

WOMEN IN  
ANCIENT GREECE

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SUE BLUNDELL

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## Creation myth

### THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

The definitive mythological account of the world's creation is presented by Hesiod in his poem *Theogony*, written in about 700 BC. It is a strange tale, describing the origins of both the cosmos and the gods. The latter, although in some instances they correspond to parts of our world, also behave like human beings, in that they make love, give birth, and produce successive generations. According to Hesiod, Chaos was the first being to appear, but after Chaos came Gaea (Earth), Eros (Love), and Tartarus (the deepest Underworld). Gaea, without making love, then gave birth to Uranus (Sky), the Hills and the Sea. Next she lay with her son Uranus, and as a result produced a great brood of monstrous children, including the primitive gods known as the Titans. Uranus did not warm to any of the offspring he had fathered, so he hid each of them inside Gaea, and would not allow them to see the light of day. Poor Gaea groaned with the discomfort of this, and plotted Uranus' overthrow with her son Cronus, one of the Titans. She created a sickle from grey steel, and with this Cronus castrated his father when next he came to lie with Gaea. The genitals were tossed into the sea, and from them spread a foam, in which the goddess Aphrodite came into being (*Theogony* 116–210).

This story of a son's violent overthrow of his father was repeated in the next generation. Cronus made love to his sister Rhea, and she gave birth to Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Poseidon, and Zeus (that is, to the older generation of Olympian deities) and to Hades (the ruler of the Underworld). As soon as each of these children emerged from the womb, Cronus promptly seized hold of it and gulped it down, for he had been told by his parents that it was his destiny to be vanquished by one of his own offspring. Grief-stricken, Rhea managed to give birth to her youngest child, Zeus, secretly in Crete, and Cronus was then handed a stone wrapped in swaddling-clothes. Being none too bright, Cronus immediately swallowed this. Later, when Zeus was grown up, he overpowered

his father, who was forced to vomit up first of all the stone, and then the rest of his children. In this way Zeus became the king of gods and men, and the Olympians were established as a powerful ruling élite (*Theogony* 453–506).

There is no reference in this narrative to the creation of the human race, which in the next episode is simply assumed to exist. Prometheus, the son of one of the Titans, organised a meeting with Zeus at a place called Mekone. Here Prometheus set before Zeus two portions of an ox, and gave him the choice between the meat of the animal wrapped up in its stomach, or its bones hidden beneath the shining fat. This was a trick, since normally the meat would have been beneath the fat. Zeus chose the less favourable of the two portions, thus ensuring that in future human beings would sacrifice only the bones of an animal to the gods and not its meat. (This was indeed the normal sacrificial practice among the Greeks.) In order to punish humans for having gained this advantage, Zeus then refused to give them fire. This would have meant (a point not made explicit by Hesiod) that they would not have been able to cook their newly-acquired meat. When Prometheus stole some fire and carried it down to mortals, Zeus retaliated by masterminding the creation of the first woman, of whom more anon (*Theogony* 535–84).

Later Zeus had to overcome challenges to his supremacy from the Titans and from a monstrous serpent, Typhoeus. This he managed to do with tremendous displays of thunder and lightning (*Theogony* 617–736, 821–86). After this he settled down to some procreation. His first wife was a goddess named Metis, but when she was pregnant with Athena Zeus swallowed her whole. He had been advised by Gaea and Uranus that in this way his royal power would be assured, otherwise Metis would eventually bear him a son who would be the king of gods and men. Later Zeus gave birth to Athena from his own head.<sup>1</sup> He also had liaisons with the goddesses Themis, Eurynome, Demeter and Mnemosyne, who bore him a succession of daughters. Leto presented him with twins, Artemis and Apollo. Finally he married his sister Hera, who provided him with three legitimate offspring (*Theogony* 887–926), Hebe, Ares and Ilithyia.

In this narrative, the evolution of patriarchal divine power and of an orderly cosmos are seen to be inextricably linked. Thus male domination is represented as an essential ingredient in the stability of the universe and the justice of divine rule. At the beginning of the story, Gaea emerges as a powerful goddess who can give birth to her sons alone; at the end, Zeus is the ruler, and he produces a daughter, Athena. Rule by the male has replaced rule by the female, and at the same time the gods have come progressively closer to appropriating the function of reproduction. Uranus tried to block the birth of his children, and it was from his severed genitals that the goddess Aphrodite was born. Cronus swallowed his children and then disgorged them through his mouth. These early attempts at take-over misfired because they were foiled by the feminine cunning of Gaea and Rhea. Zeus resembles both Uranus and Cronus in that he prevents the birth of a child through the act of swallowing; but he forestalls opposition by disposing of the mother as well as the infant. By this means he completely usurps the woman's reproductive role; and birth now takes place from the head, the seat of wisdom.

