

Babalon Rising:

JACK PARSONS' WITCHCRAFT PROPHECY

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IN THE FORTY YEARS or so following the death of John Whiteside Parsons in 1952, his name—Jack Parsons from here on out—circulated principally among magic folk, critics of Scientology, and historians of modern rocketry. In the new century, however, the tale of the SoCal rocket scientist-cum-sex magician has proven a hot commodity, told and retold in a series of articles, biographies, graphic novels, movie scripts, and reality TV shows that have transformed Parsons into one of the most storied figures in the history of American occulture. The superficial reasons are easy to see: with its charismatic blend of sex, sorcery, technology and death, Parsons' story haunts a dark crossroads of the Southern California mindscape, scrawling a prophetic glyph in the wet pavement of postwar America. Indeed, his tale is so outrageous that if it did not exist, it would need—as they say—to be invented. But if it *were* invented—that is, if his life were presented as the fiction it in so many ways resembles—it would be hard to believe, even as a fiction. The narrative would seem overly contrived, at once too pulp and too poetic, too rich with allegorical synchronicity to stage the necessary suspension of disbelief.

In this essay, I want to explore an unremarked aspect of Jack Parsons' life and thought, what I will call his *magickal feminism*. In his 1946 text *Free-*

dom is a Two-Edged Sword, Parsons issued a call for women to take up the spiritual, sexual, and political sword—a cry for female autonomy that also eerily anticipated the militant witchcraft that would find historical expression in California over twenty years later. Before we sketch these links, however, we need a quick review of his extraordinary life.

Parsons was born in Pasadena in 1914 and raised in privilege by his mother and grandparents, although the family later fell on hard times. A pampered and bookish child, Jack attempted to conjure up the devil at age thirteen and balked in terror at his apparent success. He also became interested in chemistry and rocketry, then largely the province of boys who, like Parsons, consumed pulp science-fiction magazines like *Amazing Stories*. Today, when we say that something “isn’t rocket science,” we forget that in the early 1930s, few prominent scientists took space rocketry seriously at all. This didn’t stop Parsons, who built model rockets with his pal Ed Forman, and later hooked up with a Caltech student named Frank Molina, who in turn helped bring their experiments with rocket propulsion under the guidance of the legendary Caltech professor Theodore von Kármán. Setting up in the Arroyo Seco, just above the Devil’s Gate dam, the team began experimenting with stationary rockets, and eventually moved their tests to the Caltech campus itself—at least until a few wayward explosions forced the group, now labeled the “suicide squad”, to return to the Arroyo. After the group scored some successes useful for the war effort, Parsons made, in the summer of 1942, his most significant technical breakthrough: the creation of a solid fuel dubbed GALCIT-53, whose subsequent development would lead directly to the Minutemen and Polaris missiles of the postwar era. In the forties, Parsons and Forman started the Aerojet Corporation, while also co-founding the Jet Propulsion Laboratory with Molina and others.

Parsons had managed to transform a reckless hobby into a profitable and cutting-edge technology, but the brazen and confident fellow was equally devoted to his magickal career during these years. Parsons was already familiar with the rudiments of magical practice when he came across a copy of Crowley’s *Konx om Pax* on the shelves of a Pasadena used car dealer in 1938. Inspired, Parsons then visited the Agape Lodge No. 2 in Hollywood, which at that moment was the only functioning lodge of the Ordo Templi Orientis. Jack and his wife Helen were initiated in 1941 under Wilfred Smith, and by 1943 the charismatic Parsons, who initially impressed Crowley as the perfect person to usher Thelema into a new era, became head of the lodge. At the same time, Crowley and others in the lodge were

concerned about Parsons' dark-side dabbling in "black magic", "voodoo", and "witchcraft", all of which were seen as excessively dark or crude magical currents at the time (these reactions—from Crowley no less!—remind us as well of how much the boundaries of "proper" occult practice would change during the coming decades). Parsons' wildness also dictated the social character of the so-called "Parsonage": the redwood Pasadena mansion at 1003 South Orange Grove Ave. that he and Helen transformed into a bohemian rooming house that also served as the new home of the lodge.

Parsons continued to read the pulps, and attended meetings of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society. Here he befriended Robert Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, and the redhead L. Ron Hubbard, whom Parsons described to Crowley as "the most Thelemic person I have ever met." In 1946, Parsons invited Hubbard to play the role of sryer in the Babalon Working, perhaps the single most storied rite in the history of American occultism. As we will explore later in this essay, Babalon is a polyvalent archetype within Thelema, at once symbolizing the Earth Mother, the supernal initiatrix beyond the Abyss, and a practical current of sexual mysticism embodied in the office known as the Scarlet Woman. Parsons believed that the energy of Babalon was the balance and complement to the explosive violence that characterized the Aeon of Horus, and as such had a leading role to play in the historical era that was just beginning to dawn.

