

WOMEN IN  
ANCIENT GREECE

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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.

## ATHENA

Although Athens was by no means the only Greek state where Athena was worshipped, it is as the patron deity of that powerful city that the goddess is best known to us. The prominence of the idea of virginity in the Athenian concept of their patron is something that is highly visible even today, for Athens is still dominated by the mighty temple of the Parthenon, which housed a statue of the goddess known as the Parthenos, or Virgin.<sup>1</sup> Athena is generally represented as a highly androgynous figure, who involves herself in both masculine and feminine activities; and this ambiguity seems to be encapsulated in her virgin status. Although she is female, she rejects the roles of marriage and motherhood which most Greek men saw as fundamental to a woman's existence.

Athena's feminine side is displayed most clearly in her supervision of one of the most characteristic of women's occupations. As Athena Ergane (or 'Workwoman') she was worshipped as a goddess of handicrafts, and in particular as the inventor of spinning and weaving, tasks which in ancient Greece were carried out primarily by women in the home. The goddess's association with textile production was commemorated at the Great Panathenaea, an Athenian festival celebrated every four years in her honour, where the culminating event was a procession which wound its way up to the Acropolis, displaying at its head a robe specially woven for Athena (Fig. 1).

But the dominant image of the goddess is one that links her firmly with masculine activities. Both in literature and in the visual arts, Athena is most frequently represented as an armed warrior (Fig. 34), a manifestation which is found in our earliest sources. For Hesiod, the goddess is a 'fearsome queen who brings/ the noise of war and, tireless, leads the host,/ she who loves shouts and battling and fights' (*Theogony* 925-6).<sup>2</sup> In Homer's *Iliad*, she is prominent among the divine partisans who constantly intervene in the warfare between Greeks and Trojans. On the battlefield she sweeps through the Greek ranks, bullying, inciting and bellowing out war-cries. She grabs the reins of chariots, guides Greek spears into enemy flesh and fends off Trojan weapons with her bare hands (see, for example, *Iliad* 5.121-32, 5.778-863, 20.41-53). Her golden helmet, massive spear and flapping aegis strike terror into the hearts of her opponents. Many Trojans bite the dust as a result of her interventions, including the noble Hector, who is enticed into making a stand against Achilles when Athena poses as his brother and offers to lend him assistance. Pausing only to hand Achilles back his spear after a mis-throw, the goddess then promptly disappears and leaves Hector to his fate (*Iliad* 22.224-305). Respect for fair play is not one of the warrior maiden's most obvious qualities.

In many of her functions, however, Athena traverses and transcends the boundary between feminine and masculine roles. Her relationship with the olive tree features in the story of her successful bid to become patron deity of the city of Athens, recounted in the sculptures of the Parthenon's west pediment. Her rival for the post was the god of the sea, Poseidon, whose offering to the city, a salt spring on the Acropolis, was countered when Athena created an olive tree in the same area. The decision went in the goddess's favour, and ever afterwards she was regarded as the guardian of olive trees (Fig. 2). This myth ascribes to Athena a traditionally feminine connection with the fertility of the earth. But it also links the goddess to masculine modes of economic production: olive oil was one of Athens' principal exports, and olive trees were cultivated by men.

Athena's role as *kourotrophos*, or nurturer of young men, similarly evokes a feminine quality; but in performing it she is brought into intimate contact with some of the most virile of Greek mythological characters. Anyone who is anyone in the roll-call of heroes

seems at some stage in his career to receive assistance from the warrior maiden. Among the Greeks who fight at Troy, Achilles and Odysseus are particular favourites (see p. 53). For Jason she constructs the *Argo* in which he sails off in quest of the golden fleece. Bellerophon is presented by the goddess with a golden bridle so that he can tame the winged horse Pegasus. When Perseus cuts off the head of the Gorgon Medusa, it is Athena who guides his hand. Above all, Heracles, the archetypal hero, is able to rely on the goddess as his mentor and helpmate in many of his labours (Fig. 3).

Moreover, it is often through her adoption of aggressive masculine stances (see p. 191) that Athena's overall protective function is exercised. In this respect the snake is an appropriate symbol of the goddess's powers. There is a striking proliferation of these creatures about her person, most notably in the numerous examples which wriggle around the fringes of her magic breastplate, or aegis, and can be brandished by the goddess when she is warding off her enemies. Like the snake, Athena is an ambivalent entity whose deadliness to her enemies enables her to be kind to her friends. It was believed by some Athenians that the Acropolis was protected by a giant snake which lived in the goddess's temple and, every month, consumed the honey-cake that was left out for it. This animal can be seen to represent Athena's guardianship of the Acropolis and of the city as a whole, a role referred to in one of her most important cult titles, *Polias*, or City-goddess. Athens was not the only community which looked to the goddess for protection, and in this connection her chief temple was often located on a fortress hill, as for example in Argos, Sparta, Lindos and Gortyn, as well as in Athens.

Her defence of cities establishes Athena firmly as an urban deity, involved in many aspects of human technology and culture, in both female and male spheres of activity. Perhaps above all she should be seen as a superb manager. This side of Athena is displayed even in the midst of warfare, for she is not a goddess of uncontrolled violence but one whose contribution is strategy and discipline. When Odysseus goes on a walkabout through the Greek camp, using all his diplomatic skills to persuade the war-weary fighters not to abandon the campaign, he does so because he has been motivated by Athena (*Iliad* 2.155-82). It is Odysseus' great ability as a manipulator that especially endears him to his female champion, for, as she herself admits, this is a quality which the two of them share. In response to one of the hero's tall tales about his recent adventures, she exclaims affectionately:

It would be a sharp one, and a stealthy one, who would ever get past you  
in any contriving . . . you and I both know  
sharp practice, since you are far the best of all mortal  
men for counsel and stories, and I among all the divinities  
am famous for wit and sharpness . . .

(*Odyssey* 13.291-9)<sup>3</sup>

This fondness for schemes and contrivances earns Athena her reputation for wisdom. Until the fourth century BC, the word *sophia*, which we translate as 'wisdom', signified the kind of practical intelligence which skilled craftspeople and men of affairs possessed. In the fourth century, most notably in the works of the philosopher Aristotle, *sophia* began to take on the meaning of contemplative wisdom; and it was at some stage after this (perhaps not until the first century BC) that Athena came to be regarded as the personification of *sophia* in the more abstract sense.

The two factors which more than any other determine Athena's identity as a female who is different from ordinary mortal women are brought to our attention in the

*Eumenides*, the last tragedy in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy, produced in 457 BC. The Greek commander Agamemnon has been murdered by his wife Clytemnestra on his return from Troy, and their son Orestes has later avenged his father by killing his mother. Hounded by the Furies, the ghastly spirits of retribution, Orestes goes on trial in the city of Athens. The god Apollo defends him by maintaining that his offence was less serious than Clytemnestra's, since the mother is not the true parent of the child (see p. 107), and offers as proof of this contention the example of Athena, president of the court. She is a 'Child sprung full-blown from Olympian Zeus, / never bred in the darkness of the womb' (*Eumenides* 664–5).<sup>4</sup> Athena, in giving her casting vote in favour of Orestes' acquittal, endorses Apollo's argument:

No mother gave me birth.  
I honour the male, in all things but marriage.  
Yes, with all my heart I am my Father's child.  
I cannot set more store by the woman's death ...

(*Eumenides* 736–40)

Athena is different, then, because she had no mother and because she is a dedicated virgin who has always resisted offers of marriage. The way in which these factors are exploited in this particular context is a product of fifth-century Athenian male consciousness, and as such represents a rather late formulation so far as mythology is concerned. But both factors were long-established features of Athena's biography, and though their implications may not always have been so consciously voiced, they suggest that a denial of motherhood may always have been a part of the characterisation of the goddess. In the *Theogony* (886–900, 924–6), the poet Hesiod relates how Zeus swallowed his wife Metis whole, and later gave birth to Athena from his head (see p. 21). In other versions of the story, the part played by Metis is totally suppressed, and Zeus is represented as the sole parent.<sup>5</sup> From the seventh century BC onwards the birth of Athena was depicted in Athenian vase paintings (Fig. 4), and it was also chosen as the subject of the sculptural representation in the east pediment of the Parthenon (see p. 192).

