

# The Feminine in the Cross of David Jones

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Exclusive language is becoming increasingly problematic. Not only has the Feminist movement demonstrated the alienation and exclusion felt in male dominated language, but our post-Freudian environment forbids us to accept androgyny as convincing. One is female or one is male. That has to be reflected in our language. This scenario leaves us with great paradoxes in regard to our religious language, particularly in view of our 'talk' about the Christian sacrifice. I found an equally paradoxical source of inspiration on this issue in the writings and art of David Jones. His work is paradoxical because while hardly being a feminist (far from it!) or Freudian (he was nearer Jung), he can in the liberation of the artistic communicate the female as well as male<sup>1</sup>.

In this limited exploration I am going to focus on his attitude in visual and written form to Mary and her relationship to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, her son and God. Then I will examine the role of the feminine in Jones' handling of the Eucharist. Finally I will examine the claim that the painting 'Aphrodite in Aulis' is a picture of the crucifixion.

In Jones' use of Mary as a picture of the Temple of the body of Christ he creates a layered effect of separate allusions each resting on the one before. The layering of imagery gives a different effect to a lineal arrangement so the finished picture takes on a perspective that is allowed because of all that has gone before. Thus we have a picture of ship, temple, Mary, nave, and water, all meeting in the figure of the Crucified Christ. The image of the ship as a metaphor for the cross is something Jones uses in both his art and poetry.

.the tree nailed stakes of the clinker-built hull... the great girthed cross-yard mast amidships, the image which those early christian writers had been quick to recognise, the visible image of the wood to which had been made fast the voyaging Pantocrator<sup>2</sup>

The patristic perception of the cross as the intersection of mast and boom of an ancient ship has a resonance in the sea vessels of Jones' *Anthemata*. The keel for Jones is described thus:

Hidden wood  
tree that tabernacles  
the standing trees  
Lignum for the life of us  
holy Keel<sup>3</sup>

The reference to the tabernacle speaks of the Church. The nave of the Church comes originally from its resemblance to a ship or NAVIS turned bottom up<sup>4</sup>. Jones saw this symbolism and used it in *The Anthemata*, naming the ship used to symbolise the Church as 'Mary'<sup>5</sup> (quite logically as ships are always feminine). Mary the mother of God stands as the Church, for both she and it are wedded to Christ. In orthodox Roman Catholicism the church is the female counterpart to the male Christ. In the Church the body of believers is gathered up into the symbolic figure of Mary. However, in *The Anthemata* Jones does something significantly different with this image. He talks of the ship 'Mary', as the cosmic church and speaks of it in the language of the crucifixion. In his manuscript of the poem Jones sketches a ship with blood/wine "asperging the freeboards"<sup>6</sup>, flowing down its right side — "a latere dextro". The blood flowing from the right side of the vessel in *The Anthemata* is paralleled by the water flowing from the right side of the temple as mentioned in the asperging *Vidi Aquam*. Significantly Jones is following the language of the Easter week liturgy which tells of a Temple used as a symbol of the body of Christ.

The water flowed from under the right side of the Temple, south of  
the Altar

(Ezekiel 47:2) Jerusalem Bible.<sup>7</sup>

As in the Eucharist the mixture of wine and water is evocative of Christ's sacrifice, blood and water mingled as they ran down his right side, so this is echoed in the flowing of wine/blood from the ship 'Mary' into the sea.

This image of the crucifixion is again brought to mind when at another point in the narrative during a storm fireballs<sup>8</sup> emblaze themselves on the ship in the shape of the five wounds of Christ indicating the ship "cannot be lost"<sup>9</sup>.

FIVE on'em  
terrible lovely  
starring the wide steer-board  
and lade-board arms of the main yard, afare far out-board of her  
forward flare, at the spumed bowsprit's lifted end, real lofty  
beautiful at the mizzen-mast head<sup>10</sup>



