

Of Butterflies and Banshees

I am whole unto myself
I am the **bright maiden**
Strong, invincible and free
I am the **dark maiden**
Cloaked in veils and mystery
I am the pulse of the sun
And the pull of the moon
Flowing from one to the other
In perfect harmony
Where I walk
None can hinder me
I am maiden
Forever young and free¹

We are all familiar with the fresh life the new moon brings and the renewed vitality of the early spring season, both of which are the realm of that exuberant identity of Goddess, the Maiden, and during these times we honour her in this aspect. The Maiden calls us to recognise our own perpetual youth, the joy of innocence and imagination and the power inherent in potential. It is through the awakening earth and body of the female, the budding of life, as it were, that she teaches us her wisdom of beginnings, creation, spontaneity and freedom.

It is thus that we tend to vision the Maiden Goddess. She is all butterflies and beauty, youth and ardent play, right? Wrong. Well, partly anyway.

Youth is All.

To honour the Maiden in this way, and her essence in ourselves, is of course appropriate. However, to see the rainbow and ignore the storm that birthed it is to see only half the picture. It is no surprise that modern society has very much embraced the way of the Maiden, and made her freshness, youth and beauty the stuff of awards ceremonies and glossy magazines. There is nothing innocent or fresh, however, in an eating disorder or overindulgence in cosmetic surgery, when the reverence for the maiden archetype becomes dysfunctional. Here, the woman herself is shackled, doomed to remain in a state of *stasis*. If there is one thing the Maiden Goddess begs us to understand, it is that to be stagnant is to be dead. As women, there are two things for us to embrace; our right to change, to *honour* the Maiden, *be* the Maiden and then move forward in the cycle (whether that be biologically or emotionally), and to recognize that the Maiden *embodies the entire cycle in herself*. Thus, she is not only bright, she is dark also.

Poppy and bear.

Ironically, in a culture which did its best to ensure that women conformed to an ideal of matronly virtue, where a female's dress, behaviour and responsibilities were ardently prescribed, we have a wealth of evidence which beautifully expresses the dual nature of the Maiden Goddess.

From the literature of Homer and others, we are told of the maiden Kore (ἡ κορη 'girl'), a name often attributed to Persephone, which is in turn a pre-Greek name meaning 'she who brings destruction'.² This is perhaps the first hint of the Goddess' dual nature. Her tale of descent to the underworld in the early autumn months, her enthronement there as Queen, and her ascent and reunification with her mother, Demeter, in spring is well known, and in a broad sense demonstrates both the bright and dark aspects of the Maiden. Attention to further detail, however, reveals greater possibilities.

The food chosen to represent the detainment of Persephone in the underworld (the pomegranate) is known as the 'food of the dead'. Also, the juice of the pomegranate, like to blood, and its abundance of dark seeds (new life) exhibit their own clear symbolism. It is likely that as Persephone ingests the seeds of this fruit, she represents the death/life Goddess, the earth (underworld) itself, offering herself willingly as the place of gestation, soon to ascend and burst into new life and embody new wisdom. Similarly, Persephone is often associated with poppies, a flower linked to death and probably used in the sacred rites. Such imagery expands the concept of the Maiden Goddess considerably.

In ancient accounts, the Goddess is often referred to in less than bright terms; 'dread Persephone' (Homer *Odyssey* 10:565) and 'grim Persephone' (Homer *Illiad* 9:557) for example. Such descriptions are familiar enough in the sources that they take on a sense of *topos*. So this Maiden Goddess is Queen of the Underworld, not by marriage (to Ares) but by right, as the Dark Goddess, either agriculturally or as keeper of souls.

...at the heart of both [Greek and Indonesian] mythologies there is a trinity of Goddesses identified with the local food plants, the pig, the underworld and the moon, whose rites ensure both a growth of the plants and a passage of the soul...the marriage of the maiden...is her death...and [is] a descent into the earth and is followed... by her metamorphosis into food.³

Another Maiden Goddess⁴ who displays virtues of light and dark is Artemis, whose physical prowess is praised in the Homeric *Hymn* thus:

Artemis I sing
with her golden arrows
and her hunting cry,
sacred virgin,
deer huntress
showering arrows...
In mountains of shadow
and peaks of wind
she delights in the chase...
she lets fly arrows that moan...

