

The True Quest: In Search of Gylany

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In her 1987 masterpiece *The Chalice and the Blade*, Riane Eisler develops a theory of “Cultural Transformation”, namely an analysis of the past and the future that demonstrates how society tends to be divided between two models which she calls “Dominator” and “Partnership” respectively.

The first model, which humanity has known only since 3500 BCE, is based on forms of androcratic power, gender inequality and the exploitation of fear and violence as instruments of power. According to Eisler, the “dominator” part, if not contrasted, would tend to reach the extinction of human and more-than-human life in this world. On the contrary, the “partnership” model, which is based on equality and gender-balance, has existed for the past 15000 years. Indeed, this is still evident in traditions and societies that live closer to original customs, particularly shamanic cultures. In the course of history, shamanic groups have favoured forms of sustainable, ecological and partnership existence. It is no coincidence that human beings have made their most extraordinary discoveries - from fire to agriculture - in these contexts, that is to say those of native and aboriginal cultures. It is a way of conceiving the world that has never ceased to exist and that periodically comes back and tries to remerge with force.

Partnership is not only a theoretical framework but a historical event, whose history is still discernible if we are able to distinguish and read its archaeological, literary and artistic foundations. To better explain the foundational thesis of her work, Eisler coined the term *gylany* (Eisler, 2011:78). This word describes the deeper meaning of Partnership. It derives from Ancient Greek roots *gy (woman from the Ancient Greek *gunē*) and *an (man, from Ancient Greek *anēr*) united by an “l” that recalls the Ancient Greek “lyo” (to set free) or “lego” (to put together) and also the English “link”.

The proactive message of *Partnership* is, in fact, the opposite of *patriarchy* and it is not linked to *matriarchy*. It is instead a collaborative fusion based on a real and effective “equality” that

does not eliminate differences but transforms them into resources, where women and men, clearly conscious of their value and distinctive features, use it to remould a very ancient concept of hierarchy. Thus, leadership is not based on the abuse of power, but is functional because its objectives are not individual but communal, partnership-oriented and shared.

From *The Chalice and the Blade*, we learn that critical mass of ideas can move humanity from one model to another, and for this reason Partnership has been hidden and constraint in the long-standing rewriting of our human history, and in the foundation of myths connected with androcratic cultures (Eisler, 2011).

In her book *Sacred Pleasure* Eisler argues that, in order to change our reality, we must change our myths, as they are closely entwined (Eisler, 1995). What remains of Partnership is in our genetic memory, in the wild world of symbols and archetypes (Eisler, 2018), where Clarissa Pinkola (Pinkola, 1993) and Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 2012) can be a great guide toward fables, myths and their modern version, the fantasy genre.

Which is the archetype that best represents gylany? *Hieros gamos*, meaning the Sacred Marriage. In Sumerian mythology, the Goddess Inanna and the king Dumuzi joined together to plunge into immense pleasure and acknowledge the power of sex. In their Mystic Wedding, the Chalice and the Blade are not divided! The Masculine and the Feminine form the only framework of an integrated, flourishing and abundant existence.

According to Eisler, even though this social paradigm shifted, the institution of the Sacred Marriage remained alive as a legitimate institution. Nevertheless, it became vilified, distorted and parodied, often represented as illicit, unnatural, and something to flee from, because “as it occurs and it is believed in mediaeval Christian dogmas, sex is sin” (Eisler, 2012: chap. 7).

In the search for new “outputs out of a psyche that suffered these changes” (Eisler, 2012) post mediaeval tales of English literature are an interesting example of a world where destructive principles, rather than creative ones became predominant. This translated particularly in the shift towards *thanatos* instead of *eros*. This is a world in which *hierogamos*, and thus gylany, are inserted: the feminine elements of the Sorceress or the Healer, and the masculine elements of the Warrior and the Knight have a relationship based on fear of pleasure and the obsessive exaltation of chastity and maternity (even better when through immaculate conception), otherwise they approach each other experimenting only distrust, sacrifice and guilt.

