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Paradoxes of Female Power in Greek Mythology

*The bees work every day until the sun goes down, / Busy all day long making pale
honeycombs, / While the drones stay inside, in the hollow hives,
/ Stuffing their stomachs with the work of others
Hesiod, Theogony*

*We the precocious, we the repressed of culture, our lovely mouths gagged with pollen, our
wind knocked out of us, we the labyrinths, the ladders, the trampled spaces
Hélène Cixous, The Laugh of the Medusa*

The legacies of ancient Greek culture in contemporary western societies are undeniable and ubiquitous. From art and philosophy to government and myth, remnants of classical antiquity surround and influence our lives. But of the fruits of ancient Greece, one is especially insidious and resilient; prejudiced gender dynamics. Sexist and often misogynistic views are still present in western cultures, but in ancient Greece, instances of inequity were explicit and deliberate. And the myths created reflect these views on gender dynamics. Religion intrinsically reveals social beliefs. And Greek mythology has much to say of the ancient Greeks' perspective on the social connotations of gender. It is generally agreed upon that feminist objectives have been achieved gradually, with many achievements being brought to life in the past two centuries. It's no surprise then, expected even, that ancient Greek culture, from which we draw so much, would have some rather archaic and sexist ideologies. The myths that illustrate these gender dynamics are only an extension of this biased culture. Thus we can see elucidated in ancient Greek mythology a plethora of interactions between the sexes and how certain figures exemplify

the then-norm. Of the deities that were prominent among the Greek Pantheon, Aphrodite and Athena serve as stark contrasts of female power. Aphrodite being the venerated goddess of love and beauty; who inspires so much art and ovation. While Athena is a representation of wisdom and the goddess of war. Aphrodite suppresses female power by embodying the superficial gender roles of women in ancient Greek society while Athena advances feminist ideals by showing the against-the-norm ability of women to be in positions of power and having intrinsically consequential attributes. However, the circumstances of their births prove to be paradoxes in that they contradict the essences of the goddesses.

Aphrodite is the enchanting goddess of love and beauty; however, despite these charming qualities, in some accounts, the circumstances of her birth are of a different nature and challenge the existing power. In *Theogony*, in the time before the twelve great Olympians and the Titanomachy, another subversion took place. Gaia and Ouranos were the supreme primordial beings of the universe. Gaia being the mother earth goddess and Ouranos the father sky god. Fearful that his children would overthrow him, Ouranos “used to stuff all of his children/ Back into a hollow of Earth soon as they were born,/ Keeping them from the light” (Hesiod lines 156-158). Ultimately, Ouranos is unsuccessful and overcome by Cronos. This failed attempt at retaining power in a macabre manner is the catalyst that prompts Gaia to enact vengeance. And so Gaia, along with Cronus, schemed a deceitful plan to castrate Ouranos. Afterward, Ouranos fades from mythology and the genitals are discarded into the sea. From the flesh that was thrown into the sea and the foam that formed around it, in an ultimate act of procreation by Ouranos, Aphrodite is born. In a patriarchal society that placed so much worth on gender, the connotations associated with genitals are substantial. Ouranos’s genitals, a symbol of his manhood and a source of such hegemony, are stripped from him and in an exchange of power, said virtues are

transferred to Aphrodite. From the beginning of her being, Aphrodite is described in a delightful way. Narrating the moment Aphrodite approaches land, Hesiod writes, “[t]here she came ashore, an awesome, beautiful divinity” (line 194). Of the horrendous act of castration, Aphrodite is born. Implying that for women to attain power, male clout must give in and be redistributed. Aphrodite is thus successful, in her birth, at elevating female power by evening out the power-imbalances that existed among the sexes. Despite this, Aphrodite will prove to be an antinomy because of the implications of what she embodies in a social context.

The degree of cultural expectations based on gender varies from society to society; so do the exploitations of these gender roles. The manifestation of gender roles in ancient Greek society, as reflected in myth, presents women with the grim situation of an androcentric and patriarchal culture. In which little to no recognition is given to the contributions of women to society. Women and men are plagued with presumptions of how they should act and the very role they should fulfill in the family and society. Describing Aphrodite’s role in the *Iliad*, Hamilton writes, “[s]he is a soft, weak creature” (33). The stereotype illustrated is one that persists to this day. The assumption that women are of lesser strength than men is just one of the ideas that reinforce the patriarchy. Zeus, the supreme deity, would never be labeled as “weak”, because of its negative connotation. In describing Aphrodite in a frail manner, authors of Greek mythology are giving way to male dominance. Furthermore, using bees and drones as a metaphor for men and women, Hesiod writes, “[t]he bees work every day until the sun goes down,/ Busy all day long making pale honeycombs,/ While the drones stay inside, in the hollow hives,/ Stuffing their stomachs with the work of others” (lines 600-603). Very clear roles are implied in the comparison of men to bees and women to drones (In reality, however, all worker bees are female while the drones are male). Men labor to provide for the family while women lounge, seemingly

unbothered. No recognition is given to the role or labor of homemakers in ancient Greek society; raising young, nourishing the family, maintaining household order. All traditionally female-roles that are neglected. This lack of recognition for the predetermined roles is yet another suppressor of female power in ancient Greek society. The expectation of women to be in the household limits their ability to participate in communal proceedings such as politics, commerce, or social events. One quality of women, however, is noted; beauty. Despite its prominence in ancient Greek society, it is centered around men and their fulfillment from it. In addition to social structures and ideas that give ascendancy to men, women's sexuality is rarely described as empowering or for self-pleasure, but instead always focusing on male figures. Aphrodite is described as one "who beguiled all, gods and men alike" (Hamilton 32). The tendency to center Aphrodite's attributes on men instead of on herself is telling of ancient Greek society's androcentric nature. The myths of Aphrodite don't speak from her perspective. The myths of Aphrodite don't center on the pleasures of sex or the autonomy that sexuality can yield but instead focus on the men with who she couples. This exclusion of women from even the most primitive of drives diminishes their standing in society and thus reinforces the patriarchy. Ultimately, the myth of Aphrodite is one that suppresses female power by taking female sexuality and morphing it primarily to the appeal of men. Unfortunately, Aphrodite is not the only figure that presents a sexist image of women in Greek mythology.

