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Defining Womanhood: Ancient Greek Inspirations for Our Modern Ideas

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Ancient Greek Inspirations for Our Modern Ideas

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Introduction

What does it mean to be a woman today? That is a question I cannot answer. But perhaps, in order to start exploring an answer to that question, we need to look to history, to one of the cultures that has profoundly influenced our own: ancient Greece. The myths and culture cultivated by the Greeks in the first millennium BCE are of deep import to many modern societies, and they are still utilized as a common cultural touchstone for diverse populations. But what is the point of harkening back to a dead civilization from two thousand years ago to talk about modern womanhood? What can those women, the real ones who were largely silenced by patriarchal systems or the literary ones who were written by men, tell us about what it means to be a woman? Well, I would argue that they can tell us a lot. Here will be a discussion, focusing on the literary tradition, of four representations of ancient Greek women: Antigone, Helen of Troy, Athena, and Artemis. Their classical origins and their modern personas, as well as the differences between them, can reveal much about how different cultures have adapted and adopted these figures for their own purposes. What will follow such discussion is an exploration of how these characters, and the various literary tradition journeys they have been on, are still useful to the modern woman. These classical women represent those who have stepped outside of their assigned gender roles but, in their own context, exist in spaces that are both subversive and conformist. In the modern conception of womanhood, these women have either been reclaimed as figures of resistance to traditional gender roles, or disregarded as useless for the goals of feminism.¹ However, all four of these women, whether or not they are overtly useful for the often limited goals of feminism, can

¹ Of course, the goals of feminism are not monolithic and vary vastly between different communities of women. However, as a general rule, the ‘goals’ that are being referred to are the general political, economic, and social equality of the sexes.

still be seen as rebelling against the standards society has forced upon them by giving voice and agency to those who are usually silenced.

But first, a brief background on the position of women in ancient Greece is necessary. By virtue of the origin of many Greek sources, much of my historical context and generalizations will be based in Athens. This polis provides the most comprehensive information on culture and customs due to its prolific literary tradition, especially during the fifth century BCE. Greece was a patriarchal society, where men held control over their city and their *oikos* (house). Classical Athens had in place strictly separate spheres for men and women. Men belonged in public: fighting in the army, fulfilling citizenship duties, and upholding their societal values. Women belonged in the home, where they would be good wives and produce children in order to continue their husband's family and grow the citizen body. A good woman was one who was invisible outside her *oikos*, who was not spoken of in public and had no reputation. As a general rule, women had little power and little voice. Because of the insularity of the lives of Greek women, the vast majority of stories about them are either about maidens, those who are not yet under the control of husbands or have wifely duties (though are still under the power of their male guardians in their natal families), and/or 'bad' women, those who do not adhere to the standards of gendered morality. It is in this context that we find stories about Antigone, Helen, Athena, and Artemis because they do not conform to the typical standards of Greek women and are therefore breaking boundaries in ways that may still be useful in the modern context.

Greek culture and writing continued throughout the following centuries, even as Greek areas fell under the control of the Macedonians and then the Romans. Greece remained highly respected for its intellectual and cultural prowess, especially as Athens was a significant center of learning. After the dissolution of the Roman Empire, interest largely dropped in Western Europe,

though there were still many writers in the Middle East who preserved and commented on Greek texts. Classics regained widespread European popularity during the Renaissance, conceived as part of the cultural and intellectual heritage of Western countries. Because of the narrational malleability of the literature, as numerous and conflicting traditions exist for all of these women, and the historical legitimacy of ancient culture, classical sources are used to promote and codify chosen narratives by those in power, often to the detriment of minorities. One of the most egregious examples of this is Hitler's adoption of Greek myth, philosophy, and art to justify his concept of the Aryan race and the annihilation of the Jews.² However, Greek culture has also been used to fight against tyrannical majorities, such as the use of Sophocles' *Antigone* in apartheid South Africa.³ The legacy of the ancient Greeks, both positive and negative, can be felt throughout much of Western societies, and the adaptation of the culture continues to this day. Because of the longevity and value that the West places on ancient Greek culture, it is still a worthwhile endeavor to explore how these classical traditions continue to influence us, even in ways that we might not necessarily realize.

The first woman I will be examining is Antigone. Made most popular by Sophocles (as his version was the only *Antigone* that had survived in totality), she remains one of the most continually adapted characters from Greek theatre. From Ireland to South Africa to the United States, the reach of her play is global. While her ancient context is complex, her modern interpretation is unequivocally inspirational. Due to her rebellion against her tyrannical uncle Creon, it is no wonder that Antigone's reading in the modern period is largely political, and it is in this politicism that I consider her in light of feminism. Antigone's political speech, especially

² Alastair Sooke, "The Discobolus: Greeks, Nazis and the body beautiful," *BBC*, March 24, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150324-hitlers-idea-of-the-perfect-body>.

³ Kevin Wetmore, *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky* (North Carolina and London: 2002), 194-202.

as a woman in a patriarchal society, is invaluable to minorities fighting against exclusion. Through her example, it is possible to destabilize traditional power regimes and redefine how we organize society, all because of a martyr who fought for what she believed to be right.

Next will follow a discussion of Helen of Troy. Immortalized in Homeric tradition but forever a topic for both ancient and modern writers alike, Helen is one of the most infamous women in literature. She has an almost exclusively negative reputation and is generally not considered by feminists because nearly all of her actions revolve around her relationships with men. However, despite this lack of attention for feminist goals, Helen is still important for our understanding of the expectations of women, especially as conceived as the origin of all evil, and how it is possible to combat such characterizations. As portrayed in modernity, she seems one-dimensional, but it is clear in her literature that she is anything but, subtly asserting her control and rebelling against the forces that would demonize her.

Lastly, I will examine Athena and Artemis. These two goddesses hold more variable and archetypal positions than the women above due to their religious and mythic origins and societal significance. Each of these deities could be given their own separate discussion, but I will be exploring them jointly. While they held different functions and represented particular ideas, their position in modernity as complementary female archetypes makes examining them together more fruitful for the purposes of analyzing womanhood. There are often conflicting and confusing myths about Athena and Artemis because of their divine status and cultural power, but their general characters and functions continue to be useful as paradigms of behavior, even if some of their stories are deeply problematic. Archetypes, as behavioral models, are foundational for any culture's conceptions of acceptable conduct and tradition.

Through these three chapters, it will become clear how these women affect and inspire how we think about womanhood. While the context in which these characters originally developed is quite removed from our own, the intransmutable cores of these women are still present today and useful to modern struggles. Modern society would like to claim that conditions have improved for disenfranchised minorities, and arguably they have, but there is still much improvement to be made, and these women can provide a framework that may be effective in advocating for that change.

Chapter 1: Antigone

Written by Sophocles in fifth-century Athens, *Antigone* is one of the most reproduced ancient Greek plays, having been staged and readapted around the world for over two millennia. The story of her defiance and conviction in the face of larger powers has inspired countless generations, resulting in few other classical figures capturing the imagination as much as she. Her ancient reception is nuanced because of the Athenian politics of gender, family, religion, and government. However, in our modern world of state control, postcolonialism, and holocausts, Antigone has come to be a symbol for fighting against oppression even in the face of death, sacrificing herself and her future for what she believes to be right. It is no wonder that she has entered into feminist discussions regarding civic involvement, patriarchal traditions, and political rebellion. In this chapter, the reception of Antigone from fifth-century Athens onward will be explored, including her interpretation around the world, especially in relation to her status as a woman, before concluding with the more recent readings of her story as a framework for inclusionary politics. However, while Antigone provides this framework for a new politics, she also represents the cruel optimism of feminism and challenging tradition, as she chooses to risk her future as a woman only to be disappointed and killed by the inflexibility of the patriarchy and those in power.