Consider the text that has brought the Breton cycle into modernity: *Le Morte d'Arthur*, also known as *The History of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round table* (Mallory, 2013). Through his narrative choices, Thomas Malory demonstrates how “in the mediaeval Christian contexts, the sacred marriage underwent another radical transformation, becoming the celebration of pain and death, and also the split between body and spirit, resulting in the division between men and women” (Eisler, 2012):

Morgan le Fay sends you Excalibur the sword of Arthur, together with its scabbard and bids you, as you love her, to battle to the bitter end and without any mercy, as you secretly promised her. (Malory, 2013, Book IV)

You have murdered your mother! If at such a young age you already know how to kill, you'll likely to become a vigorous man. (Malory, 2013, Book VIII)

I shall punish my flesh that wants to become my master. (Malory, 2013, Book XIV)

Launcelot decided to zealously follow the dictates of Our Lord Jesus Christ and to withdraw himself from Lady Guinevere's company. (Malory, 2013, Book XVIII)

In the book the author shows mechanical sequence of actions without strength or appeal, full of details of battles and violence. These descriptions are directly in tune with the symbol of Blade. The feminine element is relegated to the role of the antagonist or the summoner. Women are the *trigger*, where men are the shooters, the guns and the bullets: "The king ordered them, pain of death, to aid ladies, damsels and gentlewomen and not to engage in battles over wrongful disputes for love or for worldly goods" (Malory, 2013, Book III). Beyond that role, the characterisation of women sways between wickedness, cruelty and powerlessness:

Sir Marhault said: "Now I shall tell you why I detest them: they are sorceresses and enchantresses, and no matter how strong a knight's constitution and valiant his nature, they will turn him into a coward to take advantage of him. (Malory, 2013, Book IV)

Needless to say, in a context in which the Feminine is absent, *gylany* is impossible. Indeed, the story ends with the death of all its protagonists, leave out vocation, chastity and reclusion in a monastery.

However, the path towards partnership values and existence for life did not stop in the 15th century. Around four hundred years after Malory, Walter Scott, in his work *Ivanhoe* (Scott, 2017), provided us with another story of ladies and knights, with aspirations for *Hieros gamos*, in which the differences are few but important. European Romanticism, and in this case English Romanticism, stands out as a fundamental historical change from the past, especially from the period we know as Enlightenment. In this period, old dogmas are replaced by valuable alternative possibilities: from the faith on reason to the exaltation of an emotional sensitivity; from intelligence to the imagination; from realism to fantasy. This era restored a fundamental belief in dreams or better in the dreaming dimension, in primitivism, and in the praise of a nature which was no longer seen as an ordered and artificial universe but a wild enclosure or living entity to be known and experienced, a place where one could live more authentically to discover another way of life.

Indeed, Scott, who will become a frontrunner of the historical novel, wrote storylines that were still concerned with the symbol of the Blade. Nevertheless, the Chalice is no longer seen an object sent by a patriarchal and distant God. It is a Woman that speaks and has a name with an immense impact on the story.

The author shows us a woman within a more traditional stance and another one that embodies the urge to re-emerge with a conscious and powerful energy. Therefore, we can still find the woman's role which I have previously defined as 'trigger'. This role, for instance, is assigned to the character of Lady Rowena, who represents the traditional lady, in her act of waiting, in a powerless condition. At the same time, it is through this silence that Lady Rowena shows her

political influence and power and an ancient traditional custom that claims her to be the representation of matrilinearity.

On the opposite side, we find Rebecca the healer, who has little or nothing to do with tradition. She embodies the entire range of characteristics of the Goddess and the Sacred Feminine, the knowledge of life and death, a unity with nature of which she knows the secrets and from which she draws her ability, an independence founded on self-awareness, and courage to complete a mission without wavering, not even out of fear or constriction and regardless of the circumstances. Rebecca is Jewish and belongs to a culture that is perceived as obscene and hostile, exactly as it happened to Partnership in the moment of its fall. Yet, she never stops healing, nor does she refuse her gifts to anyone. She remains true to herself in every moment, while being capable of defending herself. She says no, and she knows how to be assertive and to guide people in “her” way.

Nevertheless, *gylany* is still “impossible”. Ivanhoe marries Rowena, because a union with Rebecca is impossible, even though desired and kept in the background. To the healer, the only remaining possibility is a virginal destiny, out of freewill as a way to assert herself against the rules of the world. She is ultimately renouncing to the power that Inanna - around 5000 years before her - knew how to exploit through the contemplation of her own Vulva and the pleasure that she could derive from it (Kramer, Wolkstein, 1983).

Not even the feminist (r)evolution of the 1970s could reach these objectives and goals.