The first part of Parsons' ritual, designed to evoke an "Elemental," resulted, in Parsons' mind at least, with the relatively synchronistic appearance at his home of the striking redhead Marjorie Cameron, his next and last great love and sex magic partner. Later, in February 1946, alone beneath the two power lines whose crossing framed his favorite power spot in the Mojave, Parsons evoked Babalon, who appeared before him and commanded him to write down *Liber 49*—a bold and, it must be said, resoundingly unsuccessful attempt to add a fourth chapter to Crowley's *Book of the Law*. As Michael Staley argued in *Starfire*, "In terms of content, level of inspiration, and style, *Liber 49* is nothing like *The Book of the Law*; and on this basis alone, the claim can be looked at askance."¹ More recently, Peter Grey has described Parsons' text as "a poor production with some howlingly bad lines only redeemed by a few shots of brilliant blood red clarity."²

1 Michael Staley, "Beloved of Babalon," in Michael Staley, ed., *Ecpyrosis: The Best of Starfire Vol 1*, (London: Starfire Publishing Ltd, 2010), 92.

2 Peter Grey, *The Red Goddess* (London: Scarlet Imprint, Summer Solstice 2008), 163.

The oddities of Parsons' *Book of Babalon*, an incomplete manuscript that contains *Liber 49* and other texts, have contributed to the somewhat uneasy relationship many Thelemites have with Parsons' magical legacy. Though Crowley was grooming Parsons to succeed him, Master Therion thought the Babalon Working was ridiculous. He also grew disenchanted with Parsons' erratic emotionality and—rather ironically—his erotic obsessions. William Breeze, currently the Frater Superior of the O.T.O., also does not withhold criticisms of Parsons, accurately noting that “Jack had tried to do with magick what he successfully pulled off with chemistry and rocket science: reading beyond his level of experience, skipping preliminaries, bootstrapping himself, rewriting the rules to suit himself.”³ For Breeze, Parsons was ultimately a “failed” magician—a failure that also proved disastrous for the institution of Thelema in the immediate postwar period. The loyal Smith had been knocked aside to make way for Parsons, but, by the end of 1946, Parsons turned his back on the O.T.O., selling the Parsonage and resigning as head of the lodge.

Over the next six years, Parsons' career, love life, and state of mind grew increasingly erratic even as he plunged into a solo magickal path. He wrote a few powerful texts, took the oath of Magister Templi before his old mentor Smith, and began to develop a new and more “modern” magical religion freed of the “claptrap” of the O.T.O., a path that he called “the Witchcraft.” Because of his associations with political radicals and his hedonistic lifestyle, Parsons was eventually barred from the military-industrial complex he helped to build, and earned his keep pumping gas and making explosive effects for Hollywood. In June 1952, a day before moving to Mexico with Cameron, he was horrifically maimed from an apparently accidental explosion in his home laboratory. He died a few hours later. Upon hearing the news, his mother killed herself, and Cameron plunged into an agonizing grief that in some sense never left her.

Back in the pivotal year of 1946, Parsons had written “Freedom is a Two-Edged Sword”, a remarkable proto-libertarian essay whose political, religious, and erotic concerns were inspired in part by Crowley's recently issued “Liber OZ” and in part by Parsons' growing spleen at America. In the final section, “The Woman Girt with a Sword”, Parsons presents a vision of a militantly empowered feminist witchcraft that was radical for its time and remarkably prescient. Castigating the religion of Jehovah as a

3 William Breeze, “Foreword,” in John W. Parsons and Marjorie Cameron, *Songs for the Witch Woman* (London: Fulgur, 2014), 11.

“tyrannical and superstitious patriarchy” that treats females as “an inferior animal,” Parsons bemoans the contemporary fate of woman. “How long have you served in chains, a slave to the lust of pigs and the guilt of pigs?” He ascribes this servitude to women’s love of males, whom he characterizes as “bewildered frightened children, playing games against the dark.” Pessimistic about men’s politics and men’s science, Parsons looks back fondly on the era before patriarchy, a romantic nostalgia that would not enter popular consciousness until the 1970s: “It is not a matriarchy as we imagine it—a rule of clubwomen, or frustrated chickens. It is an equality. The woman is the priestess; in her reposes the mystery. She is the mother, brooding yet tender; the lover, at once passionate and aloof; the wife, revered and cherished. She is the witch woman.”

To be sure, Parsons’ anti-patriarchal song of praise would probably not pass full muster with many feminists today, his vision being at once heterosexual, essentialist, and, in a pulp fantasy sort of way, slightly cheesy. In Parsons’ spiritual mythology, man is the hero, with woman the hierophant who compels man to make himself magically worthy of her fecund mysteries, which are still tied to male potential. “The future is with you. For you are the mother of the new race, the redeemer and lover of the new men, the men who shall be free.” That said, Parson’s evocation remains remarkable for its militancy: “Come back, woman, come back to us again!...Witch woman, out of the ashes of the stake, rise again!...Be cunning, oh woman; be wise, be subtle, be merciless.”