While there are several appearances of the Antigone myth in tragedy, including a lost play by Euripides, the one that has endured to modernity is from Sophocles. In this play, Eteocles and Polynices, Antigone's brothers, have just killed each other while fighting over the throne of Thebes. Creon, their uncle, then becomes king, declaring Polynices a traitor and forbidding anyone from burying his body. Antigone, ignoring the pleas of her sister Ismene, decides to break Creon's edict and put her brother to rest, thus fulfilling her religious and familial duties. Creon finds out

and sentences Antigone to death for disobeying both a kingly command and her head of house, threatening both his political and personal power. Despite arguments from the Chorus and his son Haemon, who is betrothed to Antigone, Creon refuses to change his mind until it is too late. By the time that Creon arrives at the cave in which he planned to enclose Antigone, she has hanged herself. Haemon, who had gone there to try to save her, tries to kill his father before falling on his own sword out of despair. Jocasta, Creon's wife, then kills herself because of the death of her son. Because of his stubbornness, Creon is now alone, despairing the loss of his entire family.

There is much debate regarding how the original audience of *Antigone* might have interpreted the play. The modern reading tends to privilege the theme of the relationship between human and divine justice, but the problem with this reading is that it disregards the relationship between the polis and religion in antiquity.⁴ The polis controlled, sponsored, and focused religious activity, and because of this link, Creon is well within his power as king to prohibit the burial of the perceived traitor Polynices. Thus, like other commentators, Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood argues that “what is at issue is whether it is right for an individual to set herself up as a source of religious value without any authority, and assume that the polis is in conflict with the *theōn nomina* [laws of the gods], and on the basis of this personal judgment defy the polis and bring about disorder and the threat of anarchy.”⁵ This is clearly a more nuanced issue than the simple binary question of human and divine justice, but stands rather at the intersection of individual agency, communal religion, familial hierarchy, and civic order. Sourvinou-Inwood argues that Creon was

⁴ For more information, see Victoria Wohl's “Sexual Difference and the Aporia of Justice in Sophocles *Antigone*” in *Bound by the City: Greek Tragedy, Sexual Difference, and the Formation of the Polis*, 2009; Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood's “Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' *Antigone*,” 1989; or Philip Holt's “*Polis* and the Tragedy in the *Antigone*,” 1999.

⁵ Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, “Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' *Antigone*,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109, (1989): 143.

right in his judgment against Polynices and his treatment of Antigone after she broke his command. While the deceased in Greece were usually tended to by their female relatives, Antigone should have obeyed Creon because he became the head of her *oikos* after the death of her brothers and therefore her duty to obey the *oikos* supersedes that to bury her brother. Consequently, Antigone's actions were in rebellion against both the polis and her *oikos*, even threatening anarchy in a politically unstable Thebes. By burying Polynices, Antigone "invaded and disturbed the public sphere in the service of her private interests," which, in a culture that upholds civic virtues above all else, is a damning offense.⁶ Antigone had no socially approved grounds on which to base her argument, disobeying her state and family and projecting her passion onto the gods. She had no real authority to claim what the gods thought about Polynices' burial because such authority was in the hands of the state, and she had no grounds to oppose the dictates of the head of her *oikos*.

Additionally, Antigone threatened the very tenuous peace in an immediate post-civil war Thebes, a transgression exacerbated by the fact that she was a woman stepping far out of her proper place. Creon, according to Sourvinou-Inwood, is the actor who pursued the just path because of these reasons. However, despite the fact that Creon was correct, he was still punished by the gods because "it is the fact that Creon kept Polynices' corpse in the upper world by not disposing of it at all, *not even symbolically*, that was offensive to the gods, for it blurred the realms of life and death and thus threatened the cosmic order."⁷ In her reading in accordance with the original audience, Sourvinou-Inwood argues that Creon is the more sympathetic character but he makes a grievous error that turns out to be disrespectful to the gods, causing him to suffer the consequences of multiple deaths in his family. Antigone's actions are vindicated in the end, but her subversion

⁶ Sourvinou-Inwood, "Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning," 139.

⁷ Sourvinou-Inwood, "Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning," 147.

of the authority of the polis and *oikos* leaves her to die alone and unfulfilled, committing suicide in a way that furthers her radical passion for her beliefs and her disgrace through the lens of social norms. Both characters were simultaneously right and wrong, but for Sourvinou-Inwood it was Creon with whom the original fifth-century audience would have sympathized more.

Philip Holt argues a different interpretation of the original reception in his “Polis and Tragedy in the *Antigone*.” He argues that Sourvinou-Inwood’s claims are ill-represented in the text because she ignores the medium through which this story is presented. Holt argues that the fact that the tale is presented as a tragedy meant for the stage automatically shifts how an audience would have received the play since staged productions inherently carry suspensions of normal thought processes with them. He says, “Antigone’s distress and passion are given full play, her opponent is made to appear weak and foolish, and she and her allies get most of the good lines. The play encourages the audience to root for the rebel against the values which they would likely espouse and practice in real life.”⁸ Through the formulation of the play itself and the theory that the audience would not necessarily support actions onstage as they would in real life, Holt claims that Antigone is without a doubt the more sympathetic and correct actor. Her will and passion to oppose the seemingly unpopular, though definitely legal, edicts of her uncle the *tyrannos* win her the favor of the democratic Athenian audience, despite the fact that she is transgressing gender boundaries. While Athenians observed strict gender roles, the state’s firmest belief lay in their populist democracy and their hatred of tyranny. Antigone would be a transgressor, but she would be doing it against an authoritarian government. Because of this, ancient Athenians would have very mixed feelings about her situation as a woman and her actions as a champion of the people, however tenuous her claim may be. Despite these inherent issues, Holt ultimately argues that

⁸ Philip Holt, “Polis and Tragedy in the *Antigone*,” *Mnemosyne* 52, no. 6 (1999): 685.

because the story is told through a fictional medium in a celebratory and nationalistic environment that encourages the suspension of everyday thinking, the audience's sympathies would lie with Antigone and not Creon.

One Sophoclean Antigone that often gets overlooked is found in *Oedipus at Colonus*. It is Sophocles' last play, performed posthumously, but the action takes place chronologically before *Antigone*. The Theban Cycle is not a true trilogy like Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. These plays were written decades apart and were not necessarily meant to be one consistent story, but it is still useful to treat them as related narratives in the context of Antigone's characterization since there are several critical throughlines. *Oedipus at Colonus* takes place many years after *Oedipus Tyrannus*. This timeline has the consequence of making Antigone much older and well past the traditional marrying age, furthering her otherness and ostracization from typical societal norms. In the play, Oedipus, guided by Antigone, enters the grove of the Eumenides toward the end of his life. He seeks refuge in Athens but is pursued by Polynices and Creon in attempts to use him to gain power in Thebes. Oedipus refuses and is given refuge and, ultimately, a heroic burial by Theseus, the wise and legendary king of Athens. Antigone and Ismene lament their father and promptly rush back to Thebes to try and stop the foretold deaths of their brothers.

