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# Women in Greek Myth

MARY R. LEFKOWITZ

THE GREEKS' MOST IMPORTANT LEGACY is not, as we would like to think, democracy; it is their mythology. Even though in the second century A.D. a mysterious voice was heard exclaiming "great Pan is dead," the Greek gods and many obscure and irrational stories about them lived on in the imaginations of artists and writers, no matter how often or in how many different ways Christians and philosophers tried to dismiss the myths as frivolous or harmful. And even in the twentieth century, when man has acquired greater power than ever before to alter the natural world, the old myths continue to haunt us, not just in the form of nymphs and shepherds on vases or garden statuary, but in many common assumptions about the shape of human experience. The notions—now presumably obsolete—that a man should be active and aggressive, a woman passive and subject to control by the men in her family, are expressed in virtually every Greek myth, even the ones in which the women seek to gain control of their own lives. That the most important phase of a woman's life is the period immediately preceding her marriage (or remarriage) is preserved in the plot of many novels, as is the notion that virginity, or at least celibacy, offers a woman a kind of freedom that she is no longer entitled to when she becomes involved with a man.

Here I intend to describe how the Greeks portrayed female experience in myth. I also want to suggest why, in the hands of the great poets, the portrayal of women was not as restrictive as I have made it sound. The Greeks at least attributed to women a capacity for understanding not found in the other great mythological tradition that has influenced us—namely, the Old and New Testaments. One reason the Greeks receive too little credit for their relatively balanced view of women's abilities is that most of us encounter Greek mythology only in a condensed and filtered form, usually in a translation of some work of literature, but more often as stories retold in a modern handbook. Inevitably, in the process of condensation and translation, the original meaning can easily get lost.

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But Edith Hamilton and D'Aulaire have done far less damage to the intended meaning of the myths than psychiatric theory or, more recently, feminist theory.

Psychologists tend to assume that human nature has for all time remained basically the same. They therefore conclude that the ancients were preoccupied with much the same problems that we are, namely, sex and the definition and role of the sexes. But it is another question whether the ancients themselves would have understood or accepted interpretations that place such disproportionate emphasis on desire and incest. The text of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* gives no indication that Oedipus was sexually attracted to Jocasta; he married her because marriage to the king's widow was the reward for ridding Thebes of the Sphinx. Similarly, I think, Thyestes does not have intercourse with his daughter because he is in love with her but because the Delphic oracle told him that the son born from this union would take revenge on Thyestes' brother, Atreus, for murdering Thyestes' other children. The son, Aegisthus, seduces Clytemnestra and murders Atreus's son, Agamemnon, and so reclaims his father's kingdom. In each generation, inheritance and power were more compelling motives than sex.

Feminists tend to reject the psychologists' premise that man's pre-occupations have not changed over time, and prefer instead to discover in the myths evidence of the persistent limitations of human imagination. In particular, the myths have a tendency to portray polar opposites and to organize experience into restricted channels, much in the same way as a language forbids some grammatical usages in favor of others that are inherently no more worthy than those it has excluded. Page DuBois has recently argued in *Centaurs and Amazons* that Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is primarily concerned with incest, or at least with an excessive endogamy that ends in sterility and the extinction of his family. It is true that Oedipus's sons Eteocles and Polynices kill each other in combat and that his daughter Antigone dies because she seeks, against her uncle Creon's orders, to bury her brother Polynices' body. But in the *Antigone* Sophocles speaks only about the inexorable progress of the family curse, from which no generation can free itself and which he calls "folly in speech and a fury in the mind." In other words, where modern critics emphasize either sexual or social issues, the poet himself speaks of *perceptual* and *ethical* problems: will man know what is right, and even if he does, will he do it? Sophocles' answer is unequivocally negative:

Hope in its many wanderings is a help to some men, but to others it is the deception that comes from vain passions. It comes on a man who knows nothing until he burns his foot in the hot fire. In wisdom once—from some unknown person—a famous statement came to light: "evil seems good to the person whose

wits the god is leading toward delusion (*ate*); he acts only for the shortest time apart from delusion.”

