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A Brief Analysis of Women's Images Constructed in Greek Mythology

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This essay is an analysis of women's images portrayed in Greek mythology. Using four figures as examples, this essay tries to answer the questions of whether the construction of women in Greek mythology is reasonable, how it affects people now, and what needs to be done to break away from it.

Keywords: Greek mythology, gender studies, literature

Background

Stories are propaganda, virii that slide past your critical immune system and insert themselves directly into your emotions (Doctorow, 2005). Mythologies, as one form of stories, sway people in a subtle and unconscious way. When approached by new dogmas, people with basic critical thinking ability would, ideally, be vigilant to them instead of following it unquestioningly. However, as the claims and discriminations in myths are wrapped under layers of stories, they tend to seem more valid.

With women being the other sex, it is impossible for any literature work to avoid portraying female characters completely. The way they portray them, however, reveals much more information than what they were intended to tell.

Greek mythology is a central work in the canon of Western literature. As a symbol of tradition, it is rarely strayed from and remains unchallenged. As Greek mythology is the treasure house and the soil for Greek art, it widely influences the whole world. The images of women portrayed in it are also prevailing. The traditional gender roles built within the Greek mythology seem to be an unspoken rule that many people now are still happy to observe. But the point of an evolving society is that no construct can stay traditional forever. Some constructions can be nudged along; others need to be dragged into the 21st century. Examining the women's images constructed in Greek mythology is necessary both for reflection on the ancient Greek culture, and for the inner awakening of females today.

Women's Images Constructed in Greek Mythology

Mortal Women's Images

Pandora. Pandora was the first mortal woman, crafted by Hephaestus on the instructions of Zeus. To Zeus, Pandora was "the price for fire, an evil thing in which they (men) may all be glad of heart while they (men) embrace their own destruction" (Hesiod, 2006, p. 7).

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Pandora was sent to Epimetheus as a gift. Turning a blind eye to Prometheus' previous advice of never taking a gift of Olympian Zues, Epimetheus accepted Pandora, resulting in her opening the Pandora's box and releasing "sorrow and mischief to men" (Hesiod, 2006, p. 9). She was then held responsible for releasing the ills of humanity, while Epimetheus, who accepted her in the first place, somehow got away from the blame.

The Pandora myth is considered a kind of theodicy, addressing the question of why there is evil in the world. As the first mortal woman was created with the aim of punishing men by bringing evils into the world, the existence of women is then bound closely with mischief and placed in opposition to men, causing potential danger and threat as what's hidden under women's "sweet, lovely maiden-shape" (Hesiod, 2006, p. 7) is "a shameless mind and a deceitful nature" (Hesiod, 2006, p. 7).

Briseis. Briseis is a significant character in *The Iliad*. Her role as a status symbol is at the heart of the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon that initiates the plot of Homer's epic.

Yet, such a critical character is not given detailed description in *The Iliad.* Apart from the pronouncing glossary, the name of Briseis is mentioned 14 times in *The Iliad*, with five times in Book 1 and five times in Book 19. Except for one place in Book 19, Briseis is mentioned only as a name, at best with little description of her appearance, without any description of her inner world.

Take the description in Book 2 and Book 19 as two examples. In Book 2,

> The brilliant runner Achilles lay among his ships, raging over Briseis, the girl with lustrous hair, the prize he seized from Lyrnessus—after he had fought to exhaustion at Lyrnessus, storming the heights, and breached the walls of Thebes and toppled the vaunting spearmen Epistrophus and Mynes, sons of King Euenus, Selepius' son. (Homer & Knox, 1998)

This description reveals only her appearance and her identity as a war prize, not her characteristics. In Book 19, when Agamemnon and Achilles made a deal,

> Off they went to the tents of Agamemnon—a few sharp commands and the work was done. Seven tripods hauled from the tents, as promised, twenty burnished cauldrons, a dozen massive stallions. They quickly brought out women, flawless, skilled in crafts, seven, and Briseis in all her beauty made the eight. (Homer & Knox, 1998)

Mentioned along "seven tripods", "twenty cauldrons", and "a dozen massive stallions", Briseis is treated like an object.