Most of the action in the play revolves around the Labdacid men, but Antigone and Ismene also play crucial parts. Antigone has become Oedipus' greatest supporter, literally becoming his eyes and legs in his blind old age. She has become his confidante and a source of advice for him, which is a very odd relationship between father and daughter in fifth-century Athens. Normally, father-daughter relationships look more like that between Creon and Antigone, essentially a traditional patriarchal relationship, but this is clearly not the dynamic between Antigone and Oedipus. In this unusual familial relationship, after Ismene arrives with news of civil war brewing

in Thebes and Polynices' impending arrival in Athens, Antigone beseeches her father to hear her brother out, despite Oedipus' initial instinct to turn him away, and he takes her advice. Once Oedipus says his goodbyes to his daughters and proceeds to his heroic death, both sisters grieve their father, which mirrors Antigone's lament at the end of her play. Throughout the play, Oedipus continually emphasizes the loyalty and capability of his daughters as opposed to the ambition and opportunism of his sons. Antigone and Ismene are figured as the only true children of Oedipus and they are left to inherit his blessings and his sufferings.

While Sophocles' Theban plays are not a traditional trilogy, it is still possible to trace the development of Antigone's journey and the consistency of her characterization leading up to her later defiance of Creon for familial love. It is clear that Antigone's unusual situation with her father in *Oedipus at Colonus* has led to her unique outspokenness and independence. She has been wandering the wilderness alone with him as a beggar for years. She is his eyes and his legs as his body fails him, a fact that is reflected in the stage directions where she is often described as leading or guiding him. Oedipus asks for her advice multiple times (170-173, 214, 225), and she gives it unprompted several times as well to both Oedipus and Polynices (1181-1203, 1280-1283, 1414-1447).⁹ It is highly unusual and improper for women to be confidantes to their older male relatives, and this forthrightness also extends beyond her immediate family. In lines 237-253, she directly addresses the chorus of Athenian elders, appealing to them to let her and her father stay, and she has no qualms in imploring Theseus to let her see her father's grave (1754-1757) and demanding him to send her and Ismene back to Thebes to stop the bloodshed (1769-1772). Her time alone with her exiled and disgraced father disabused her of many notions of traditional female behavior, and she is loyal to her family to a fault. It could be argued that Antigone's familial loyalty is

⁹ Line numbering and translations from Frank Nisetich, 2016.

conformative to expected female behavior of only being concerned with her family, but the way she goes about caring for her relatives is subversive in that she challenges political and social institutions to advocate for her beliefs. Oedipus praises her behavior saying, “And if I hadn’t had these two daughters, my nurses, I wouldn’t even be alive, for all you care! They keep me safe, they are my nurses, they are men, not women, standing at my side,” (1365-1368). Normally when a woman gets described as a man it has negative connotations, as with Clytemnestra throughout *Agamemnon*, but here Oedipus means it as a compliment. Antigone’s lack of respect for traditional boundaries was fostered by her father. His example as defiant to power, retrospective on his past sufferings, and committed to a heroic death have profound influences on Antigone and explain much of her behavior in later events. While few scholars talk about Antigone in *Oedipus at Colonus*, it provides a fascinating glimpse at the origins of her character that appears so strongly in the earlier *Antigone*.

The debate surrounding ancient interpretation is complex and largely insoluble, but the modern reading is generally seen as the individual versus the state. The play became especially popular during World War II and the subsequent decolonization movements around the world. Two well-known examples include Jean Anouilh’s 1944 production performed in Nazi-occupied France and Bertholt Brecht’s World War II and Nazi-inspired version. As such, Antigone has been called to protest in places where minorities are oppressed by tyrannical governments and by political majorities who do not want to relinquish their power. Antigone stands as a tool for suffering groups to appeal to justice and faith against others who would see them subjugated.

One of the countries in which *Antigone* has been popular is Ireland. While not used as a form of protest during the independence movement in the early twentieth century because Antigone was not yet colored as anti-imperialist, the play did enter Irish discourse regarding the

religious divide between the North and the Catholic Church in the late 1900s.¹⁰ Brandon Kennelly's 1984 adaptation fought against clericalism, the belief that Church teaching and authority should be reflected in state legislation, the arena for which was largely within the scope of women's rights. This political battle over clericalism was evident in legislation on divorce and abortion, both of which were conservative victories.¹¹ Hugh Harkin, surveying these Irish Antigones, suggests that the language used by Kennelly for Antigone's banishment may allude to the mythological figure of Echo or to the more contemporary death of Ann Lovett, who died alone at age fifteen after giving birth to a stillborn and dying of internal bleeding and exposure.¹²¹³ The violent and lonely death of Antigone served as a warning against clericalism's effects on women's issues, showing how those who do not follow the conservative expectations of the Church often fall to the wayside and are forced to fend for themselves before effectively being killed by their own society.

Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1985) displays his radical politics against Unionism, which is loyalty to the crown of the United Kingdom, and conservatism in Northern Ireland. By painting Polynices as a sympathetic man who had a legitimate claim to the throne and portraying Creon and the Chorus as elitist conservative men who ignore past injustices and refuse to recognize their lasting effects on the future, Paulin's Antigone is a woman of the people who leads a revolution against Creon's tyranny. Ismene, in this case, is the embodiment of inaction against injustice,

¹⁰ Hugh Harkin, "Irish Antigones: Towards Tragedy Without Borders?" *Irish University Review* 38, no. 2 (2008): 293-294.

¹¹ Harkin, "Irish Antigones," 295.

¹² Cursed by Hera because she was forced to protect Zeus during his affairs, Echo could only speak the last words spoken to her. She fell in love with Narcissus, but he spurned her. Eventually, after Narcissus had withered away looking at his own reflection, Echo faded as well until only her voice remained.

¹³ Harkin, "Irish Antigones," 295-297.

which equates to complicity, and the fear of altering the status quo, thus destabilizing the current elitist power structures. This conservative view embodied by Ismene, one that expresses no faith in humankind, is what Paulin is directly attacking.¹⁴ Through the proliferation of these revolutionary Antigones, Harkin claims that the best Antigones are ones born of “despair and powerlessness” in immediate circumstances, such as those by Kennelly and Paulin, which are steeped in Irish history and contemporary conflict.¹⁵ Other examples of this politicized Antigone can be found around the world, and are especially numerous in Africa.

Antigone and other classical works were brought to Africa during the colonial period, which peaked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but in the eyes of many Africans they remained separate from other pieces of imported and enforced Western culture because the colonists did not create the classics.¹⁶ Postcolonial discourse in Africa, especially that of the black population, used Greek tragedy as political and cultural resistance to the Europeans, adapting the theatrical tradition to their own. Thus, for native Africans, “*Antigone* demonstrates the disenfranchised speaking out against the powerful whose interest is the preservation of power, not necessarily doing what is right or just.”¹⁷ This representation is ripe for exploration in Africa, a continent that was and continues to be deeply affected by European colonialism and its legacy of racism and apartheid. The most famous African adaptation of *Antigone* comes from apartheid South Africa. *The Island*, written by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, is set in the second half of the twentieth century, regarding two prisoners on Robben Island, which was a

¹⁴ Harkin, “Irish Antigones,” 298-300.

¹⁵ Harkin, “Irish Antigones” 306.

¹⁶ Kevin Wetmore, *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky* (North Carolina and London: 2002), 30-32.

