

Interpreting Athena: Ancient Times and Now

The ancient Greeks used myths and drama to explain nearly every aspect of their lives. Bards told stories of how gods formed the earth from chaos. Homer expanded upon these stories and created epic legends of the glorious days of the Greek past. The characters, gods and goddesses, are given human attributes. They represent certain ideals as well as exhibit the duality of human nature. But the goddesses are more difficult to interpret than the gods because although they may appear to be womanly, their powers are nearly always taken from the accepted roles of men. "It is hardly surprising that in myth, feminists have found visions of powerful womanhood to sustain them. In part, myth is where culture stores such images, out of the way of any real political consequence but readily available for escapist art."¹ The goddesses of ancient Greece were never supposed to directly represent a natural woman. Ancient writers referred to a goddess using two terms; *theos*, a generic term for divinity, and *thea*, a female divinity.² One could substitute *theos* for *thea* at any time and not change the meaning of his thought. Also, the goddesses existed before humanity. Pandora was the first woman. She was created to imitate the feminine aspects of the divine, but also to distance man from divinity. Ultimately, a goddess is not a woman and "she often

¹ Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, "Mythic Language and Gender Subversion: The Case of Ruskin's Athena," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52 (Dec., 1997) : 352.

² Nicole Loruax, "What Is a Goddess?" in *A History of Women: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints*, vol. 1, ed. Pauline Schmitt Pantel (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1992), 16-17.

represents a purified, and even more often a displaced, form of femininity."³ The most controversial instance of this fact lies in the interpretation of Athena. She is arguably the most powerful goddess and ought to give great strength to women. However, so much of her identity is derived from masculine power and the rejection of the feminine, that Athena cannot be the champion of woman's capability.

One of the most revealing stories about Athena's character is that of her birth. Hesiod records the myth in the *Theogony*. "Now Zeus, king of the gods, made Metis his wife first, and she was the wisest among gods and mortal men."⁴ After Metis conceives, Zeus swallowed her to try and prevent the birth of a child. The prophecy proclaimed that Metis' son would overthrow Zeus and become king. Hesiod wrote of Metis: "for very wise children were destined to be born of her, first the maiden bright-eyed Tritogenia, equal to her father in strength and in wise understanding,"⁵ and second the treacherous son. But Zeus' plan did not succeed, and he "gave birth from his own head to the bright-eyed Tritogenia, the awful, the strife-stirring, the host-leader, the unwearying, the queen, who delights in tumults and wars and battles."⁶ Some scholars, and ancient dramatists, contend that a male Zeus gave birth to a daughter without need of a woman. But they ignore the fact that Athena survived in Metis' womb. These scholars would have Zeus as the sole benefactor of wisdom. However, they also

³ Loruax, 43.

⁴ Hesiod, *Theogony*, line 886, found at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hesiod/theogony.htm>.

⁵ Hesiod, line 889.

⁶ Hesiod, lines 924-926.

downplay the fact the Zeus did not willingly give birth to Athena. Wisdom entered the world by her own force at the expense of a divine headache.⁷ For the rest of her life, Athena denied the role of her mother in her birth. She became entirely detached from every feminine quality she might possess.

Athena had a strong heritage as a feminine goddess. Most likely she descended from the “Minoan shield goddess” who was a “protective divinity” and a “tree goddess and a snake goddess, both earthly symbols of eternal renewal.”⁸ This goddess was worshipped as an eternal mother, nurturing and creative. Her symbols survived to the classical period for Athena herself was the goddess of the olive tree while the snake and owl are seen as her representations. All of these elements, nurturing mother and the wisdom of the soul, are found in Metis. But Athena is pragmatic and wants to rule with order and uprightness without use of her mother’s abilities. Therefore, she forsakes everything feminine and “honor[s] the male, in all things but marriage.”⁹

An interesting view on the worship of Athena in Athens is held by Jane Harrison. She writes, “To tell the story of the making of Athene is to trace the history of the city of Athens, to trace perhaps, in so far as they can be severed, its political rather than its religious development.”¹⁰ Using the story of the battle between Poseidon and Athena for the patronage of the city, Harrison argues that the deities represented two

⁷ John Mulryan, “Satan’s Headache: The Perils and Pains of Giving Birth to a Bad Idea,” *Milton Quarterly* 39 (2005) : 20.