A similar pivoting marks Parsons’ vision of liberated female eros. Critiquing the “frigid woman,” he cries “Go to the mountains and the oceans and the forest, go naked in the summertime, that you may regain the old joy, and love gladly and freely under the stars.” This might seem like a stereotypical male Dionysian fantasy, but Parsons’ next lines more surprisingly anticipate the body image critiques and celebratory consciousness raising that would come to characterize the many feminist currents of the future. “But the body is not beautiful? Here is a secret. The body is molded by the mind. Embrace fear, repression, hate; then look upon the body—or rather do not look upon it. But go free; love joyously, without restraint; run naked a little. Then watch the cheeks flush; see the breasts swell—the supple contours, the flowing rhythm.”⁴ He ends the essay with a martial evocation of Babalon, “girt with the sword of freedom,” a figure

4 These quotations are from John Whiteside Parsons, *Freedom is a Two-Edged Sword: Essays* (Las Vegas: Falcon Press, 1989), 39–44.

whose incarnation into political reality he also linked in a contemporaneous essay to women's "demand for increased freedom, the rejection of both the tyrannical husband and the child lover, [and] the increase of feminine polygamy and lesbianism."⁵

Archetypal assemblages arise and echo through history in nonlinear patterns of resonance. Parson's vision of a gynocentric, erotically libertarian, and explicitly martial and anti-patriarchal proto-witchcraft began developing almost ten years before Gerald Gardner's publication of the considerably tamer *Witchcraft Today* in 1954, and over twenty years before the appearance of the New York City feminist group WITCH, an acronym that stood, at least in some accounts, for "Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell." Formed in Halloween 1968, WITCH was inspired by the wacky Movement activism of the Yippies, and was less focused on the specifically feminist issues that would soon come to the fore in radical women circles. In Cynthia Eller's words, "These first feminist witches did not gather to worship nature, but to crush the patriarchy, and to do so in witty, flamboyant, and theatrical ways."⁶ In their 1968 manifesto, WITCH claimed that "witches and gypsies were the original guerillas and resistance fighters against oppression—particularly the oppression of women... Witches have always been women who dared to be: groovy, courageous, aggressive, intelligent, nonconformist, explorative, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary."⁷ Writing a decade later, the feminist theorist Mary Daly would strike a similar tone in her "gyn/ecological" work of "re-calling/re-memembering/re-claiming our Witches' power to cast spells, to charm, to overcome prestige with prestidigitation, to cast glammers, to employ occult grammar, to enthrall, to bewitch."⁸ This reclamation included the power not only to seduce and enjoy, but to focus and direct militant aggression. In *Pure Lust*, Daly writes that "The Metamorphosing Sage rides her Rage. It is her broom, her Fire-breathing, winged mare...Rage is not a 'stage.' It is not something to be gotten over. It is transformative, focusing Force."⁹

5 *Freedom is a Two-Edged Sword*, 91.

6 Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: the Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 53.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: the Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), 318.

9 Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), 375.

From the perspective of magical praxis, however, it is fair to say that the militant witch was more pose than potion within radical feminism. "By the late 1970s," Ronald Hutton notes, "witchcraft had become a symbol without a practice in most feminism."¹⁰ However, while the second-wave feminism of the seventies focused on a host of concrete political goals, the practice of "consciousness raising" also transformed the inner life of many feminists. This, coupled with the opening to lesbianism and changing sexual roles, broadened the focus for many feminists towards the energetic features and potentials of the liberated female body. This "essentialism" developed into a loosely focused feminist spirituality that inevitably began to feed and comingle with popular witchcraft. In 1978, the Pagan historian Margot Adler noted that some Wiccan practitioners viewed the term *witch* "as a word to be reclaimed, much as militant lesbians have reclaimed the word *dyke*."¹¹ In other words, rather than rewrite the figure of the witch into a gentle New Age healer, many Wiccans drew productive energy from the very negativity that charged and animated the archetype.

