

Female Divinities

WCL 3355

Dr. Caryn Tamber-Rosenau

Spring 2019

Tuesdays and Thursdays 2:30-4 p.m.

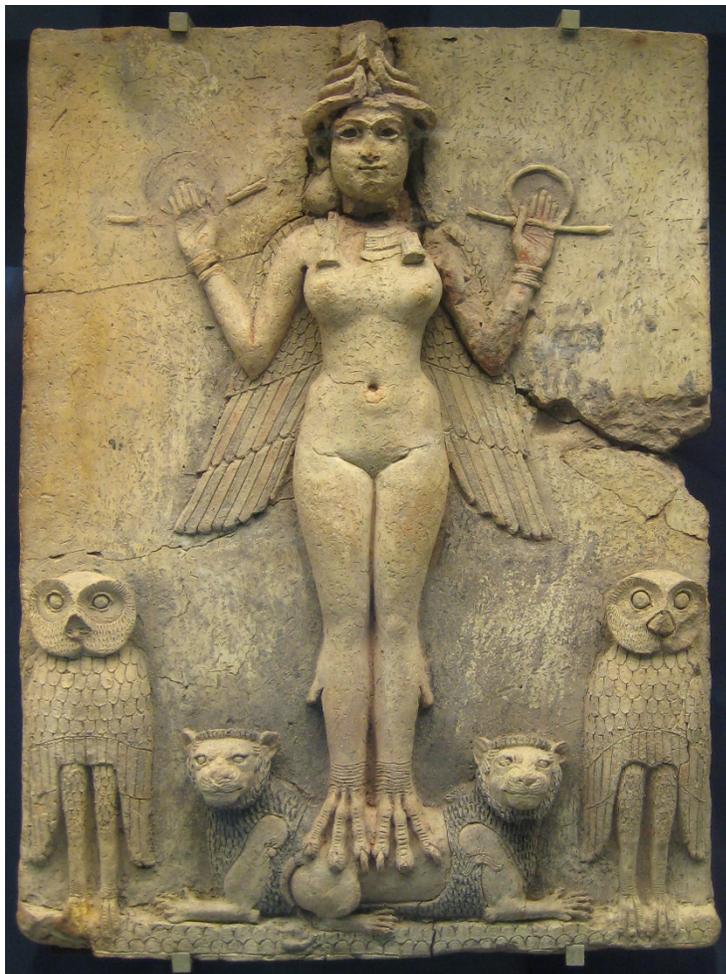
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Office hours: Wednesdays 1-2 p.m., Thursdays 1-2 p.m., or by appointment (Please do not hesitate to visit my office to discuss the course, questions you have, assignments, etc.)



Course description: What do goddesses do? What are the connections between gender and divinity? Are there transgender divine figures? How are goddesses and other female divine figures represented in popular culture? Why do scholars and the public often misinterpret female deities? How do monotheistic faiths incorporate the divine feminine? Did God kill the goddess? In this course, we will explore these and other questions by examining visual and literary primary sources and secondary literature. We will discuss female divinities in a variety of historical and modern cultures, including ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Mesopotamia, as well as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Students will hear guest lecturers from around the university.

Image: Burney Relief, 19th-18th centuries B.C.E., British Museum

Course goals: By the end of the semester, students should:

- Be able to discuss a variety of divine figures;
- Have a basic familiarity with the religions and cultures that produced those figures;
- Understand the modern “goddess movement” and be able to evaluate its claims;

- Be able to evaluate textual and visual evidence concerning female divinities;
- Have gained experience in creatively presenting material to classmates.

Readings: You are not required to purchase any books for this course. (Yay!) All readings will be posted on Blackboard. Please bring assigned readings to class on the appropriate day.

Course requirements and policies:

1. Attendance is required at all sessions. Excessive absences or lateness will affect your grade, as will unexcused early departures from class. If you must miss class, arrive late, or leave early on a given day, please *let me know in advance* if at all possible; it will be your responsibility to make up work that you have missed.
2. You are entitled to two absences, no questions asked, without your attendance and participation grade suffering. Further absences will affect your grade unless they are excused. Examples of excused absences include holidays, personal illness, or family emergency. Documentation of absences may be requested by the professor for them to count as excused.
3. This class is discussion- and participation-based. Therefore, except in cases of serious extenuating circumstances, students missing more than one-quarter of the total number of class sessions will be ineligible for a passing grade in the course.
4. Class participation counts significantly toward your grade! Please come to class prepared to contribute to class discussions. You are expected to do the assigned readings for every class and share insights or ask questions.
5. It is impossible to pay attention and participate if you are on Facebook or Twitter, so please refrain from using your computer, tablet, or phone during class time for any non-class-related purpose. I strongly encourage you to use paper and pen to take notes.
6. For most class sessions, I have provided a few questions for you to consider while doing the readings for that day. I hope that this will focus your time and allow you to get more out of both the readings and class sessions.
7. In between class sessions, I will occasionally need to communicate important information to the class via e-mail. It is your responsibility to check your university e-mail regularly.
8. Students will pair up to research and deliver a short (10-15 minutes) presentation. The presentations will relate to modern pop culture images of female divinities. Each pair will deliver its presentation on the day on which we discuss their assigned divine figure. Assignments will be given and discussed on January 24.
9. Three times during the semester, students will write short (2-3 pages) response papers to course readings. The questions to be addressed in the response papers will be distributed in class beforehand. The response papers will be submitted via TurnItIn.
10. Students will complete a final paper of 8-10 pages about a female divine figure of their choice. Final paper topics will be discussed in class later in the semester. Papers will be due on **May 3** via TurnItIn.
11. Written work may be handed in up to one week after its due date, at a penalty of one-third of a letter grade per day. For example, a paper handed in two days late (i.e. more than 24 hours and less than 48 hours late) is eligible for a maximum grade of A-. After one week, late work will not be accepted.

12. There will be opportunities to earn extra credit points, by attending events on campus or doing a bonus assignment. Stay tuned for more information.
13. This syllabus is subject to change. If I make any changes, I will notify you.

Students with Disabilities: The University of Houston System complies with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, pertaining to the provision of reasonable academic adjustments/auxiliary aids for students with a disability. In accordance with Section 504 and ADA guidelines, the University of Houston strives to provide reasonable academic adjustments/auxiliary aids to students who request and require them. Students seeking accommodation in this course should contact the instructor after obtaining the appropriate documentation through the UH Center for Students with Disabilities.

Counseling and Psychological Services: Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) can help students who are having difficulties managing stress, adjusting to college, or feeling sad and hopeless. You can reach CAPS (www.uh.edu/caps) by calling 713-743-5454 during and after business hours for routine appointments or if you or somebody you know is in crisis. No appointment is necessary for the “Let’s Talk” program, a drop-in consultation service at convenient locations and hours around campus. http://www.uh.edu/caps/outreach/lets_talk.html

Academic integrity:

Students at the University of Houston are required to adhere to the university’s academic honesty policy, which you can find here: <http://www.uh.edu/provost/academic-affairs/policy-guidelines/honesty-policy/> If you are unsure how the honesty policy applies to a given assignment in this course, please ask me. I will not tolerate plagiarism or other forms of cheating and will refer all violations to University officials.

Grading:

Attendance and participation: 20%
Group project: 20%
Response papers: 30%
Final paper: 30%

Course Schedule:

Week 1

Tuesday, January 15: Introductions, syllabus review

Thursday, January 17: “The goddess” or “goddesses”? And why does it matter?

Read: Cynthia Eller, “Not Just God in a Skirt,” pp 130-149 in *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America*

- According to Eller, what is a “spiritual feminist”? How does feminist spirituality relate to goddesses?
- Why does Eller speak of “thealogy”?
- What do you make of Eller’s questions and answers on the bottom of p130 and top of p131? Are they satisfying to you? Why or why not?
- Why doesn’t Eller make a sharp distinction between monotheistic and polytheistic goddess worship?
- What is the relationship of feminist spirituality to male deities, in Eller’s telling?
- What do goddesses have to do with nature?
- Why do so many spiritual feminists “identify” with the goddess? What does identification with a deity mean?

Week 2

Tuesday, January 22: How can we study goddesses? What are the limitations?

Read: Hackett, Jo Ann. “Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us? Ancient Near Eastern ‘Fertility’ Goddesses”

- What does Hackett mean by “Neopaganism”?
- What are Hackett’s complaints about the ways in which scholarship has traditionally spoken about women? How does this relate to goddess spirituality, according to Hackett?
- What issues does Hackett identify with discussions of “fertility” goddesses?
- Discuss this quote: “What some feminists are embracing is not ancient goddesses, ancient religions, and ancient women, but rather the fears and fantasies of modern Western scholars in my field, many of whom were Protestant clergymen.”
- What sources do scholars typically use to discuss Canaanite goddesses? What are the problems with those sources?
- What do you think should be the relationship of historical fact and modern goddess veneration?

Thursday, January 24: How do we discern gender? What are the terms of the “goddess debate”?

Read: Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris, “Introduction: Exploring Female Divinity: From Modern Myths to Ancient Evidence,” pp 6-21 in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*

- What is the nature of the controversy about a “mother goddess”? Who are the players in the controversy and what does each side argue? Why don’t they talk to one another?
- Can you tell what the authors think of the archaeologists’ side of the story? Of the goddess movement’s side?
- What kinds of questions do Goodison and Morris argue for asking about a found object?