⁸ Arianna Stassinopoulos, *The Gods of Greece*, (New York: Harry Abrams Inc., 1983), 142.

⁹ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, lines 936-938.

¹⁰ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena: To the Study of Greek Religion*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 301.

forms of government rather than man and woman. Poseidon represented the old aristocracy based on patriarchal lines. Those who fought for democracy must undo this paternal supremacy. To do this, they embody the *Kore*. However, "in reviving her they strangely altered her being and reft from her much of her beauty and reality, they made her a sexless thing, neither man nor woman;...She is, in fact, the Tyche, the Fortune of the City, and the real object of the worship of the citizens was not the goddess but the city herself."¹¹ Athena was the symbol of democracy; a pure maiden, willing to fight for the truth that lies in a representative government. As the legend goes, the women of Athens voted for the goddess' gift and since they outnumbered the men, Athena became the patron deity. Democracy triumphed over aristocratic oligarchy and Athena was their champion.

Athens was famous for its religious festivals. The people celebrated more days as holy than not. Ruskin notes that myths were believed more sincerely by the simple peasant than the questioning philosopher. The commoners took the stories at face value and trusted that the gods did everything that was written about them in the myths.¹² They would have worshipped Athena for protecting and blessing their city. One ritual dedicated to Athena was the annual robe made for her. Each year, two girls were chosen to live in the Acropolis and weave a new robe for Athena. They were probably seven to eleven years old. Their parents made donations to the treasury at the temple in order to request a blessing for their daughters. At the end of the year, the girls take a

¹¹ Harrison, 301.

¹² John Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air*, (Project Gutenberg: 2004), online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12641/12641-8.txt>.

vital role in the festival of the *Arrhephoria*. During the celebration the girls carry baskets from the temple to a sacred, underground place where they exchanged them for new parcels. The girls did not know what was inside their baskets and were not supposed to look. The interpretation is “problematic, but it is clear that the virginal *arrhephoroi* are deployed in a context of impregnation, sexual power, and birth.”¹³ But why would a ritual honoring the virgin Athena have anything to do with impregnation and sexual power? Myth tells us that the baskets actually contained Erichthonius, the child of Hephaestus. Although Athena detested her own femininity, gods found her quite attractive. Hephaestus tried to take Athena but his semen fell to the earth instead. A child, Erichthonius, was born and Athena raised him since the earth could not. Athena was a mother, but only to those whose real mothers did not fulfill their natural role.

Ruskin claims that Athena was the Queen of the Air. She was in the fresh winds that came from the mountains and the sea and through her breath comes life for all things.¹⁴ One example of this comes from the *Odyssey*. Upon Odysseus’ arrival home, Athena came to Penelope during her sleep and breathed youth and beauty onto her face. This was to hide the grief that had aged the queen during her husband’s long absence. This is an unconventional role for a feminine deity. “Uranus, Zeus, and Apollo represent aspects of the sky; Gaia, Demeter, and Persephone of the earth. By making Athena goddess of the air, Ruskin upsets the traditional masculine/feminine dichotomy

¹³ Price, 92-94.

¹⁴Ruskin, sect. 31.

between deities of the air and earth.”¹⁵ But Ruskin was not simply reversing Athena’s gender, and interpreting her as she would have liked. He gave her the masculine power of creation. Athena uses this power to breathe life into humans in order to make them into the shape they ought possess.¹⁶ Athena is more like a god than a goddess. She chose to deny her relationship with Gaia, the earth, and instead became a master of the masculine order. She will guide a hero anywhere, save into the underworld. Athena does not want to visit her inner self. She does not want guidance from her emotions. This goddess is determined to keep up in the masculine arena and will not be held back by a perceived womanly weakness.

Athena’s determination to be treated like a god is revealed in her complete abstinence. In Greek mythology, there are three virgin goddesses. Athena is a warrior virgin, Artemis is a huntress, and Hestia is guardian of the hearth.¹⁷ Athena’s virginity is her choice. Remember, Hephaestus would have Athena be the mother of his child but this would force her to succumb to her emotional, nurturing side. Athena remains a virgin so she may live in the masculine realm.

Tyrrell argues another aspect of Athena’s virginity as it relates to the Amazons. After conquering a foe, the hero/god embodies the strength of his enemy. He writes, “On Athena’s shield [Medusa’s head] protects Athena’s virginity... on her shield in plain sight, the gorgon loses its ability to turn to stone any but the sexually violent.