The unambiguous origin of radical feminist witchcraft lies in Southern California, where Zsuzsanna Budapest, a hereditary witch from Hungary who moved to Los Angeles in 1970, founded the women-only Susan B. Anthony Coven no. 1 in 1971. Radically detuning the masculine/feminine polarity that structured Gardnerian Wiccan, Budapest saw spiritual work as continuous with the discourse and militant practice of radical feminism and particularly lesbian separatism. Her manifesto states that "We believe that just as it is time to fight for the right to control our bodies, it is also time to fight for our sweet woman [sic] souls." This spiritual militancy employed a good deal of pragmatic kitchen witchery that resembled American rootwork more than the more anodyne ritualism of some Pagan witchcraft. The coven's "Anti-rape squad" publicly shamed male rapists, and ushered victimized women through the legal process by teaming them up with butch dykes who would keep aggressive cops at bay. Once the rapist was apprehended, a black candle in the shape of a penis would be ritually burned. "A witch who cannot hex cannot heal," Budapest wrote. "Cupcakism, turning the other cheek, is not for witches."¹² Though Budapest's most famous student, Starhawk, offered a kinder, gentler, and more inclu-

10 Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 344.

11 Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon*, (New York: Viking Press, 1979), 42.

12 Z. Budapest, *The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries* (Berkeley, CA: Wingbow Press, 1989), 2, 48.

sive model of witchcraft activism, she too would sometimes articulate an aggressive militancy that stands out against the more tepid New Age and ecumenical visions of spiritual feminism. “So-called negative emotion—anger—is valued ...as a sign that something is wrong and that action needs to be taken,” she wrote in the 1979 collection *Womanspirit Rising*. “Witches prefer to handle anger by taking action and making changes rather than by detaching ourselves from our feelings in order to reach some nebulous, ‘higher’ state.”¹³

None of the feminist witches from the seventies are likely to have read Parsons, and none of them, it should be stressed, needed his peculiar prophecy. That said, I don’t believe it is an accident that militant witchcraft arises most vociferously in Los Angeles, whose powerful magical currents draw from decades of local Thelemic practice, and the corresponding presence of the Babalon current so brazenly established by Parsons. Here I am using the term “currents” not only in the sense familiar to esoteric scholars, in which a “current” is a historically identifiable but constantly developing mode of discourse and practice. I am also interested in a more haunted and energetic sense of current as a kind of psycho-geographical charge. So while there are certainly direct connections between Parsons and the Los Angeles magical culture of the sixties and seventies, principally through the influence of the amazing Marjorie Cameron, we don’t need to speculate about such points of contact to understand the intertwining of times within a particular nexus of space. In light of what comes later, we can also follow the flow backwards—upstream so to speak—and ask questions of emergence that resonate with figures of later manifestation. Here in particular I would like to return to Parsons and consider the question: From what gleamings did Parsons derive his vision of the self-empowered feminist witch? Though we can never nail down the dense psycho-dynamics of such a singular soul as it journeys through the labyrinths of archetype, I think we can locate three seedbeds for Parsons’ prophetic vision: pulp literature, the Thelemic lore of Babalon, and Parson’s own unusual sexual ethics.



13 Starhawk, “Witchcraft and Women’s Culture”, in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds, *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper & Rowe, 1979), 264.

Parsons was a life-long lover of fantastic literature, weird tales, and science fiction, material that undoubtedly fed his magick, his science, and his erotic imagination. Though he does not to my knowledge mention the book, as a youth Parsons almost certainly read Rider Haggard's 1886 novel *She*, the mega-selling *Star Wars* of Victorian fantasy adventures. The novel's eponymous and sometimes vengeful heroine, Ayesha or She-Who-Must-Be-Obeded, is a white queen of an African tribe who espouses a savage and Nietzschean social Darwinism. For Ayesha, all human motives are reduced to sex, wealth, and power. "Our life is one long crime", she says. "We destroy that we may live."¹⁴ Haggard's book can be seen in some ways as an interrogation of Victorian sexual values, though an only partially subversive one—for every kink there is a correspondingly smooth accommodation. For example, the tribal people first encountered by the British explorers invert the normal rules of courtship by displaying aggressive female come-ons. As Haggard critic Norman Etherington noted, the author "appears to endorse simultaneously the feminist proposition that women should be given more choice in romance and the conventional man's desire for women who will fulfill his sexual fantasies without prompting."¹⁵ Ayesha, an independent and murderously cruel leader, features a similar ambivalence, for after falling in love with the explorer Leo, she grows submissive, and pledges to love, honor, and obey him. That said, the character Ayesha carved a radical, even revolutionary archetype into fantastic literature, a woman at once violent, exotic, and desirably in command. Freud was fascinated by the character, and Jung believed she embodied the anima, the unattainable ideal female whose pursuit through the labyrinth of projection had destroyed many a male. Etherington also presents a psychoanalytic argument, concluding that Ayesha ultimately represents "the desired but unattainable mother."

Parsons certainly had a close and curious relationship with his mother, but we will leave such speculations aside in light of a far more important literary influence on his adult fantasies: Jack Williamson's excellent 1940 short story (and later novel) *Darker Than You Think*, one of Parsons' favorite fictions. An imaginative reflection of the sexually repressed Williamson's own Freudian analysis at the Meninger Institute, the horror story concerns the journalist Will Barbee's embroilment with the confident and charis-

14 H. Rider Haggard, Norman Etherington, ed., *The Annotated She* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 136.