Metis in Greek means 'cunning intelligence' – a suitable name for the mother of the wily Athena – and we can speculate that at one time the story was one which told of the transmission of a purely feminine wisdom. What is much clearer, however, is the significance in the surviving narratives of the downgrading or total removal of Metis' role. The myth as it now stands demonstrates that it is the father who is the predominant or sole parent, and in this way the very special relationship which exists between Zeus and his daughter is explained. Athena by her birth has secured the stability of Zeus' political regime, and has at the same time validated patriarchal control within the family.<sup>6</sup>

In the most extreme version of this story, Athena has had no contact at all with a woman's womb. At the same time, her own womb is denied, since she herself is a virgin who will never marry or give birth. Even a glimpse of the goddess's naked form is unforgivable: the seer Tiresias as a young man caught sight of the goddess as she was taking an al fresco bath in a spring, and was punished with blindness for this offence. The story which best illustrates Athena's antipathy to male sexual advances relates how the blacksmith god Hephaestus had once tried to rape her when she was visiting his forge to commission a new set of weapons. Athena resisted furiously, and the god ejaculated over her leg. In disgust, she wiped away the semen with a piece of wool and threw it onto the ground, causing a child, Erichthonius, to be born from the earth. Having missed by

inches becoming the infant's mother, Athena consented to take charge of his upbringing (Apollodorus 3.14.6). In this way the goddess's virginity, which marks her off from ordinary mortal women, is mediated by her role as a foster mother, an aspect of her *kourotrophos* function which draws her back into the realm of human femininity. In a prayer composed by the tragedian Euripides, Athena the virgin goddess can nonetheless be addressed as 'Mother' (*Heracleidae* 771–2).

In many of her activities Athena can be seen to be like her mortal worshippers, both female and male. But she is also strikingly different – different from the females because she is a virgin, different from the males because she is female. The significance of this tension between likeness and difference will be explored in more detail below (p. 44).

## ARTEMIS

The second virgin goddess is the twin sister of Apollo, and a child of Zeus by a minor deity named Leto. In some ways, Artemis can be seen as the antithesis of Athena, who is essentially an urban goddess. Artemis, by contrast, is a loner who haunts the remote reaches of the countryside. 'Let all the mountains be mine', was the request that she put to her father when she sat on his knee as a baby; and instead of girlish trinkets, she asked for a bow and a loose knee-length tunic suitable for hunting (Callimachus, *Hymn Three: to Artemis* 8–19). She is an 'arrow-pouring virgin' (*Homeric Hymn* 9.2),<sup>7</sup> whose most familiar image is that of the vigorous young sportswoman who strides out purposefully in pursuit of prey (Fig. 5).

In myth Artemis is also terribly destructive towards young women. In the course of a family row her stepmother Hera taunts her with the words, "Zeus has made you a lion / among women, and given you leave to kill any at your pleasure." (*Iliad* 21.483–4). Along with her brother Apollo she inflicts the most horrific punishment on the mortal woman Niobe for boasting that she has had more children than the goddess Leto. Apollo and Artemis immediately spring into action with bows and arrows to rob her of this advantage, and while her twin disposes of Niobe's six sons, Artemis shoots down the six daughters.

The maiden Iphigenia is another of Artemis' victims. When the Greek fleet is about to set sail for Troy, Artemis sees to it that the winds are unfavourable and then decrees that Agamemnon, the leader of the expedition, must sacrifice his first-born child Iphigenia to her in order to make the winds blow in the right direction. Agamemnon obeys, and the capture of Troy is assured. But the deed certainly does not endear him to his wife Clytemnestra, who in many versions of the myth gives the slaughter of her daughter as the motive for murdering her husband on his return from Troy (see p. 177–8). One way or another, Artemis' treatment of Iphigenia seems to be bound up with her function as a hunting goddess: in some versions it is because Agamemnon has killed one of her sacred stags that she demands this dreadful act of expiation,<sup>8</sup> in others, Artemis at the last moment replaces Iphigenia with a deer and carries her off to the city of Tauris in the Crimea, where she becomes a priestess in a cult involving the sacrifice to the goddess of all the unfortunate Greeks who land on the shore.<sup>9</sup>

These human sacrifices are mythical, and we cannot be sure that there was ever in reality a time when men and women were offered up to Artemis. But the cult practices associated with the goddess do throw up a number of instances of ritual cruelty. At Halae in Attica, for example, a festival of Artemis was celebrated at which a few drops of blood were drawn from a man's throat with a sword. In Sparta, Artemis presided over a more

gruesome and testing ordeal: at the festival of Artemis Orthia young men had to run a gauntlet of other youths wielding whips in order to grab some cheeses from an altar. It is possible, as Pausanias suggests (3.16.10), that rites such as these had at some stage been introduced as substitutes for human sacrifice. But this is a matter for speculation. Of more significance is the fact that myths and rites alike create an image of a goddess who can be deadly in her treatment of the human race.

However, these destructive tendencies are combined with a remarkable creativity. Artemis the hunter is also celebrated for her nurturing of young animals. In the *Iliad*, Homer refers to her as 'Mistress of Animals' (21.470), a long-established formula which doubtless refers to her role as a supplier of prey for human hunters; and in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (141–3), she is hymned as 'Artemis, lovely Artemis, so kind/ to the ravening lion's tender, helpless cubs,/ the suckling young of beasts that stalk the wilds'. Human fertility too comes within her remit. The goddess capable of destroying young women is also thought of as participating in three of the most important transitions of their lives, all of them linked to their reproductive role. She was appealed to at the onset of menstruation.<sup>10</sup> She was in women's thoughts just before marriage, when they dedicated to her the girdles which they had worn since puberty. Above all, 'women suffering the sharp pains of childbirth' called for her aid (Callimachus, *Hymn Three* 20–22). By the Classical period, Artemis had developed into a full-blown goddess of childbirth, and as such had merged with the more obscure birth deity Ilithyia.

Artemis' close relationship with young women was highlighted in Athens by a rite which seems to have had the function of preparing an Athenian girl for the transition into adulthood, defined as far as a female was concerned as the stage at which she became capable of bearing children and therefore marriageable. Between the ages of five and ten, girls went into service in the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron, on the east coast of Attica. These young attendants were referred to as the 'bears' (*arktoi*), and during their time at the sanctuary – probably a year – they wore yellow dresses, and ran races and performed 'bear-dances' in honour of the goddess. According to legend, this service was an atonement for the slaughter by Attic youths of a bear which was sacred to Artemis. Its theme of propitiation points to the notion that a price had to be exacted from young women before they could be allowed to become fertile and surrender their virginity.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the girls' activities at Brauron can also be seen as an acknowledgement of their natural wildness – of the part of them that wanted to 'act the bear'. Only when this had been purged could they be tamed within the institution of marriage.<sup>12</sup>

The creative side of Artemis is represented most graphically in the famous statue of the goddess which was the focus of her cult at Ephesus, a Greek city on the west coast of Asia Minor (Fig. 6).<sup>13</sup> This image, which was housed in a magnificent temple, is very different from that of the lithe young athlete honoured in the western part of the Greek world. The copies of the statue which have survived date from the Roman era, when the cult was still so popular that a mass protest meeting was organised against St. Paul's preaching by the city's replica-makers, and the theatre reverberated to chants of 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians' (*Acts of the Apostles* 19.23–41). However, the image's iconography certainly dates back to the Greek period, if not to an earlier time. It is now generally agreed that the numerous globes attached to her chest do not represent breasts: recent suggestions identify them as either fruits or the testicles of bulls sacrificed to the goddess. It may at one time have been the practice to attach one or other of these items to a primitive wooden image of Artemis as a way of 'asking her for more' – more fruit or more bulls – while at the same time providing her with the wherewithal, seeds or semen,

to produce them. After a time these temporary offerings would have been given a more permanent form in a ritual pectoral, and eventually the statue was carved with the pectoral already in position.<sup>14</sup> In any event, whether the objects are fruits, testicles or indeed breasts, there is little doubt that they are emblematic of the goddess's role in promoting fertility. The bulls, lions and bees which are worked into the design of her robe point in the same direction, and call to mind the Artemis who is hailed as 'Mistress of Animals'.