The chorus does not say specifically that these lines apply to any particular character in the play, but since it is talking about the house of Oedipus, it is natural to assume that it has Antigone in mind, though it soon turns out that the chorus's words apply equally well to Creon, the king who has condemned Antigone to death for trying to bury her brother against his orders. Creon's decision will cause the death of his family as well. The point is that, at least as far as the Greeks were concerned, the human condition—not gender—causes problems that both men and women are bound to experience, especially when they try to accomplish something out of the ordinary.

I wish to suggest that it may not be profitable to regard the myths as a kind of code that could be reliably deciphered were we to apply the right modern methodology. Whatever the story of Oedipus may have meant when it was first told (whenever that was), by the time the poems of Homer were composed, it and virtually every other myth were presumed to belong to a distant past. The myths had become a kind of history, and they were retold both for entertainment and for instruction, often with the conclusion first (since everyone knew how the story would end). Even an extraordinarily long narrative like the *Odyssey* begins by stating that Odysseus returned home after wandering and learning much, but having lost his companions because of their own folly. Modern critics may discern in Odysseus's adventures a covert description of the development of the human psyche, but the Greeks themselves understood it first as a moral tale, where the evil suitors were defeated by the courage and intelligence not only of Odysseus but also of his wife Penelope, to whom—in spite of an offer of immortality from the goddess Calypso—he was eager to return.

What would ancient Greek women have thought about Greek mythology? The ancients tell us very little about their education. In general, we only know what male writers tell us about what women thought, because there are so few women writers. But certainly everyone, men and women, free and enslaved, knew the stories. In Euripides' *Ion*, a group of slave women who had been brought to Delphi eagerly identify in the temple of Apollo the representations of gods, heroes, and monsters that they recognized from stories that were told to them as they worked at their looms. It is unlikely that women, at least in the fifth century, attended the theater. But I doubt in any case that women (or men) regarded the stories of Oedipus and Jocasta or Agamemnon and Clytemnestra as “norms,” since the stories belonged to a heroic past that no longer existed.

The myths did, however, place emphasis on the kind of experiences and problems—although in idealized or exaggerated forms—that most ancient women encountered in the course of their lives. In myth, there were essentially two main courses of female existence: celibacy or involvement with males and (inevitably) childbearing. The two paths were of course mutually exclusive, though a woman (or goddess) could return to celibacy after her children were born. For mortal women, involvement with males was the more usual and probably the more promising alternative, since virginity offered freedom only to goddesses like Athena and Artemis, who as goddesses had the power to defend themselves and by definition were ageless and immortal. Virgin goddesses who remained fixed in one place, like Hestia and Hecate, were guaranteed protection and honor by Zeus. Other goddesses who had been wives or lovers of the gods could gain power temporarily by withdrawing from the males and by withholding something essential to men or to the gods. Demeter, for example, long since estranged from Zeus, won back her daughter Persephone from Hades by keeping the seeds of grain within the earth so that humans began to starve and the gods received no sacrifices. But to mortal women, who by definition as humans can be destroyed and will grow old, disengagement offered fewer rewards and posed greater dangers. Daphne refused to have sexual relations with Apollo and ended up fixed in one place—as a laurel tree. Only in one respect—the dependence on males—does the existence of the virgin goddesses correspond to that of mortal women. Although the virgin goddesses were worshiped for their power over so many aspects of human life, they acted only within limits defined by Zeus and with his approval, or with the cooperation of another god. Hesiod, in a passage that describes and virtually advertises a local cult, explains how Zeus honors the virgin goddess Hecate beyond all others and gave her shining gifts. Zeus permits her to help or hinder kings, soldiers in battle, or athletes in competition; with Poseidon she can help the fisherman, and with Hermes she can aid the herdsman.

