

THE BROTHER-SISTER MARRIAGE: *Opposite Sex Siblings and Their Impact on Adult Relationships*

Hera's Gamos

*In myth the union of siblings was reserved for gods
and was realised in Hera's Gamos, where the highest god of the Greeks
joined her as brother-husband.¹*

Hera was frustrated with the progress of the Trojan War as well as her husband, Zeus, who protected her Trojan enemies. She decided to indirectly help the Greek offense by ensuring that Zeus was occupied; with her husband not keeping his vigilant eye on the war, the Greeks would be in a better position to confront the Trojans. Hera's scheme needed the help of two other gods, Aphrodite and Hypnos. Aphrodite was persuaded by Hera to lend her the magic girdle which when worn made the woman irresistible. Next she bribed Hypnos into promising that he would lead Zeus into a deep slumber after Hera made love with him. With Zeus out of the way the Trojans would be more vulnerable and gods, like his brother Poseidon would be freer to help the Greeks.

On the peak of Mount Ida, Zeus encountered Hera and desired her passionately, in a way he had not felt for a very long time. His desire reminded him of the first time they had made love together, in the palace beneath the sea. Here they had gone to bed together unbeknownst to their parents or any other gods and consummated their relationship.² Aphrodite's magic girdle cast its spell over Zeus, and when Hera approached him, Zeus could not wait to make love to his wife. On the grassy slopes of Mount Ida they made love, protected from sight of the other gods by a golden cloud that Zeus drew down around them. With his divine powers Zeus gave Hera the soft bed of clover and crocuses as well as the privacy she needed. Wrapped in the golden cloud on nature's softest bed, the couple made love in a way they had not done since they were younger.³

After their lovemaking Hypnos lulled Zeus into a deep slumber, as agreed. Then he let Poseidon know Zeus was sound asleep, so he was free to help the Greeks. Hera's scheme, at least for now, had been successful.

There was an earlier time when the Olympian couple was not always locked in power struggles or scheming and lying to each other. This was when they first fell in love in the palace of their aunt and uncle, Tethys and Oceanus where they were being hidden, protected by their mother Rhea from the familial wars that were raging with their father.⁴ Here in the great palace beneath the sea, they consummated their relationship, a relationship that was to remain secret for 300 years.⁵



Zeus with Hera (c. 470 BCE)

When Zeus finally defeated his father Chronus and ascended to power, Hera became his queen. Their marriage is often referred to as the only *true* marriage on Olympus, certainly the most important marriage on Olympus. Hera became the goddess who presided over marriage and its rituals. The classical version of their relationship depicts a marriage that is 'at risk' due to Zeus' constant philandering and infidelity and Hera's jealousy and vengeful retributions. A power struggle arises from their tempestuous feelings. Their 'secret' relationship no longer existed; the infidelity and recriminations were public. As the supreme deities on Olympus, their marriage reflected the spectrum of experiences that adult partners undergo, both positive and negative.

Hera and Zeus are also siblings; hence an aspect of their relationship is incestuous. The sibling layer of every adult relationship is often the secret level that remains unconscious to the partners. Hera and Zeus' relationship reminds us of two important layers of adult relating: the sibling and the marriage relationship. The sibling level of the marriage contains the feelings of equality, the facility to share both physical and emotional spaces, loyalty and *philia*- the love of brother-sister. There is a symmetry and equality between siblings that is reflected on this level of the relationship. However this level of relationship could also activate the incest taboo leaving the partners to feel loving, supportive and caring of one another, but not sexual. The marriage level of the relationship contains the tension of the opposites, the powerful feelings of love and desire, dependency and need. Here the unknown in the other is challenging, motivating as well as erotic. Both of these levels of the marriage relationship also constellate a shadow side. Hera and Zeus become engulfed in the shadow side of the marriage relationship: power struggles, jealousy, infidelity and dishonesty. The sibling aspect of their relationship remained unconscious and neither was able to recognise their equality, similarity and shared origin. Recognizing both levels within an adult relationship gives more scope to the union and allows the partners more flexibility when interacting with each other. Balancing both levels within an adult relationship/marriage is a task of mature relationships. Lynda Schmidt expresses these two spheres of adult relationship as the 'sibling archetype' and the 'marriage archetype':

The sibling archetype offers the possibility of understanding, free of parental overtones. It allows for the natural expression of positive and negative feelings of peers whose relationship is for life. The marriage archetype offers the excitement and tension of non-understanding. It permits the instinctive, biological expression of extreme ends of the dimension of maleness and femaleness, thus keeping the charge of sexuality.⁶