The juxtaposition of destructive and creative elements within the same deity may be paradoxical, but it is by no means unusual. It is a common motif in myth, and doubtless springs from a basic sensitivity to human mortality: death is the price which we have to pay to the gods for the gift of life. We are born to die, and Artemis reminds us of these two extremes of the human condition by showing us that in a very real sense our lives are sustained by death. A goddess who both nurtures and kills would certainly not seem strange to hunting or agricultural peoples, who are forever involved in the ambiguous practice of caring for young animals so that later they can be slaughtered for food. Childbirth, too, in ancient Greece at least, could very easily bring death with it; and it is not surprising that at Brauron, where young girls were set on the road to motherhood, the garments of women who had died in labour were also dedicated.<sup>15</sup>

Rather more difficult to come to terms with is the fact that a goddess who is so intimately associated with the fertility of animals and humans should herself be a dedicated virgin. Like Athena, Artemis defends her chastity vigorously: when the hunter Actaeon accidentally catches sight of her bathing in a woodland pool, she punishes him by turning him into a stag, so that he is torn to pieces by his own hounds. Unlike Athena, Artemis also inspires a commitment to celibacy in some of her followers. In Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus*, the young son of King Theseus is so obsessively devoted to Artemis that he tries to suppress his own sexual identity. For this he is persecuted by the love-goddess Aphrodite, who arouses in his stepmother Phaedra an ungovernable passion for the youth: both of them come to very nasty ends. Atalanta, who as a baby was fostered by a she-bear, is another of Artemis' devotees; a formidable hunter and athlete, she expresses her antipathy to the married state by announcing that she will only become the wife of a man who can beat her in a running race, a feat which she mistakenly believes no-one can achieve. All this fervent dedication to the single life is inspired by a goddess who also presides over childbirth. Some possible explanations of this anomaly will be discussed below (p. 44–5).

## HESTIA

The third Olympian virgin is the goddess of the hearth. While other deities are out and about, Hestia stays at home on Mount Olympus to keep the fires alight: as a result she has very few adventures, and generates only a minimal amount of mythology. Indeed, Hestia (whose name means simply 'hearth') seems very often to be thought of more as a set of sacred stones than as a deity with a human form, and it is not surprising that there are very few visual representations of the goddess.

Nevertheless, she was a deity of great symbolic significance, and was worshipped throughout the Greek world. The hearth was the centre of the Greek home, and as a family altar it was the site of many domestic rituals. Small offerings of food – the most basic and the most common form of sacrifice – were made there before a meal. In Athens, a rite called *amphidromia*, in which a baby was carried around the hearth a few

days after its birth, probably signified the formal acceptance of the child into the family. At a wedding the bride was led from the hearth in her father's house to the new hearth which she would tend as mistress in the home of her husband. Clearly, the *hestia* was deeply rooted in family life, and not surprisingly it came to symbolise the sanctity of the Greek *oikos* or household. That the stable core of the household should be regarded as female is, of course, only to be expected.

Hestia also provided a focal point for the community as a whole. In many Greek states, the *prytaneion*, a kind of town hall, contained a public hearth which was seen as the centre of the city and as an emblem of civic unity. The one in Athens was situated midway between the agora and the Acropolis, and in it there was a statue of the goddess and a fire that was kept perpetually burning. It was here that foreign ambassadors were entertained following an invitation to dine 'at the public *hestia* of the city'. Hestia, the goddess who stays at home, represents permanence and security not only within the family, but also within the community of which the family forms the foundation.

The only significant piece of narrative attached to Hestia concerns her refusal to marry. Once when she was courted by both Poseidon and Apollo, she touched the head of her brother Zeus and swore a great oath that she would remain a virgin forever. Instead of marriage Zeus gave her high honour and a central place in the home (*Homeric Hymn* 5.21–32). Of all the virgin goddesses, she comes closest to providing a role model for young Greek women, for she is the only one of the three who exhibits anything like the required degree of passivity. Yet even here there is a paradox, for Hestia – the goddess who forswears marriage and motherhood – is also, as we have seen, a symbol of family life. This ambiguity is underlined by the writer Porphyry, when he tells us that there were two images of Hestia: one was a virginal figure, but the other was a matron with prominent breasts, representing the power of fertility (in Eusebius, *Praep.Ev.* 3.11.7).

## HERA

Hera was the full sister and wife of Zeus, ruler of gods and mortals. The importance of the goddess in cult practice is indicated by the fact that two of the earliest temples in the Greek world, on the island of Samos and at Argos, were dedicated to her in the eighth century BC.<sup>16</sup> Primarily, she was worshipped as a goddess of weddings and marriage. She was invoked as the Uniter (*zygia*), as the Preparer-of-weddings (*gamostolos*), and as the Woman-given-in-marriage (*nympheuomene*); and in the month of Gamelion ('Wedding-month' – our January), special sacrifices were offered to her. In the *Thesmophoria-zusae*, a fifth-century comedy by Aristophanes, the female chorus addresses this prayer to the goddess:

Be with us, sweet Hera, great Goddess and Queen,  
Take part in our dancing today!  
Defender of marriage, Protectress serene,  
Lend grace to our revels and play!

(973–6)<sup>17</sup>

This role as protectress of marriage is obviously linked to Hera's relationship with Zeus, and in visual representations the two deities are often shown side by side. In the Parthenon frieze, for example, Hera turns to face her husband, and raises her veil in the gesture of a bride (Fig. 7). Even in Hera's own shrines, her influential consort was liable

to put in an appearance: according to Pausanias (15.17.1), a helmeted figure of Zeus stood next to the cult statue of the enthroned goddess in the temple of Hera at Olympia. Her association with marriage was perhaps responsible for Hera's strange status as a semi-virgin. Pausanias (2.38.2) tells us that near Nauplion there was a spring named Canathus where the goddess bathed annually in order to renew her virginity: for most women, virginity was an essential prerequisite of marriage, and Hera's yearly rebirth as a potential bride may well have been seen as an event which recreated and reaffirmed the marital relationship.

Hera's supervision of weddings gave her a special link with young women, and it was in this connection that she was honoured in a festival celebrated every four years at Olympia. This was the female counterpart of the famous Olympic games held in honour of Zeus, although needless to say the women's version was far less prestigious and elaborate. Very little information about the festival is recorded by ancient authors, but it is known that it began with the presentation to the goddess of a newly-woven *peplos* or robe, after which running races were held in the Olympic stadium. The competitors, who may all have been young local girls, wore short tunics which left their right shoulders and breasts exposed. The course for the races was about five-sixths of the length of the Olympic track, and the prizes were olive crowns and a share of the cow sacrificed to Hera (Pausanias 5.16).

According to one legend, this festival was instituted by the local princess Hippodamia as a thank-offering for her marriage to the hero Pelops which took place after Pelops had won a chariot race against the bride's father, an event seen by some authorities as the original contest of the men's games at Olympia. The importance of the marital relationship was in fact accorded some very visible recognition in the Olympian sanctuary: not only was the prelude to the chariot race depicted in the east pediment of Zeus's temple, but in its west pediment the story of the unsuccessful attempt by the Centaurs to disrupt a Lapith wedding ceremony was represented (see p. 189–90). The union between Pelops and Hippodamia had not been without its problems, however. The hero had managed to kill his prospective father-in-law in the course of the chariot race, and as a result had brought down a curse upon his family. This curse was to have enormous mythological repercussions, since it eventually descended to Pelops' grandsons, Agamemnon and Menelaus, both of whom experienced considerable marital difficulties: Menelaus' bride Helen absconded to Troy with Paris, while Agamemnon was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra when he returned from the Trojan War (see p. 173–4). Clearly, marriage is not being presented in these myths as a source of unalloyed delight, and much the same might be said of Hera's own relationship with the god Zeus, which is a very stormy affair.