The great majority of myths about goddesses or women concentrate on their relations with males, particularly the first union with a male, which, in the case of ordinary mortals at least, was marriage. The great epic about the origin of the gods, Hesiod's *Theogony*, is a chronological catalogue of divine unions, in which the virgin goddesses, like Hecate and Athena, appear as rare exceptions; virtually every other goddess is the mother of children. Earth, who with her husband, Heaven, is the ancestress of Zeus and the most important gods and many primeval forces, asks her son Cronus to castrate his father because he hides all his children back in Earth as soon as they are born, and she "groans because she is oppressed." But Cronus, too, swallows his children as soon as they

are born. His wife Rhea has to devise a means of keeping one son, Zeus, away from him so that Zeus can drive Cronus out of power by force and rule over the gods himself. But Zeus prevents a recurrence of this cycle by having several wives. He swallows Metis, his first wife, so that he could bear Athena himself from his own head, and thus keep her and her mother under his control. Zeus has six other wives, the last of whom is Hera, and he has many temporary liaisons with both goddesses and women. Thus a patriarchal order is established, with both women and children kept subordinate, although with particular rights and responsibilities.

Hesiod doesn't say how Zeus tricked Metis into letting him swallow her or what she might have said when she discovered that she had been tricked. But Homer, in the first book of the *Iliad*, makes it clear that Hera very much resents Zeus's granting favors to other goddesses and opposing her plans without consulting her. Hesiod, in the *Theogony*, says nothing about the fate of the mortal women, Semele and Alcmena, with whom Zeus had relations, but later poets speak poignantly about the perils and pleasures of intercourse with a god. Perhaps the most vivid description of a union of this type is spoken by Creusa in Euripides' *Ion*. Apollo had fallen in love with Creusa, but he immediately abandoned her; years later, as queen of Athens, unable to bear another child, she complains that she can neither ask for the god's help nor tell her story because even associating with a woman who bore a bastard child might disgrace her. Like Persephone when she was carried off to the Lower World by Hades, or like Europa when she was approached by a beautiful white bull who later turned out to be the god Zeus, Creusa was gathering flowers when Apollo—his hair glittering with gold—drew her into a cave, as she cried out in vain to her mother:

You brought me there in shamelessness as a favour to the Goddess of Love. And I in my misfortune bore you a son, and in fear of my mother I left him in the couch where you compelled me, in misfortune, in my sorrow, on a bed of sorrow.

When she speaks these lines she is angry at the god, who has—as she believes—both abandoned her and failed to protect their son. Only after she attempts and fails to kill him does she discover that the boy her husband thought to be his son is, in fact, her and Apollo's lost child, who is destined to be king of Athens. Similarly, in *Prometheus Bound*, the chorus hears the story of Io's involvement with Zeus and sees her head horned like a cow's. After listening to her hysterical ravings, the female chorus exclaims that they would not want to "marry" one of the gods:

Let my marriage be humble, may the passion of the powerful gods not cast on me an eye none can escape; that is a war I could not fight, a source of

resourcelessness. I do not know who I would become. For I do not see how I could escape the mind of Zeus.

Their words make it clear that they are afraid not only of the gods' power but of the physical changes in themselves that sexual union with a god might cause. Ancient medical treatises confirm that girls in the first stages of puberty (the time when they would ordinarily be married off) became hysterical and suicidal, like Io; the prescription and cure for them, as it was for her, is pregnancy. Also, neither Io nor the chorus can see that for her, as for Creusa, what she presumes to be misfortune will ultimately bring her fame and happiness: the birth of a son who will be the ancestor of a famous race and whose descendants will include another son of Zeus, Heracles.

Like Antigone, Io and Creusa are victims of *ate*, "folly of speech and a fury in the mind," because they do not understand the consequences of their actions, and they fear as disaster what will ultimately bring them fame and guarantee them a place in history. Judged by standards of what Christianity promises to the good, at least after the Day of Judgment, the Greek reward for endurance may seem slight indeed. But in Greek religion no human being, male or female, could live entirely without sorrow; from Zeus's two jars of good and of evil, a person can get either a mixed portion or *all evil*, but there is no possibility of *all good*. For a woman the best available "mixture" would seem to be marriage—however temporary—and family, particularly if her children are heroes or the mothers of great men.

