

Earth Mother and Sky Father Gendered Archetypes in Northrop Frye's Work

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*The Holy Spirit
conception originates
from the earth-mother &
the Thanatos world, the
Father from the Logos
one. (Northrop Frye)*

Abstract: This paper proposes a reading of Northrop Frye's work in the context of certain conflicting claims of feminist theories. On the one hand, postmodern thinkers advocating gender scepticism question the legitimacy of comprehensive communal symbols; on the other hand, building on the binaries of gender, feminists continue to perform a useful critique of the extremely "masculine" values of Western culture. I argue that Frye's unique distinction between primary concern (mythology) and secondary concern (ideology) can be used to theorize the difference between archetype and stereotype, and thus to distinguish the ideological and oppressive from the nourishing and liberating aspects of gendered imagery in our culture. And ultimately, Frye's typological dialectic provides a way of going beyond the binaries of gender towards the interpenetration of masculine and feminine, subject and object, culture and nature.

Keywords: Frye, Northrop, archetype, gender binaries, ideology, mythology.

Some of Frye's feminist critics, most of them his former students and disciples, have not hesitated to call him an "ensconced" patriarchal thinker. In light of some passages,

especially in his earlier works, this is hardly surprising. Consider this, for example:

The worship of a female principle, therefore, specifically a maternal principle, is not imaginative, and is only possible to natural religion. In Eden there is no Mother-God. In many religions God is certainly worshipped as a trinity of father, mother and child, as in Beulah, but in the more highly developed ones God is always the Supreme Male, the Creator... Mother-worship is womb-worship, a desire to prolong the helplessness of the perceiver and his dependence on the body of nature which surrounds him. (CW 14:)

Although I am aware that such a passage may well invite a belligerent feminist response, in the following pages I choose to apply a moderate and hopefully constructive feminist perspective to Frye's theories. Instead of stressing points of disagreement, I will prefer to concentrate on aspects of Frye's work which can trigger a dialogue with certain feminist concerns, revealing him as a possible ally rather than a patriarchal antagonist.

This dialogue is all the more important as Frye is increasingly seen as a significant cultural theorist¹ rather than a nearly structuralistobsessed with a self-contained literary universe. Anticipating several later developments in literary and cultural theory, Frye has insisted as early as the *Anatomy of Criticism*(1957) thatthe human and social world we inhabit is built out of words, or to use a contemporary expression, is built out of a web of verbal discourse, which is ultimately not descriptive, rational or conceptual, but *rhetorical*. As he famously says: "nothing built out of words can transcend the nature and conditions of words, and ... the nature and conditions of *ratio*, so

¹One recent monograph with a strong emphasis on Frye as a cultural theorist is Glen Robert Gill's *Northrop Frye and the Phenomenology of Myth*.

far as *ratio* is verbal, are contained by *oratio*” (CW 22, 316). His literary universe of recurring verbal patterns (called archetypes in the earlier works) extends, already in *Anatomy of Criticism*, into a universe of discourse in which the “verbal structures of psychology, anthropology, theology, history, law, and everything else built out of words have been informed or constructed by the same kind of myths and metaphors that we find ... in literature” (CW 22: 328). Thus Frye’s investigations of the myths and metaphors of literature have always had interdisciplinary implications for broader – social, cultural, psychological and religious – issues.

For feminists then, Frye’s discussion of gendered archetypes can be especially relevant. Indeed, the very binaries of gender constitute an extremely divisive question even for feminist and gender studies scholars. At one end of the scale, postmodern feminist theories advocate an extreme gender scepticism, questioning the legitimacy of comprehensive communal symbols, voicing doubts concerning any articulation of the “feminine” or “the masculine.” Towards the opposite of the scale, building on the binaries of gender but questioning their hierarchy, feminists continue to perform a useful critique of the extremely “masculine” values of Western culture. This is the practice of most Jungian feminists such as the Swiss psychiatrist, Verena Kast,² but perhaps the most well-known critique of extreme gender scepticism comes from feminist Susan Bordo, who in a seminal essay defends the need for “wide generalizations along the gender axis,” by referring to the “wealth of insight that may come from using gender as a tool of analysis.” Ultimately, Bordo says, the tension is “between the preservation of gender consciousness and identity

²See her *Father-Daughter, Mother-Son : Freeing Ourselves from the Complexes that Bind Us*, in which her analysis of a vast range of mother and father complexes expands into a pungent critique of Western culture as suffocatingly and one-sidedly paternal and masculine in its values.