Zimmer Bradley in *The Mists of Avalon* (Zimmer Bradley, 1986) narrates the story of the Chalice and the Blade from a feminine perspective. Indeed, the author, the narrators and its main characters are women. Here the *Hieros gamos* is not just present, but it unfolds the entirety of the story: first between Igraine and Uther to conceive Arthur, second between the latter and Morgan and third between Launcelot and Guinevere. Despite the physical act, however, *gylany* is not fully achieved.

The unions between Igraine and Uther, like that between Morgan and Arthur, are told in a way to highlight external manipulation. Merlin and Viviane are pulling the strings. They share the Chalice and Blade in each other's arms, thus deceiving themselves, hiding and omitting the worst parts of Truth. In this way, the two acts of love, similar in meaning to the relationship of Inanna and Dumuzi (both in terms of the legitimation of power and that of ecstasy and pleasure) are not reaching the are not fully exploited like it happens for the Sumerian divinities. Also in that case, a god-sorcerer (Utu) was behind the union, but without deception. Inanna said “yes” with awareness and desire.

African shamans teach us that there are two paths in the Universe, Love and Fear. If compared to the Sumerians' view, Zimmer Bradley chooses to point everything towards this second path, deviating from the way to Partnership and remaining in that of the Dominator. Thanks to this, we can see why the opposite of patriarchy cannot be matriarchy.

The relationship between Igraine and Uther is crushed by doubt and manipulation. The consequence is the sterility of the queen after the birth of Arthur. The act of love loses all of its power and cannot bring forth anything other than a monastic choice.

Guilt also marks the relationship between Morgan and Arthur. The initial spontaneity is wiped away by a sense of betrayal, by the absence of a true Faith. The sexual encounter between brother and sister, that placed Isis and Osiris at the top of the Egyptian pantheon, now is seen as an abomination, a sin, a condemnation. The inevitable penalty is the systemic frustration of every desire: this is true for Morgan, Arthur, Guinevere and Launcelot. In *The Mists of Avalon* gylany results in separation, contrast and conflict which leads to war and death.

Is this the failure of Partnership? Actually, it does not appear so. According to stories that we can see in the 21st century, like in cinemas, TV series or even in the so-called young adult literature, the reality is different.

Let us consider urban fantasy novels. One example (but there are many others) is Cassandra Clare with her saga *Shadowhunters*. The author knowingly alludes to the Arthurian saga, involuntarily (in my opinion) she presents a shamanic perspective and creates the perfect *gylany*. If I were right, that spontaneous act would make the choice even more important, demonstrating not only that the urge for renewal is still alive inside us, but indeed also the memory of how to bring it to life.

The first trilogy of the saga, *The Mortal Instruments* (Clare, 2007-2009) is about a Sword and a Cup with divine origins. United by a lake called Lynn, they create a bridge between our world and the spirit world. The saga is all about the search for the Cup and the relationship between a man (a modern Knight) and a woman completely different from the pure virgins of Malory. She is rather like Rebecca with the added power of Morgan and a new spirit of optimism. She is liberated from rage against men, from suspicion, and the desire for revenge. She is strong and magic woman, and she discloses to be the keeper of the Cup (Clare, 2007). The holy wedding between them at first seems impossible, as usual. But then, when the Sword and the Cup are united, their symbolic meaning become tangible and *gylany*, finally, gets real (Clare, 2009). They reach the happy ending, with its role of transcendence which constitutes the healing and the true power of the myth (Campbell, 2012).

In conclusion, there is an innovative and vital dynamism in new myths that reinterpret the ancient ones. But I think we have to pay attention, especially to the stories that represent strong and independent women that embody masculine movements, ideals and modes. We must also pay attention on heroines that keep their distance from the Masculine in an Amazonian way. History invites us to be alert, because androcracy had already used this method to facilitate the transition to the Dominator model: it is enough to think of Athena in the Greek pantheon: born from the Head of Zeus without a mother, virgin, goddess of war, always with weapons, helmet and shield.

However, it is also important to emphasise stories in which strong, independent, conscious women do not need to undermine or replace men, where they do not need to imitate or destroy him in order to take back their power and reclaim their role. Transformation, I insist once more, does not depend on the gender of those who sit on the throne, but on the renouncement of the throne itself, with the aim towards mutuality and partnership.

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