¹⁷ Wetmore, *The Athenian Sun*, 171.

maximum security prison for political offenders, such as Nelson Mandela. The two men, John and Winston, spend some of their time putting on a production of *Antigone*. Winston, playing Antigone, is at first reluctant to do so, but upon learning her spirit and motives, his own defiance of his country's oppressive government is renewed. The play stands clearly against apartheid, casting the black political prisoners of the island as Antigones, fighting for what is right but punished and incarcerated because of it. It is also Sisyphean in nature because the prisoners must wake up each day and be in the "living death" of Robben Island, yet every day they must also be Antigone and "continue to resist a system bent on erasing their identities, oppressing them, and removing their humanity."¹⁸ Both they and Antigone are doomed, entombed and incarcerated, but continue to resist, whether by choice or necessity. As seen from these examples and many others, influential stagings are those that subvert usual power structures and put power back in the hands of the oppressed, giving hope to those who need it most, even in the face of defeat.

In contrast, the United States has had a vastly different journey with *Antigone*. She was introduced to a widespread female American audience during the Victorian era as classicism was incorporated into women's education. Prior to the latter part of the nineteenth century, classics was thought to be a primarily masculine field that was concerned with politics, especially focusing on Rome. But with the rise of standard female education and a shifted focus to Greece, it instead became an instrument of self-perfection and articulation of private struggles with emotion and conscience.¹⁹ This shift was especially important in female education since women were barred from politics and, as such, classics could not be used for a socially unacceptable female political preparation. Instead, Antigone was fashioned as the model of (privileged white) Victorian

¹⁸ Wetmore, *The Athenian Sun*, 194-202.

¹⁹ Caroline Winterer, "Victorian Antigone: Classicism and Women's Education in America, 1840-1900," *American Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2001): 71.

womanhood. Caroline Winterer explains, “The vast majority of American commentators on Antigone . . . cast her as a hyperfeminine, domestic figure, the incarnation of Victorian ideals of true womanhood. Women, these writers argued, were by their natures emotional creatures, whose innate sense of duty to family and God aimed their political compass.”²⁰ In this way, Antigone became the prime example of proper public action for women, who were to be driven by their selfless duty to family and God above purely private political interest. She became a virginal Christian martyr who sacrificed her future as a wife and mother for her devotion to God and his laws, similar to the Roman Lucretia or Christian Perpetua. In this way, “the devout martyr” interpretation supersedes Antigone’s fundamentally political action, thus circumventing questions regarding a woman’s place in society that would challenge Victorian norms. Additionally, since staged productions of *Antigone* in Victorian-era universities were performed in the original Greek, they were only accessible to those with a classical education. Thus, women who could perform as Antigone had achieved equal classical education to men. However, this education was for enlightenment and self-perfection rather than political preparation, and this equity was achieved just as classicism was losing its hold on collegiate curricula. By the beginning of the twentieth century, social sciences rather than classics became the core of education. Furthermore, this hyperfeminine domestic Antigone fell out of favor with the rise of the women’s movement because her version of womanhood was not conducive to the active and political image suffragettes and other activists were trying to promote in the battle for enfranchisement.²¹ It would take another fifty years before the play would reenter popular discourse, and another thirty beyond that for it to be reclaimed by feminist movements.

²⁰ Winterer, “Victorian Antigone,” 77.

²¹ Winterer, “Victorian Antigone,” 80-88.

One of the earliest analyses of *Antigone* by an important feminist scholar was written by Simone de Beauvoir in 1945, before her foundational feminist text *The Second Sex* in 1949. Beauvoir, while not American, had profound philosophical and ideological influences on second-wave feminism. In “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” Beauvoir figures Antigone and Creon as two diametrically opposed characters, just as Hegel would later, but divides them on the line of ethics and politics. She casts Antigone as a moral idealist who is “a prototype of those intransigent moralists who, while being contemptuous of earthly goods, proclaim the necessity of certain eternal principles and insist at any cost on keeping their conscience pure—even though they forfeit their own lives or the lives of others.”²² Beauvoir largely ignores the gender politics of *Antigone* that are usually focused upon by later feminists. For her, moral idealism breeds quietism, an acceptance of things as they are without questioning or resisting them, but that approach is not grounded in reality. This leads to ineffective pacifism because the moral idealist is too beholden to their ethics to compromise with a socially realistic solution. On the other hand, political realism, as represented by Creon, is too cynical about the world to reach for improved circumstances, which means that because people believe the world cannot change, it never will, leading to no improvement whatsoever. As such, both Antigone and Creon, embodying the moral idealist and political realist respectively, are ineffective in changing anything because both are too attached to their ideals or lack thereof to compromise. Possibly due to Beauvoir’s ungendered stalemated interpretation of *Antigone*, the play did not enter popular discourse in the early stages of second-wave feminism. Had Beauvoir examined Antigone in light of the feminism that she would later champion, maybe *Antigone* would have entered the conversation decades earlier than it did.

²² Simone de Beauvoir, “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret Simons, trans. Anne Deing Cordero (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 175.

Instead, it was not until the late 1970s and into the 1980s that *Antigone* became a common topic among academics and feminists alike.

Before G. W. F. Hegel's foundational 1977 interpretation of *Antigone*, there was little specific scholarship on a gendered and political *Antigone* in the United States. His work changed that. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he figures Creon as a public man, leader of the polis, and champion of human law. Simultaneously, he casts Antigone as a private woman, the representative, though not leader, of the family and beholden to divine law. They are complete opposites and represent two different sides of civilization, deeply tying his paradigmatic approach to politics, ethics, faith, gender, and family. This polarized interpretation started a significant increase in interest in *Antigone*, aided by second-wave feminism that emerged in 1963, which was generally focused on political and cultural iniquities, especially connecting women's personal and political lives. This theme is embodied in the Carol Hanisch slogan that came to define second-wave feminism, "The personal is political," an idea that is very much Antigonean. Feminist writers danced around her themes but did not draw on her specifically until after Hegel's work. Once *Phenomenology of Spirit* was published, there was a massive resurgence in interest in response to it. The 1980s and 1990s were abundant in Antigone-related materials, and she has yet to leave the conversation as feminist scholarship continues, though her appearances are not quite as frequent as they were a few decades ago.

Once Antigone reentered scholarship and popular imagination, she has yet to leave, providing interpretations for political theorists and feminists alike. She brings up many questions about the so-called 'proper place' of women, usually in terms of politics, civic engagement, and the boundaries between the personal and political. In her 1998 article, Catherine Holland argues that while Antigone is important for discussing feminist politics, her previous use as a model of

feminism is incomplete and misguided because her situation is so far removed from our own. She believes that Antigone's story should not be brought into the present, but should remain in the past instead to emphasize her cultural and societal differences from today. Leaving her in her original context would allow modern audiences to learn from her situation, assess the limited options she had available to her, and understand the path she ultimately chose. This would provide a framework for modern cultures to innovate on their own traditions, making it possible for minorities to reject patriarchal practices for societally improved circumstances. In Holland's words, *Antigone's* radical public/private and man/woman dynamics show "how we may speak through a set of languages handed down to us by disciplinary conventions that may not comfortably accommodate feminist politics, how we may employ those languages in ways that do not simply reiterate our own exclusion from those traditions, but instead remake them for the present."²³ Rather, Antigone is valuable in feminist politics not as a model of action but as a template of speech for how to use the inherently exclusionary language of tradition in a way that serves to include marginalized populations in places where they were not previously allowed to exist.