[...] and the destruction of gender prescriptions[...] which limit human choice and possibility.” (Bordo 153) Her powerful defense of broad interpretive schemas such as gender binaries further justifies my attempt to involve in this discussion a thinker like Frye whose imaginative perceptions of large recurring patterns of human creation has undoubtedly yielded a widely acknowledged wealth of insight.

Frye and Blake

To begin with, we need to deal with the question raised by my provocative motto from *Fearful Symmetry*. Admittedly, in the Western imagination inspired and structured by the Bible as its “Great Code,” the father principle or the masculine has traditionally been associated with activity, articulacy and culture whereas the mother principle or the feminine with passivity, inarticulacy and nature. And admittedly, Frye as well as Blake not only gives prominence to these binary opposites, but he also confirms their hierarchy as seen from the rather strong language of the passage from *Fearful Symmetry*. The human vocation is to turn nature into a home, to invest chaos with form and thus to bring culture into being. For Blake’s radical immanence the otherness of the objective world is to be completely assimilated to the human. Otherness and therefore the feminine principle has no value in itself, it is not more than “dirt upon [the] feet.” Without man, nature is barren, as Blake famously says.³

³For a nuanced discussion of Frye’s view of nature and the feminine principle, see C. N. Cotrupi’s article. For a later, brief discussion of the metaphorical identification of women with nature, particularly the *femme fatale* image see Brian Russell Graham’s article, in which, similarly to Cotrupi, he defends Frye against the charge of sexism and essentialism.

For Frye, however, the picture is a great deal more complicated. Although the passage about the maternal principle in *Fearful Symmetry* has been quoted by Margaret Burgess, one of Frye's sharpest feminist critics, as Frye's own (Burgess 116), this unproblematic identification of Frye's ideas with Blake's is misleading. Moreover, contemporary scholars, including feminists, increasingly question even Blake's misogyny, arguing for a more positive view of the feminine in Blake's work.⁴ As to Frye, he actually takes a critical stance, admitting in a late essay that in this area "the clarity of Blake's vision must have been obscured by some personal anxieties" (CW 16: 431).

Ideology versus mythology

Frye's much more nuanced vision, I contend, is based on a careful distinction he worked out in his later years. One way to formulate this distinction in the context of gendered discourses is to say that generalizations concerning gender identity may roughly correspond with Frye's notion of archetype, and limiting gender prescriptions with stereotype. Or perhaps we should discard the term "archetype" as Frye did in his later work, and contrast instead primary concern or primary mythology with secondary concern or ideology as it appears in his second book-length study of the Bible, *Words with Power* (1990). Whereas thinkers such as Roland Barthes tend to identify mythology with ideology, for

⁴ Of course, Blake's misogyny is a complex issue. As Magnus Ankarsjö notes in his book *Blake and Gender* (2006), "the problem of ambiguity in Blake's portrayal of women has led Blake critics to diverge into different directions." Several feminist critics read Blake's female metaphor negatively, as misogynist or sexist (for example Anne Mellor or Brenda Webster), whereas others stress the positive reunion between male and female characters (for example Helen Bruder or Josephine McQuail) (Ankarsjö 37–38).

Frye, secondary concerns are the ideological distortions of basic human desires expressed by primary concerns. This introduces us to a unique aspect of Frye's cultural theory, his conviction that ideology is not all there is to culture. This monumental verbal and creative construct called by Frye the envelope of culture has been pervasively corrupted by ideology and power games, but our tasks as critics, Frye believes, is "to distinguish where we cannot divide," and thus to work on distinguishing archetype from stereotype, primary concern from secondary concern. The ideological content or "secondary concern" of a work of literature, including the Bible, the master-narrative of Western culture, is what Gerard Manley Hopkins has called "overthought," but critical dialogue with the text should pursue the so-called "underthought," a progression of metaphors and images counterpointing, often without the consciousness of the author, the ideological, i. e., the patriarchal, meaning (see CW 26: 63–65). The fact that good stories live on even while the ideology fades testifies to the reality of the "underthought" or the primary mythical layer. "The principle involved," Frye writes, "is that there is a flexibility in the story that its ideological reference does not permit" (CW 26: 65). Applied to my distinction between archetype and stereotype this would mean that whereas stereotypes are rigid and conservative, preserving and indoctrinating social hierarchies, archetypal stories and images are characterized by a high degree of flexibility. Thus, even patriarchal narratives and images can perhaps be explored for their liberating mythical "underthought."