15 *The Annotated She*, xxx.

matic red-head April Bell. Bell's "lithe free grace", it turns out, depends on her actually being a werewolf bitch, a shape-shifter who seduces Bardee into her ancient witch cult through the Lovecraftian route of dream. In one dream, Bardee is changed into a saber-tooth "were-tiger" while Bell remains in her human form: "nude and white and beautiful, her red hair streaming in the wind", she *mounts him*. Though radiating the cruel ambivalence of a film noir femme fatale, April is at the same time magnetic and liberated, and the psychoanalytic process represented by Barbee's seduction by this aggressive and sexually amoral woman is a threatening but ultimately positive vanquishing of repression. The last line of the novel describes Barbee, back in wolf form, as he "picked up her exciting scent, and followed her into the shadows."¹⁶ In the words of the psycho-biographer Alan Elms, the ultimate fate of "Will" in the story represents a "triumph of id over superego".¹⁷ Though the randy and psychoanalytically informed Parsons needed no such erotic encouragement, the figure of the threatening, darkly erotic, and supernatural anima figure certainly informs his aggressive woman girt with a sword.

If pulp fiction represents a "low magic" of the psycho-sexual imagination, we can turn to Thelema, and especially the blood-red radiance emanating from Babalon, to find more numinous—though still highly erotic—exemplars of magickal female power. The nature and function of Babalon in Crowley's magickal imagination and system of practice is a matter most recondite, and I trust other contributors of this volume to lead us through this arcana. Here I simply want to offer the uncontroversial assertion that Parsons' transformation of the Babalon current both carries on and significantly reframes Crowley's powerful re-imagination of the Biblical figure. That said, I also think it is important to respect the distinction that Carl Abrahamsson makes between Babalon as archetype and Babalon as a magical formula, two features that I shall briefly address in turn.¹⁸

Though Crowley's vision of Babalon directly emerges from the scarlet images and purple prose embedded in *The Book of the Law*, we should begin with the apocalypse that closes the New Testament. The Babylon who appears in *Revelation* is, of course, the personification of a place: the

16 Jack Williamson, *Darker Than You Think* (New York: Garland, 1975), 162, 282.

17 Alan C. Elms, *Uncovering Lives: the Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 129.

18 See Carl Abrahamsson "Babalon", in Carl Abrahamsson, *Reasonances 2000–2013* (Scarlet Imprint, 2014), 59–68.

ancient city of Jewish exile that was itself almost certainly a cipher for the more present hegemony of Rome. As such, she incarnates the *city as such*, whose wanton luxury is rendered all the more corrosive through its whorish proximity to kings and rulers. Significantly, though she rides the sovereign beast, Babalon herself does not reign, but rather prostitutes herself to power. In the Enochian magic of John Dee, which forms the matrix of Thelema's scarlet Lady, "Babalon" remains a signifier of wickedness and harlotry. But in the sort of inverted affirmation we saw above, whereby derogatory terms like "dyke" and "witch" are validated and extolled, Crowley's visionary encounter with Babalon in *The Vision and the Voice* turns this sluttishness on its head.

In the 12th Aethyr, Crowley encounters a charioteer whose ruddy cup echoes the golden cup "full of abominations and filthiness" that Babylon enjoys in *Revelation*. Here the cup itself is full of blood, an intoxicating wine that Crowley somewhat counter-intuitively names "compassion." The logic, however, is compelling, even brilliant. The Mystery of wanton Babalon is precisely her selflessness: "she hath yielded up herself to everything that liveth, and hath become a partaker in its mystery. And because she hath made herself the servant of each, therefore is she become the mistress of all." Here the Biblical rejection of harlotry is reclaimed as the saint's infinite generosity, not unlike the utopian phalanxes of Charles Fourier, whose "sexual philanthropy" ensured that pleasure was distributed even to the infirm, the repulsive, and the kinky. However, despite her position atop the Beast, Babalon is far from a commanding figure; indeed, it is precisely her "weakness" that "hath subdued their strength." This is not the "woman girt with a sword" announced by Ra-Hoor-Khuit in the third book of *Liber Legis*, a figure who, it must be emphasized, is not identified with the "Scarlet Concubine" we meet a few lines later. Even as the Lady of the City of Pyramids, the Babalon we meet in *Liber 418* is not martial.