Other scholars also concentrate on the inclusionary politics of *Antigone*. Amy Story, while focusing on and problematizing Simone de Beauvoir's interpretation of *Antigone*, also puts forth ideas on the necessary feminist reading of the play and what it does in the larger literature surrounding feminine issues. She posits that "Antigone suggests a model of social rebellion that insists upon the uniting of the moral and the political, the private and the public. . . She does this not as an 'everyman' moral/political hero, but specifically as a woman in a masculinist state, and

²³ Catherine Holland, "After *Antigone*: Women, the Past, and the Future of Feminist Political Thought," *American Journal of Political Science* 42, no. 4 (Oct. 1998): 1129.

thus her story demands a feminist interpretation.”²⁴ Many debates surrounding *Antigone* occupy this *oikos/polis* (simplified contemporarily, though not without issue, to private/public) and female/male divide. Is *Antigone* fulfilling what she believes to be her private duties by burying her brother, or is she violating absolutist public laws by disobeying the king in burying a traitor? Invariably, the answer to both questions is yes. *Antigone* is doing both of these things simultaneously, and the discussion instead transitions to what the proper course of action is, which is further colored by the imbalanced power dynamic between *Antigone* and *Creon*. According to Story, “*Antigone*’s life and death revolve around a refusal to separate the practical and the useful from the moral and the just. Thus is the nature of political activism that is bent on the expansion of human rights and the extension of human dignity.”²⁵ *Antigone* exists at a crossroads between all of these dichotomies, trying to unite them in an action that is both moral and political. This action is a hallmark of inclusionary politics of the same kind that Holland was also discussing. *Antigone*’s value comes in her transcending traditional boundaries and providing a framework in which to expand those boundaries to include those who are not typically allowed to exist in those spaces.

The sheer volume of *Antigone* adaptations and academic analyses are telling of her hold on the popular imagination. The hopeless and cyclical nature of oppression is apparent and hard to resist, which poses a paradoxical question: how do we break the cycle and move toward a brighter future? How does *Antigone* survive standing up to the regime, or will she always be doomed to die alone and in despair, a martyr to a never-ending cause? The overlap between resisting oppression in the face of death and the inevitability of dissent followed by justice are characteristic

²⁴ Amy E. Story, “Simone de Beauvoir and *Antigone*: Feminism and the Conflict between Ethics and Politics,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 41, no. 3 (Sept. 2008): 170.

²⁵ Story, “Simone de Beauvoir,” 182.

of the *Antigone* storyline, but the inclusion of the cyclical nature of resistance in almost every adaptation no matter the cultural context is telling of the play's power to advocate for change. While Antigone's justice, passion, and martyrdom are inspiring for many reasons, her self-destructive nature also serves as a warning. She risks everything for what she believes in, and she pays for her speech with her life and the lives of others. Death is a necessary part of being Antigone, but it is critical that we move beyond death to survive to see the change we are fighting for. From this perspective, Antigone is the embodiment of the cruel optimism of feminism. This is a term coined by Lauren Berlant and defined as "when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving."²⁶ Berlant gives several examples of this, including upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy.²⁷ Antigone is a prime representation of this. She is optimistic because her adaptations advocate for a better future free from oppression, but it is a cruel optimism because she cannot live to see it yet continues to fight for it regardless, even though she is doomed to be let down by the inflexibility of those in power. Antigone is a framework but she should not be a model. She provides useful speech patterns for resistance but the extremity of self-destructive martyrdom should not be emulated. Death can be a catalyst for change but it cannot be the end result. We should instead stand *alongside* an Antigone, not as a model for behavior but as a symbol for justice, because living to see that change through is ultimately the greatest ambition.

²⁶ Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

²⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 3.

Chapter 2: Helen

“The face that launched a thousand ships”—a seventeenth-century quote from Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*—is the most renowned descriptor of Helen of Troy, yet it tells us absolutely nothing of who Helen actually is. It tells us that she was beautiful enough to cause the launching of an armada but nothing of her personality or why she might have been worthy of such an endeavor. Certainly, this is the perennial problem of the Homeric tradition: was Helen worth it? Was Helen, with her legendary beauty and renown, worth the death and destruction that fighting over her caused? Does Helen have any say at all as to what she wants, or are not only her actions, but even her desires determined for her? These questions have plagued writers and readers for millennia. Helen remains a specter lurking in the background of femininity, reminiscent of women like Pandora and Eve, bringing up questions of beauty standards, agency, and blame. She has simultaneously become a model for everything women should and should not be: beautiful and desirable but disloyal and manipulative, a template upon which men can prove their masculinity by taming her. Does Helen have any worth at all to the modern conception of womanhood? This chapter will examine the ancient literature of Helen of Troy, especially focusing on the Homeric tradition and Athenian tragedy, before concluding with a discussion of her more recent use in popular culture and place in modern femininity. Helen has an almost exclusively negative characterization in literature, yet she can teach us much about asserting agency even when objectified and writing your own narrative in the face of dehumanization.

Helen was a Spartan princess and the only mortal daughter of Zeus. She was born from an egg after the god took the form of a swan and impregnated her mother, Leda. As an adult, Helen—along with her despised half-sister Clytemnestra—doomed the house of Tyndareus to ruin. Per her mythic tradition, Helen was married to Menelaus purely because he was the wealthiest of her

suitors. Little else recommended him to the most beautiful woman in the world since he proved to be a rather weak man, both physically and socially, as became clear from the outset of their marriage when he shamefully moved to Helen's home of Sparta despite the usual custom of the bride moving to the husband's house. The ill-matched marriage would produce only a single daughter, showcasing both husband's and wife's lack of ability to fulfill their marital duties. Helen never wanted to be a bad wife, but the temptation to leave the lackluster marriage proved to be too much when Aphrodite put Paris in front of her. Women were supposed to be good wives and practice *sōphrosunē* (self-control, temperance, moderation), a characteristic that Helen rarely possesses across her many relationships. Despite Aphrodite's involvement with Paris, Helen is still understood to be complicit in her elopement by most sources. She still chooses to leave for Troy with Paris and chooses to stay with him for many years, despite the other options of absconding back to Greece or suicide. By the time she appears again in the *Iliad* ten years after her elopement, that power of choice has left her. While the men of the *Iliad* do not blame Helen for the war, she accepts her responsibility, saying "If only death had pleased me then, grim death, that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child," (3.208-211).²⁸ The use of active verbs portrays Helen's conscious decision to leave Sparta for Troy. What happens after is largely out of her control, but that one action on her part led to the most devastating and legendary event in Greek literature.

Homer's *Iliad* tells the story of some of the greatest heroes in Western literature, yet these legends would not exist without the actions of Helen of Troy. Had Helen been a "good woman" and followed the strict cultural rules set before her, no men would have ever gone to war on her behalf and earned their mythic status. The supreme glory of the men of the Trojan War cannot

²⁸ Line numbering and translations from Robert Fagles, 1990.

exist without the misdeeds of one of the most hated women in the world. Her position as the *kalon kakon* (“the beautiful evil”) marks her as the *casus belli*. The elopement is the initial catalyst for the amassing of the Greek army but the war extends so far beyond one beautiful woman, turning into a masculine quest for *kleos* (glory, reputation) that transcends the original aim to retrieve a dishonorable woman. Helen is integral to the start of the plot but only appears in books 3, 6, and 24. She has little time in the spotlight (about 300 lines out of the entire 15,600+ line poem) but she uses what time she has to tell her own story in a tale that has all but written her out of it.