The gender binary of culture and nature

Building on his distinction between primary and secondary concern, Frye succeeds in transcending the Blakean hierarchy of

female nature and male culture. First of all, he points out that a hierarchical conception of the relations between masculine and feminine and the ensuing dominance and exploitation of the latter by the former must be an ideological distortion, an “overthought” with its hidden “underthought” waiting to be uncovered. He suggests that in Western thought “the imaginative and mythological relations of male and female” have been perverted, and a more balanced conception such as the “classical Chinese conception of yang and yin” would be useful (CW 4: 58). And in *Words with Power* he talks about “two strains of traditions” in the Bible, the mythical, which in the book of Genesis hints at an original androgynous Adam from which both sexes were then derived, and the ideological, preoccupied with the rationalization of male supremacy, which holds that Adam was male and he was the one created first (CW 26: 168).

One important text in which Frye discusses the culture-nature – more precisely, art-nature – binary in the context of gender is the famous “Garden” chapter of *Words with Power*. This is his most extended discussion of gendered symbols in the Bible which begins with an elucidation of the two creation stories, the so-called artificial creation myth in which God is a creator of form and order and the created world emerges *ex nihilo* as an artistic product (*natura naturata*), and the sexual creation myth in which the world is an organism of vitality and growth (*natura naturans*) (CW 26: 168). Later in the same book he associates *natura naturans* with an autonomous aspect of nature “which had been subordinated and distrusted for [...] many centuries” (CW 26: 208). His attention to the second – “feminine” – version of creation may function to counterpoint the notion of a masculine creator subduing the feminine chaos, since ideological perversion in this case may well manifest itself in the exclusive dominance of the hierarchical first myth in the Western imagination.

On the other hand, this late stress in Frye also calls into mind an intriguing early metaphor of his about artistic creation. In *Anatomy of Criticism* he describes the poet and the creative process in terms of maternal metaphors calling him midwife, what is more, “Mother Nature herself” who gives birth to the poem (CW 22: 91). Cotrupi finds in this the “destabilizing of the conventional application of the gender metaphors in the context of the nature/culture debates” (Cotrupi 42). However, what remains to be pointed out in this description of the poet as maternal is that it anticipates Frye’s later subtle move away from Blakean immanence towards a heightened appreciation of the otherness of the creative powers. Instead of stressing the “feminine” passivity of the material world receiving the seed of the poet’s “masculine” imagination, here it is a “feminine” imagination receiving the seed – of what or who? For the late Frye this would certainly be the seed of a divine spiritual other. Instead of the Blakean identification of human and divine, Frye increasingly strikes a note of humility as far as human creative powers are concerned. And again, an implicit emphasis on the traditionally “feminine” aspects of creativity, those of openness and receptivity emerges: a greater awareness that the human endeavour of creation is part of a “vaster operation where human personality and will are still present, but where the self-begotten activity no longer seems to be the only, or even the essentially, active power. The initiative is now usually seen to come, not from some unreachable *in itself* world, but from an infinitely active personality that both enters us and eludes us.” (CW 26: 359) And finally, as the excessively masculine idea of culture being a conquest of nature is closely related to the subjugation and exploitation of women, a new and more gentle attitude to the otherness of nature, Frye hopes, may bring about a reconciliation and a relationship based on mutual love and partnership between men and women as well (see for instance CW 26:196, see also Graham 179).

Mother-body, Father-soul?

This increased interest in the spiritual other has led Frye to literary, psychological, mythical and theological speculations on the human search for identity which are relevant for our discussion of gendered symbols as well, mainly because of the controversial association of the spiritual or divine other with the Father symbol. Some of this surfaces in his books on the Bible, but a deeper insight is available from the study of his various notebooks (published posthumously within the new Collected Works series). In what follows then, I will discuss the significance of the Mother and Father archetypes: how Frye first distinguishes their ideological distortions from their liberating meaning and then how he finally he seems to transcend both in an upward moving spiral.