Indeed, when we turn from Hera's role in cult practice to her representations in myth, a very different image of the goddess emerges. The revered defender of marriage features in Homer's poems as an almost comic character – an archetypal nagging wife who keeps a jealous watch over all her husband's movements, and shows considerable resentment when he fails to consult her (e.g. *Iliad* 1.536–70). Her sharp tongue and competitiveness are also displayed in the anonymous *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, in a scene where Hera learns about her husband's do-it-yourself procreation:

'O stubborn and wily one! What else will you now devise?  
How dared you alone give birth to gray-eyed Athena?  
Would not I have borne her? ...

And now, I shall contrive to have born to me  
a child who will excel among the immortals.'

(*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 322–7)

In retaliation, Hera gives birth unaided to the monstrous serpent Typhoeus. But what a difference there is between the two offspring – between the clever and supportive Athena, the child of the father, and the devouring monster who is the symbol of the mother's power. There can be little doubt who is the moral victor in this particular contest.

A famous episode in the *Iliad* provides a portrait of a more subtle and manipulative Hera. In order to distract her husband from a turn of events in the Trojan War of which he may not approve, she throws herself enthusiastically into a magnificent scheme of seduction. Having bathed and adorned herself with the utmost care, she engineers a 'chance' meeting with Zeus on Mount Ida, and with the aid of a magic girdle borrowed from Aphrodite succeeds in reawakening his ardour. Their union sets in motion a series of splendid cinematic effects:

... There  
underneath them the divine earth broke into young, fresh  
grass, and into dewy clover, crocus and hyacinth  
so thick and soft it held the hard ground deep away from them.  
There they lay down together and drew about them a golden  
wonderful cloud, and from it the glimmering dew descended.

(*Iliad* 14.346–51)

This description may preserve a memory of an earlier concept of Hera as an earth goddess, whose sacred marriage to the sky deity causes vegetation to spring forth. But in Homer's *Iliad* Hera is much more than a personification of the earth: she is a strong and vigorous personality, and it is to marriage on the human rather than the cosmic level that she principally relates. The model of marital relations presented in the poem could hardly be said, however, to present a positive image of women's role. When Zeus discovers that his encounter with his wife was part of an elaborate plot, he threatens her with a whipping, and reminds her of the violent punishments which he has inflicted on her in the past. For all Hera's forcefulness, the pattern of male domination is clearly reaffirmed in these glimpses into the domestic life of the Olympians.

Hera is also a member of a ruling dynasty, and within the political institutions on Mount Olympus she exercises considerable authority: her appearance in the assembly of the gods produces instant and respectful attention, and her policy decisions are readily accepted by the other deities (*Iliad* 15.84–148). But here again, the power accorded to a woman has to be viewed within a framework of overall male control. Hera's authority is shown to derive ultimately from that of her husband: in the words of Aphrodite, honour must be accorded to a goddess who lies 'in the arms of Zeus, since he is our greatest' (*Iliad* 14.213; see also 18.366).

Hera figures most prominently in myth as a wife and a queen. As a mother, she is negligible. Her marriage to Zeus produces three or four offspring – two minor goddesses, Hebe and Ilithyia, the hateful war-god Ares, and, in Homer's account, the blacksmith-god Hephaestus.<sup>18</sup> This last child is born lame, and according to Homer his mother is so ashamed of him that she hurls him from the top of Mount Olympus (*Iliad* 18.394–405). He lands in the ocean, and in one of its underwater grottoes he receives his training in metallurgy, a skill which he later exploits in order to win revenge against his

unkind parent.<sup>19</sup> When Hera seats herself on a beautiful golden throne which her son has sent as a gift, she is immediately clapped in invisible bonds; and frantic messages to Hephaestus that he should come and free his mother are met with the response that he has no mother. Only when he has been brought back to Olympus in a drunken stupor by the wine-god Dionysus, and has been bribed with an offer of marriage to Aphrodite, does he agree to release Hera from her shackles.

Clearly, the goddess's relationship with her son is far from ideal. Her cruelty towards the younger generation is brought out particularly strongly in the stories of her treatment of the many illegitimate offspring fathered by the persistently unfaithful Zeus. Many of these are pursued with a terrible vengeance. At Hera's command, Dionysus is torn to shreds by the Titans. The monstrous serpent Python is despatched to dispose of Apollo. Most famous of all is the punishment inflicted on the hero Heracles, who as a result of the machinations of Zeus's wife has to endure the dreadful burden of the twelve labours. Far from being a tender, caring mother, Hera is frequently in myth made to act out the role of the archetypal wicked stepmother.

The negative qualities with which Hera is invested in myth are important, for they tell us a great deal about the attitudes of Greek males to marriage and motherhood. But the mythological portrait should not be allowed to overshadow the very different picture which emerges from a study of Hera's role in cult practice. There, she was venerated as the protector of an institution which was not only central to women's experience but was recognised as a vital component of Greek social structures. To the people who took part in her rites, and more especially to her female worshippers, she must have presented a far more positive image.

## APHRODITE

Aphrodite is the goddess of love and sexuality (Figs 42, 44–5). She is seen as being present in the sexual act itself: the term *aphrodisiazein* means simply 'to make love'; while *eros*, the word for physical love or desire, is also the name of a god who is Aphrodite's companion from the moment of her birth (Hesiod, *Theogony* 201). But it would be a mistake to regard the goddess as a straightforward incarnation of the erotic impulse. Though sex is her prime concern, the narratives surrounding her reveal that her powers extend well beyond the realm of physical relations.

As a divine being, Aphrodite had close links with the Semitic goddess of love, Ishtar/Astarte, who was worshipped in Mesopotamia and Phoenicia. Aphrodite often bore the title Heavenly (*Urania*), while Astarte was invoked as the Queen of Heaven; and both goddesses were honoured with incense altars and sacrifices of doves. Sacred prostitution, one of the best-publicised aspects of the cult of Ishtar/Astarte, was also to be found in some of the centres of Aphrodite's worship. The best-attested example is Corinth: in 464 BC a Corinthian athlete named Xenophon, who had won victories in two events at the Olympic Games, fulfilled a vow which he had made to Aphrodite and dedicated a number of prostitutes to the goddess's service in her temple on the hill of Acrocorinth. The offering was commemorated in an ode by the poet Pindar:

Young women, hostesses to many, handmaidens  
Of Attraction in wealthy Corinth,  
Who burn the golden tears of fresh frankincense,  
Often you soar in your thoughts  
To Aphrodite in the sky,  
The mother of loves.

She gave to you, girls, without blame  
To pick the fruit of soft youth  
In beds of desire.  
With compulsion all is fair . . .

(Pindar, fragment 122)<sup>20</sup>

The historian Herodotus's statement (1.105) that the oldest cults of Aphrodite in Greece had been established by Phoenician settlers may contain a broad element of truth. The goddess had very strong associations with the island of Cyprus: the city of Paphos, the site of one of her most important temples, was seen by Greek poets as the goddess's true home; and from the time of Homer onwards the epithet most commonly applied to her was *Cypris*, or 'the Cyprian'. It is possible that she started life as a local Cyprian love goddess who took on some of Astarte's characteristics when Cyprus was colonised by Phoenicians in the ninth century BC. From here, the cult would have spread gradually to the mainland of Greece, a process which may be partially recaptured in the story of Aphrodite's birth from the sea and her journey across the waters. This reconstruction is speculative, however, for the picture of the goddess's early development is still very unclear.

The most famous account of the mythical origins of Aphrodite is the one given by the poet Hesiod (*Theogony* 154–206). When Cronus castrates his father Uranus and throws his genitals into the sea (see p. 20), a shining white foam or *aphros* is produced. From this there arises a beautiful goddess (Fig. 40), who floats slowly to Cyprus where she steps ashore and causes grasses to spring up beneath her slender feet. Gods and mortals call her Aphrodite, because she was born from *aphros*. She is attended from the first by Eros and Himeros (Desire), and she is allotted a sphere of influence that includes 'Fond murmurings of girls, and smiles, and tricks, / And sweet delight, and friendliness, and charm' (Hesiod, *Theogony* 205–6).