Perhaps because the life of any human being was perceived as essentially temporary and fragile, the myths tend to emphasize the continuity, not just of families, but of whole peoples. Creusa's son by Apollo is Ion, ancestor not only of the Athenians but of the Ionians in Asia Minor. Virtually every village and town claimed descent from a god, often through a hero for whom the town was named. The Ionians, for example, were said to have been named after Ion. Hesiod's *Theogony* ends with a long catalogue of marriages and extramarital unions between gods and goddesses, gods and women, and goddesses and men, all of which resulted in the birth of gods, goddesses, heroes, and women who married heroes. Another epic attributed to Hesiod, *The Catalogue of Women*, described the unions that produced all the famous heroes, nations, and races; each new heroine was introduced with the words "And like her was. . . ."

For centuries, only short quotations from the *Catalogue* survived and some prose summaries that could give but little impression of the shape of the original epic; but in this century a number of long fragments were discovered on tattered strips of papyrus, and from these we can get at

least a partial sense of the pacing and emphasis of the original narrative. Although Greek bards could describe brilliantly the excitement of sexual passion and the verbal and physical prelude to making love—the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* is the best example—the *Catalogue of Women* seems to have been valued, and recited, even in the Hellenistic Age, not for its power to engage the emotions, but as historical information, like the *begats* in Genesis or at the beginning of Matthew, or the fascinating list of the different types of whales that interrupts the grim story of Melville's *Moby-Dick*. The ancient Greeks seem to have been particularly fond of such catalogues—book 2 of the *Iliad* contains a list of all the cities that sent ships and men to Troy—and they attribute to women a significant role in this formal history. Each “founding mother” is listed by name; none is merely an anonymous bearer of divine seed.

Like the *Theogony*, the *Catalogue* is organized by genealogies, and within each family tree Hesiod concentrates on explaining why certain women captured the attention of gods or of heroes. In the first book Demodike (about whom virtually nothing is said in any other surviving text) is wooed by numerous suitors, as were Helen and Penelope, because of her “unbounded beauty, but they didn't persuade her.” She held out, apparently, for a god instead. Ares, by whom she became the mother of Thestius, was the father of Leda, who in turn was the mother of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen. Mestra, daughter of Erysichthon, who had an insatiable appetite, was able to change into every type of animal; each day her father sold her in exchange for food, and each night she changed back into human shape and returned to him. Finally, Sisyphus bought her for his son and demanded arbitration when she ran away. But even then, Sisyphus wasn't able to keep her, because “Poseidon broke her [*edamassato*, the same verb denotes both taming of animals and the taking of a virgin], far away from her father in sea-girt Cos, carrying her across the wine-faced sea, even though she was very clever” [*polyidris*, a term that always seems to imply, both for men and for women, that one is tricky, or too clever for one's own good]. By Poseidon, Mestra became the mother of the great hero Bellerophon. Another fragment describes the contest for the athletic and beautiful Atalanta from the point of view of her successful suitor, Hippomenes: “The prize that awaited them both was not the same; swift-footed god-like Atalanta raced refusing the gifts of golden Aphrodite; for him the race was for his life, whether he should be captured [by Atalanta's father] or escape; and so he addressed her with crafty intention, ‘daughter of Schoeneus, with your relentless heart, accept these shining gifts of golden Aphrodite.’” He threw an apple on the ground, “and she snatched it swiftly like a Harpy on delaying feet; but he threw a second apple to the ground . . . then swift god-like Atalanta had two apples, and



she was near the goal, but he threw a third to the ground, and with this he escaped death and dark fate. He stood there catching his breath."