Zeus has managed in this way to escape from the cycle of succession, and from the hostility between father and son which was so notable a feature of the two preceding generations. By evading the future overthrow prophesied by his grandparents, he ensures that no son will ever succeed to his position. Instead of a threatening male child, he begets a loyal daughter whose perpetual virginity is a guarantee of her refusal to be the source of any further challenge to his power. This does not mean that Zeus will never father children by the normal method (far from it), or that he will never have sons.<sup>2</sup> It is

in its tremendous potency as a symbol that the miraculous birth of Athena is significant: it sets the tone for the system of rule which it has helped to bring into being. This will be a system in which the male is utterly dominant, since even the female's role in reproduction can be dispensed with if Zeus puts his mind to it; and it will be perfectly stable, for unlike human government, it will never be disrupted by the transference of power to the next generation. At this stage the immortality of the Olympians is made manifest: if the gods are to provide us with a model of eternity, there has to be a point at which they stop behaving like human beings and therefore stop yielding power to their sons. Athena's birth and her virginity stand as signs that this point has been reached.

Moreover, the nineteen children that are born as a result of Zeus' subsequent liaisons are all daughters and all virgins. The first three, born of his second marriage to Themis, or Right, are called Order (Eunomia), Peace (Eirene), and Justice (Dike): they are indicative of the high moral tone of Zeus' government, and of the good things which can come out of the female principle once it is subject to regulation within the patriarchal system. These women are like the statues of Justice or Liberty or Industry which adorn the institutions of our own male-dominated societies.<sup>3</sup> In Zeus' case, they tell us in no uncertain terms that the violence which characterised the previous regimes has now been replaced by peaceful and enlightened government. The swallowing of Metis has confirmed Zeus in his power; the virgins who are then born to Zeus tell us what the nature of that power will be.

Thus the myth of creation can be seen to validate male domination on the human level by erecting a divine pattern in which the onset of patriarchy is linked to the creation of order. But among mortals the 'ideal' situation of the gods cannot be completely reproduced. In the world of humans the existence of two sexes is essential for reproduction. Men cannot survive without women, and as a result their position of dominance is never absolutely assured. It is in this context that the story of Pandora's creation is introduced.

### THE CREATION OF WOMAN: PANDORA

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, the human race is punished for the acquisition of fire when the craftsman god Hephaestus, acting under instructions from Zeus, moulds from the earth the image of a virgin. Athena decks her out in some splendid clothes, and the 'lovely curse' (*Theogony* 585) is then handed over to an assembly of mortals, for whom she becomes a 'hopeless trap, deadly to men' (589). At this point, we discover that hitherto the human race has consisted entirely of males:

From her comes all the race of womankind,  
The deadly female race and tribe of wives  
Who live with mortal men and bring them harm.

(*Theogony* 590–92)<sup>4</sup>

Hesiod now lets fly with a spate of misogynistic reflection. Women do nothing to alleviate men's poverty, but they are always ready to share in their wealth. They are like the drones in a beehive, who fill their bellies up with the products of the worker-bees' labour. But,

... if a man avoids  
Marriage and all the trouble women bring  
And never takes a wife, at last he comes  
To miserable old age, and does not have  
Anyone who will care for the old man.  
He has enough to live on, while he lives,  
But when he dies, his distant relatives  
Divide his property ...

(*Theogony* 603–7)

In another of his poems, the *Works and days*, Hesiod treats us to another version of the same story. Here, a number of deities contribute to the woman's ornaments and accomplishments: Athena teaches her to weave and fits her out with a girdle and robes; Aphrodite provides charm and 'painful, strong desire' (66); Hermes gives her 'sly manners, and the morals of a bitch' (67); and the Graces adorn her with golden necklaces, while the Seasons crown her with spring flowers. The *Works and days* narrative also supplies the first woman with a name. She is called Pandora, or 'Allgifts', because she is presented as a gift by the gods. This 'deep and total trap' (83) is delivered to the human race by Prometheus' absent-minded brother, Epimetheus, who has forgotten that his more forward-looking brother warned him to accept no gift from Zeus, in case it should injure men. Up to this time, men have lived free from sorrow, disease, and the need to work. But the woman opens up her jar, and scatters all the pains and evils of the world among its inhabitants: the only thing to remain inside the jar is hope. 'Thousands of troubles, wandering the earth' (110) are released, and all of this has been willed by Zeus.