Within the same article, the author highlights the need to balance these two archetypes that shape adult relationships. Traditional marriages could benefit from the equality and love offered from the sibling relationship while modern couples may feel more passionate and secure by becoming more consciously aligned to the marriage archetype. When we are engaged in a dominant struggle to be equal to our partner, the erotic tie may wane. Conversely if we are lost in the passion of the union we may be unaware of the inequality and power imbalance within the relationship:

What is needed is the doubling up of the pair imagery. What begins as a husband and wife pair needs the intimacy, understanding and mutuality of a Brother-Sister attitude to bridge the otherwise intolerable gap between man and woman.⁷

Hera as the goddess of marriage embodies both the sibling archetype, as sister, and marriage archetype, as wife, in her union with Zeus. She has married her brother-husband and as the patroness of marriage has lived the secret of the sibling marriage.

No Athenian bride was allowed to marry a *homogastrios*, a brother who had the same mother as herself. Such a marriage would have been contrary to the greatest matriarchal incest prohibition, which only Hera was allowed to transgress. Of her it is said that she was the only sister allowed to have such a husband, the only one equal to her in birth⁸

Why the sibling level of adult relationship has remained a secret in modern psychology is an engaging mystery. Karl Kerényi suggests the sibling relationship extends beyond the image of 'normal' love to a representation of a bisexual totality, an androgyny, an equality. The sibling pair stresses similarities, symmetry, equality yet individuality and separation. The sibling union resonates on a level of equal relationship; a friend, a comrade, a colleague, a companion. The

sibling relationship is not dependency-based and therefore threatens ‘the propagation of the human race’.⁹ The incest taboo also operates amongst siblings. This taboo along with gender inequality has helped imprison the sibling union in the unconscious. The ‘secret’ relationship of Zeus and Hera reminds us of the powerful union of siblings, which takes place away from the consciousness and control of the parents. While we exclusively focus on the parental marriage we may conspire to keep the sibling marriage unconscious.

Cultural bias and religious ethic contributed to depicting Hera in a never-changing fixed role of the jealous wife, trapped by the marriage archetype. However Hera, as the marriage deity, wed her brother-husband, Zeus and is well aware of the other level of her relationship with her husband. While we keep her trapped in a one dimensional role we fail to honour her history and her ancient tradition that brought her into union with her brother-animus, the aspect of her self and her marriage that represents equality and symmetry.

The Sibling Bond

*libidinal feelings, ranging from concern through attachment and including the most intense love, are among the spectrum of feelings that siblings can arouse in one another.*¹⁰

Myth, fairy tales and folklore tell of numerous brother-sister relationships. From classical myth there are various sister-brother bonds depicting many themes. Antigone is loyal to her brother, Polynices, and defends her brother’s honour with her own life. Electra pleads with her brother Orestes to defend their father’s honour, which he does. Both Medea and her cousin Ariadne sacrifice their brothers for their hero-lover. And Ovid tells of the opposite sex twins, Byblis and Caunus, and the passionate desire the sister Byblis had for her brother. At the beginning of the story Ovid moralizes that the story ‘affords a warning to other girls to love only what is permitted’.¹¹

Byblis at first thought that her desires for her brother were part of the normal range of feelings that a sister had for her brother. But soon she began to realize that she was in denial; her actions revealed that she was obsessed with her brother. She would dress for him, be anxious about her appearance in front of him, and began to fantasize that she lay in his bed with him. Byblis was tormented with desire for her brother and struggled to reconcile the fact that what the gods were able to do, she could not. Oceanus married his sister Tethys, Saturn was wed to Rhea and even Jupiter married his sister Juno! But Byblis was not free to love her mortal brother.

Byblis eventually decided to send her brother a letter confessing her passionate love for him and her delirious possession by Cupid. On reading the letter, her brother became enraged, disgusted at his sister's suggestion of incest. But his sister was possessed by this love and continued her approach towards him. Finally he felt he had no choice but to flee to a foreign shore where he established a new city. The abandonment by her brother drove Byblis mad with grief. In her hysteria, she decided to pursue him. But her grief was so debilitating she was unable to travel very far, falling upon the wooded trail and crying herself to death. The nymphs of the forest pitied her and changed her tears into a continuous fountain. The continuous tears are an apt reminder of the violated taboo of the brother-sister incest, a taboo that is broken more often than we would imagine between siblings.