In this and every other case, the males win, which could be interpreted as an illustration of the inferiority of women, were no struggle to capture them involved. In Atalanta's case, the women's skill is quite obviously superior. The mother of a hero clearly must be more beautiful than other women, but she must also be more clever or swift than most men and, in the end, can be subdued only by or with the assistance of the gods. Perhaps the best example is Alcmena, the mother of Heracles, the greatest hero of all. Her brothers were all killed, and she "alone was left as a joy to her parents"—after which, immediately, the next lines refer to Zeus, who wanted Alcmena to be the mother of his greatest mortal son, Heracles. According to the epic the *Shield of Heracles*—another work attributed to Hesiod but probably composed at least a century later than the *Catalogue of Women*—Alcmena was more beautiful, more clever, and (in our terms) sexier than anyone. She was also so faithful that on her wedding night Zeus had to pretend that he was her husband. That occasion had been postponed until Amphitryon had avenged the death of Alcmena's brothers, but "when [Amphitryon] had accomplished the great deed he returned to his home, and he did not go to his slaves or the shepherds in the fields until he had gone up to his wife's bed—such great desire ruled the heart of the leader of the army; and he lay with his wife all night rejoicing in the gifts of golden Aphrodite." This should be noted, lest anyone argue that Greek men had all their sexual pleasure in extramarital or homosexual relationships.

The moral superiority of women like Alcmena is significant, because the heroic age is brought to an end by the three daughters of Tyndareus, "twice and thrice married and leavers of husbands": Timandre who left her husband Echemus for Phyleus, Clytemnestra who "after she deserted her husband Agamemnon slept with Aegisthus and chose a worse husband, and then Helen disgraced the bed of fair-haired Menelaus." It is important to note that Helen, unlike Atalanta, is won not by the most daring man but by the one who offered the most gifts, and one who was not even present himself but rather was represented by his brother; the poet observes that "Menelaus could not have won Helen nor would any other mortal suitor, if swift Achilles returning home from Pelion had encountered her when she was a girl; but before that warlike Menelaus had her, and she bore fair-ankled Hermione in his halls—though the birth had been despaired of" (*aelpton*). At this point the gods were divided by strife, and Zeus wanted to destroy the race of men. The Trojan War followed and, with it, a kind of *Heldendämmerung*: apparently, the race of heroes cannot exist without women of heroic caliber.

Since Greek myth glorified the role of mother, it also tended to

condemn to infamy those who in some way rebelled against it. A confirmed mortal virgin who resisted the advances of a god might be punished simply by metamorphosis into a tree or flower. But women who consciously denied their femininity, like the Amazons, or ones who killed their husbands and fathers, like the women of Lemnos, were regarded as enemies and monsters. The expected outcome of any sexual encounter between a mortal woman and a god was a notable child—as Poseidon reassures Tyro both in the *Odyssey* and in Hesiod's *Catalogue*: “You will bear glorious children, since the embraces of a god are not fruitless.” But in the *Catalogue*, when Poseidon had intercourse with the daughter of Elatus, king of the Lapiths in Thessaly, and promised to grant her any favor she wished, she asked to be turned into a man and made invulnerable. This man, Caineus, proved to be a threat to the gods because he did not respect the limitations of mortality, like Ixion, who tried to seduce Hera, or like Tantalus, who stole nectar and ambrosia from the gods to try to make his friends immortal. Caineus instead set up his spear in the marketplace and asked people to worship it; so Zeus arranged to have the Centaurs drive Caineus into the ground.

According to the prose genealogy of Acusilaus, Poseidon allowed the sex change of Caineus because “it wasn't holy for them to have children by him or by anyone else.” Compare the story of Thetis, whose son was destined to be greater than his father and who was therefore married to a mortal man, or the story of Metis, whom Zeus swallowed in order to produce her offspring Athena from his own head. The notion seems to be that by completely preventing rather than somehow mitigating the outcome of her pregnancy, Poseidon makes Caineus dangerous and undesirable. Coronis, who has intercourse with another of Elatus's sons, Ischys, while she was pregnant with Apollo's son, is allowed to die, but the child Asclepius is saved only to be killed when he too oversteps mortal boundaries. Medea, who kills her children to take revenge on their father, Jason, who has deserted her, gets away with her life, but she knows she will live unhappily ever after. Clytemnestra, who helped to murder her husband, Agamemnon, in order to live with her lover Aegisthus, is murdered by Orestes, her son by Agamemnon. Throughout the *Odyssey* Clytemnestra's evil actions are contrasted with those of the faithful Penelope. Modern feminists may admire these destructive women because they took action and used their great intelligence to right what they considered to be personal wrongs against themselves. But even the chorus of Corinthian women, who at first sympathize with Medea's desire to punish Jason for deserting her, condemn the form that her revenge takes.