In his remarkable *Late Notebooks*, he associates the real “Father” with the unspeakable spiritual other, “source of human life, origin and destiny,” “something other, uncreated, given” (CW 6: 712). Following Martin Buber, one of Frye’s important guides in this inquiry, he says that being addressed by the spiritual other and awakened to consciousness is what turns us into genuine human persons. Buber, a process thinker like Frye, describes the spirit (or, in one of Frye’s terms, the “creative life”) as “occurring” not “in man” but “between man and what he is not” (Buber 141); in other words, as an intermediate world of language in which the dialectic of Spirit and Word takes place neither in humans, nor in God, but between them. In Frye’s formulation, this is the case “where a Word not our own, though also our own, proclaims and a Spirit not our own, though also our own, responds” (CW 26:111, see also Tóth 128). Having attempted to translate Buber’s dialogue principle into Christian trinitarian terms Frye then proposes that this total otherness of the Father is made

intelligible by the descending Word, and the Spirit is the ascending response of human creativity or the power unifying the divine and the human.

At this stage in Frye's upward moving spiral it seems necessary that the human awakening to consciousness or the human strife for identity is symbolically associated with a response to the Father, as well as with a separation from the Mother. Similarly, when Buber describes human spiritual growth, he talks about the necessity of exchanging the "pure natural association" of the prenatal life of the child in the womb of the Great Mother, through detachment, for a "spiritual association – a relationship" (76 –77). Hence Frye's provocative note: "Paul says 'in him we live & move & have our being' [Acts 17:28] because if he said 'her' he'd be speaking of embryos." (CW 5: 164). In other words, union with the mother, symbolically speaking, would be a return to a state prior to consciousness. Elsewhere, in an earlier work Frye makes the same point in more detail:

... the parent stands for the whole of whatever has existed before us that has made our own existence possible. As that, the parent is the handiest symbol to express the feeling that we are born with an unknown identity which is both ourselves and yet something other and greater than ourselves. Of the two parental figures, the mother is the less convincing for this purpose, because the mother is the parent we must break from in order to get born. ... the emphasis on the male in the Bible is connected with its resistance to the cyclical fatality of all religions founded on Mother Nature. (CW 4: 58)

Separation from the mother and entering the world of the father is also a major theme for prominent 20th-century psychoanalytical thinkers such as Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. One great difference of the Lacanian scheme from the one I am describing here is that for Lacanians, especially for

Lacanian feminists, the Father can only be interpreted in ideological terms as the supreme phallus, the symbol of male authority, whereas in Frye's primary mythology this big Other is at best a demonic parody called "Satan-Noboddady, the skyscarecrow." The "real Father", in contrast, as Frye paradoxically puts it, "is spiritual authority, which is order without authority" (CW 6: 620), and the only way to manifest such authority is to renounce it as Jesus, the Word, did. It was paradoxically by not wanting it that he himself as Word became *the* authority (see CW 5: 356). The Law in the Jewish tradition, Frye has suggested in his short article on Lacan, is "the codifying of Lacan's *nome du père* into a social contract," but "in the Christian perspective, where a revised revelation makes the Law a 'type' of something greater than itself, a something that culminates, as far as human history is concerned, in the Crucifixion of Christ, the *nom dupère* stands first in the place of absence and then in the place of death." (CW 18: 393) This is the basis of Frye's visionary hope: "The paradisaical vision is re-established, but without hierarchy. It's a vision of order but not of authority – except the spiritual authority that exists only in education." (CW 5: 395) Thus for Frye the towering archetypal symbol of Western culture, Christ and his crucifixion understood as voluntary sacrifice, is ultimately a surrender of (patriarchal) power and authority.

This is all very well, but what about the Mother? In Frye's mythic perspective, the last envisioned stage of the development of the individual and of culture is the healing of the alienated, split subject, the interpenetration of subject and object, male and female, divine and human. If the "real father" as non-alienated otherness is associated with differentiation and dialogue (Logos-Word), the "real mother" is associated with unifying and oneness (Spirit). Indeed, the final envisioned interpenetration is a mirror image of the primal, prenatal oneness with the mother, a repetition

of it on a higher level.⁵In apparent contradiction with the previous stage, the maternal ultimately resumes an important role in the growth towards genuine human identity. This is described in some length in Buber's *I and Thou*, which is registered by Frye in a note where he remarks that "there is something maternal about his [Buber's] Thou." (CW 5: 345)⁶This also explains why Frye sometimes refers to the Holy Spirit or the Spirit as maternal or feminine, though regrettably only in his posthumously published notebooks.⁷"The Holy Spirit conception," he says, "originates from the earth-mother & the Thanatos world, the Father from the Logos one." (CW 13: 162) Thus not only the Father image, "the old Father" of an alienated world, but also its Mother image, "the old Mother" has what Frye elsewhere calls a paradisaic or apocalyptic equivalent: both are redeemed and lifted up to a higher level.