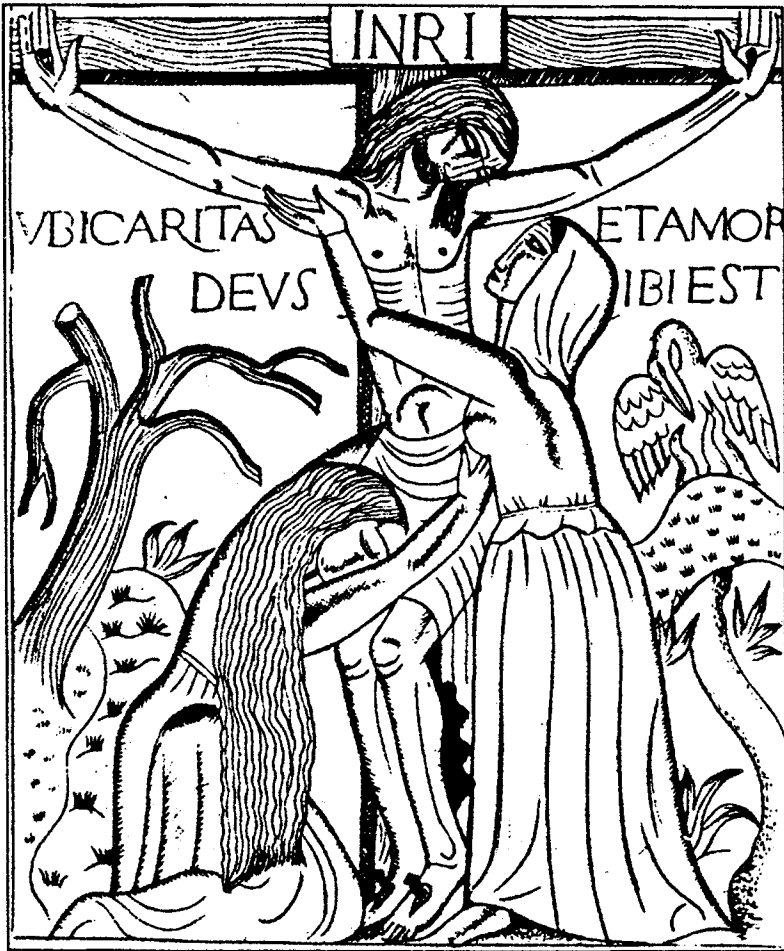


Fig.1

“Crucifixion” (1926)

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the sufferings of the cross is again shown by Jones in a sketch entitled 'Lamentation'. This does not say the same thing as Eric Gill's 'The Nuptials of God',<sup>16</sup> although Jones was aware of this line of thought of his one-time mentor. In all his work he is attempting to include fully the feminine, as opposed to purely masculine, dimensions of the Cross.

Jones also detected feminine symbols within the Eucharist. Both the chalice and the bread have feminine undertones for Jones. In regard to the bread of the Eucharist we find the Greek goddess figure Demeter in *The Anathemata*. Jones made much use of Classical and old English/Welsh myth and legend as René Hague explains :

...for him myth is truth expressed in artifice, the truth of the former constituting in the latter. And it is here that his use coincides with the Christian use of mystery so that what in pre-Christian times, was 'mere' myth becomes when Christianised the revelation of Mystery.<sup>17</sup>

Demeter the corn goddess was responsible for agricultural fertility, through her the offering of the bread at the Eucharist is possible.

from dear and grave Demeter came  
germ of all:  
of dear arts as well as bread.  
To institute, to make stable  
to offer oblations  
permanent  
kindly, acceptable and valid. <sup>18</sup>

However it must be added here that Jones links Tripolemus (who was her messenger, to teach men the art of agriculture) with Melchisedech (the foretype of Christ and priest), as both made holy the fruits of the earth<sup>19</sup>. But Jones also in the use of Demeter recalls Mary for both gave birth to the bread of life.

Out from the mother...  
bearing the corn-stalks<sup>20</sup>

The feminine symbolism of the chalice can be found in his engraving 'He frees the water of Helyon', which was influenced greatly by Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*. . According to Weston the lance of the Grail myth originally had nothing to do with that which pierced Christ's side, but was an emblem of phallic potency, just as the cup originally signified the uterine resources of the female. Jones it would seem (from the notes made in his annotated copy of the book now in the National Library of Wales)<sup>21</sup> disagreed with the separation of



**Fig. 2**

**“Aphrodite in Aulis” (1941)**

(reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the David Jones Estate)

meanings between the sacred and sexual. He accepted the feminine undertones of the chalice in the same way that he incorporated the myth of Demeter into the symbolism of the bread. For Jones was searching for a balance of masculine/feminine imagery in the Eucharist. Simply to merge the symbols to a sort of androgyny would be, for Jones, to render the language meaningless. But to show both the masculine and feminine in the sacrament provides a more holistic presentation of the ritual.

Finally we need to turn to an examination of the watercolour 'Aphrodite in Aulis' (see fig. 2). This contains a synthesis of almost every thing already mentioned in Jones' work. In the background one can find a sea with ships, soldiers, a priest, antique columns crumbling and wasted, a sacrificial lamb, hills and trees. In the foreground, drawing us into the picture is Aphrodite, the goddess from ancient Greece, pregnant in myth. Aphrodite is chained to an altar with soldiers standing guard on either side and a priest officiating behind them. A sacrifice is in progress. The ram on the front of the altar is the *Agnus Dei* with blood issuing from its side into a chalice. The priest is swinging a censer and dressed as a Roman Catholic officiant at a Mass. The soldier on Aphrodite's right, though in World War One uniform, carries the spear of Longinus in preparation for piercing her side. Aphrodite herself shows the sign of the stigmata. Do we have therefore in this conglomeration of myth and mystery a crucifixion? In order to decide whether Jones can be making so radical a visual metaphor we need to look at the thought behind the painting.

The title 'Aphrodite in Aulis' found its original inspiration from Euripides' 'Iphigenia in Aulis', a story telling of an innocent maiden sacrificed in order to appease the god Artemis and thus enable Greece to wreak revenge on Troy. Iphigenia was the willing victim who saw herself as a saviour.