In this narrative, Aphrodite appears as a powerful and primaeva deity. She is older than any of the other Olympians, for she is present at the first stage in the formation of our world, when Earth and Sky are separated. This view of Aphrodite as a vital cosmic force emerges even more clearly from a poem entitled *On nature*, written by the fifth-century philosopher Empedocles. In this account of the physical workings of the universe, Empedocles outlines a system in which the four elements – earth, water, air and fire – are mingled together by a controlling force called Love, so as to form the visible objects of our world: 'Love is in their midst, equal in length and breadth. Gaze on her with your mind, and do not sit with dazzled eyes. For she is recognised as being inborn in mortal limbs; through her they think kind thoughts and perform the deeds of friendship, calling her Joy by name and Aphrodite.'<sup>21</sup>

The account of Aphrodite's birth transmitted by Hesiod may have been inspired in part by some early myth-maker's belief that her name had been derived from the Greek word *aphros*, which can mean either semen or sea-foam. Similarly, her relationship with Uranus could have been invented in an attempt to explain the goddess's title of Heavenly, or Urania. But these considerations would not in themselves have given rise to the most striking element in the story, the castration episode. The basic association implied between the act of love (symbolised by Aphrodite) and the act of castration points to a pervasive fear of female sexuality, a response which may also have helped to determine the paired but contrasting roles of Aphrodite and Athena in the narrative (see p. 21). Both goddesses are born from the male alone. But while Aphrodite emerges from

Uranus's genitals as a result of the latter's overthrow, Athena comes out of Zeus's head and helps to ensure his supremacy. Thus the birth of a goddess renowned for her sexual activity is ascribed to a period when the female principle is still strong; while the consolidation of male control is marked by the advent of a goddess who espouses virginity. The same polarisation could be said to mark the subsequent careers of the two deities: Athena is unfailingly loyal and helpful to her worshippers; Aphrodite on the other hand is often seen as the female force that lays men low.<sup>22</sup>

The power possessed by Aphrodite is disturbing but also essential. In the anonymous *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, she is honoured as the irresistible sexual urge that operates on every level of creation. She is 'the Cyprian, who stirs sweet longing in gods/ and subdues the races of mortal men as well as/ the birds that swoop from the sky and all the beasts/ that are nurtured in their multitudes on both land and sea' (2–5). Among deities, we are told, only the virgin goddesses Athena, Artemis and Hestia are immune to her ministrations. Zeus himself cannot escape her, but on one occasion he did get his own back by inspiring her with love for a mortal man, the Trojan Anchises. Aphrodite went to visit him while he was tending his cattle, and as she strode across the wooded slopes of Mount Ida she drew with her a retinue of enchanted beasts:

And along with her, fawning, dashed grey wolves  
and lions with gleaming eyes and bears and swift leopards,  
ever hungry for deer. And when she saw them, she was delighted  
in her heart and placed longing in their breasts,  
so that they lay together in pairs along the shady glens.

(69–74)

In this scene, Aphrodite is pictured as a powerful nature goddess, a Mistress of Animals who, rather than tending young creatures as Artemis does, ensures that the coupling takes place which will bring them into being.

Her relationship with the world of nature may be present also in the myth of her passion for the beautiful Cyprian youth Adonis, who was born from the bark of a myrrh tree. While out hunting, Adonis is fatally gored by a boar, and from the drops of his blood which fall to the earth the goddess causes scarlet anemones to spring up. In an alternative version of the story, Adonis is still a baby when Aphrodite falls in love with him. She hides him in a chest and gives him to Persephone, queen of the Underworld, for safekeeping. But the goddess of death is so enchanted with him that she refuses to give him back, and the dispute between the two deities is eventually brought before Zeus. He decrees that the boy is to spend a third of each year by himself, a third with Persephone, and a third with Aphrodite. In this way, he becomes subject to an annual death and resurrection.

Adonis' name is clearly derived from a west Semitic word *Adon*, meaning Lord, and he may well have been in origin a god who made his way from Phoenicia to Greece in the company of Aphrodite. His myth had its counterpart in an annual festival, the Adonia, which was celebrated in various parts of the Greek world, chiefly by women. In this cult, the emphasis was on mourning the death of the god. In Athens, women planted short-lived herbs and cereals – the 'gardens of Adonis' – in pots placed on the roof-tops, and as the plants withered the women bewailed the god's passing. In Alexandria, a magnificent pageant imitating the wedding of Aphrodite and Adonis was followed on the next day by a ritual in which an image of the god was carried down to the shore, where it was cast into the sea amid loud lamentation.



The myth and cult of Adonis were seen by James Frazer (1957, pp. 426–57) as fitting neatly into his theory of the powerful nature goddess, whose annually resurrected consort symbolises the decay and revival of vegetation. But death and weeping were the central features of the cult, and it is not until the time of the Roman Empire that we hear of women rejoicing over the rebirth of the god. As a representative of vegetable life, Adonis would appear to be singularly unreliable, for the plants with which he was associated were essentially barren and ephemeral. Moreover, it is unlikely that his festivals were seen as having any link with the stages of the agricultural year, since they were not state-sponsored and were indeed looked on with suspicion by the male population.

The sexual element in the story should not be overlooked. The young lover dies prematurely as a consequence of his relationship with a powerful female. The wound inflicted by the boar can perhaps be seen, because of its location near the groin, as the equivalent of castration.<sup>23</sup> In the alternative version of Adonis' biography, it is Aphrodite herself who first consigns the beloved infant to the Underworld. These narratives may be thought of as expressing once again a male fear of women's sexuality. The Adonia festival, with its uninhibited exhibitions of grief and despair, clearly provided the women involved with a tremendous emotional outlet; but the association which the rite established between unrestrained sexuality and the failure of fertility perhaps spoke to them of society's need to contain women's passions within the male-dominated institution of marriage.<sup>24</sup>

Aphrodite is represented in Homer's poems on a much more human scale. As a personality caught up in the byzantine machinations of the Olympian deities, she cuts rather a pathetic figure. When her son Aeneas, born as a result of her affair with Anchises, is injured on the battlefield at Troy by the Greek hero Diomedes, she rushes to defend him: 'and about her beloved son came streaming her white arms, / and with her white robe thrown in a fold in front she shielded him' (*Iliad* 5.314–15). But as a devoted mother she has very little staying power. When Diomedes wounds her in the hand she lets out a shriek and immediately drops her son. Having fled to the safety of Mount Olympus, she is taunted by the warrior Athena; and the father of the gods himself, taking her on one side, advises her to leave warfare to the others and to content herself with 'the lovely secrets of marriage' (5.429).

Aphrodite's links with marriage must surely have been seen by Greek men as somewhat disturbing, for she herself is unique among the Olympian goddesses in that she is sexually promiscuous and adulterous. Although married to the blacksmith god Hephaestus, she has well-publicised affairs with the Olympians Hermes and Ares (see p. 54), as well as with the mortals Anchises and Adonis. She also inspires adulterous desires in others. In the myth of the Judgement of Paris, Aphrodite secures for herself the award for the most beautiful of goddesses by bribing the young Trojan prince with the offer of Helen's love; but the responsibility which she thus incurs for the deadly combat of the Trojan War is referred to only obliquely in the poems of Homer. By the fifth century, however, attitudes were hardening; and in the tragic drama of this period the disruptive effects of Aphrodite's power to shatter marriages are evoked much more vividly. In Euripides' *Andromache* (289–92), Aphrodite is said, at her meeting with Paris, to have spoken 'witching words / Most sweet to the young judge, / But deadly too, a lewd confusion to destroy / And throw low / All the towers of high Troy'.<sup>25</sup>

It is as the source of terrible passions in married women that Aphrodite features most devastatingly in fifth-century tragedy. Most searing of all is the story of Phaedra's love for

her virginal stepson Hippolytus (see p. 31). By excluding Aphrodite from his life, Hippolytus has provoked the spiteful goddess into a terrible demonstration of her power; but it is Phaedra who provides the emotional arena in which the consequences of this rejection are played out. The passion which Aphrodite inflicts on her leads eventually to the woman's suicide and to Hippolytus' brutal death at the hands of his father. As the nurse in Euripides' play comments:

Cypris is an unbearable thing when she comes in full flood.  
She comes gently to anyone who yields, but if she finds someone out  
of the ordinary and thinking big,  
she seizes him, and you can imagine how she humbles his pride!  
She passes through the sky; she lives in the waves  
of the sea; Cypris gives birth to all things.