Antiquity was aware of the powerful sibling patterns that were an *a priori* aspect of psyche. The brother-sister relationship ranged from feelings of extreme closeness through to indifference including images of sacrifice as well as the taboo feelings of sexual desire. In contemporary society, the taboo on brother-sister sexual attraction is rarely spoken of. There is a silence that has fallen over the relationship of opposite sex siblings and how feelings of love, desire, ambivalence, and even loathing are an integral part of this dynamic. Psychologically we are unaware that the way these feelings are handled will directly impact our adult relationships.

Oedipal longings and the incest taboo are more consciously concerned with the parent-child relationship where there is a power imbalance. However Oedipal longing also extends into the brother-sister pair which Freud may have unconsciously excluded due to his personal experience of the sibling relationship. His sister Anna was his least favorite sibling. Anna is described in Freud's interpretations of one of his own earliest memories.¹² His father had allowed Sigmund, aged five at the time, and Anna, almost three, to rip up an illustrated book. He described tearing the book, leaf by leaf, like an artichoke. Paralleling this memory were fantasies of masturbation. Freud was to postulate later that these erotic fantasies felt guilt laden and therefore were converted into hostility. Freud's Oedipal complex centred on the young boy's desire for the mother; yet sexual desire for the sister could be even more overwhelming owing to their closer proximity, equality and symmetry.

In one of Freud's most famous cases, the 'Russian Wolf Man', he commented on the damaging Eros of a brother-sister relationship. After being rejected by an intelligent and seductive older sister, Freud suggests the Wolf Man was then compelled to choose relationships that were inferior substitutes for the sister.¹³ Freud's adherence to the oedipal complex did not allow him to see the erotic impulses between brother and sister in their own right. Ernest Jones states:

The characteristics of the father-daughter complex are also found in a similar one, the brother-sister complex. As analytic work shows every day, this also, like the former one, is a derivative of the fundamental Oedipus complex. When the incest barrier develops early in the life of the young boy it begins first in regard to his relationship with the mother, and only later sets in with the sister as well; indeed, erotic experiences between brother and sister in early childhood are exceedingly common.¹⁴

Freud's adherence to the Oedipal tale limited his vision into the abundant myths that told of the brother-sister marriage as well as the love and Eros between opposite-sex siblings.

An interesting enmeshment between Sigmund Freud and his sister, Anna, continued into their adult lives. Anna and Sigmund married a sibling pair- Eli and Martha Bernays. Eli Bernays, the older brother of Martha Bernays, married Anna three years before Freud married Martha, even though Sigmund and Martha were the first couple to be engaged. In each case the older brother married the younger sister. This was not the only sibling enmeshment in Freud's marriage. His wife's sister, Minna, lived with them throughout much of their marriage and became a close companion and confidante to Sigmund.¹⁵

Little is spoken of about the brother-sister incest taboo even though it has been reported that the probability of violation of this taboo is five times more likely than adult-child incest.¹⁶ The high incidence of the broken taboo must be connected to the collective denial of the power of the brother-sister bond. While the sibling bond remains unconscious, the archetype is imprisoned in the dark. Guggenbull-Craig is very perceptive on this point. In revisioning the state of marriage he discusses exiled archetypes that are banished to the underworld and therefore become pathological or are lived out more intensely and obsessively. He acknowledges the sibling archetype is one of these condemned archetypes and in the changing ambiance of relationships may be able to become more conscious.

the archetype of the siblings will again be able to be lived out - the Artemis-Apollo relationship- and the intimate, persistent, all- encompassing love between brother and sister will no longer be condemned as incest or unhealthy bond. (Interestingly enough, the sibling relationship was less pathologised and less understood as 'incest' in Queen Victoria's time than it is today.)"¹⁷

The denial of the sibling impact on our present relationships is often greater when there are still unresolved issues or powerful feelings associated with our opposite sex siblings. This denial is supported collectively therefore often slips by the trained ear of the therapist. However the unconscious will often bring sibling material to the conscious forefront through dreams or uncanny

coincidences between the sibling and the partner- the same name, the same birth date, the same birth position, or similar personalities.

It is often the case, when the sibling situation is most directly replicated in the contemporary love relationship, that the patient is generally unaware, denying, or manifesting total repression of the earlier derivation of the current relationship. Often the sibling will be left out of the associative material and will emerge only through disassociated, displaced, and dream references.¹⁸

Astrologically this transferential situation can be explored in the comparison of the sibling and partner's horoscopes. The similarities between the horoscopes reveal the patterns that are most likely to repeat in the current relationship. The comparison of the two composite charts, the client and their sibling and the client and their partner, also reveal the recurring issues that are replayed in the relationship.