- To the authors, why does the debate over evidence for goddesses strike such a chord with so many?

Group projects assigned

Week 3

Tuesday, January 29: The first goddess? Exploring Çatalhöyük

Read: Rountree, Kathryn, “Archaeologists and Goddess Feminists at Çatalhöyük: An Experiment in Multivocality”

- Why is Çatalhöyük important?
- What is the main conflict Rountree describes? Can you tell whether she takes a side?
- How do local attitudes toward Çatalhöyük play into the debate among outsiders (archaeologists and goddess feminists)?
- What is “multivocality”? Is it really present at Çatalhöyük, according to Rountree?
- What does this article tell you about debates over the objectivity of archaeology? What do you think?

Thursday, January 31: Isis and other great goddesses of Egypt

Read: Three prayers to Nut, Hymn to Maat, Prayer to Hathor as Goddess of Love

Optional: Hassan, Fekri A. “The Earliest Goddesses of Egypt: Divine Mothers and

Cosmic Bodies.” Pages 98-112 in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*

Hand out and discuss: Response paper #1 prompt

- What do these hymns and prayers say about the goddesses? What don’t they tell us?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of gleaning information on goddesses from written sources such as these?
- To what does Hassan trace the origin of goddess images in Egypt? What is his evidence?
- What was the connection between Egyptian pharaohs and the gods? What is “divine kingship”?
- What is the relationship of cows to Egyptian goddesses?
- What did goddesses have to do with life after death, according to Hassan?

Week 4

Tuesday, February 5: Isis and other great goddesses of Egypt

Read: Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Isis and Osiris”

Barbara S. Lesko, “Isis, Great of Magic,” pp155-202 in *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (optional)

- What is the role of Isis in this story? What are the problems with relying on this source for information about Isis?
- Why does Isis seem to gain prominence over time and among worshipers beyond Egypt?
- What was the relationship of Isis to kingship? To death?
- How is Isis depicted in iconography and what does this tell us about how ancient Egyptians perceived her?
- What sorts of magical abilities are attributed to Isis?
- What connections have been proposed between Isis and the Virgin Mary?

Thursday, February 7: Inanna/Ishtar

Read: Hymn to Ishtar, Prayer of Lamentation to Ishtar, Self-Laudatory Hymn of Inanna and Her Omnipotence, Tablet VI of The Epic of Gilgamesh
Rivkah Harris, “Inanna-Ishtar as Paradox and a Coincidence of Opposites”

Due: Response paper #1

- Describe the relationship between Inanna/Ishtar and humans displayed in these ancient texts.
- What does Harris mean when she calls Inanna/Ishtar a “paradox”?
- How is Inanna/Ishtar ambiguous in gender?
- What does Inanna/Ishtar have to do with prostitution?
- How does Harris explain the goddess’s ambiguity?

Week 5

Tuesday, February 12: Tiamat and Anat

Read: Enuma Elish, The Baal Cycle

Murphy, Kelly J. “Myth, Reality, and the Goddess Anat: Anat’s Violence and Independence in the Ba’al Cycle”

Hand out and discuss: Response paper #2 prompt

- Who was Tiamat? What is her role in the Enuma Elish?
- Why do you think Anat is portrayed as so violent in the Baal Cycle?
- Does Anat appear to be sexually active?
- What is Murphy’s argument about Anat’s violence and sexual status?

Thursday, February 14: Anat; Did God have a wife?

Read: Aqhat Epic, Keret (Kirta) Epic

Karel van der Toorn, “Goddesses in Early Israelite Religion,” pp 83-97 in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*

- Describe the role of Anat in the two Canaanite stories. What is the significance of her epithet “Virgin”?
- What evidence does van der Toorn describe for goddess worship in early Israel? How do you assess this evidence?

- Who might the Queen of Heaven be?
- Who was Asherah?
- Describe the figurines of women uncovered from ancient Israel. What are the possibilities for the meaning of these figures?

Week 6

Tuesday, February 19: Did God have a wife?

Read: William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?* pp209-236

Due: Response paper #2

- According to Dever, how have modern scholars erred in explaining Asherah?
- What is Ugarit and what is its relevance for the Bible?
- In what contexts does the word “asherah” appear in the Bible?
- What is “folk religion,” and how does it relate to Asherah, in Dever’s opinion? What does folk religion have to do with women?
- What does Dever say the iconographic evidence tells us about Asherah?