(*Hippolytus* 443–8)<sup>26</sup>

Underlying this narrative is the belief, present also in the story of Aphrodite's birth, that female sexuality can unhinge and destroy a man. In the work of a woman writer, a totally different view of the goddess is presented. For the poetess Sappho, Aphrodite is a gentle and accommodating deity. She descends to the earth not as a torrent of painful passion, but as one who can soothe and satisfy her worshippers. Her presence is an occasion for rejoicing:

... Cyprian goddess, take and pour  
gracefully like wine into golden cups,  
a nectar mingled with all the joy  
of our celebrations.<sup>27</sup>

The ambivalence of the male response to the goddess of love is perfectly encapsulated in an account of her given by one of the characters in Plato's dialogue *The Symposium*. According to him, there are two Aphrodites. The older one, Heavenly Aphrodite (Aphrodite Urania), is composed entirely of the male element. She inspires a love that is free from lust and is directed towards young men who are old enough to be intelligent companions. The younger goddess, Common Aphrodite (Aphrodite Pandemus), is made up equally of male and female elements. She is associated with the love experienced by the man in the street, who admires people for their bodies rather than their minds, is only interested in the sexual act, and is as likely to fall in love with a woman as a boy (*Symposium* 180d–181d). Aphrodite Pandemus was one of the goddess's cult titles, honouring her as a deity 'of the whole people', who by bringing a population together in common worship helped to strengthen the social bonds which united them. In Plato's usage, however, the ambiguity of the name has been exploited. This Aphrodite is 'common' in the derogatory sense of the word – she is a symbol of an inferior sensual love, which is distinct from the spiritual and uplifting variety which is created between males who share the same intellectual concerns.

As a sexually active goddess, Aphrodite is also inevitably a mother. Apart from the Trojan prince Aeneas, she produces a son named Hermaphroditus, the result of her love affair with the god Hermes; and according to some sources Eros is also her child. However, this aspect of her activities receives very little recognition in myth. Aphrodite is the patron of sex and sexual desire, and it seems that for the Greeks sex and motherhood do not mix. The passion which the goddess inspires is associated, in many contexts, with wildness and otherness and lack of control. To conjoin this passion with

WOMEN IN ANCIENT GREECE

motherhood would be to accord to a female a frightening accumulation of powers which would place her beyond the orbit of male control. Hence Aphrodite is good at sex, but a failure as a mother. Our last goddess, Demeter, represents the reverse side of the process. Exemplary in her love for her child, she is negligible when it comes to sexuality.

## DEMETER

Demeter's name is indicative of the most significant aspect of her identity, for *meter* is the Greek word for mother. She also has a clearly established link with the fertility of the earth. But the goddess should not be seen simply as an Earth Mother, as a straightforward personification of the powers that reside in the soil. As the patron of corn and cultivation, she is very much associated with human control of the earth: like Athena, she is a goddess of culture rather than nature.

The definitive version of the story bringing together Demeter's two roles as mother and corn goddess is presented in the anonymous *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which was probably written between 700 and 550 BC. One day, when Demeter's daughter Persephone was picking flowers in a meadow, she was snatched up by the god Hades, ruler of the Underworld, who carried her into the depths of the earth in his chariot. For nine days Demeter wandered through the world, with a blazing pine torch in either hand, searching for her child. Eventually the sun god Helios told her that Hades had borne her away to become his bride, and that this had happened with the consent of the girl's father, Zeus. Appalled by this treachery, Demeter deserted Mount Olympus and went to live on earth with the human race. In her journeyings she came at last to the city of Eleusis (near Athens). Here, disguised as an old woman, she found employment in the palace of the king Celeus and his wife Metaneira, who hired her as a nurse to their only son Demophoon. Under her care the baby was well on the way to becoming immortal, for Demeter secretly anointed him with ambrosia, and every night she buried him like a brand in the heart of the fire. But one night Metaneira caught her in the act, and let out a terrified scream. The angry goddess then revealed her true identity, and ordered the people of Eleusis to make amends for their lack of faith by building a magnificent temple.

Here Demeter remained, mourning for her daughter, and for a whole year she would not allow the crops to grow. The human race began to suffer from a dreadful famine, and the immortals too were becoming restless, for no sacrifices were being made to them. The various embassies despatched by Zeus left Demeter unmoved:

She said she would never set foot again on fragrant Olympus  
and never allow the grain in the earth to sprout forth  
before seeing with her eyes her fair-faced daughter.

*(Homeric Hymn 2.331-3)*

Finally the god Hermes was sent down to the Underworld to tell Hades that he must let Persephone go. Before her departure, Hades gave his bride a single honey-sweet pomegranate seed to eat, telling her that in his kingdom she would be 'mistress of everything which lives and moves' (*Homeric Hymn 2.365*). Mother and daughter were reunited at Eleusis, rushing joyfully into each other's arms. But the very first words which Demeter spoke to her offspring were these: 'Child, when you were below, did you perchance partake/ of food?' (*Homeric Hymn 2.393-4*). If she did, Demeter said, she would have to spend a third of every year in the Underworld, returning to her mother and the other immortals for the remaining two-thirds:

Whenever the earth blooms with every kind of sweet-smelling  
spring flower, you shall come up again from misty darkness,  
a great wonder for gods and mortal men.

*(Homeric Hymn 2.401-3)*

And so it turned out. Demeter made the earth teem once more with vegetation. Every year, when her daughter was restored to her in the springtime, she would do the same. Before returning to Olympus, the goddess instituted her sacred Mysteries among the people of Eleusis:

... (she) showed them the  
celebration of holy rites, and explained to all  
... the awful mysteries not to be transgressed, violated  
or divulged, because the tongue is restrained by reverence for the gods.  
Whoever on this earth has seen these is blessed,  
but he who has no part in the holy rites has  
another lot as he wastes away in dank darkness.

*(Homeric Hymn 2.474-82)*

In all subsequent versions, the essential features of this story remained unchanged. But by the fifth century BC another episode had been added. On her departure for Olympus, Demeter had taught a young man of Eleusis named Triptolemus the secrets of agriculture. He was sent off around the world with the mission of teaching the human race how to grow corn. In this way, a further dimension, an account of the origins of human civilisation, was added to the narrative. The Triptolemus incident was a very popular one in Athenian art of the Classical period (Fig. 9).

In the main narrative, Persephone's perpetual return to the Underworld is secured by the eating of a pomegranate seed. This feature of the story springs from the Greek tradition of guest-friendship: once Persephone has tasted the food that she has been offered in the Underworld, she has become subject to a sacred bond which requires that she remain loyal to the host who gave it to her. But the pomegranate was also a symbol both of fertility (presumably on account of its large number of seeds) and of death (because of the bloody colour of its juice). As a motif it stands at the heart of the Demeter and Persephone story, and encapsulates its overall theme of death and resurrection.