Among the women in the *Iliad*, Helen stands out as the only one who takes action independently from the men around her. While she is still trapped in the power dynamics of marriage, she makes an effort to distance herself from Paris and assert her own agency, though she is not always successful. Following Aphrodite’s removal of Paris from his duel with Menelaus, the goddess places him in bed to entice Helen to join him. After watching her former husband nearly defeat Paris and tired of the endless fighting and guilt, Helen initially refuses the instructions of Aphrodite, bitter at the goddess’ control and obsession with her life (3.456-478). Aphrodite quickly threatens Helen to do as she is told or the goddess will turn her ire on her and Helen will be destroyed. Usually, Aphrodite’s blessings come in the form of physical beauty and romantic opportunities. If Helen were stripped of these, then she would be nothing. She would no longer hold sexual sway over the men who decide her fate and her relative safety would be in jeopardy. Additionally, Helen’s name is synonymous with beauty and they cannot be separated from one another because then she would no longer be Helen. She has no choice but to sleep with the emasculated Paris, who lost in a duel with Menelaus and now hides from battle in bed with her. Helen resents her husband, the choices she made, and the lack of control she now has over her life.

While Helen's relationships with her husbands are historically poor, her relationship with other men in the *Iliad* is rather positive. Priam explicitly tells Helen that he does not blame her but the gods for the war that the Trojans are suffering and he treats her as family, gently prompting her to tell him about the Greek warriors (3.199-206). She also has a strong relationship with Hector, saying to him, "But come in, rest on this seat with me, dear brother. You are the one hit hardest by the fighting, Hector, you more than all—and all for me, whore that I am, and this blind mad Paris. Oh the two of us! Zeus planted a killing doom within us both, so even for generations still unborn we will live in song," (6.420-426). Hector is kind to her and in return, Helen cares about him. She recognizes her and Paris' part in his suffering while still ensuring Hector's literary immortality. This could be seen as a calculated and manipulative move by Helen in order to garner sympathy from one of the most powerful men in Troy, but Hector's rejection of her offer, her continued use of rhetoric that absolves Hector of any blame, and her sadness at his death seems to indicate that she genuinely cares for him and his kindness.

Of the few women in the *Iliad*, Helen also gets the last word at Hector's funeral and nearly the last word of the entire epic. Following the laments of Andromache and Hecuba, Helen gives her speech, lauding Hector's generosity and kindness toward her, even at odds with his own family at times. She mourns the man and her last friend in Troy, leaving her at the mercy of the surviving Trojans and the incoming Greeks (24.893-912). While Helen is understandably concerned with her own uncertain fate, she gets the last meaningful word about the greatest Trojan hero. Unlike Andromache, who focuses on her widowhood and her doomed son, and Hecuba, who talks about the circumstances of his death, Helen speaks of Hector's character. She takes more time elaborating on his personality and compassion than the people he is leaving behind. This may be because Helen is in no real danger of being killed or enslaved like the rest of the Trojans, but it

serves to make her more sympathetic nonetheless because she is more concerned with the loss of a great man rather than how that loss may affect herself. Helen's actions throughout the *Iliad* show her to be regretful of the circumstances that brought her there, resentful of Paris and Aphrodite who have trapped her in Troy causing death, but nevertheless appreciative of the Trojans who have been kind to her despite the trouble she has brought them. Homer writes Helen to be a much stronger and more sympathetic character than one might expect from the rather flighty and selfish woman that later authors make her.

This multidimensional characterization of Iliadic Helen has also been closely examined by other scholars, such as Hanna Roisman, in "Helen in the *Iliad*; *Causa Belli* and Victim of War: From Silent Weaver to Public Speaker." She claims that "Homer creates a complex and suffering figure with a good mind, who strives for autonomy, expression, and belonging, within and despite the many constraints to which she is subject."²⁹ While the question of Helen's agency and autonomy in the events leading up to the Trojan War may be debatable, her actions during the war exhibit no such ambiguity. Her encounters with her family and a couple of goddesses show that Helen wants to tell her own story and be her own person but that her situation does not always allow it. Helen is simultaneously a prized possession and a hated cause of strife, but it is clear that she is not allowed to leave Troy and she has no course of action to stop any of the conflict that started on her behalf. Roisman analyzes each of Helen's appearances in order and posits that "as the encounters progress, she reveals more and more aspects of her personality and increasingly becomes assertive, increasingly her own person, and increasingly a part of the society in which she is an outcast."³⁰ Roisman thinks that Helen, despite the general consensus on her passivity and

²⁹ Hanna M. Roisman, "Helen in the *Iliad*; *Causa Belli* and Victim of War: From Silent Weaver to Public Speaker," *The American Journal of Philology* 127, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 1.

³⁰ Roisman, "Helen in the 'Iliad,'" 8.

lack of viable options, is assertive in the *Iliad* in writing her own story in the very same narrative where her story is no longer in her hands.

In a similar vein, Ruby Blondell's "'Bitch that I am': Self-Blame and Self-Assertion in the *Iliad*," also focuses on Helen's speech in Homer, but instead on her rhetoric towards herself and how that blame asserts her agency. Throughout the *Iliad*, most of the men fighting on her behalf do not actually blame Helen for the war. They blame Paris, but this lack of agency afforded to her in her departure from Sparta also erases her as a character with motivations and flaws since her most abhorred act did not happen of her own volition. According to Blondell, "The implication that the Iliadic Helen is more than an object puts the question of her culpability back on the table. Though no man within the epic blames her, she is free, as a subject, to reproach herself. . . . These self-reproaches serve not only to fill the vacuum left by the male characters' avoidance of blame, but to trump that avoidance."³¹ Helen's guilt about her own actions in her leaving Sparta and causing the war serves to position herself as a subject instead of an object in this narrative. In doing so, she becomes an active agent via her own rhetoric rather than a passive recipient in a man's narrative. Her acceptance of her own culpability and her continuing conflicts about where she wants to be also immortalize her story within Homer's narrative of the war. Helen has to operate within the constraints put upon her by the gods and the men but it does not mean that she has to accept the passive characterization that so many would thrust upon her. In examining Helen's heated confrontation with Aphrodite, she is all but forced to join Paris in bed because "Helen is her beauty and the desire that is inextricable from it. In order to remain who she is—and to remain protected by that fact from hatred and death—she must embrace the shame and transgression that

³¹ Ruby Blondell, "'Bitch that I am': Self-Blame and Self-Assertion in the *Iliad*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-2014) 140, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 9.

are inseparable from her supreme beauty.”³² Helen would not be Helen if she were not beautiful, shamefully transgressing typical female boundaries, and completely lacking *sōphrosunē*. She is perpetually a prisoner of her characterization, despite her continued attempts to complicate and outright deny that portrayal. As opposed to Roisman’s argument that Helen asserts her own character and agency, Blondell agrees that Helen asserts her subjectivity but problematizes it by arguing that in doing so Helen is also perpetuating the characterization that has been placed upon her by society. She had control over her leaving with Paris, but her agency is tenuous in terms of whether she is able to assert her own personality or is forced to play out the script that has been thrust upon her.