Things become spicier when we turn to the Babalon who becomes the central topos for Crowley's vision of sexual mysticism. In *Liber Cheth*, her ruddy cup becomes at once the Holy Graal and the sacred orifice into which the magician expends himself in an act of radical self-abnegation that catalyzes an erotic *nigredo*: "Then shall thy brain be dumb, and thy heart beat no more, and all thy life shall go from thee; and thou shalt be cast out upon the midden, and the birds of the air shall feast upon thy flesh, and thy bones shall whiten in the sun." Babalon's acolytes are, in a sense, called to emulate her own compassionate abjection, a submission that, to speak in less covert sexual terms, introduces a distinct element of masoch-

ism to the scenario. The *chela* here is urged to “slay thyself in the fervour of thine abandonment unto Our Lady.” At the same time, it is still the supplicant’s “quenchless lust” that drives the scene, and not Babalon’s own desire. In *Liber Aleph*, a later text, Babalon’s role as magickal “top” comes through more boldly, as she “plieth Her Scourge upon me, even upon me, To Mega Therion, to compel me to Creation and to Destruction...” Once again, though, Babalon remains a supernal Mother, albeit an incestuous and drunken one, “wallowing in Joy.” There is no sword in sight.

Within Crowley’s own practice of sexual magick, the Babalon current was “stepped down” into the office of the Scarlet Woman, whose characterization in the third chapter of *The Book of the Law* of course already provided a typology for Babalon. We need only recall Leah Hirsig’s oath to recall the continuity of this office and shameless Babalon: “I will work the way of wickedness, I will kill my heart, I will be loud and adulterous, I will be covered with jewels and rich garments, I will be shameless before all men, I for token thereof will freely prostitute my body to the lusts of each and every Living Creature that shall desire it.”¹⁹ The Scarlet Woman incarnated the pride, luxury and sacred sluttishness of Crowley’s supernal archetype, while providing the Beast with the concrete opportunity to continue transgressing the Christian taboos that in some sense he never could (or wanted to) abandon.

As with many intense and transgressive sexual relationships, Crowley’s treatment of Hirsig and his other Scarlet Women present a complicated and not always pretty picture. The stress of trying to uphold your spiritual mentor’s grandiose spiritual and sexual projections should not be underestimated. As Carl Abrahamsson delicately puts it, “For many of these women, I’m sure the concept [of Babalon] created great challenges.”²⁰ Moreover, as the scholar Hugh Urban suggests in his well-informed if one-dimensional account of Crowley in his *Magia Sexualis*, “Crowley seems to have regarded women as rather limited and ultimately expendable companions in spiritual practice.”²¹ Similar critiques have been directed towards traditional Tibetan tantric practice, of course, and the origin of both complaints remains what can only be called the patriarchal stain. Urban turns to *Liber C vel Azoth*, a practical text of heterosexual magick linked

19 Cited in Abrahamsson, *op cit.*, 64–65.

20 *Ibid*, 64.

21 Hugh Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 133.

to the 9th degree work in the O.T.O. Here Crowley writes that “Man is the guardian of the Life of God; woman but a temporary expedient; a shrine indeed for the God, but not the God.”²² Every man and every woman may be a star, in other words, but those stars burn with a solar-phallic light.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that Crowley's Babalonian vision played a direct and instrumental role in establishing the figure of the Goddess within modern—as opposed to traditional—witchcraft. In his initial version of the Charge of the Goddess, Gerald Gardner, who Crowley initiated into the O.T.O., put a good deal of Crowley's “scarlet” language from the Gnostic Mass (and *Liber Legis*) into the mouth of his Wiccan high priestess, voicing the Star Goddess:

I love you: I yearn for you: pale or purple, veiled or voluptuous. I who am all pleasure, and purple and drunkenness of the innermost senses, desire you. Put on the wings, arouse the coiled splendor within you. Come unto me, for I am the flame that burns in the heart of every man, and the core of every Star.

This language was later drastically changed by Doreen Valiente, who offered a less lusty but more pastoral and regal portrait of the deity. On a more “meta” level, Valiente's “overwriting” of Crowley's visionary language also represents the complex ways that Crowley's legacy has been cloaked within popular postwar Wicca, which has always had trouble with the Beast's distinct lack of feminist sentiments. So, for example, Starhawk presents Crowley's definition of magic in *Dreaming the Dark*, within quotation marks, but nonetheless does not attribute the citation to him or mention him anywhere in the book.²³ Similarly, many less informed Wiccans and feminist witches have denied any connection with the Thelemic current that, through the complex of images that bind female energies in the *Book of the Law* to the figure of Babalon, directly shaped the lineaments of the modern Goddess.

To return to Parsons, we might locate his “Woman Girt with a Sword” at the halfway point between Crowley's Babalon and the independent goddess of later popular witchcraft. In Abrahamsson's words, “Parsons reformulated what Crowley had already defined,” drawing the Babalon current away from Crowley's solar-phallic fixations and releasing it into a post-patriarchal or proto-feminist frame that amplified the martial element. With

22 Ibid.

23 Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 169.

