

That Old Black Magic

By Kathleen Watt

Handel's heroine Alcina belongs to a long line of mythological and literary characters formed by the age-old equation: Women Plus Power = Sorcery

WHEN IS A SORCERESS not a sorceress, but just a woman—with influence? It sounds like the start of a stupid joke, but it's serious business. Why, in every age and every place, in archives and artifacts and popular opinion, are powerful women and sorcery eternally paired?

Sometimes, woman has been reputed to be magical, otherworldly, even evil, in an effort to explain her unique and inviolate life-giving capacity. At other times, the linking of women with sorcery has been a spiteful scapegoating of underlying social problems that have little or nothing to do with women: Consider history's periodic paroxysms of witch-hunting, stonings, and burnings at the stake, in both the Old World and the New.

And sometimes a woman's "magical" power is undermined more subtly—as when she is enthroned as Princess, Oracle, Muse, or Madonna. That is, her personal power is made to seem, instead of frightening or unlovely, precious, lofty, rarefied. Yet she is marginalized just as surely by the quixotic ideologies pinned upon her.

Still, in all her forms—whether comely or hideous, seductive or repugnant, beguiling or bloodthirsty—the sorceress has always been potent inspiration to artists of every stripe. For her power is more than mere shape-shifting and hocus-pocus. It is transformative, and sacred.

As far back as the beginning of time, there is Gaia—the Great All-Mother Goddess—a dominant mythic figure known the world over. Embodying the mystery of all life, the Earth and human sexuality, she emerges, for example, in the Stone-Age votive figure known as "Venus" of Willendorf. Magnificent and tiny, this grossly obese female figure carved out of Paleolithic limestone fits deliciously in the palm of the hand, where her stony voluptuousness seems magically to yield. And as recently as the winter of

2002, we are spellbound again by the cinematic incarnation of Galadriel, J. R. R. Tolkien's captivating Elven Queen, who bequeaths enchantments to the questing Fellowship of the Ring. These two magical female archetypes bracket an vast treasury of mythic figures who resurface throughout the centuries to invoke again and again that certain supernatural something about powerful women.

In the 15th century, when Classical antiquities began to be excavated in the ruins of Athens and ancient Rome and the translation of Latin classics into vernacular languages, the architects, painters, and poets of Renaissance Italy rediscovered the themes, plots, and characters of classical mythology that would help illuminate their complicated longings. Raffaello Santi (or Raphael), famous for his Madonnas, also would turn to pagan themes. In *Triumph of Galatea*, the careless sea-nymph rides the waves in a dolphin-drawn chariot, laughing away the love song of the uncouth giant Polyphemus. Caravaggio, turning for subject matter to the myth of the hideous Gorgon sisters, paints a terrifying *Head of the Medusa*—furious in its severed awfulness, alive with still snapping serpents.

Following suit, poet Ludovico Ariosto brewed up the Italian Renaissance masterpiece *Orlando furioso*, which in turn inspired George Frideric Handel's opera, *Alcina*, two centuries later. A hybrid of Carolingian chivalry and Greek mythology, this epic romance draws upon the medieval exploits of Charlemagne's legendary paladins and their magical women—the miscreant Arthurian sorceress Morgan le Fay, and the mythological Circe, the dread goddess who fitfully transforms the hapless crewmen of Odysseus into swine on her enchanted island. The Circe turns up in *Orlando furioso* in the character of Alcina, who casts spells willy-nilly on a bewitched island of her own.

Morgan herself is muddle of mysterious origins. Early sources refer to her as "Goddess," and giver of healing ointments. She is supposed to have learned her skills initially in a corrupt early Christian nunnery, further honing them under the magician Merlin. The legend of Morgan's wickedness derives from Cistercian monks who believed nonmale, noncloistered healers to be blasphemous, and who associated the pagan Morgana with the Morrighan, an ancient triple-aspected Celtic Goddess of death, sexuality, and conflict. Handel's *Alcina* realizes this Morgana spectacularly.

In the mythological enchantress Alcina, Ariosto found the imprint of all-too human passion, undone by love—love for the aspect of a mortal man, the legendary knight Ruggiero. The impossible reverie the sorceress Alcina shares with Ruggiero is as blissful and cock-eyed as any love-struck mortals'. In *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "What lies immediately below the surface of [*Orlando furioso*] is simply the actual—the daily life of travel, war, or gallantry." Like any authentic mythology, *Alcina* is not specifically about shape-shifting or hocus-pocus: It is about our sacred selves.

—*Kathleen Watt writes frequently on the performing arts.*