She is the inviolate virgin who revels in dance and music with her nymphs and girls are initiated by her rites; Brauron (near Athens) is probably the most famous site. Initiates and priestesses alike might be called 'Bears' (αι αρκτοι), this animal in particular being sacred to the Goddess.⁵ One should not be misled by this seeming picture of sweet girlhood, however. Artemis has 'a darker obverse... [she is] terrible and even cruel'.⁶ This is in reference to the Maiden Goddess' role as slayer; the animals she nourishes, girls becoming women and women becoming mothers. At these thresholds, there were exacting rituals to be performed, which honoured the darker aspects of Artemis, and which helped to ensure her blessing and protection.

Both Persephone and Artemis then, exhibit characteristics of the Bright and Dark Maiden, and these aspects were in turn acknowledged and revered in ancient religious practice. As the functional and healthy nature of these waxing and waning energies are understood, so the sacred feminine moves through her 'wholeness'.

The Maiden in you.

The treasures revealed by such an exploration into ancient religion include a foundation by which we can renew our worship of the Goddess, but which also provision us with a map of our own 'sacred psyche'. As we know Goddess, so we know ourselves and vice versa. These aspects of dark and light carry with them inherent characteristics and potentials, which allow us to identify and strengthen the sacred feminine in our lives. To do so honours the divine in all.

To take yourself on the sacred journey of the Maiden, at each crescent moon, waxing and waning, consider your responses to the following elements.⁷: (These are examples/suggestions only. Please add your own to the list!)

Bright Maiden (overt, waxing energy)		Dark Maiden (hidden, receptive energy)	
<i>Afflicted</i>	<i>Liberated</i>	<i>Afflicted</i>	<i>Liberated</i>
Hard	Strong	Procrastinates	Surrender
Over- intellectualises	Rational	Self sacrificing	Compassionate
Dominating	Assertive	Myopic	Subjective
Hyperactive	Energetic	Over- reacting	Intuitive
Superficial	Deeper sense of authenticity	Deluded	Imaginative
Disdainful of others	Strong sense of self	Fearful	Instinctive
Aloof	Healthy boundaries	Introverted	Independent
Unemotional	Objective	Manipulative	Emotional intelligence
Obsessive	Disciplined	Sabotage	Healthy release
Smothers	Nourishes	Emotional implosion (depressive, aggressive)	Introspection
Power over	Power from within		

Naturally, the Bright Maiden is addressed and explored at the waxing moon. You might like to use a white or pale blue candle, and adorn your altar in new flowers, anoint your chakra points in light uplifting scents such as lemongrass or lavender. The waning crescent is the appropriate time to sit with the/your Dark Maiden. Silver, black or indigo, and heavier fragrances such as sandalwood, spikenard, myrrh or juniper can be used in her honour. Give yourself adequate time to respond to the above elements fully, noting them in your journal and including ideas to transform any behaviours you have identified as destructive or challenging. You may wish to ask one of the Maiden Goddesses to guide you on this journey and share their wisdom with you.

The Goddess Association in Australia (G.A.I.A.) is a not for profit, member- driven organization which is committed to bringing women together, united in the timeless wisdom and lore of Goddess. For more information go to www.goddessassociation.com.au

Alicia Sherwood M.A. (Ancient History) facilitates programs and workshops for women. For more information, go to www.moontree.net

¹ Shekhinah Mountainwater *Ariadne's Thread* (1991: 70).

² Robert Graves *The Greek Myths I* (1960: 93).

³ Joseph Campbell *Primitive Mythology* (1969: 186)

⁴ Artemis' earlier and Eastern roots declare her status as a Great/Mother Goddess, however, in the Classical period and for the purposes of this discussion, it is her identity as Maiden which prevails.

⁵ *SEG* 9.72.13-16.

⁶ Walter Burkert *Greek Religion* (1985: 151).

⁷ Elements are adapted from Mountainwater (1991: 65).