The other major repository of writings about Helen is Athenian tragedy. While the theatre that came out of Athens during the fifth century is deeply tied to political and cultural events, the themes, especially those extant in tragedy, can be universally applicable and are highly influential in the interpretations of Helen after Homer. The first major treatment of Helen in tragedy is Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, though Helen herself never appears onstage. The first play, *Agamemnon*, is especially rife with references to Helen because of the actions of her sister Clytemnestra when Agamemnon returns from Troy. While they are only half-sisters, the comparison of Helen and Clytemnestra is potent because neither is inclined to exhibit expected female behavior. They are both unhappily married to Atreids and proceed to escape those marriages through violent or shameful means. Because of Agamemnon’s sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia in order to get to Troy, Clytemnestra, with the help of her lover Aegisthus, murders Agamemnon upon his return home. The chorus of *Agamemnon* is especially cognizant of the two powerful women who have destroyed the house of Atreus and contribute much of the dialogue surrounding the sisters.

³² Blondell, ““Bitch that I am,”” 24.

The first major example of language about Helen occurs early in the play and illustrates Aeschylus' image of a superhuman and therefore culpable Helen. During the third choral ode, they say, "Who named her so very aptly? Was it some invisible being seeing the future, who directed language that whirred to the mark, calling her Helen—for Hell? She's the one they fought for, the one the spear courted. How fitting: ships destroyed, men destroyed, city destroyed when she sailed out from among her dainty curtains," (681-691).³³ While it is not easy to convey in English, the Greek uses considerable wordplay in this passage between the name 'Helen' and the verb '*helein*' (to take or seize but also to capture or kill). It appears in Greek as "*helenas, helandros, heleptolis*" (689-690) which are nominative epithets for Helen, denoting a much more active role in the destruction than the translation above renders. The repetition of three alliterative epithets also gives an incantatory effect because both name play and the number three were heavily associated with magic, further presenting Helen as a superpowerful being.³⁴

The other significant passage occurs during the climax after Clytemnestra has killed Agamemnon and Cassandra and stands triumphant over their bodies. The chorus says, "[Agamemnon] endured so much for a woman; now a woman has obliterated him. You were out of your mind Helen, Helen, annihilating great numbers, terrible numbers of lives beneath Troy's walls. Now you've won the consummate, the immortal prize: the blood that will not wash away. It was some spirit of unassailable discord in the house, a husband's anguish," (1454-1461). The chorus admits that Clytemnestra has killed Agamemnon but goes on immediately to say that Helen is the sole arbitrator of the destruction at Troy and she ultimately caused the murder of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra quickly denies this claim, trying to bring light to the men who are at

³³ Line numbering and translation from Sarah Ruden, 2016.

³⁴ Ruby Blondell, *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 130.

fault, such as those who actually fought at Troy and her husband who murdered their daughter. This argument the chorus ignores in favor of further indicting Clytemnestra, Helen, and therefore all women (1462-1489). There is no nuance in their view of what happened at Troy. Helen left Menelaus and therefore Agamemnon died. For them, there is no action or circumstance in those years that eliminates Helen's sole guilt, even when Clytemnestra is the one standing over his body. The chorus of *Agamemnon* has no interest in Clytemnestra's justified revenge or a complex understanding of why Agamemnon died, but is only concerned with the proper course of easy justice (that excludes women entirely) that will be later established in the *Eumenides* which supports their narrative of who is ultimately guilty.

Despite many ancient authors talking around and about Helen through other, mostly hostile, characters, the first, as far as historians are aware, to give back Helen's voice was Euripides. Her first appearance on the tragic stage likely occurred in 415 BCE with *Trojan Woman*. Euripides was fascinated by transgressive women and put many of them at the center of his plays and Helen was no exception.³⁵ *Trojan Women* tells the tale of what happened to the women of Troy after their city fell. It centers on Hecuba who mourns the loss of her city, power, and family as she waits for the Greek leaders to decide to whom she and her daughters will be enslaved. Hecuba clearly blames Helen and essentially no one else for the ill fortune of her family. While one would think that Hecuba should blame the Greek men for destroying her city, she has no power over them and no recourse for revenge upon them, as Talthybius points out, so she must turn her anger on Helen because Hecuba may be able to persuade Menelaus to kill her for all of the evil she may or may not have done. In keeping with the previous tragic narrative, Helen is presented very negatively by other characters before she ever gets a chance to defend herself. She is called

³⁵ Blondell, *Helen of Troy*, 182.

“the hateful wife of Menelaus” (129), “a curse on foreigner and Greeks alike” (770-771), a “disgusting monster” (1024), “that shame to mighty Greece” (1115), and “woman that the gods abhor” (1213) at various points throughout the play, most of which occur when she is not onstage.³⁶ By the time Helen says her first line about two-thirds through the play (line 895 of 1332), public opinion is decidedly against her, and this version of Helen does little to change that.

Menelaus enters first claiming that he is going to bring Helen home to execute her. He orders the guards to bring her to him. Helen enters in fine clothes in sharp contrast to the rags that queenly Hecuba has been reduced to. This visual of Helen’s fortune continues to induce hatred in Trojan hearts. Hecuba convinces Menelaus to let Helen defend herself so that Hecuba can then disprove Helen’s arguments and further convince Menelaus to kill her. Helen defends herself by saying that (1) Hecuba is to blame because she birthed Paris, (2) she was under the influence of Aphrodite when she left Greece, and (3) she was forced to stay in Troy even though she tried to escape (914-965). Helen’s claims are suspect at best, because (1) blaming Hecuba for Paris’ birth is a poor argument for defending her elopement, (2) the Greeks believed that godly influence did not erase mortal culpability, and (3) no one has ever claimed that Helen tried to escape Troy at all. Hecuba goes on to argue that (1) the goddesses are not to blame because Helen found Paris desirable, (2) she longed for foreign gold and reverence, (3) Helen did not protest when she was supposedly kidnapped from Sparta, and (4) if she was a decent woman she would have killed herself for being violated in such a way (969-1032). Despite Menelaus’ seeming agreement with Hecuba’s opinions, he decides to take Helen home to kill her there, though Hecuba knows that the voyage will weaken his resolve and Helen will not be punished for all the death she has caused. Unlike the *Iliad* where Helen is the only one who blames herself and therefore is characterized as

³⁶ Line numbering and translation from Emily Wilson, 2016.

sympathetic, in *Trojan Women*, everyone blames Helen except Helen herself and therefore she is portrayed as guilty.³⁷ Helen's physical beauty conquers Hecuba's rational argumentation, and Helen leaves with her weak-willed husband knowing that she will safely sail home. Helen's return to the spotlight in Euripides' *Trojan Women* serves to further her blame for the Trojan War and cements her as an active participant in its destruction. Unlike the Homeric Helen, this Helen garners no sympathy from the audience and embodies the *kalon kakon* that many make her out to be.