The one and only place in *The Iliad* where Briseis is given a chance to speak is in Book 19, when she is returned to Achilles and finds out that Patroclus died:

> And so Briseis returned, like golden Aphrodite, but when she saw Patroclus lying torn by the bronze she flung herself on his body, gave a piercing cry and with both hands clawing deep at her breasts, her soft throat and lovely face, she sobbed, a woman like a goddess in her grief, "Patroclus—dearest joy of my heart, my harrowed, broken heart! I left you alive that day I left these shelters, now I come back to find you fallen, captain of armies! So grief gives way to grief, my life one endless sorrow! The husband to whom my father and noble mother gave me, I saw him torn by the sharp bronze before our city, and my three brothers—a single mother bore us: my brothers, how I loved you!—you all went down to death on the same day … But you, Patroclus, you would not let me weep, not when the swift Achilles cut my husband down, not when he plundered the lordly Mynes' city—not even weep! No, again and again you vowed you'd make me godlike Achilles' lawful, wedded wife, you would sail me west in your warships, home to Phthia and there with the Myrmidons hold my marriage feast. So now I mourn your death—I will never stop—you were always kind. (Homer & Knox, 1998)

Through her words and actions, Briseis' inner world is shown explicitly, indicating that Homer was aware that Briseis is not an object, but a human being with emotions, just like the main character Achilles. Such a lengthy description also proves that Homer was able to capture the complexity of Briseis' internal struggles. Yet

such humanity and complexity of Briseis is ignored throughout the rest of *The Iliad*. With Achilles celebrated as the hero and Briseis overlooked entirely, the whole story of *The Iliad* immortalized the actions of men while repeatedly marginalizing women's narratives.

Goddesses' Images in Greek Mythology

Hera. Being the Queen of Olympus, Hera's rank surpassed all other Greek goddesses and most other gods. As the Goddess of Marriage, Hera was one of the most worshipped and respected goddesses in ancient Greece. At every wedding and throughout every marriage, people would regularly pray to Hera for her protection and guidance.

Whilst Hera was meant to represent the divine ideal of a happy marriage and family, she actually experienced the opposite. Her story began with a forced marriage. In Greek mythology, Hera repeatedly rejected Zeus' advances and refused to marry him. However, Zeus was relentless and ignored her dismissal. Eventually, by transforming himself into a cuckoo and pretending to be an injured and helpless little bird, Zeus took advantage of Hera's proximity and then transformed back into his true godly form to rape Hera. Hera, ashamed of the violation, agreed to marry Zeus. Yet Zeus then cheated on Hera with many beautiful mortal women and men, and often showed more favor to his illegitimate children than he did to Hera's children by him.

The result of the rape was not Zeus being punished, but Hera's forced marriage. Hera, Queen of Olympia, powerful and mighty, could not divorce with Zeus. The underlying norms that the Greek mythology wants readers to take for granted are that women, however high her status may seem, are only appendage of men and are at men's mercy.

In the context of the history of feminism, Hera's example illustrates that society was structured in such a way that women were dependent on their husbands and often helpless to change the dynamic. Hera's rape also demonstrates that women were seen as sexual objects to exploit.

Aphrodite. Aphrodite was one of the most beautiful Greek Goddesses in Greek mythology. Due to her unparalleled beauty, many of the gods courted her. Zeus was unsure how to go about handing her over in marriage to a god without causing tensions. In the end, though Aphrodite was in love with Ares, she was given in marriage by Zeus to Hephaistos who she disliked. Zeus made such arrangement only because he would benefit from it. Similar to Hera, Aphrodite did not have the right to divorce and was thus stuck in a marriage against her own will.

