

MOTOR PSYCHE

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The Ride of the Valkyries

The Valkyries ("Choosers of the Slain") are beautiful young women, mounted upon winged horses and armed with helmets and spears. The Valkyries scout the battlefields to choose the bravest of the slain, to escort them to Odin, King of the Gods, for the oncoming mythic battle of Ragnarok.

Today, no archetype of the Valkyrie so pervades our culture as the woman motorcyclist. As an executive or politician, a woman is perceived to maintain a derivative of the nest, and as a soldier to protect the nest. But the woman rider, independent and untamed, at once bears and

transcends the archetype. She may choose amongst the brave, but she does so for her own purposes as much as those of Odin.

Primitive societies subjugated women as a practical consequence of physical power, but as civilization has developed, and knowledge and skill have eclipsed strength as the mark of power, the role of women has become more equal and complex. The degree to which each culture has adapted to this change has become a marker of its position in the world.

The concept of a powerful female has both captivated and frightened every culture since the beginning of time. Nothing threatens men, and women to a lesser extent, so much as a change in sexual role and identity.

Our culture derived its image of the motorcyclist from films, which depicted either misogynistic biker gangs, or meditative explorations of the self on the road. Women were victims or adjuncts to male protagonists. But now, in rapidly accelerating numbers, women are becoming motorcyclists, claiming for them-

selves the independence of the road as a right of passage and a state of being. For women and the culture at large, motorcycle riding parallels the individuation of women from predefined expectation.

So who are these women? What traits do they share? According to the Motorcycle Industry Council, as of 2003, they constituted 10% of motorcycle owners and 18% of motorcycle operators. Their median age was 42. In regard to education, 28% were college graduates (the same percentage as the female US population at large). Some 35% held technical or professional jobs. And 56.7% were married, a surprising statistic given that only 45% of US males and females are married. (Perhaps the sample sets are different.)

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Older studies show that women are less prone to take risks, but over-represented in motorcycle accidents. About 80% ride cruising or road bikes, 20% sport bikes. A decreasing majority is tattooed. In general, the demographic of women riders, like that of men, is becoming more representative of the population at large.

The sexual orientation of women bikers has always been an issue. Kris Slawinski, in her International Journal of Motorcycle Studies (IJMS) essay last year, said:

Gender politics was an issue early on in my riding career. As a female rider my sexual orientation was questioned, and I was often treated condescendingly... many people automatically assumed I must be gay.

Here in San Francisco, we are host to Dykes on Bikes, who take pride in their political feminism as well as their sexual orientation and motorcycle prowess. Alex Ilyasova, in her essay in the IJMS, makes clear her view:

Who is riding – women, or more specifically lesbi-

ans, and bisexual and transgender women. As to the why they are riding, well it's a pride thing-connected strongly to issues of rebellion, visibility, life, community, and freedom.

Women riders have no fear of challenging gender roles, and lesbians may be over-represented in their ranks, but I could find no real data in this regard. Presumably, most of the 56.7% of women riders who are married are heterosexual, as are likely a majority of unmarried women riders.

No psychological studies of female motorcyclists are yet available, at least until we sample our readership. However, a perusal of women's motorcycle biographies, as well as a few interviews of local women riders revealed some common themes.

All had some element of rebellion in their adolescence, many for good reason. At a minimum there was lack of validation at

home, and in some cases outright neglect and abuse. Anger manifested itself in unconventional appearance or behavior, but not delinquency. As young adults, the theme of reclaiming oneself by external declarations of independence became important. For some it meant exploration of sexual identity roles. For most it meant tattoos, for which the pain of application was itself a right of passage. For all it meant taking on fear by the horns, mastering fear by facing and managing it, and no better way lay available than riding a motorcycle.

Most women riders became interested in bikes as teenagers, and began riding in their early 20s. A few delayed riding until their children were about to leave home. Most urban women ride a motorcycle for recreation as well as a primary means of transportation.

Like their male counterparts, female riders seek out a high degree of external stimulation, and the freedom of the open road. Men are more often thrill-seeking to avoid emergence of unconscious feelings. Women riders are more aware of their high degree of emotional intensity. The women seemed conscious of any pain they were evading, and conscious of their identity in transformation. The more powerless they felt as children, the

more empowered they feel on the road. Eloquently, one said, "I like the empowerment, thrill and relaxation of riding. It is a release and makes me feel both free and accomplished. It started out as intimidating and scary, but has become a necessary means for release and relaxation."

To what extent is a motorcycle a sexual object? The women I interviewed denied any such awareness, although a few feel sexy while riding and by identifying as a rider. Certainly, it enhances a woman's power as it does that of a man, as would a weapon in the hand of either sex. Supporting the Freudian hypothesis in her above cited essay, Kris Slawinski did not hesitate to include her favorite version of "Why Motorcycles are Better Than Men." This included some 50 examples of which I will list but 3:

- A motorcycle can go for more than one ride an hour.
- Motorcycles don't get you pregnant.
- If your motorcycle is boisterous, you can buy it a muffler.

Why then are threats to the sexual order so frightening? Because identity is precious and too often fragile. In a hierarchy of fears, being nothing ranks higher than death. Some persons lack a core sense of self, and cling to the threads of assigned external trappings to know their role in life. If such a person observes another to cross boundaries by changing trappings, then that observer fears a loss of identity by losing his or her trappings.

The good news for women, on and off of motorcycles, is that Western Society has evolved. Identity, once assigned by society, religion, and family, is increasingly defined by the individual.

Building a new order is a task laden with anxiety. But men and women are learning that love is best among equals. We want the Valkyrie to ride for her own pleasure as well as for Odin. Society is learning that competent and skilled women serve everyone's interest.

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