Parsons, the two images that are clearly distinguished in *Liber Legis*—the “woman girt with a sword” (III.11) and the “Scarlet Concubine” (III.14)—are conflated in Babalon, who is now not only wanton, but armed, dangerous, and demanding her freedom. This transition is made abundantly clear in Parsons’ poem “The Birth of Babalon,” usually included within the *Book of Babalon*. The poem begins with a restatement of Crowley’s figure, with her wine and compassionate harlotry:

*BABALON is too beautiful
for sight of mortal eyes
She has hidden her loveliness away
in lonely midnight skies,
She has clothed her beauty in robes of sin
and pledged her heart to swine
And loving and giving all she has
brewed for saints immortal wine.*

In the immediately following stanzas, however, the figure shifts abruptly—“But now”—into distinctly Parsonian imagery, which links Babalon to both the sword and the flame:

*But now the darkness is riven through
and the robes of sin are gone,
And naked she stands as a terrible blade
and a flame and a splendid song
Naked in radiant mortal flesh
at the Birth of BABALON.²⁴*

The emphasis on “birth” here also reminds us that, for Parsons, the maternal potential of Babalon does not only underscore her archetypal power but announces her capacity to incarnate in the flesh, in the human world. In contrast to Crowley’s more metaphoric (and savvy) understanding of the Scarlet Woman as a mobile office of Babalonian ritual, Parsons seems to have literally believed that Babalon was going to take or had already taken physical incarnation. While this belief helps us appreciate the particular burden that Cameron carried in her life, it is also important to register, again, the paradoxical *autonomy* of this vehicle. In *Liber 49*, Parsons’ chan-

24 *Ecpyrosis*, 122.

neled text, Babalon promises to provide a female “vessel” but commands Parsons to “Seek her not, call her not. Let her declare.” Significantly, this vessel, “single in will,” is also linked to the language and imagery of witchcraft: “And she shall wander in the witchwood under the Night of Pan, and know the mysteries of the Goat and the Serpent, and of the children that are hidden away.”

This is strange and powerful stuff, both echoing and extending Crowley's more incantatory prose. But overall, as noted above, *Liber 49* is a singularly unconvincing “sacred” text, its obsessive force undercut by bursts of terrible prose and an erratic emotionality that suggests an almost adolescent naivete on Parsons' part. The 59th verse is particularly representative in its bizarre combination of prophecy and immature smut:

Yea it is even I BABALON and I SHALL BE FREE. Thou fool, be thou also free of sentimentality. Am I thy village queen and thou a sophomore, that thou shouldst have thy nose in my buttocks?

Babalon demands liberation in forthright terms that cannot help but evoke the language of the civil rights and feminist movements to come. Here we are far from Crowley's wanton initiatrix, whose demands are seemingly restricted to pleasure. At the same time, Babalon scolds Parsons—the “fool”, the pulp Parcival—for precisely the features of romantic sentiment and masochistic submission that mar *Liber 49* and criss-cross his broken and extraordinary life. Moreover, Babalon makes her claim with a graphic, ridiculous image that cannot allow us to forget for a moment the clammy psycho-sexual dimension of Parsons' remarkable vision of militant deity. Indeed, in “village queen” I cannot help but hear the echo of She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, Etherington's “desired but unattainable mother.”

No doubt the pampered child Parsons had an interesting relationship with his mother, who spoke volumes by killing herself once her son had left the world. But there is nowhere to go with such potentially cheap psychoanalyzing. More important here is Parsons' adult sexual ethics, and the ways these forced him to relate to the choices and independence of the women in his life. Parsons was a passionately sexual person with self-admitted bisexual leanings, and his adventurous nature found easy purchase in his bohemian social milieu. Many people in both the Agape Lodge and the Parsonage practiced free love, an experimentalism that perhaps was inspired by the sexual magic enshrined in the higher grades of the O.T.O., but was more likely due to the erotic realities of a mid-century Angelino

demimonde linked to political radicalism, Hollywood hedonism, and the nascent stirrings of the sexual liberation movement. (It is hardly accidental that Harry Hay, who founded the ground-breaking homosexual Mattachine Society in 1950, and later co-founded the Radical Faeries, sometimes played organ for the Agape Lodge's Gnostic Mass.) Though free love had been a part of American radicalism and the esoteric fringe since the nineteenth century, more modern sexual practices like wife-swapping and "swinging" were just coming into their own in mid-century America, and there was nothing like today's discourse of "polyamory" to support the conflicts and complexities that inevitably arose. In "Freedom is a Two-Edged Sword," however, Parsons attempted to give the sort of open relationships he pursued an ethical foundation based in a proto-libertarian notion of transactional autonomy. In a couple, he wrote, "neither party, whether the relationship be in or out of wedlock, has any right or jurisdiction over the love or affection, the body or sex life of another for longer than that other desires." Sexual possession, in contrast, turns marriage and partnership "into a gruesome joke by the ever-present specters of jealousy and suspicion."²⁵