The parallels between Aphrodite and Pandora demonstrate the lesser importance given to Aphrodite, despite her being a goddess. The account of the first woman (Pandora) goes into great detail, which is very telling of ancient Greek views. Women in Greek mythology are labeled as a punishment for men, going as far as to being called "a great infestation" (Hesiod line 596) and "a curse for mortal men" (Hesiod line 605). Misogyny is foremost in the myth of Pandora and her

similarities with Aphrodite demonstrate that despite beauty being a virtue, it is ultimately for the enjoyment of men. The reason Pandora is endowed with such sublime beauty is so to be “irresistible bait” (Hesiod line 103) for men. Similar to how Pandora is illustrated, Aphrodite is described as “the irresistible goddess” (Hamilton 32). It’s evident that despite men being the ones who are unable to resist their lustful urges, women are the ones who are characterized in a negative fashion. Additionally, the expectation of women to be attractive further promotes gender roles which in turn uphold the patriarchy. As seen with other deities, beauty is of lesser importance than their main attributes. Attributes of a different nature are emphasized and realized by men. Of the seven male Olympians, attractiveness is only accentuated in one of them; Apollo. Apollo, for example, is described as “a beautiful figure” (Hamilton 30). However, his beauty comes second to his endowments and musical abilities. Illustrating the preeminence superficial beauty holds with women, as opposed to men. Aphrodite intrinsically embodies superficial gender roles promoted by ancient Greek society and consequently suppresses female power.

The argument that Aphrodite sustains female power by using her beauty to manipulate men is one that ignores the fact that female beauty, as an expectation, is one that is rooted in androcentrism and the role of women to please men. How powerful is one if all your true intentions must be concealed under the guise of seduction? What are the tangible effects of Aphrodite’s power on women of ancient Greece? Of post-industrial nations? Implying that Aphrodite has consequential impacts on female power through her own beauty is erroneous. Characterizing Aphrodite, Hamilton writes, “the laughter-loving goddess, who laughed sweetly or mockingly at those her wiles had conquered” (32). The trivial nature of Aphrodite’s affairs can

be deduced by the characterization. Unlike Athena, the goddess of war, or Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, the concerns of Aphrodite are insignificant in nature.

Just like Athena's attributes defy traditional gender roles of the time, the conditions of her birth are also unconventional. In myth, Athena is the goddess of wisdom and war. Zeus's first wife, Metis, was close to giving birth to Athena when, fearing his own demise and a prophecy, Zeus swallowed Metis. Unlike Ouranos, however, Zeus was successful in retaining his position. Afterward, Athena is born of the head of Zeus. Narrating the circumstances of her birth, Hamilton writes, "[n]o mother bore her. Full-grown and in full armor, she sprang from his head" (29). Because Athena is born from Zeus's head, a symbol of reasoning and intelligence, the conditions of Athena's birth imply that wisdom is a male-originating virtue. Conclusively, the myth of the birth of Athena fails at sustaining female power by allocating wisdom, a virtue of utmost importance to men. Despite the repercussions of Athena's birth and origins of her wisdom, Athena is nevertheless the goddess of wisdom and war in a patriarchal society.

Reflected in the "supreme ruler" (Hamilton 27) are characteristics that the ancient Greeks valued highly; of which, Athena shares some. Naturally, being that the ancient Greeks lived in a patriarchal society, the roles and attributes of Zeus would fulfill traditional gender roles for men. This classification of attributes doesn't alter their intrinsic values but merely associates them with a specific gender. Men were expected to be wise and women to be evil (as seen in the myth of Pandora). And to be anything but the norm, was for women, empowering. The similarities between Zeus and Athena demonstrate the unique nature of Athena. In the same society that labeled women "a curse" (Hesiod line 605), to share attributes with the supreme being in the universe is noteworthy. Athena is described as "[e]qual to her father in strength and wisdom" (Hesiod line 901). One of the few instances of equality shown in Greek mythology. Additionally,

Athena is entrusted with holding the belongings of Zeus, including his weapon. Explaining this role of Athena, Hamilton writes, “He trusted her to carry the awful aegis, his buckler, and his devastating weapon, the thunderbolt” (Hamilton 29). The ability of Athena to hold possession of the ultimate tool in the universe further illustrates the capacity of her might. By defying traditional gender roles of men being stronger and wiser than women, Athena sustains female power in greek mythology.

The dual nature of culture, both fluid and resilient, ensures that at least some degree of previous societies is manifested in our modern lives. The same gender roles present in ancient texts such as *Theogony* are still alive today. Continuities of ancient Greek gender dynamics are still being combated, millennia later. The differences in gender expectations are the reason power imbalances among genders have been able to persist. Despite generations of activists advocating for equality among the sexes, societies with rigid beliefs of what a woman or man should act like or what she or he should do hinder the advancement of equality. It’s likely that the prejudice that afflicts women will continue on through the subtle expectations of what is acceptable or not and the subconscious images we have of women and men.

Works Cited

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