The brother-sister incest taboo is also a common theme in folklore and Jung draws on an Icelandic and a Russian fairy tale to illustrate his ideas on the crossed marriage or what he referred to as the "marriage quaternity" in *Psychology of the Transference*.¹⁹ Both of Jung's fairy tale examples portray the brother-sister union as myth does, confirming this archetypal pattern between brother and sister. The Russian fairy tale, "Prince Danila Govorila", tells the fable of a young prince who is given a magical ring by an old witch. However the magical ring is conditional in that he must marry the woman whose finger it fits. The prince is unsuccessful in his attempts to find a perfect match and he returns home. In his despair he shares the story with his sister who then wants to try the ring on. The ring fits her finger and the prince then decides to marry his own sister. The sister knows that this is forbidden and rushes from the house weeping. Some old beggars who give her some advice comfort her. They tell her to make four dolls and place them strategically in the four corners of the bedroom. When her brother summons her to the wedding she is to follow but she is to not hurry into the bedchamber.

When Danila summons his sister to the bedchamber after the wedding, the four dolls in the corners of the room begin to sing:

Cuckoo, Prince Danila,
Cuckoo, Govorila,
Cuckoo, he takes his sister,
Cuckoo, for a wife,
Cuckoo, earth open wide,
Cuckoo, sister fall inside.”

The sister has now disappeared, having descended into the underworld where her brother cannot access her. The sister has begun her separation and individuation process. She travels underneath the earth until she comes to the hut of the old witch where she meets the witch’s daughter who shelters and protects her from her dark mother. When the witch discovers her presence she heats up the oven to cook Danila’s sister, however the two girls combine forces and are able to overcome the witch placing her in the oven instead. They escape from the evil with and instinctively find themselves back at the home of the brother-prince. The brother’s servant recognizes the sister but the brother cannot tell the two girls apart. However the magic ring also fits the witch’s daughter and therefore the prince marries her, which liberates his sister to find her own partner.

This Russian fairy tale tells of the powerful union between brother and sister that must confront the incest taboo in order to freely move into an adult marriage relationship. The ring fits the sister because like mother, sister is a defining anima figure for the brother. She is an early personification his inner feminine figure but the incest taboo must be honoured for him to be able to move past the sister image to his beloved in the world that is without his inherited kinship ties. The four dolls as Jung suggests:

form the marriage quaternity, the aim being to prevent the incest by putting four in place of two. The four dolls form a magic simulacrum which stops the incest by removing the sister to the underworld, where she discovers her alter ego.”²⁰

Jung often wrote of the ‘brother-sister incest’. Adult partners partially mirror our relationships with siblings of either sex. However it is the opposite sex siblings that have constellated the anima/animus images and for a time carried the projection of the other which in turn impacts the formation of our adult relationships. The incest taboo has allowed the sibling partner to hold these internal images for the other until they are ready to take the underworld journey that separates them and frees them for a relationship that is external to the family. The sibling in this way is an outer representation of the inner task of beginning to contain the feeling life in order to be better able to discriminate. Violating the taboo ruptures this ability to discriminate and separate keeping us bound to the dark brother or sister in every relationship. The taboo is also broken when the interaction between the siblings is so charged with feeling that they are not able to separate from each other. This is generally supported by the family atmosphere. The incest taboo allows the process of separation to take place. The individual feels initiated into their own separateness, which they are able to take into future relationships. In referring to the incest taboo John Layard suggests that:

every instinctive desire must ultimately be satisfied, and that what therefore cannot be satisfied in the flesh must be satisfied in the spirit²¹.

The taboo of the brother-sister incest protects the psyche’s transference of the anima/animus from the mother/father to the sister/brother then out into the world. The libidinal flow of energy is protected by the taboo so that psychological maturation can include opposite sex images of both dependence and equality. The opposite sex sibling is a transitional carrier of the anima/animus projection allowing the image to be internalised in the sibling partner. The violation of this process through literal, emotional and psychological incest impedes the process of forming relationship.

Adult partners may reawaken sibling themes and issues that have not been completed. The Greek myths also knew of this dynamic for the ruling couple of Olympus was brother and sister as well as husband and wife. Zeus is a brother-husband to his sister-wife, Hera. Another Olympian pair, Ares and Aphrodite, was also half-siblings. Apollo and Artemis are twins who serve as an example of a brother sister pair who are not able to separate from each other. On an archetypal level the brother-sister union is part of our adult relationships and is perhaps more powerful than we care to recognise.

