CHAPTER FOUR

THE WORSHIPPERS

In various literary fields Bona Dea and her cult were discussed in Antiquity. With one author the elucidation of the goddess’s nature fits in with a political argument (Cicero). For the mythographer she is interesting enough as to be described in an episode of his poetry (Propertius). Terms used in her ritual are no longer understood and give the grammarian occasion to discuss her (Festus and his successors). For the Greek interested in Roman antiquities an explanation of the phenomenon Bona Dea is essential (Plutarch). Rules of her cult give the moralist an opportunity to describe the corruption of morals in his days (Juvenal). Her exclusiveness is the subject of instructions to wife and lover (Tibullus, Lygdamus, Ovid). In late Antiquity she is either a paragon of old-Roman tradition (Macrobius) or an objectionable element of paganism (Lactantius, Arnobius, Tertullian). Although the aims of the various writers are different, as may be clear from what has been said above, in the literary sources five points are frequently emphasized as characteristic of the Bona Dea cult.

The worship of the goddess is a state affair, which is apparent from the expressions used to define her ritual: *publicis religionibus, populare sacrum, publica ... sacra, publicas caerimonias.*¹ The goddess’s feasts are annually listed in the official calendar.² They are celebrated for the people: *pro populo, ὑπὸ τοῦ δαιμόνιος,*³ for the welfare of the Roman people: *pro salute populi Romani.*⁴ The house of the magistrate *cum imperio,* either Consul or Praetor, is the place appointed for the celebration of the rites. Yet it is not the representative of the Roman State himself but his wife (or his mother) who conducts the ceremonies.⁵

---

¹ Ch. II, Nos. 7 (*Scholia in Ciceronis Orationes Bobiensia*), 44 (Martial), 51 (Juvenal), 53 (Suetonius); but cf. also Festus and Paulus Diaconus (Nos. 55 and 71), who state: “Damium sacrificium quod fiebat in operto in honore Deae Bona; dictum a contrarietate quod minime esset δαιμόνιον, id est publicum.”


⁴ Ch. I, No. 16 (Cicero).

Bona Dea is called the *Women’s Goddess*, Γυναικεία Θεός, Θεός Γυναικεία, *Feminarum Dea.* In the myths concerning her she eschews meeting men; and modesty towards the male sex appears to be her most typical quality. Her worshippers imitate her example in this respect when observing her rites. From the ceremonies in honour of the goddess, celebrated in secret and by night, not only men are barred—indeed the master of the house spends the night of the festival elsewhere—but also all things male are excluded and representations of anything male are to be covered.

in his house; cf. Gelzer, *Caesar*, pp. 53-54. The fact that Caesar, in addition to the praetorship, held the office of Pontifex Maximus was the reason why the rites were celebrated in the *domus publica*, but the celebration in that place did not depend upon Caesar’s priesthood. Yet, it was this coincidence which offered Cicero the opportunity to attach an extra accent of disgrace to Clodius’ intrusion; see ch. II, Nos. 11 and 14, Lenaghan, p. 62. Proculeia’s husband was Praetor when the feast was being organized; ch. II, No. 44 (Martial). From Plutarch’s *Life of Caesar* (ch. II, No. 49) it is evident that when a man is discovered among the women who are celebrating the feast Aurelia, Caesar’s mother, orders the ritual to be stopped and the sacred objects to be covered. Whether one is to infer from this that it was Aurelia, not Caesar’s wife Pompeia, who was in charge is uncertain. One would imagine that Pompeia would hardly have felt inclined to undertake anything from the moment when her “lover” was discovered. In IX Plutarch had already explained that Aurelia closely watched her daughter-in-law all the time, and that indeed it was for this reason that Clodius seized the opportunity to visit Pompeia during this special night. Here lack of initiative therefore is not strange. Cf. also Terentius’ attitude at the celebration in Cicero’s house (Plutarch; ch. II, No. 47).

6 Ch. II, Nos. 32 (Propertius), 45, 46, 49 (Plutarch), 67 (Macrobius).
7 Ch. II, Nos. 57 (Tertullian) and 67 (Macrobius). Cf. the story of thirsty Hercules who asks the (female) worshippers of the goddess for water. They refuse to give him any since a man is not admitted to the celebration: ch. II, Nos. 32 (Propertius) and 67 (Macrobius).
8 *Nocturna sacrificia* ch. II, No. 25; Cicero; *nota Bonae secreta Deae* (No. 51; Juvenal).
9 Wen the feast was celebrated at Cicero’s house he himself spent the night at the house of a neighbour (ch. II, No. 46; Plutarch); nor was Caesar at home when Clodius entered during the night of the ceremonies (No. 49; Plutarch).

10 Cicero asks Clodius whether he has ever heard of one of his forebears, people, no doubt, concerned with religious matters both of a private and a public nature, having participated in the Bona Dea ritual. Cicero also refers to the penalty for witnessing the mysteries, blindness: Clodius has been struck with mental blindness: (ch. II, No. 11). The crime itself, i.e. the participation in the rites by a man, is called *incestus* or *incestum* (No. 14; Cicero; cf. Lenaghan, pp. 61-62); Nos. 15 and 17: “... aut quod oculos, ut opinio illius religionis est, non perdidisti!”; 18 and 19, Lenaghan, pp. 75-76; 2 and 22 (all, Cicero); 30 (Tibullus); 31 (Lygdamus); 32 (Propertius); Tiresias’ punishment for having seen Pallas bathing is a warning to Hercules; 33 (Ovid): a woman who cannot boast beautiful hair is advised to have it dressed in Bona Dea’s temple where she cannot he observed by any man; 34 (Ovid): a woman in love is instructed how to escape from her guards. How ineffective the guard appears to be when she chooses to go to forbidden places: “cum fuget a templis oculos Bona Diva virorum, / praeterquam siquos illa venire iubet”; 35 (Ovid); 42 (Seneca); 45, 48, 49 (Plutarch): Clodius, disguised as a female harper, succeeds in entering Caesar’s house; 51 (Juvenal): “penem / maiorem, quam sunt duo Caesaris Anticatones, / illuc, testiculi sibi conscius unde fugit mus, / intulerit, ubi velari pictura iubetur / quaecumque alterius sexus imitata figuras”; 59 ( Dio Cassius); 67 (Macrobius): Macrobius proposes as the reason why men are forbidden to enter the goddess’ temple, her identification with Medea, who was wronged by her husband Jason. The chastity of Bona Dea, whose name was never heard in public and who had never seen a man nor had been seen by any man. is cited as another reason to exclude men; 56 (Festus): *religiosus* means, among other things, to act against the will of the gods, e.g. “in aedem Bonae Deae virum introire.”