Aphrodite was passed through the patriarchal structure of society by the men who had the most control over her life. First, she was in possession of Zeus, her father, and the head of her household. Then, she was the possession to the new household of Hephaistos.

Concerning the history of feminism, Aphrodite's position reflects the many cases in which ancient Greek women were given in arranged marriages, passing from their father's household to their husband's. In most cases, the marriage was a transaction between two men, for their benefit. There was not much consideration for the woman's opinion.

Summary

From goddesses to mortals, women in Greek mythology are portrayed differently. Some were overlooked entirely; others enjoyed the privilege of a few more lines of description. Yet, none escaped the repression of the patriarchal society. Women in Greek mythology are constructed as objects for men to blame, to sacrifice, to trade, or to exploit.

Influence of Women's Images Constructed in Greek Mythology

Narrative of myth has powerful persuasive effects. In a study into persuasion, Green and Brock found that subjects who felt more transported by a story—more hooked into its narrative—later identified fewer flaws in the story, expressed beliefs more consistent with the story and gave more favorable evaluations of the story's protagonists (Green & Brock, 2000). Appel and Richter note that when we engage with a story, we cross over into an imaginary world. This affects our emotional processing, as we begin to experience empathy and identification with the characters presented to us. It also affects our cognitive processing in the sense that our responses can become substantially framed by the standards of the imaginary world, rather than those of the real world. If the story is engaging enough to us, dubious ideas can be smuggled into our belief system without our awareness, under a blanket of appealing narrative (Appel & Richter, 2007). For centuries, Greek mythology has influenced how women live and led women to imagine themselves in certain ways by using inadequate narratives and allowing men to have the prerogative of naming. The writing of the past continues to pass on as a tradition that traps women.

Under the influence of Greek mythology, inadequacy of women's narratives is still prevalent in today's works. *Troy*, a 2004 epic historical war film loosely based on Homer's *The Iliad* in its narration of the entire story, takes a step even further, turning Briseis from a queen-turned-slave without free will into a girl who falls in love at her own will, but with the killer of her family. In *The Iliad*, though the description is few, Briseis' actions still make sense on the whole. She is a queen-turned-slave, stolen from her homeland and bought with her parents' and brothers' blood. She is traded between Achilles and Agamemnon like any other war prize, and upon Achilles' death is rumored to have been given to one of his comrades, with no more say in her fate than his armor and other possessions. The lengthy description in Book 19 reveals that Briseis is struggling with her queen-turned-slave identity, grieving her loss of family and being grateful for Patroclus' kindness. Her hatred towards Achilles who killed her husband and plundered the lordly Mynes' city is also obvious between the lines. But in the film *Troy*, ironically, Briseis falls in love with Achilles quickly, turning a blind eye to the fact that Achilles is the one who put an end to her family and her city. Such a change is not only unreasonable but also shows the Greek mythology's influence upon today's works, and that is to continue considering and portraying women as appendage of men.

Revision

The ill construction of women's images and lack of adequate narrative in Greek mythology have now been recognized and reflection. But beyond recognition and reflection, what we need more is revision. Revision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter of cultural history: It is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge for women is more than a search of identity: It is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society (Rich, 1995).

Now, finally, women are beginning to break the rule of silence and raising a strong voice to question the world. This is a cataclysm (Bomarito & Hunter, 2005). This literature of revision will be one that is different from the male-dominated one. It is a new literature that tells stories from the perspective of women that encourages women to define themselves and respects instead of objectifies others. It is a literature that does not

invent history or try to explain the world solely with reason, but seeks knowledge through feelings and imagination.

Conclusion

Women's images in Greek mythology are ill constructed. Women in Greek mythology are portrayed as objects for trade or sacrifice, defined to domestic sphere, sexual objects to exploit, or even overlooked entirely. These constructions of the past and the inadequacy of narratives continue to structure the experience and identity of women in the present and their power must urgently be broken. A literature of revision has now thus emerged to liberate women.

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