This myth has been subject to a large number of interpretations. Frazer's theory (see p. 38), that myths which tell of the death and resurrection of a deity were closely linked to rituals designed to promote the revival of vegetation, may appear extremely tenuous in many of its applications, but in this case it does seem peculiarly apposite. Greece was a country with very little arable land, and the threat of famine would have been a constant preoccupation in many areas, particularly in the winter months when the stock of grain harvested in the early summer was beginning to dwindle. Against this background, the reassurance offered by the myth can be easily appreciated. It provides an explanation of why the crops do not grow in winter, and at the same time holds out a promise of future regeneration. The Eleusinian Mysteries, the rites associated with the myth, were celebrated in September, just before the planting of the seed corn in October. When Persephone disappears into the Underworld, this must surely represent the burying of the seed corn in the ground; while her reunion with her mother symbolises its return to the earth in the form of crops. Thus in the period when the seed is destined to die, its resurrection is vouchsafed to the celebrants; and in this way, the renewal of human life is guaranteed.<sup>28</sup>

But the significance of the myth is not confined to its agricultural content. The intimate relationship between mother and daughter is an impressive feature of the story, and it is highlighted again in the fact that the Greeks often referred to them simply as 'the Two Goddesses', or even sometimes as 'the Demeters'. The psychologist Jung and his collaborator Kerenyi (1963, pp. 101–83) see the two goddesses as a dual entity, representing two distinct but complementary phases in a woman's life, maidenhood and motherhood. When Persephone and Demeter are reunited, we are reminded of the continuity which springs from the merging of these stages: the maiden becomes the mother, and the mother gives birth to the maiden. In the words of Jung, it might be said 'that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter ... The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that (a woman's) life is spread out over generations – the first step towards the immediate experience and conviction of being outside time, which brings with it a feeling of immortality' (1963, p. 162). From the myth of Demeter and Persephone there springs an awareness of the contribution which the individual makes to the cycle of regeneration. The rebirth of the grain and the recreation of human life are to be seen as two manifestations of a divine pattern of eternal renewal which is revealed to us by the two goddesses.

However, for a woman living in ancient Greece the story may have had a more immediate and less positive significance. Marriage to a stranger, arranged by her father against her mother's wishes, and envisaged as a kind of rape, would have been a reality and not a fanciful tale for many Greek women. That the event was also seen as bringing with it a kind of death – a loss of individual identity – can be easily imagined. Indeed, the fear would always be present that marriage might be fatal in a very real sense, for many women died in childbirth. The link commonly made in myth between death and marriage can thus be seen to have its roots in a shared feminine experience. Persephone, of course, provides the ultimate example of this response, for she marries Death himself.

The more abstract implications of the theme of death have been emphasised by Burkert (1979, p. 139). He points out that the return of the maiden is very much a mixed blessing. Persephone was the queen of the Underworld, and it was in this guise that she was chiefly worshipped in ancient Greece. When she makes her annual ascent to the earth, she is bringing renewal, but she is also bringing death into our world. Looked at from this point of view, the myth becomes one of many which tell of the terms on which the gift of life is offered to the human race. Through the annual growth of crops and the ability to reproduce, Demeter and Persephone confer a kind of immortality on human beings. When the Triptolemus episode is added to the narrative, the art of agriculture becomes another factor in our survival. But the price which we have to pay for this endless regeneration is our individual mortality: 'a dimension of death is introduced into life, and a dimension of life is introduced into death' (Burkert, 1985, p. 161).

To the worshippers of Demeter and Persephone the prospect is at least held out of a better fate after death. The speech made by Demeter when she institutes the Eleusinian Mysteries hints at a distinction between the lot of the initiated and that of the uninitiated. This is elaborated on in a fragment from Sophocles' play *Triptolemus*: 'Thrice blessed are those mortals who have seen these rites and thus enter into Hades: for them alone there is life, for the others, all is misery' (Sophocles, fragment 837). In this respect, the symbolic value of corn appears to be very close to the one expressed in the New Testament: 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal' (*St. John* 12.24–25). The guarantee of some form

of personal salvation is unusual as an aspect of Greek religion in the Archaic and Classical periods. But the evidence of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* would suggest that the Eleusinian Mysteries did encompass this belief, and there is no direct evidence to suggest that it did not go back to the origins of the cult.

Festivals of Demeter and Persephone were very common in ancient Greece. Many of them were linked to important stages in the farmer's year, and some of them, such as the festival of the Thesmophoria, had a close connection with the experience of women (see pp. 163–5). But the ritual most intimately associated with the myth of Persephone's rape and return was that of the Eleusinian Mysteries, celebrated at the town of Eleusis, fourteen miles to the west of Athens, and administered by Athenian officials. Initiation into the Mysteries was open to all Greek speakers, both male and female. Following some preliminary rituals in Athens, a procession of prospective initiates set out along the Sacred Way linking the city with the sanctuary at Eleusis. Initiation took place during the night in a huge pillared hall called the *telesterion* (the 'initiation-place'). Details of the rites were a closely guarded secret, and we have little reliable information concerning them.<sup>29</sup> However, it seems certain that they included the revelation of sacred objects; and some re-enactment of the myth of the goddesses was also doubtless performed. The emotional impact of Persephone's return would have been enhanced by a sudden blaze of light. Torches, carried by Demeter in her search for her daughter, were an important emblem of the cult, and there are numerous representations of them at Eleusis. The lighting of these torches to celebrate the deity's epiphany would have produced an impressive underscoring of the theme of cosmic renewal implicit in the narrative to which these rituals were linked.

## CONCLUSION

There is a marked tendency in Greek mythological representations to divide powerful women up into the sexually active but hostile, and the virginal but helpful. Just one example of this antithesis can be found in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy, where Clytemnestra can be seen on one level as the wicked mother who has to be eliminated, while Athena is the friendly virgin who sets everything to rights (see pp. 27–8). Although it would be an oversimplification to analyse the Olympian goddesses purely in terms of this bad mother/good virgin polarity, it is significant that Demeter is the only one among them who presents a positive image of motherhood.

This attitude to mothers could be explained on a purely psychological basis, an interpretation which has been discussed in detail by Philip Slater (1971), who employs Freudian analysis to account for the various destructive and devouring mothers of Greek myth. According to Slater, men's natural fear of female reproductive powers beyond their control became accentuated in Classical Athens on account of the sharply dichotomised lives led by men and women. Athenian boys, who spent their formative years cooped up in the home with women who were frustrated and bitter, would have been the object of disturbingly ambivalent feelings on the part of their mothers: intense involvement springing from the need to find an outlet for repressed aspirations and sexual desires, coupled with tremendous hostility inspired by the knowledge that their sons would grow up into oppressive Athenian men. Hence the Athenian male's fear of sexually active women; and hence the violent mothers of Athenian myth and tragedy.

This reconstruction should certainly not be dismissed out of hand; but it lacks an awareness of the political dimension of the male response – of the interaction that takes

place between individual psychological impulse and collective ideology. In a society in which women's reproductive powers were carefully regulated, not merely by the male-dominated institution of the family, but also by the state, there was clearly an official recognition of the crucial social role played by women as reproducers of the citizen group; and in this context a collective anxiety about women who were fertile was likely to develop (see pp. 120-1, 125-6). Thus, there would have been a political as well as an individual dimension to the invention of hostile mothers. A child-bearing woman was supposed to come under male domination, and any female who tried to evade this social truth, and to take control of events, was clearly up to no good.

Conversely, only a woman who was not fertile could be allowed, at least on the level of the imagination, to be both powerful and beneficent. Virginité in a goddess would have been seen as a mark of potency and inviolability. Since in theory wives were subordinate to their husbands both sexually and socially, it may well have been felt that the married state was incompatible with a goddess's independence, and hence with her ability to confer independence on others. The symbolic value of resistance to male domination can be appreciated in the case of all three Olympian virgins. As a goddess of war and of urban life, Athena could prevent both warriors and cities from being overpowered by their enemies. Artemis looked after hunters, and ensured that they maintained the upper hand in their struggle against the animals. Hestia, the protector of the household, guaranteed the self-sufficiency and integrity of the family units on whose survival the state depended.