¹⁵ Weltman, 356.

¹⁶ Weltman, 357.

¹⁷ Loraux, 18.

More to the point, on her shield it denotes Athena's lack of sexuality...She has no part of marriage, intercourse, birth. Restored within her and combined with her military attributes, the gorgon would make of Athena an Amazon."¹⁸ Amazons, unlike Athena, must sacrifice their virginity in order to reproduce. Still, they represented the women who upset the social order by denying the dominance of men and devoting themselves to the art of war.

Homer tells us that Athena was born a warrior. She sprung from the head of Zeus "arrayed in warlike arms of flashing gold" while "shaking a sharp spear."¹⁹ However, Athena is not sovereign in war. She shares this power with Ares. But there are distinctions between the two that must be acknowledged. "Athena fought to defend, to protect; she fought with strategy and clear intention."²⁰ Ares, on the other hand, delighted in war and fought for his pleasure at the sight of blood. Ruskin also discusses Athena's role in battle. She is the "queen of bodily strength in war; not mere brutal muscular strength, -that belongs to Ares,- but the strength of young lives passed in pure air and swift exercise."²¹ Her duty on the battlefield was to guide and invigorate the heroes through wisdom and her power over air. This is just another aspect of her disdain for the feminine. Athena will not sit and wait on Olympus for the men to determine the fate of her beloved Greeks; she takes action.

¹⁸ Wm. Blake Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 110.

¹⁹ Homer, *Hymn to Athena*, lines 5 & 7, found online at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/OMACL/Hesiod/hymns.html>.

²⁰ Stassinopoulos, 170.

²¹ Ruskin, sect. 32.

Most scholars consider Athena to be the goddess of civilization. She created arts like weaving and pottery-making in order to tame humanity. This is recognized in the annual robe dedicated to her. Her crafts brought wealth and prosperity to Athens. But she not only made these arts for people; Athena used her talent of persuasion to weave the polis together.²² Her guidance saved heroes like Odysseus, Achilles, and Heracles. She persuaded the people of Athens as they built their democracy. Ruskin describes Athena's arts like this: "Athena rules over moral passion, and practically useful art. She does not make men learned, but prudent and subtle; she does not teach them to make their work beautiful, but to make it right."²³ His argument is that a man can never hide his true nature in his artwork. One may conceal his lack of integrity in daily life, but such a flaw will be visible in his work. "A foolish person builds foolishly, and a wise one, sensibly; a virtuous one beautifully; and a vicious one, basely."²⁴ Athena ruled over men of excellence because she persuaded them to be so. Her relationship to art was less for the sake of the work than for the building of the character of artists. If the artisan was to have a voice in the political arena, then Athena must make of him a man worthy of speaking. By instilling in Athenians a sense of truth, she does just that.

A prime example of Athena's role in the establishment of democracy is Aeschylus' play *Eumenides*. In this story, Orestes has killed his mother, Clytemnestra, because she murdered his father. Orestes goes to Apollo at Delphi to be cleansed of the

²² Stassinopoulos, 141.

²³ Ruskin, sect. 101.

²⁴ Ruskin, sect. 102.

blood and to avoid the wrath of the Furies. Apollo tells Orestes to “go to the city of Pallas” and wait for Athena to give “words to charm them [the Furies].”²⁵ Ancient practice gives the Furies the right to torment anyone who kills a parent of the same blood. Athena declared that the only way to decide Orestes’ fate is to call a jury; “Hear now my ordinance, people of Attica,/ you who are trying your first trial for the shedding of blood./ In future time also there shall remain for the people of the Aegeus/ forever this council of judges.”²⁶ Tyrrell uses this dramatic trial as an example of the removal of maternal rights in society. Apollo argues that Orestes is only the son of his father, Agamemnon. He uses Athena’s birth as proof of this possibility. Since the Athenians vote for Orestes’ acquittal, they too agree that mothers have limited rights in public society.²⁷ Athena herself has no sympathy for Clytemnestra, and her vote to release Orestes is the deciding one. Athena denied her own mother in life and would not satisfy another’s in death. This story provides the origin of the Areopagus and trial by jury, but more importantly it rationalizes the inheritance practices in Athens. An orphaned, only daughter could not inherit her father’s property. She was to be married and have a son who would become the heir. This was only possible if the father’s closest kin married the daughter. Therefore, the new baby was the child of his biological grandfather; but Athenians accepted this as a father-son relationship whereby

²⁵ Aeschylus, lines 79&82.

