even be
acknowledged in the mythological fables because it is invisible and concealed under the obvious path of the logos, appearing either as obstacle or as ineffectual protestation. She is sophia, the feminine portion of the soul and of the cosmos, which, hidden away in darkness, unintelligible and sometimes furious, ultimately manifests itself quite discernibly by modifying, softening, delaying, altering the course of destiny. When she withdraws from Zeus, staying away from him for a year while she is pregnant with the monstrous Typhaon, we are told

She never came to the bed of contriving Zeus nor pondered for him sagacious counsels sitting as before, on her elaborate chair but staying in temples where many pray . . .

Her role in the marriage has been to provide "sagacious counsels." She is not simply, as Zabriskie has written, "restless matriarch in a patriarchal world." Hera is perfectly at home in her gender. As opposed to the modern concept of the second sex, gender, says Ivan Illych, "bespeaks a complementarity that is enigmatic and asymmetrical. Only metaphor can reach for it." The metaphor here is marriage, in which the complementarity, though asymmetrical, is eminently equitable. Hera has entered into a permanent partnership with the masculine as an equal, as consort and cohort, not primarily for amorous delight, though that perquisite no doubt follows (their wedding night was said to be three hundred years long) but for the completion of being and the co-creation of history.

If the gods are not only forces in the soul, but archetypes of being itself -- being that is prolix, polymorphous, chaotic, contradictory, always in motion -- then the quality that Hera represents is wifehood. And wifehood has had a quite negative image in the West for some centuries -- perhaps from the very beginning. What gives wivery such a bad press? Is it because it has been portrayed in story and legend so frequently as little-minded, jealous, possessive, trivial,
parasitical, lacking in courage, fundamentally dishonest and conniving?

Perhaps we could maintain that wifehood has been portrayed in such a way because the tellers of the tales are masculine, those chanters of the *epos* by which our culture since the Greeks has known its destiny. And we ourselves as readers are masculine in our expectations. (The spinners of other sorts of tales are feminine -- the stories that tell of our old griefs and old joys and remind us of our ties to earth -- folk tales, comedies, and lyrics). But the epic tale-telling is in itself logophallic; and the epic (a new kind of reality, not just a new art form, says Suzanne Langer) came into being with Zeus' reign -- with the beginning of history. In this essentially masculine tale, Hera, the troublesome other half, Hera is perceived as impediment to the ongoing of "the plan" and hence portrayed in a dubious, largely ignominious and even ludicrous light. Judged from the point of view of the story, its masculine perspective, Hera is unruly, possessive, a troublemaker, shrewish, vengeful. But this judgment of her actions is no doubt influenced by the masculine desire (the poet's and ours) to see action proceed in a straight line, observing the clear relationship between cause and effect.

Even Homer, our greatest of poets, follows the path laid down by the mythological fables, though he allows the paradoxical double action to proceed at its own pace. In one stunningly beautiful passage portrays something of the splendor and mystery of the *hieros gamos*. The lyrical celebration between Zeus and Hera on Mt. Ida, even though Hera has contrived by means of it to seduce her husband away from his watchfulness of the battle, is a high point of the poem. It establishes the generative effect of their union on all the vegetative life of the cosmos. Hera has borrowed Aphrodite's loveliness and desirability (these aphroditic qualities no doubt symbolizing a
distinct change from Hera's usual regal pride) for the purpose of enticing Zeus, who when he looks upon her feels desire as "a mist about his close heart as much as on that time they first went to bed together and lay in love, and their dear parents knew nothing of it." (This is a reference to one version of the story in which the two, from the beginning, are lovers.) Zeus feels a resurgence of that early love and entreats her, "Hera, . . . let us go to bed and turn to lovemaking! For never before has love for any goddess or woman so melted the heart inside me, broken it to submission, /as now" -- and then he proceeds, rather ingenuously, to enumerate his many loves, including, finally, Hera herself: "not [even] yourself --" he says, "have I loved so much as now I love you, and the sweet passion has taken hold of me."

. . . the son of Kronos caught his wife in his arms.
There underneath them the divine earth broke into young, fresh grass, and into dewy clover, crocus and hyacinth so thick and soft it held the hard ground deep away from them.
There they lay down together and drew about them a golden wonderful cloud, and from it the glimmering dew descended.

Here Homer has allowed himself to portray the generative power of the marriage bond between Zeus and Hera, showing it as an analogue to the original hieros gamos, in which, as the Theogony tells us, "great Uranus came, bringing on night and longing for love, and he lay about Gaia, spreading himself full upon her." The union of Zeus and Hera, despite their quarrels, is a genuine incarnation of the original holy marriage, and it is through this Olympian pair that the very face of the earth is renewed.

Hence, we must say, the archetype of marriage is to be found in Zeus and Hera. His promiscuity and her rebelliousness do nothing to detract from this authentic union. And what a
study of the archetype makes clear is that the masculine component of this union, though serious in its commitment to the marriage, has its view fixed on the long-range plan of history: on large events that will alter the scheme of things. The masculine eros desires this vision to come about; and in order to accomplish it, must intrude into realms outside the oikos, away from Olympus, to produce heroes by injecting into history a bit of what Faulkner called "that Olympian ejaculation" that continually enhances and elevates the course of human destiny. In contrast, marriage is at the very heart of Hera’s identity. Her inviolability is represented in the myths by the harshness with which she rejects those who dare to try to seduce her: Endymion, Ixion, Ephialtes, Otus, Ceyx. She is faithful wife to an unfaithful husband. Outrage and vindictiveness are part of the archetype; jealousy and reproaches must be accepted in the total paradigm. From the inner, hidden point of view, which makes a quite different story, Hera is pursuing her own dynamic: intuitive, wise, resourceful, tricky, passionate, following out an inner logic that gives a totally different slant to history.

Caroline Gordon perceived this different slant when she composed her novel The Glory of Hera, in which the ending of the story shows the persecuted Herakles ascending to Mt. Olympos just after his fiery death. He is born again to a radiant Hera, in an act that completes the divine trinity (his name means "he who wins glory from Hera"). The goddess gives her amazed husband the fullest look of love she has ever given him. "Ours all along," she informs him. Virgil too perceives this obscure inner action when, in The Aeneid he completes Hera’s story, allowing Jupiter to come to the understanding that Juno’s wrath has had meaning. The hated Trojans are to be allowed to found their city -- though not to call it Troy, but Rome. The eternal city is to be Juno-Hera’s, where she will be honored and enshrined as no other goddess. This
powerful goddess' influence in human history is hidden underneath the obvious pattern of military conquest and martial display of honor; but suddenly Hera's way, by a kind of reversal, is seen to be the real path, promising hope and peace for the human race.

So we have no choice but to accept her. Hera is part of the picture of reality. She leads each of us, male or female, to an understanding of the inner marriage within ourselves that makes for wholeness. She is an image of the feminine component, not in conflict with, or in comparison to, or dependent upon the masculine but working with the masculine, independently, in a kind of counterpoint. Her difficulties make possible an understanding of the ambiguity and contradiction within ourselves and enable us to see these disturbances as creative. Her headstrong certainty frees us from the tyranny of abstract reason, from sentimentality, from erotic distractions. Our Lady brings to the process of soul-making a sternness, a counterpoint, a grace, working out in that interior wedding feast a movement -- on a larger scale -- of the soul as eternal bride.