This of course does not mean that they are spiritualized in their ascent on some Platonic ladder. On the contrary. For Frye the hierarchical "soul-body" setup is the unredeemed existence of the

⁵This redeemed aspect of the maternal is what Margaret Burgess seems to disregard when she describes the risk involved in Frye's "valorization of the verbal at the expense of the physical" or natural (Burgess 119).

⁶Troni Y. Grande in her comprehensive discussion of the role of woman in Frye's account of Western mythology also calls attention to this note, showing how we can trace in Frye as well as in Buber "a connection between the sacred and the feminine." She discusses in detail how Frye associates the death-rebirth archetype with the maternal and the feminine, and she states that "the renewal of the green world [in Shakespeare's comedies] through a feminized force of nature becomes a central idea in Frye's later writings." Even the biblical manifestation of the death-rebirth archetype, Jesus' resurrection, Grande points out, is presented by Frye in female terms as "taking on flesh in the womb of the tomb" and thus suggesting that "there's a female principle incorporated in the spiritual body." (Grande 262, 264, quoting Frye from CW 5: 327)

⁷For example he refers to the lost Gospel to the Hebrews quoted by Origen and Jerome in which Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "my mother" (CW 13: 194).

split subject in an alienated society. The soul is associated with the “old Father”: it is an alienated consciousness ruling over the “old Mother-body,” in less mythical terms, a precarious Freudian civilization suppressing chaotic pre-Oedipal instincts or the Lacanian symbolic order which substitutes and excludes the inaccessible maternal by language and law. The Freudian scheme is dualistic, a reversed Platonism as it were, in which the sole and unaccessible reality is material, as opposed to the illusion of language and culture. In Frye’s utopian or apocalyptic vision, however, the above mentioned hierarchy ultimately gives place to “the spiritual body” which unites nature and culture, body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, male and female, human and divine. In mythic language, “old Father-Soul” and “old Mother-Body” turn into “Bridegroom” and “Bride,” so the marriage of soul and body can take place. It is worth quoting Frye’s notebook in full: “If the father-soul stops spanking the mother-body long enough to screw her instead, the child-spirit may get born. If it does, it grows & grows & grows into a spiritual body, the parental soul-body unit collapsing into a self-alienated ego, Lacan’s moi...” (CW 5: 20–1) Instead of the static platonic view of a two-story universe or the pessimistic Lacanian imprisonment in language, Frye’s is a forward moving, hopeful scheme:

The soul-body complex is to spirit as embryo is to baby, as type is to antitype, as illusion is to reality (after what we call reality has vanished into illusion). This is not ‘dualistic,’ unless it is dualism to say that an embryo and a baby live in different environments (CW 5: 175).⁸

⁸The difference between the static platonic view of a two-story universe and Frye’s dynamic notion of (personal and historical) development in time is rooted in a biblical view of time and history. In biblical typology the meaning of events, persons, concepts is not found by searching for causes in the past, but by looking forward to a future fulfillment. See chapter 4, “Typology I,” and

As we have seen, archetype clusters around “the old Father” and the “old Mother” have to do with secondary or ideological concerns, thus they easily freeze into stereotypes and rigid hierarchies. To go beyond these concerns both on the social and individual level often involves fight to the death against hardened egos and frozen power structures. In mythic language this struggle is expressed by the quest or heroic romance in which rebirth or victory is preceded by a confrontation with death in the shape of the mythic monster. In an apparently cryptic note involving the familiar gendered symbols Frye says: “We enter the Thanatos vision through the mouth of a hermaphroditic monster, who includes the terrible mother (Earth & Death, the worm-sister) & leave it through the arse-hole of Satan, the false father.” (CW 9: 167). The “mythological logic” underlying this discussion must be clear by now: ultimately, neither the “mother” nor the “father” is symbolically privileged for Frye. He implicitly seems to offer an alternative interpretation of the defeat of the mythic monster which in classical mythology appears to be “the primary attack on the divine feminine” (Burgess 108). If the “old Mother” is terrible, “the old Father” is Satan itself. They belong to the old world of suppression and oppression and they should be left behind together. The fruit of their union, the “spiritual body” is our genuine human identity in which gender binaries have been reconciled and transcended. Yes, it is an idealistic and utopian vision, but so are most human visions worth striving for.

chapter 5, “Typology II: *Phases of Revelation*,” in the *Great Code* (CW 19: 96–158).

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