²⁶ Aeschylus, lines 681-684.

²⁷ Tyrrell, 118-124.

the daughter is left out of the inheritance. Athena encouraged the dominance of women by men in the judicial-political system of Athens.

In Athena exists a goddess who forsakes the home in order to pursue a military and political career. She defends the place of men in Athenian society and disdains the lower status of women. Pragmatism and intellectualism override any emotion or natural instinct. Finally, Athena is a daughter who refuses to learn from her very wise mother, Metis. Athena might have been a powerful goddess with womanly characteristics, but she simply chose not to be. For Greek men Athena was a perfect character to justify the limitation of women's freedoms. The Goddess of Wisdom preferred men to women. If the women of the time truly believed Athena to be champion of their rights, then they were as ignorant as the men claimed them to be. More likely, Athena was a character that helped compensate for male dominance.

Modern societies have reinterpreted Athena. Beginning in the 19th century, women perceived the goddess to be a role model instead of a compensation for male supremacy. Henrik Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*, is among the first stories of a woman who actually struggles to live in a man's world. Nora, a housewife, has taken out a loan without her husband, Helmer's, knowledge. Not only this, but Nora forged her father's signature to obtain the credit. In a twist of events, Helmer has decided to fire Mr. Krogstad, the man to whom the debt is owed. Nora must convince her husband to allow Mr. Krogstad to keep his job or else he will announce her criminal activity. At the end of the play, while Nora is at the depths of despair, Helmer learns of the loan but also that Mr. Krogstad does not plan to tell the authorities. But he has already angered

Nora to a point of clarity. She decides that she must educate herself and declares, "I must stand quite alone, if I am to understand myself and everything about me. It is for this reason that I cannot remain with you any longer."²⁸ Helmer tries to convince her that she must not forsake her "sacred duties" as wife and mother. Nora replies that she has duties more important than those. "I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being, just as you [Helmer] are-or, at all events, that I must try and become one."²⁹ From this point forward, women have used the model of Athena to break from traditional ties. However, obtaining this equality at all costs may not be the best path.

"The great gift [Athena] can give modern woman [is] the realization that creation and action are as inherently natural to a woman as to a man."³⁰ But many women abuse this gift and suffer for it. They become so enthralled with keeping up with the men that they ignore their feminine attributes. These women embrace the masculine part of Athena. Their passion for work and intellect "turns into coldness aloofness, self-righteousness."³¹ Some fear their emotions. None are willing to search their hearts for dreams, feelings, or satisfaction. These modern Athenas want to control their own lives and everyone who becomes a part of it. There is no room for emotional regret and so no risk for happiness. But this is not the way life should be for modern woman or for Athena herself. Stassinopoulos argues that parts of Athena's myth would bring back

²⁸ Ibsen, 81.

²⁹ Ibsen, 82.

³⁰ Stassinopoulos, 140.

³¹ Stassinopoulos, 142.

the feminine heritage that is needed to complete modern woman. Especially the wisdom of her mother, Metis, might incorporate Athena's cold intellect with warm emotion.³² Because Athena chose to sacrifice emotion, she gave up a chance to ever know excitement, happiness, and love. If she was trying to protect herself from grief or indecisiveness, then she paid a very heavy price.

Modern woman would do well to re-examine the person of Athena. Although her life was full of accomplishment, she could not elevate the status of woman. She gave Athenians a city to be proud of and liberty for all citizens, but did not create a society in which women shared equal treatment with men. Athena, daughter of the king of gods and of wisdom itself, had every opportunity for an accomplished, fulfilling life. But she chose to devote herself to the "world of men" and rejected the opportunity to become champion of the Greek women. Instead of mimicking Athena's choice, modern woman ought to embrace their emotional, feminine side. They should realize that Athena was not a champion for equality, but really a way for men to make themselves feel better for subverting women to their authority. The goddess looked like a woman, but loved to behave like a man. She did nothing to elevate the status of women unless that would mean turn them into men. Athena does not represent a strong female, but a male deity in woman's appearance.

³² Stassinopoulos, 145.

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