

## REPORT: MYTHS OF THE MIGHTY WOMEN CONFERENCE

On October 11 & 12, 2014 in New York City COWAP presented a conference on Myths of Mighty Women. Over seventy people attended. Many of them were students at the American Institute of Psychoanalysis. That Institute hosted the conference and was generous in providing back-up staff and a lovely auditorium.

Gisella Galdi of AIP presented a paper on Karen Horney who was the founder of that institute and a woman of valor who spoke her own mind confronting Freud with an alternative view of female psychology that stands today as more true than the phallogocentric idea of female development.

Philip Matyszak, from Oxford University presented a paper on Greek Goddesses and their evolution from the age of the gods, through the age of the titans to the age of the heroes. He discussed the gradual diminishment of the images of the mighty. Hecate personified a goddess, Medea a figure of superhuman powers and Psyche a mortal heroine. All were fearful figures. All refused to accept ill treatment from the men in their lives and by using their own minds to decided what was right.

Irmgard Dettbarn of the German Psychoanalytic Association and the Chinese Psychoanalytic Association presented a Chinese legend of a woman MengJianGru who was so loyal to her husband that she followed him North at the building of the Great Wall with food and warm clothing only to find that he was dead by the time she got there and buried in the wall rather than in a grave. She defied the Emperor who had ordered the wall built and conscripted her husband, got him to give her husband a proper burial by agreeing to marry him after the funeral, but maintained her loyalty to the husband she loved by committing suicide before the wedding night. Dettbarn stressed the role of ritual in promoting social coherence and continuity with wailing as a structure for emotion.

John Munder Ross of the Columbia Psychoanalytic Center in New York talked about the continuity of projections of mighty women from Athena to Antigone to Anna Freud. He pointed out that little boy feels inadequate to satisfy the mother's vulva because it is so large compared to his small penis. From this he believes that the man needs to be shored up in his masculinity in order to face the mighty women in his current life. He reported that male patients complain of disrespect from their wives and girlfriends.

Cecile Bassin of the Seattle Psychoanalytic Institute discussed current versions of fairy tales that provide little girls with models of female roles and possibilities. The two she discussed in detail were Snow White and Cinderella. Both are motherless girls who are treated badly by their stepmothers when they reach marriageable age. Each is rescued by a prince and each has a happily ever after marriage to the prince. Bassin contrasted these stories with more modern versions in which the heroines fend better for themselves. She pointed out that even in the modern versions the model of feminine achievement involves doing good for there, rather than achieving for oneself.

Frances Salo introduced the British queen Boadicia who led a revolt against the Romans that lasted for two years and whose statue stands between the House of Parliament in London and the London Bridge. Her fierceness and fearlessness serve to inspire young Britons to this day. She also spoke of the image of mother formed by babies awareness of their own helplessness and their belief in the all-powerful nature of their mothers.

Alicia Ostriker poet and Professor of Poetry at Rutgers University in New Jersey talked about women heroines in the Hebrew Bible. She pointed out that many of the heroines of the bible were tricksters who got their power by civil disobedience and pretense. She talked about the midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh by not putting the baby Moses to death, Miriam who fooled Pharaoh by putting Moses in a basket where he was not necessarily a Hebrew, but just a baby, and by suggesting a nursemaid to suckle him who was really his own mother. She talked about Sarah who got her son Isaac to be the sole heir of Abraham by exiling his first son Ishmael. Rachel disobediently took her father's household gods with her when she left her parental home and hid them under her, preventing her father from finding them by asserting that she was menstruating so could not touch her. Rebecca tricked her husband into giving his son Jacob the blessing and patrimony that belonged to his older brother Esau. Judith tricked Holofernes and ultimately cut off his head with a sword to save her tribe from his attack.

Ellen Sinkman of the Contemporary Freudian Society talked about three recent movies that showed contemporary versions of images of women. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* showed a plucky seven year old who got up after each letdown and tried to be the tough person she needed to be in a non-nurturant environment. *Juno* showed a teen who defied the shaming of her high school contemporaries when her pregnancy showed. She managed to protect her unborn baby by finding a good adoptive family for her. *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* in the television series of that name is charged with protecting the whole earth from vampires. The progression from protecting oneself to protecting one's offspring, to protecting the world was striking.

Arlene Kramer Richards of COWAP talked about Innana, the earliest known goddess whose story in cuneiform was translated into modern languages only in the past century was described as a model of a woman who could value her sexuality and who could protect her children and her people by using her strength and the knowledge of civilization she got from her father by getting him drunk. Two cases of how her story helped modern women in therapy to deal with their challenges were described.

Groups discussed the application of these ideas to the treatment of our patients. The group meetings contained sensitive data and were not reported to either the larger group or in this report.