The woman created in both versions of this story is a manufactured object, moulded from clay like a piece of pottery. Men receive her as the 'free gift' that comes with their acquisition of fire; and like many a free gift, she is not all that she is made out to be. Deceptiveness is one of her outstanding characteristics: she is a mere 'image' and a 'trap', and Hermes has put into her breast 'lies and persuasive words and cunning ways' (*Works and days* 78). In the *Theogony* her appearance represents the final phase in the establishment of a separate identity for the human race. Three successive developments – the introduction of meat-eating (associated with the sacrifice trick), the use of fire and the institution of marriage (the result of Pandora's creation) – serve to bring into being a civilisation distinguished by its double-edged character. Like meat-eating and fire, women help to sustain human life, but like them<sup>5</sup> they are also, in Hesiod's view, potentially damaging. However, men need children to care for them in their old age, and to inherit their property when they die. So women must be endured.<sup>6</sup>

The female whose existence helps to characterise this human civilisation is herself only partially incorporated into the human race. In the *Works and days*, Pandora's ability to cross the boundary between the divine and the human spheres is suggested both by the fact that she is a gift to men from the gods, and by the terms in which she is described: she has a face 'like an immortal goddess' (*Works and days* 62), but a human voice and capacity for movement (61–2). She is also credited with bestial qualities – she has 'the morals of a bitch' (67) – and so can be seen to straddle another boundary, the one between humans and animals. She is in fact a thoroughly ambiguous creature, who, though an 'evil', can bring 'delight', and, though a 'ruin', will be loved by men (57–8). By incorporating within her person elements from all three levels of being, she helps to determine the intermediate status of the human race, poised between the gods and the beasts. With her

coming, the distinctively human problems of sorrow, hard work and disease are unleashed.

Pandora's significance as a gift has been admirably discussed by Joseph Nagy (1981), in an article in which he draws on the work of the sociologist Marcel Mauss. In his classic study *The Gift* (1925), Mauss discusses the social function of the exchange of gifts, and points out that, because of the obligation to repay which is created, a gift can be a means by which the giver gains power over the receiver. Nagy discerns in Greek myth a common pattern whereby a theft (the negation of the gift) is paid for when the thief then accepts a gift which turns out to be other than what it appeared: it is through this 'subtle act of giving' that relations of domination and subordination are created. The ultimate example of this pattern is to be found in the story of the Trojan War, which is caused by Paris's theft of Helen, and is brought to an end when the Trojans accept from the Greeks the fatal offering of the wooden horse. In the Prometheus/Pandora myth, we are presented with a complex but logical sequence of deceptive gift, gift withheld, theft, and deceptive counter-gift. Zeus's acceptance of the ox bones hidden beneath fat means that human beings have gained one advantage over the gods: in future, in return for this paltry gift made in the course of sacrifice, the gods will have to confer favours on the human race. Zeus responds by withholding fire, and this refusal to give is countered by an act of outright theft, when Prometheus steals fire and delivers it to mortals. The final stage comes with the handing over of Pandora, who brings terrible gifts, the contents of her jar, to the human race.

According to Nagy, the female can be seen here as the ultimate gift within society: not to accept her would mean that human society would come to an end, but acceptance brings nothing but trouble. Pandora's beauty is like the fat that covers the bones, for it conceals a worthless interior. Her belly is always taking (see p. 22), but men have to put up with this if they want what her belly can also give, the children whom they need in order to survive. Through Pandora, the deceptive counter-gift, the gods finally gain the upper hand over mortals, for she ensures that human beings will for evermore be subject to the ills which mark them off from the race of the gods. Like the Biblical story of Eve, the myth of Pandora envisages the female of the species as a necessary evil whose existence helps to determine the inferior status of the human race. Although this is not the only view of Woman which is offered by Greek myth, it is one that colours many of the subsequent representations.

## *The Olympian goddesses: virgins and mothers*

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Greek characterisation of their Olympian goddesses is the emphasis which is placed on virginity. All of the male Olympians are sexually active. But of the six females, three – Athena, Artemis and Hestia – are dedicated virgins, steadfast in their refusal to marry; while one – Zeus' consort Hera – is what might be called a semi-virgin, since she is able to renew her virginity annually by bathing in a sacred spring at Canathus, near Argos. Although both Hera and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, are mothers, neither of them acquits herself with any distinction in this role; and Hera in particular illustrates quite clearly the negative connotations which in Greek myths are liable to attach themselves to women who have given birth. Only one of the six Olympian goddesses, Demeter, could be said to be a true mother goddess – a being whose identity is closely bound up with her role as a parent.

Although it was of the utmost importance to most Greek men that their daughters should be virgins up to the time of their marriage, it was of equal importance that women should marry and give birth. In this respect the role model presented by the Olympian females was hardly an inspiring one. The virgin goddesses repudiate the most important function ascribed to women by Greek social values, while two of the mothers are notable for their lack of devotion to their children. Four of the goddesses, moreover – Athena, Artemis, Hera and Aphrodite – are remarkably active outside the home, contradicting the ideal of a modest and domesticated lifestyle constructed for both married and unmarried women. The mythological characterisation of the female Olympians cannot, it seems, be explained simply in terms of a reinforcement of a conventional social code. The differences between the Olympian goddesses and their female worshippers seem, if anything, to be more significant than their similarities. In what follows, I shall be discussing some of the basic characteristics of these deities, and then considering the implications of their distinctive behaviour and attributes.