Even though so few options in life seem to have been available to Greek women (or men), the Greeks did not hesitate to give “equal time”

to descriptions of the problems of human existence from a woman's point of view. We can tell from the titles of lost plays that women were the central figures of many tragedies, as they are in the ones that have come down to us. The poets, even though they were men, and their plays, even though they were performed by male actors, allow female characters to describe their predicaments in detail. It is as if the actors had listened with a sympathetic ear to the complaints of women in their own families. Euripides shows with particular clarity how the conditions of ancient marriage could be both restrictive and frustrating. As Medea says, when a man is bored with his family, he can go out and put an end to his heartache, but a woman must stay behind, inside the house, and "look towards him alone." Phaedra complains of the aristocratic wife's problem of having too much time on her hands to think. She cannot even have the man she loves because adultery would bring disgrace not only to her but to her children. Sophocles depicts the plight of Heracles' wife Deianira no less sympathetically. She is abandoned year after year by her husband as he goes about his labors and sleeps with other women. Heracles sees his children "like a farmer who sees a distant field only at sowing-time and harvest." In a fragment of Sophocles' lost play *Tereus*, the king's deserted wife complains that women are happy only in girlhood, in their father's house, after which they are "thrust out and sold" to strangers or foreigners, in joyless or hostile houses, "—and all this once the first night has yoked us to our husband we are forced to praise and say that all is well." Sophocles' and Euripides' dramas were often produced in competition with one another, so throughout the last decades of the fifth century (from the beginning until the disastrous end of the Peloponnesian War), Athenian men who comprised the audiences were compelled to reflect on how their customs and actions affected (or afflicted) women's lives.

It has recently been suggested both by Freudian and feminist critics that the destruction of Athenian society was predicted in dramas like Euripides' *Bacchae*, which describes how Pentheus, the king of Thebes, is murdered by his mother in a Bacchic frenzy. The Greeks' habitual misogyny, it is suggested, compelled them to seek the company and love of other men and to restrict and repress the females in their family. Euripides, it would then seem, is saying that women are confined to "the loom and the shuttle" inside their houses. Pentheus's cruel death and the disgrace and exile of his mother are particularly vivid reminders of the universal power of *ate*. The deception that leads men to ignore the worship of the gods (and of the vital forces in nature that the gods represent) and the "folly in speech and fury in the mind" will drive men to bring about their own destruction. Pentheus, his mother, and his aunts refused to recognize the existence of the god Dionysus, so the god whom

they dishonor causes them all to go mad and ultimately to destroy themselves. As in the *Antigone*, both men and women are equally subject to *ate*, and both are equally responsible for their actions. When Euripides suggests that, if the women abandon their homes and infant children and the responsibility of caring for the family that is represented by the loom, they will harm not only others but themselves, he is recommending, not that women enjoy the role society has assigned to them, but simply that women accept that role as the least destructive possibility. Men, too, are compelled to play roles that they would not willingly choose. For example, Cadmus, Pentheus's grandfather, had to abdicate his throne when he was too old to defend himself. He was forced to pretend that he was young again in the ritual required by the god. At the end of the play, he is but an old man who has done nothing himself to offend the god, but he nonetheless must leave the city he founded and end his days in the form of a snake.

Rather than claim that Greek men were misogynists because they did not give women "equal rights"—rights that women have yet to acquire even in the most advanced democracies of this century—I would suggest that they be regarded as pioneers. Greek men recognized and described with sympathy both the life and the central importance to their society of women. Women, to whom society assigned the task of lamenting and burying the dead, are very often the last commentators on the war or murders described in an epic or a drama, and male poets did not hesitate to allow them to make articulate and poignant observations about the futility of all that their men had prized so highly. Women assume an important role in drama because they are passive and required to remain at home or away from the scene of the action, as natural victims, and thus they are able to represent the human condition in general, and man's true powerlessness before the gods and the fact of his own mortality.