Antiquity tells us of the range of brother-sister relationships from loyalty through to sacrifice and incest. It was the prerogative of the gods to be able to experience all facets of the brother-sister relationship. At the archetypal level the individual carries these images; brother-sister images of union of which we seldom speak. .



Two illustrations from C.G. Jung's *Collected Works*, Volume XII. The first is entitled "The artifex at work with his *soror mystica*", and the second, "The artifex and his *soror mystica* making the gesture of the secret at the end of the work". Both are from *Mutus Liber* (1702). The *soror mystica* is the alchemist's sacred sister.

ENDNOTES

¹ C. Kerényi, *Zeus and Hera Archetypal Images of Father, Husband and Wife*, translated by Christopher Holme, Princeton University Press (Princeton: 1975), 113.

² There are differing versions to the location of the first sexual encounter between Hera and Zeus, however most versions agree it was a 'secret' from the rest of the other gods.

³ For the description of this scene, see Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press (Chicago: 1961). 14:346-51.

⁴ C. Kerényi in *Zeus and Hera Archetypal Images of Father, Husband, Wife* states that the source of this myth of Zeus and Hera's first lovemaking "was most probably a sacred story told or sung among women at a Hera Festival", 102.

⁵ This is the tale from the island of Samos. The story is either that the wedding night lasted 300 years or the marriage was secret for 300 years. For amplification on this see C. Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks*, Thames and Hudson (London: 1951). p. 95-99 as well as C. Kerényi, *Zeus and Hera, Archetypal Images of Father, Husband and Wife*, 91-113.

⁶ Lynda Schmidt. "The Brother-Sister Relationship in Marriage", from *The Journal of Analytic Psychology*, Volume 25, Number 1, January 1980, 34

⁷ *Ibid*, 31-32.

⁸ K. Kerényi. *Zeus and Hera Archetypal Images of Father, Husband, Wife*, 109

⁹ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁰ Judith F. Lasky and Susan F. Mulliken, "Sibling Relationships and Mature Love" from *Love, Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, edited by Judith F. Lasky and Helen W. Silverman, New York University Press (New York: 1988), 85

¹¹ for the myth of Byblis and Caunus see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Mary M. Innes, Penguin (London: 1955), 215-221.

12. Freeman and Stream, *Freud and Women*, 26.

13. Freud, 'From the History of Infantile Neurosis (1918)', *SE* 17.22-3.

14. Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus: the Oedipus Complex as an Exploration of Hamlet's Mystery* (Doubleday, New York: 1949), 157-8.

¹⁵ for an amplification of Freud and his siblings see Brian Clark, *The Sibling Constellation*, Penguin Arkana (London: 1999).

¹⁶ this was reported in the article "Shared Passages" by Laura M. Markowitz, *The Family Therapy Networker*, Volume 18, No. 1, January/February 1994, 27. Reporting of sibling incest is most often not done. Often the secret is maintained by the siblings and if it has only been once or a few times then it is most likely to be contained as a secret by the two participants. Often the first time this is reported is to a therapist. If the incest is revealed then the attitude is often that it is a family dilemma and the family closes in to contain the experience, often more as a means of containing the shame rather than dealing with the issue. Hence accurate statistics of sibling incest are difficult to maintain. The truth of this form of incest however is confirmed by family therapists, social workers, psychologists and family sociologists who have reported the high frequency of occurrence.

¹⁷ Adolf Guggenbuhl-craig. *Marriage Dead or Alive*, translated by Murray Stein, Spring (Zurich: 1977), 58.

¹⁸ Judith F. Lasky and Susan F. Mulliken. “Sibling Relationships and Mature Love”, from *LOVE Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, edited by Judith F. Lasky and Helen W. Silverman, New York University Press (New York: 1988), 86.

¹⁹ C.G Jung, *Collected Works, Volume 16, the Practice of Psychotherapy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1954: 425-432

²⁰ *Ibid*: 430.

²¹ John Layard. “The Incest Taboo and the Virgin Archetype” from *Images of the Untouched Virginity in Psyche, Myth and Community*, edited by Joanne Stroud and Gail Thomas, Spring Publications (Dallas: 1982), 165. Layard’s interesting thesis looks at incest taboos amongst various cultures and then examines its psychological significance.