With my own blood in sacrifice I will wash out the fated curse of  
God. <sup>(22)</sup>

If the name Iphigenia had been retained it would have given an image of human sacrifice to the glory of a god. However he changes it to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, and fertility.

My intention in changing Iphigenia to Aphrodite in the title was to include all female cult figures... the figure is all goddesses rolled into one — wounded of necessity as are all things worthy of our worship — she's mother figure and *virgo inter virgines* — the pierced woman and mother of all her foretypes. She is 'Elen the bracelet-giver' of I.P. and also the many wounded Mair, Rhiannon



of the Mabinogion, Ceidwades Wen, Mundi Domina, "not a puff of wind within her" in L.O.P. section p.128. In the Ana., the Lady of the Pool refers to our lady as comprehending, in herself all the potent pre-Christian cult figures and their suffering<sup>23</sup>

Summing up, he takes Aphrodite to stand for Mary (giving her the crescent moon of Mary of the Apocalypse and the light piercing the sky and falling round her as of the Annunciation). In this respect the artistic intention of a female counterpart to the crucified Christ holds a strong resonance.<sup>24</sup>

The tangle of myth and mystery in the picture forces us to see the image as metaphor. He is providing a necessary counter-balance against a purely masculine perception of the crucifixion. The God of love in Jesus Christ is met by the goddess of love in Aphrodite. Jones would maintain that we cannot leave the sexual nature of our beings to talk about the androgynous nature of the crucifixion but must seek both the male and the female within the cross. This is brought out most vividly in a fragment entitled 'The Old Quarry' Part II. It is set at the time of the Passion in Palestine. The scene is a dinner party of Roman intelligentsia discussing current affairs. In the course of the evening the conversation moves on to the crucifixion of Jesus. In the discussion this is said of Christ:

The Salutory Spectacle is, in the first instance seen of the  
soldiers,  
as a pauper.  
Beggar man,  
thief,  
rich man, and if  
priests dare look, for them also on five hooks discovers herself, the  
sum of Aphrodite and the wounded Eros, the pierced  
Hermaphrodite.<sup>25</sup>

The goddess Aphrodite was instrumental in the cult of Hermaphroditus who had a body both male and female, never androgynous. And as we too can never leave our sexuality behind, the feminine in the cross must not be ignored. Thus Jones attempts to show the maleness and femaleness of the sacrificial figure on the cross. The God of love is seen not just as the giver of spiritual love, but also of corporeal love. The Genesis view that God made man and woman both bearing the image of the Divine can find its reflection in the philosophy of Jones, as biblical and patristic writers have similarly spoken of God as both male and female.<sup>26</sup>



- 1 *Dai Great-Coat* p.136-137. Particularly 'Jesus Xt and women. Luther's idea. Not possible for theological reasons. Our Lord only known to us intelligibly in a 'theological and mythological manner'.
- 2 *The Dying Gaul* p. 219f.
- 3 *Anthemata* p. 180f.
- 4 'Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones' p.236.
- 5 'The Lady of the Pool' p.124.
- 6 *Anthemata* p.182.
- 7 From the *Vidi Aquam* of the Catholic rite.
- 8 From Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner'.
- 9 *Anthemata* p.142.
- 10 *ibid* p.141.
- 11 lines 7-8
- 12 *A Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* p.310.
- 13 In the liturgy of Our Lady in the Catholic rite Luke Ch.1 is read: when Jesus jumps in the womb of Mary the typology is that of King David jumping for joy before the Ark of the Covenant..
- 14 *Anthemata* p. 235.
- 15 *ibid* p.224.
- 16 An essential sexual statement that shows Christ in a passionate embrace with a woman (Virgin Mary?) on the Cross.
- 17 *A Commentary on the Anthemata* p.9 .
- 18 *Anthemata* p.230.
- 19 *ibid* note.
- 20 *Anthemata* p.209.
- 21 Paul Hills 'The Pierced Hermaphrodite' in *David Jones Man and Poet* ed. John Mathias.
- 22 'Iphigenia in Aulis' p.337
- 23 *A Commentary on the Anthemata* p.38.
- 24 'Roman Quarry' p.175.
- 25 *Dai Great-Coat* p.138. David Jones personally views the picture as achieving something later pictures fail to capture. He even goes as far as suggesting the 'Aphrodite in Aulis' in its balance of form and content resolves dilemmas created in "Vexilla Regis".
- 26 In the Patristic period for examples of God as female see Clement of Alexandria. Examples of Holy Spirit as female see Latin thinker Marius Victorinus, Greek thinkers Hippolytus and Synesius, Bishop of Cyrene. The Syriac Church had writers who referred to all three members of the Trinity as female - see for example Ephrem, and the Church order *The Didascalia*. Biblical references of female qualities of God are: Isaiah 46:3-4, 66:13, Psalm 131:2, Numbers 11:12, Deuteronomy 32:18. It is also interesting to note that the word in Hebrew for the Mercy of God — *racham* — originally meant *mother's womb*.