However foolish he might appear at times, Parsons attempted to practice what he preached. He somewhat brazenly took up with his wife Helen's younger and vivacious half-sister Sara, aka Betty, who according to Crowley's letters was something of an "alley cat." Parsons was brutally frank with Helen about his sexual preference for Betty, and this greatly wounded his wife. Though Helen soon availed herself to Smith's bed, the two men's friendship remained strong. Similarly, Betty's own subsequent adventures with L. Ron Hubbard did not infuriate Parsons. To Crowley, he admitted that Betty had transferred her sexual attentions. "I think I have made a great gain and as Betty and I are the best of friends, there is little loss. I cared for her rather deeply but I have no desire to control her emotions, and I can, I hope, control my own. I need a magical partner. I have many experiments in mind."²⁶ In other words, though the affair caused Parsons significant pain, this did not prevent him from working intimate magick with the man who stirred his jealousy—at least until Hubbard, with Betty at his side, absconded with a great deal of Parsons' cash. Far more importantly for our purposes, however, is the fact that Parsons

25 "Freedom is a Two-Edged Sword," 27–31.

26 Russell Miller, *Bare-Faced Messiah: the True Story of L. Ron Hubbard* (New York: H. Holt, 1988), 118.

did not attempt to “control” Betty. He wanted her free. In cleaving to the ethical principals he outlined in his essay, he affirmed her right to wield her own independent erotic will, even if that meant putting a very painful sword to their affections.

A number of authors have pointed to Parsons' masochism in all this, but I think it is also important to emphasize that Parsons sincerely believed that women had a right to their own erotic self-determination—and that this sword-wielding bid for autonomy aligned them with the social dynamics of Babalon and the new Aeon. All of these themes were put into exceptional play once Parsons encountered the fearless, highly talented, and erratic Marjorie Cameron, who also possessed a head of burning red hair. When they first met, following the initial phase of the Babalon Working, they barely left Parsons' bedroom for two weeks. Parsons wrote Crowley that he had found “my elemental”, though he also came to suspect that Cameron was carrying something of Babalon as well—presumably a very different esoteric energy, though one that was arguably no more suited to a flesh-and-blood woman. At the same time, as Parsons' biographer George Pendell astutely noted, “In Parsons' mind she was his very own creation, but this did not mean she was in his thrall.”²⁷ When Parsons suggested they open up their relationship, she heartily agreed. During their six years of marriage, she had many lovers, left Los Angeles for long stretches of time, and caused Parsons considerable pain as well as a less familiar emotion: doubt. Some of the resulting ambivalence can be sensed in some of the Parsons poems recently published in *Songs for the Witch Woman*, which are accompanied by Cameron's extraordinary images. In one poem, a black goat cavorts with a golden girl, but it is the girl who has demon's eyes. In another verse, a seemingly innocent dancing girl is revealed to be bait for unwary men, with spiders waiting in the wings to attack.

Echoing Crowley's complex relationships with his Scarlet Women, Parsons placed a heavy magickal load onto Cameron's shoulders. Though she did not take to magick immediately, she eventually took lessons from Parsons, who playfully called her his “witch.” Even when it was unclear if Cameron would return from Mexico, where she worked alongside a number of Surrealist painters, Parsons believed that she was his magickal heir, just as he presumed to be Crowley's. In early 1952, Cameron did return to Los Angeles in order to support Parsons during a particularly bleak time in his career. Her return partly inspired his final turn towards what he called

27 George Pendell, “Introduction,” *Songs for the Witch Woman*, op. cit., 19.

“the Witchcraft”: a modern, stripped-down magical organization that would transcend the “claptrap” of the O.T.O. Together the couple elected to move back to Mexico, a decision that can be seen, in part, as Parsons’ final turn towards Babalon. Not only was he following Cameron into her world, but in the months before the move, he became fascinated with Ixcuina/Tlazolteotl, an Aztec goddess of filth and STDs who rules over sexual misdeeds as well as their purification. But even after his death, Parsons’ transfigured Babalon continued to exert her power through Cameron. She incarnated the Scarlet Lady with chilling aplomb in Kenneth Anger’s 1954 film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, and went on to influence an underground network of artists, actors, and bohemians who helped establish Angeleno counterculture, including Wallace Berman, George Herms, Dennis Hopper, and Curtis Harrington. Cameron, who burned much of her work and never made a career of her art, was certainly a fragile vessel; a broken Babalon who never forgot the charge that both animated and oppressed her. William Breeze reports that even late in life, Cameron still wondered if it were possible that she could really be an elemental—as striking a reminder as any of how the gods we construct construct us in return, in fragments and in flame.

