

## **Masculine Shame: From Succubus to the Eternal Feminine**

By Mary Ayers

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Reviewed by Richard Reeve

In a companion volume to her previous book *Mother-Infant Attachment and Psychoanalysis: The Eyes of Shame*, Mary Ayers probes deeply into our cultural heritage with the publication of *Masculine Shame*. Ayers challenges the reader at every turn, not only because she takes on the fathers of psychoanalysis, submitting their personal material to her incisive scrutiny, but also because she attempts to clear a path for the return of the eternal feminine. After amplifying the autonomous expression of the succubus (the repository of masculine shame throughout history) and exposing the failings of the founders of psychoanalysis in carrying their shame, Ayers moves on to envision pathways to collective healing.

*Masculine Shame* opens with a poetic amplification of the succubus, the demonic female creature said to emasculate men and murder mothers and infants. In what I consider to be the book's strongest writing, Ayers invites the reader to imagine with broad brushstrokes the history of the archetype as "a deeply religious and cultural symbol that has betrayed women by making them containers of men's shame." (pg. 32) For Ayers the image of the succubus "symbolizes mankind's most fundamental source of powerlessness, fear, disrespect, and loss of self – all the places he feels the deepest kind of shame." (pg. xiv) She traces the figure from Lilith through the ages, seeing manifestations in Salome, Delilah, Jezebel, Circe, Clytemnestra, Medea, Pandora, Rusalka, Yuki-Ona, and Cleopatra.

Rendering the emergence of the succubus with the rise of the patriarchy approximately 7000 years ago, Ayers notes that "When patriarchy arises through the negation of the Great Mother as a figure of autonomy and power, as repeatedly has been said, a splitting of the whole into good and bad, male and female, occurs, and in this dichotomy, women are forced to identify with either Lilith or Eve." (pg 9) Ayers convincingly demonstrates that "The succubus and the shame she contains is the psychic heritage of all humankind, for shame is the affect which makes us human. She derives her powers from mankind's fatal flaw - unbounded omnipotence." (pg 11)

The second part of *Masculine Shame* renders an analysis of both Freud and Jung, taking issue both with their personal failings as well as the limitations of their theories to address the fundamental problem of shame. Amplifying the image of the succubus in both Freud's Medusa and Jung's visions of Salome, Ayers claims that "Freud and Jung's theories were very much determined by the society in which they lived - hence, plagued with too much masculine drive to dominate, degrade and destroy. It is an impasse that the succubus takes hold and continues to be a driving splitting force in the field of depth psychology today." (pg. 39)

When I look to the field as a whole, I too see the split from shame in the psychoanalytic tradition, but with regards to the community I find myself taking root in, this is not the case. Ayers notes this as well when she writes in the closing of the book that “A cornerstone of Analytical psychology is the feminine.” (pg. 169) To this point, Harding’s works *Woman’s Mysteries: Ancient & Modern*, *Way of All Women: a Psychological Interpretation* and *The Mother Archetype and its Functioning in Life*, and Perera’s *Descent of the Goddess and Celtic Queen Maeve and Addiction* demonstrate a keen awareness of these aspects of Psyche. Throughout my training journey, these issues have been central both in the curriculum and in the emergence of personal process. While I’m certain the split Ayers has defined is prevalent, I simply point out that others not referenced in this book have been working this field of inquiry and diligently addressing the material in their writings and with their clients for decades.

Reading Ayers analysis of Jung’s Salome figure I was stunned by the level of insight it contained. She writes, “to his credit, Jung intellectually understood his own femininity through his projection upon women... While Jung could objectively see that the woman a man deals with most of the time is a projection of his own anima, he remains blind to the shame he unconsciously projects in order to maintain his position of power.” (pg. 81)

*Masculine Shame* might be one of the last important books to be written before the release of *The Red Book* which explores Jung’s descent without the benefit of this document. Ayers does a masterful detective job piecing together all the elements of Jung’s descent from various sources. I can’t help but wonder how Ayers might have adjusted or further made use of *The Red Book* to make her case regarding Jung. For my part, while the issues Ayers sees are clearly accurate, I came away from reading *The Red Book* with a sense that Jung did in fact suffer much of what Ayers feels he was defended against. In fact, near the end of her analysis of Jung she acquiesces a bit from her stark criticism when she writes “Jung believed that the repression of the feminine is bad for the whole human race, and that if it is not restored to its archetypal place in Western religion the results would be catastrophic. This conviction is reflected in the restoration of Salome’s vision.” (pg. 104)

The third part of *Masculine Shame* explores a wide range of psychoanalytic material for piecing together the potential for the restoration of the eternal feminine. Ayers works from the premise outlined earlier in the book, that “A basic psychoanalytic tenant is that repression always creates pathological potential. So, like any psychic content that is repressed and only grows more powerful, the Great Mother will remain extremely and progressively terrible so long as the patriarchy oppresses the maternal feminine. The dark side of the mother, a place of massive collective repression, only grows in negativity as she is silenced and banished from expression.” (pg 19)

Ayers emphasizes the importance of mother-infant attachment and recognition. She writes, “Recognition brings to life that which is real. It makes one feel authentic and true, and facilitates the acceptance of responsibility, self-mastery, and ownership in a real way.” (pg. 123) She then

proceeds to demonstrate how cultural forces prevent such recognition from occurring. Drawing heavily from the work of Winnicott, she outlines the various developmental failures and convincingly explains how the ego becomes enslaved to shame. She writes, "Since the evil that represses shame dissolves conscience, the individual who is steeped in it justifies, and in one way or another does not recognize, his evil acts." (pg.145)

*Masculine Shame* leaves me wanting examples of clinical material rendering analytic work with adult males who are moving through their defenses and beginning to work with the absolute shame that resides at the core of the Self, what Ayers defines as "Shame generated in the earliest days of life for a male infant is best described as a central affect in the psychotic core of a narcissistic condition." (pg. xiv) It's been my experience that clients do face the challenges the book renders. While her initial book *Mother-Infant Attachment and Psychoanalysis: The Eyes of Shame* was rich with clinical examples, the lack of case material throughout *Masculine Shame* made the move to 'The Gaia Hypothesis' of Lovelock presented in the epilogue as a pathway for the return of the eternal feminine feel a bit ungrounded.

It's a tribute to the great stretches of ground Ayers has covered that she can leave the reader thirsting for more and with many questions pushing one further out into the material she has explored in such a provocative manner.