Even though male Greek writers of the fifth century created brilliant descriptions of the problems of women's lives, they were not equally good at offering solutions. Even the philosophers of the fourth century were better at explaining how the world worked than at proposing any *practical* change. In the Hellenistic period, when the Macedonian conquests had imposed more efficient governance and caused Greek culture to come in contact with new ideas, the law, centuries behind the facts as always, granted women in name some of the rights they had already had in practice. Despite greater physical comfort and freedom of movement, women had the same basic role in life, and the old myths continued to be told and retold, even by the best and most sophisticated court poets in Alexandria. Medea, in Apollonius's epic *The Voyage of the Argo*, has the run of the palace, and with her handmaids, the city of Colchis; but she is still dependent on her father and, later on, her lover

Jason. The destructive powers of Medea's magic and her selfish desires lead to her exile, the death of her brother, and the unhappiness of both Jason and herself.

At least by stressing the importance of the family and of women's role within it as nurturers and continuers of the race, the Greeks attributed to women a vital function that the Church fathers were later to try to deny them when they placed an even higher value on celibacy and offered virgins a new subservience rather than an increased independence. Comparison with narratives about women in the early church reveals that the Greeks—however immoral their tales from the point of view of Christian ethics—at least placed a higher value on women's initiative and intelligence. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary is chosen to be the mother of God's son because she is a virgin and thus fulfills the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14: "Behold the maiden [*parthenos*] shall conceive in her womb and she shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel." We hear nothing about her other qualities, though she does, in the course of the narrative, display both piety and common sense: "How can this be," she asks, "since I know no man?" The sexual encounter that invariably marks the culmination of the episodes in Hesiod's *Catalogue* is of course missing in the Gospel of Luke 1:35–37: "The Holy Spirit will come to you and the power of the highest will overshadow you." The incident emphasizes instead the power of God: "and behold, Elizabeth your kinswoman, she has also conceived a son, in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who had been called barren." Here the angel cites Genesis 18:14—"because nothing at all will be impossible for God." In Greek mythology gods choose women because of their distinguished genealogy—Io, for example, was the daughter of the river Inachus—or for their beauty—for example Cassandra, who, because of her ability to prophesy accurately, was the "most beautiful of Priam's daughters"—or for their courage—Apollo sees Cyrene wrestling alone with a lion—or for their intelligence—Poseidon finally outwitted the "very clever" Mestra.

Of course I do not mean in any way to deny that from a modern point of view women's experience as described in Greek myth is severely limited. We cannot really blame the Greeks for not having been able to envisage the advantages for women that the industrial and scientific revolutions would bring. At the same time it would be foolish to claim that the traditional roles of women in Greek myths have lost all their influence or even appeal. If feminists now seek to concentrate instead on those relatively few myths and authors whose heroines assert themselves, even if only to hasten their own or another's death, that is to be expected and possibly even applauded. But at the same time I would like to stress that the original myths, with their original emphases, also

#### WOMEN IN GREEK MYTH

have something to teach us; *ate* is still with us, and perhaps nowhere more obviously than in the belief that the ambitious career woman can “have it all,” without divine intervention, or at least without the creation of new narrative patterns to help chart some of the crises, other than marriage and childbearing, that may arrive as the result of a longer, more complex life. In addition to reminding us of the limits of human vision, the ancient texts also emphasize the importance of “nature” as opposed to “nurture” in human life. In their concentration on certain critical moments, the myths also suggest that in some respects human existence is perceived episodically, even though it is lived chronologically. But perhaps the most important notion that Greek mythology has helped fix in our minds is that women have not only the right but the power to comment on the events that shape their lives, even if they cannot control them; and because they have a voice, women are able to speak not only for themselves, but for humankind in general.

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