Thursday, February 21: Library Day

Week 7

Tuesday, February 26: Hera, Aphrodite, Hestia

Read: Mary E. Voyatzis, “From Athena to Zeus: An A-Z Guide to the Origins of Greek Goddesses,” pp 133-147 in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*

- What are our sources of information about Greek goddesses? What are the strengths and weaknesses of those sources?
- What is a votive, and what can votives tell us about these goddesses?
- How does Voyatzis assess the theory that goddess such as Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite derive from an earlier mother goddess? What do you think of her conclusion?

Thursday, February 28: Athena and Demeter

Read: Hesiod, *Theogony* 929; Homer, *Odyssey* 13.220-249; Homer, *Iliad* 21.390-414; Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Sarah Pomeroy, “Goddesses and Gods,” pp1-15 in *Goddesses, Whore, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*

- In the primary texts, what role does Athena play in the pantheon? What role does she play in relation to humans?
- What can you say about Athena’s gender?
- Why are so many of the major Olympian goddesses virgins?
- What insights does Pomeroy bring to discussions of mother goddesses?

Week 8

Tuesday, March 5: Aphrodite/Venus (guest speaker Darah Vann, History) and Ptolemaic deified queens (Tara Sewell-Lasater, History)

Thursday, March 7: Woman Wisdom

Read: Proverbs 7-9:6

- How would you describe the portrayal of Woman Wisdom in the Proverbs passage?
- Is Woman Wisdom here a goddess? If so, how does this accord with monotheism? If not, what is she?

SPRING BREAK

Week 9

Tuesday, March 19: Shekhinah and Binah

Read: Luke Devine, How *Shekhinah* Became the God(dess) of Jewish Feminism

- What is *Shekhinah* in Jewish tradition, and how did the idea develop?
- How and why did Jewish feminists gravitate toward Shekhinah and adopt it/her as a patron and powerful figure?
- How has Jewish feminist feeling about Shekhinah evolved over the last few decades?

Thursday, March 21: Mesoamerican Goddesses (guest speaker Dr. Rebecca Storey, Anthropology)

Week 10

Tuesday, March 26: Virgin Mary

Read: Luke 1-2

Excerpt from Marina Warner, *Alone Above All Her Sex*

- How is Mary characterized in the Gospel of Luke?
- How do the Gospels portray Mary's role in the life of Jesus? Are there differences among them in this regard?
- How does the idea of the virgin birth develop in early Christianity? Why do you think this idea becomes so popular?

Thursday, March 28: Virgin of Guadalupe (guest speaker Dr. Marie-Theresa Hernandez Ramirez, World Cultures and Literatures)

Week 11

Tuesday, April 2: Maryam and the divine feminine in Islam; Monotheism and the female divine

Read: Qur'an *Surah Maryam*

A.J. Wensinck and Penelope Johnstone, "Maryam" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*

Excerpt from Elisabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (chapter 3)

Due: Response paper #3

- How do the Qur'anic and Muslim treatments of Mary(am) differ from those of the New Testament?
- What is the relationship between the material in the Qur'an and what we find in non-biblical Christian texts?
- How does Maryam relate to the Trinity?
- What does Johnson identify as the problem with male God-language?
- What is her response to using feminine traits to talk about God?
- Why does Johnson suggest using female metaphors about God? What does she hope this will accomplish?
- How does Johnson propose using the discourse of ancient deities to inform modern discussions of God?

Thursday, April 4: Hindu goddesses (guest speaker Dr. Bhavya Tiwari, India Studies)

Read: Ayesha Matthan, "Woman or Goddess?"

Week 12

Tuesday, April 9: Kuan-Yin

Read: The Legend of Miao-shan

Cathryn Bailey, "Embracing the Icon: The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva, Kuan-Yin"

- What is a bodhisattva?
- What can the transformation of Avalokitesvara into Kuan-Yin tell us about Buddhism in China, and vice versa?
- What do you make of Bailey's contention that Kuan-Yin is "trans"?

Thursday, April 11: Oshun

Read: Ifa Divination

Wande Abimbola, "The Bag of Wisdom: Osun and the Origins of the Ifa Divination," pp141-154 in *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas*

- What is Ifa divination? Can you get a sense from this article of its importance?
- What is the popular story about Osun, Orunmila, and divination?
- How does Abimbola upend this conventional view?

Week 13

Tuesday, April 16: Berber founding ancestors and culture heroes (guest speaker Dr. Susan Rasmussen, Anthropology)

Thursday, April 18: Field trip; itinerary and timing TBD

Week 14

Tuesday, April 23: Field trip; itinerary and timing TBD

Thursday, April 25: Wrap-up, reflection on field trips, and discussion of papers
Due: Reflection paper on field trips (extra credit)