This idealised construction of female virginité would have been reinforced by Greek attitudes to male sexuality. Burkert (1983, pp. 60-61) has pointed out that sexual abstinence was often a part of the preparation for war or hunting, and Athena and Artemis, the goddesses who brought success in these activities, would have served to validate this ban through their own inaccessibility. A negative version of the same message can probably be extracted from the story of Actaeon's association with Artemis (see p. 31): the hunter who breaks the taboo on sex and dares to look at a naked virgin loses the battle against the animals, and becomes the hunted instead of the hunter. Like many other people, the Greeks seem to have regarded celibacy as a precondition of physical achievement. Their view of sex as a form of bodily combat, the belief that it involved the release of vital fluids or contamination with feminine weakness, and the association with loss of self-control, may all have helped to inspire the notion that erotic activity could have a debilitating effect on a man.<sup>30</sup>

But what are we to make of the virgin goddesses' associations with motherhood? Part of the explanation probably lies in their fostering role: young heroes and warriors, hunters and girls approaching puberty are all cared for by these goddesses, who are allowed to display the benevolent qualities which are for the most part denied to the genuine mothers. But the idea that Athena and Artemis are boundary-crossers (see p. 19) – being capable in their case of passing over the dividing line between women and men – helps to throw a little more light on this aspect of their characterisation. As females, they would naturally be seen as sharing in the nature of women; but as females who repudiate the most characteristic of women's functions (marriage and childbirth) and engage instead in the most characteristic of masculine activities (fighting and hunting), they would also be regarded as honorary males. By combining the female and the male principles in this way, they would be able to bring women's creativity within the orbit of men's control.

This ability is best illustrated by the role of Artemis. The stages in a woman's life which

she supervises – menstruation, loss of virginity on marriage, childbirth – all involve bleeding. Her task can thus be identified with that of the male, whose job it is to bring about bloodshed, whether in war, in hunting and sacrifice, or in their relationships with women. If, in the interests of reproducing society, Artemis has to make women bleed, then she must herself resemble the male: she must be active, not passive; she must shed blood but not bleed herself. As a female, Artemis can get close to women; but as a virgin she can assume a dominant position and cause the wounds through which women give birth.<sup>31</sup> These wounds are the price which women have to pay to a goddess whose own espousal of virginity means that it is only with reluctance that she allows women to bear children.

Comparative evidence exists which tends to bear out this interpretation. In the Bimin-Kuskusmin tribe of Papua New Guinea, fertile women are seen as possessing great power which can become dangerously polluting unless it is controlled and properly channelled by men. To assist them in this task they have a female ritual leader, the *waneng aiyem ser*, a post-menopausal woman whose gender is highly ambiguous. On assuming her position she takes on a masculine name, wears regalia that are partly female and partly male, and is allowed to share in some of the men's privileges, such as the right to speak on certain public occasions. When women are in labour, she has the role of ritual midwife; while at male initiation ceremonies she handles menstrual blood, and stands with her legs apart so that the young men can pass through them in a form of rebirth: for this reason she is sometimes called the 'male mother' (Poole, 1981, p. 117).

The anomalous virginité of the more shadowy Hestia must be explained in rather a different way. Unlike Athena and Artemis, Hestia is not androgynous and does not engage in masculine activities: she comes closer than either of her fellow-virgins to exemplifying the chaste demeanour which was expected of a young woman prior to her marriage. In Ancient Greece, life-long celibacy in real people was rarely seen as a good thing in itself. Virginité was prized rather as a form of freshness, a prelude to subsequent fruitfulness, and hence as a symbol of endless renewal. In this context Hestia can be seen to represent the powerful potential of the virgin daughter who will one day marry and produce children; and it is this which establishes her link with the regeneration of the family unit.

In Classical Athens, at least, Hestia's virginité would have carried an extra dimension, one which underpinned the patriarchal nature of the family. The virginité of a bride was one of the guarantees of the paternity of subsequent children, and this helped to establish its value in the eyes of Athenian men. It is a wise child that knows its own father: but in Classical Athens, where it was an offence to have sex with an Athenian woman before she was married, or with an Athenian woman who was married to somebody else (see p. 125), they did their very best to ensure that children knew who their fathers were, and, more importantly, that fathers knew who their children were. Virginité seen in this light can come to be associated with loyalty to the father.

J.-P. Vernant (1983) provides a further insight into the link between Hestia's virginité and patriarchal control. When a woman marries, she renounces the hearth of her own family and goes to join that of her husband. There is therefore a basic ambiguity in the symbolic association of women with the fixity and permanence of the home: it is the woman who moves from one household to another, while the man remains in the same household for the whole of his life. According to Vernant, Hestia's virginité can be interpreted as reconciling this contradiction on the level of religious representation. A real woman has this one element of mobility in her life; but through Hestia, who never

marries and therefore never leaves the parental home, this element is denied. In this way, the need to import a woman from another household in order to perpetuate one's own is also denied. 'Through the goddess of the hearth, the function of fertility, dissociated from sexual relations . . . , can appear as an indefinite prolongation of the paternal line through the daughter, without a "foreign" woman being necessary for procreation' (pp. 120-1).<sup>32</sup>

Finally, it should be said by way of an addendum that there is no close parallel, in spite of their connections with motherhood, between the virgin goddesses and the Virgin Mary. Just a glance at the lifestyles of Athena and Artemis is sufficient to tell us that they are expressing a very different ideal. While these two deities can be seen to act as mediators between female and male, the Virgin Mary serves rather to create a relationship between divine and human, by becoming the vehicle through which a mortal child with a divine father is brought into the world.<sup>33</sup> In this respect, the women who are much more closely comparable with the Virgin Mother are the various mortals – Alcmena, Semele, Leda, and so on – who in Greek myth give birth to the illegitimate sons of Zeus and other deities. None of these women would have been considered to be virgins in a biological sense – sexual intercourse with the god in question is generally an undisputed part of the process. But it is interesting to note that one of them, Coronis, who becomes pregnant with Apollo's son Asclepius, is referred to by the poet Pindar (*Pythian Odes* 3.34) as a *parthenos*, the word that is normally translated by us as 'virgin'.

Some scholars have argued on this basis that the significance of the term *parthenos* is social rather than biological: it denotes a woman who has reached puberty but is still unmarried, rather than one who has never been penetrated by a man. However, after a thorough examination of the evidence, Sissa (1990a, pp. 73-104) maintains that a *parthenos* is indeed a virgin, but in the case of the unmarried mothers the virginity is a sham: there is a degree of irony in the application of the term to these women, and in some instances it becomes a definite stigma – a mark of their shame. The debate is an interesting one, but it does not impinge on our interpretation of the virgin goddesses, who have all quite unequivocally foresworn sexual relations with men.

The Virgin Mary may not in her function resemble the virgin Olympians, but in one respect there is a similar pattern of thought behind her characterisation. Like Athena, Artemis and Hestia, the Virgin holds out the promise of a fertility that does not involve sexuality, and does not therefore threaten men with feminine power or feminine passion beyond their control. In this way, as Zeitlin has commented, 'Mother is denied but not denied' (1977, p. 172). Hera and Aphrodite, goddesses whose sexuality has not been suppressed, are both in their different ways seen as dangerous to men. Only in the case of Demeter did Greek mothers encounter a narrative which presented an uplifting view of the fundamental role which they played in Greek society.

## Women in the poems of Homer

Many of the mythological images of women created by the Greeks were based on characters from the poems of Homer, which by the Classical Age had attained a hallowed place in the canon of Greek literature. Even in that period there was considerable uncertainty about when the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had actually lived. Most modern commentators assign him to the late eighth century BC, but some would put him rather later, in the seventh or even the early sixth century BC. What seems almost certain is that the poems as we know them were composed at some time in the Archaic Age, at least five hundred years after the Trojan War and its aftermath, the events which they purport to depict.<sup>1</sup> Few people nowadays doubt that they were the end-product of a long process of oral composition and transmission, and that for several centuries wandering bards had been taking up and embroidering the themes that eventually came down to us in the work of Homer. As a result, the poems contain descriptions of material and social items which derive from a wide range of periods, so that they cannot be assumed to represent a single well-defined historical era. This begins to cause difficulties when we try to use Homer as a source of evidence for the social history of early Greece (see p. 65). In this section, which is concerned with the cultural representation of women rather than their social reality, this lack of historical definition is not a major problem.

In what follows, I shall be examining Homer's treatment of a variety of females – mortals, monsters, and goddesses. But one group of women who play a significant part in both narratives will not be considered: Homer's characterisation of the Olympian goddesses, some of whom have a very high profile in the Trojan War, has already been discussed in the previous chapter.

### WOMEN IN THE *ILIAD*

On one level, the women represented in the *Iliad* are peripheral. The *Iliad* is a poem about the Trojan War, and about the heroes who fight in it; and, in the words of the