One of the most interesting and divergent narratives about Helen is Euripides' *Helen*. This play, likely written circa 412 BCE, survived to modernity through sheer luck on a single papyrus scroll. Without it, the ancient presentation of Helen would be nearly homogenous. In this version, Helen never went to Troy but was instead placed in Egypt by Hera while an *eidōlon* (image, phantom, likeness) accompanied Paris to Troy. This idea of a phantom Helen seems to have originated with Stesichorus, a late-seventh and early-sixth-century lyric poet, but Euripides adapted it for the Athenian tragic stage. This version of Helen never committed her most famous act, so who is Helen if she had never gone to Troy and had all the characteristics a good woman should have? In this play, Helen is loyal to Menelaus, even under pressure to marry the Egyptian king Theoclymenus. Menelaus, as he does in Homeric tradition, wrecks on the shore of Egypt with the *eidōlon* of Helen, who still draws all the ire of the Greek world. Menelaus seeks refuge from Theoclymenus, but stumbles upon his wife and is in disbelief that a second Helen lives among the Egyptians. Helen is unable to convince him that she really is his wife until Menelaus gets word from his fellow Greeks that the *eidōlon* has disappeared. The couple undergo a joyous reunion and plot how to escape Egypt without Theoclymenus killing them. Through deceit, nearly all of which

³⁷ Blondell, *Helen of Troy*, 188.

is Helen's idea, they escape on a ship and sail for Greece. Helen is no longer the *kalon kakon* but is both beautiful and good, exhibiting loyalty and *sōphrosunē*. The magical fantasy land of Egypt allowed this mythological dream to play out, where a woman could be both beautiful *and* good.³⁸ Teucer, a Greek exile in Egypt who gives Helen news of Troy's destruction and the fallout, says to her, "Your body is like Helen's, but your heart is very different, not at all alike. May she die, and never reach the banks of the Eurotas. But to you, good luck!" (160-163).³⁹ This virtuous Helen seems counterintuitive to the Greeks who endured ten years of hardship for her. She hardly seems like the real Helen, especially after they fought a war for a woman who was not even real.

The blameless Helen also appears to care less for the one characteristic that makes her special: her beauty. Unlike the Iliadic Helen who knows that her beauty is the only thing that gives her any worth and allows her to survive her transgressions, and the Helen of *Trojan Women* who weaponizes her beauty for her own gain, this Helen possesses the moral virtue that allows her to manipulate her physical appearance without much risk. In order to trick Theoclymenus, she convinces him that Menelaus has died and she must mourn him. In line with traditional Greek custom, Helen cuts her hair, changes into a black dress, and scratches her cheeks. She erases the beauty that ties her to her bad reputation, thus separating herself from Homeric Helen's misdeeds and starting a new chapter that allows her to be a virtuous woman. According to Blondell,

Instead of presenting herself as a passive object, victimized by her beauty, she has taken control of her appearance. She no longer merely voices the wish for an uglier appearance but has put that wish into action, demonstrating visibly that she does not take a dangerous pride in her beauty or view it as a source of power. This symbolic renunciation of her beauty goes hand in hand with a willing suppression of her independence.⁴⁰

³⁸ Blondell, *Helen of Troy*, 203.

³⁹ Line numbering and translation from Emily Wilson, 2016.

⁴⁰ Blondell, *Helen of Troy*, 215.

Helen is beautiful but she does not let it be her defining characteristic, and instead invests more in her moral virtue. However, by being a good woman, Helen loses all of the power and independence she had in other literary traditions. Good Greek women did not have power and were completely subject to their husbands. Helen is willingly giving up any control she had and submitting to living virtuously with Menelaus. It is easy to argue that this version of Helen is not Helen at all, because Helen does not exist without her beauty nor her shameful transgressions. Character identity is inseparable from those key characteristics, especially in narrative literature. Just as Antigone always needs to be defying seemingly unjust powers greater than herself, Helen has to be beautiful and shameful. They cannot maintain their discrete identities without those characteristics. However, by eliminating both of Helen's defining attributes, Euripides is creating an impossible fantasy of a woman who can be the most beautiful and the most virtuous. This woman cannot be Helen of Troy.

Helen of Troy, as we know her today, is markedly less nuanced than she was in antiquity. Although she remained popular during the Middle Ages as a figure influenced by both Eve and, surprisingly, the Virgin Mary, most of the time, especially in poetry, Helen is a point of comparison for authors to laud their own more virtuous paramours.⁴¹ Helen's legendary beauty also serves as a metaphor that writers and artists can easily use to evoke beauty in their own works.⁴² She loses nearly all her personality and personal struggles because artists are only representing her physicality. Helen regains little when she enters modern popular culture in Hollywood on television and film screens. In most adaptations of the *Iliad*, she is relegated to being purely a side

⁴¹ See Pierre de Ronsard's *Sonnets pour Hélène*, Oscar Wilde's "The New Helen," and William Butler Yeats' "No Second Troy."

⁴² Blondell, *Helen of Troy*, 248.

character and undergoes none of the internal struggle with her personal agency or blame that Homer wrote. If a script writes Helen to be a main character then she is largely limited to being a romantic partner in Paris' heroic quest, such as the 2003 miniseries *Helen of Troy* or the 2018 series *Troy: Fall of a City*. Some filmmakers have tried to make her palatable to modern film audiences, but "Most modern pop-cultural defenses revolve, instead, around romantic self-assertion and female victimhood. This allows filmmakers to present Helen as a victim of patriarchal oppression, trapped in a loveless marriage, who chooses to follow her heart; but it complicates her heroism by placing her in the role of love interest or romantic heroine."⁴³ In order to make Helen likable to audiences who might not be intimately familiar with Homer, filmmakers must write her as unequivocally sympathetic. This means erasing any of the complicating characteristics that make her morally gray in Homer. Most versions remove Hermione since a mother who abandons her daughter is not appealing to modern audiences, as well as Helen's regret of choosing the cowardly Paris and her wish to return to Menelaus. Paris himself is given a makeover to seem a better, more courageous, and stronger man than Homer wrote, also painting Menelaus as a traditional controlling patriarch who wants revenge against Helen and Paris, getting in the way of their "true love."⁴⁴ In order to make Helen a good character in a romantic storyline (as Hollywood is wont to do), they eliminate any complexity to her situation. Producers want romance because that sells to audiences, so Helen can be little else except a romantic, even though that is not what Homer writes her to be. The capitalization of Helen in popular culture simplifies and dehumanizes her, effectively erasing any of her more interesting qualities that would make her a good feminist model for womanhood.

⁴³ Ruby Blondell, *Helen of Troy in Hollywood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), xiv.

⁴⁴ See films *Troy* (2004) and *Helen of Troy* (1956).

Helen of Troy is one of the most beautiful women on earth but because of her superhuman beauty, she is treated as subhuman. The Greeks and Trojans fight over her as a spoil of war, determined to claim the most beautiful woman as their own, as a point of pride. She is nothing but a symbol of glory for the victors. Modern media minimizes Helen to be a romantic, second to the heroic men in her life, and subject to the heteronormative and patriarchal requirements of capitalist Hollywood producers who are content with erasing her personality in favor of selling to audiences. In most cases, Helen has no agency in how she is treated or how her story is presented. She has no agency in her own personality as it is changed by ancient and modern authors alike. The only place she seems to have agency as her own person, marginally separate from the men she ties herself to so consistently, is in her oldest source: Homer. Nowhere else is Helen so complex a character. In Homer, through the dialogue of her self-blame and insistence on her narrative, she resists the objectivity thrust upon her. She claims subjectivity, despite her very few appearances, and in spite of every other character's attempts to relegate her to *casus belli* and nothing else. Helen is consistently objectified as the *kalon kakon*, a neuter term that further dehumanizes her as a thing and not a woman. In every rendition since Homer, Helen has become less than she used to be. Her modern persona is less useful as a model of womanhood because authors have erased her narrative. However, despite her mostly negative reputation, she can still be a model if we trace how she became that way. Helen stands as a stalwart defender of her own story despite the progressive dehumanizing narrative that dominates her literature. She must insist on her own agency because everyone else refuses to do so, trusting no one but herself to write her story and immortalize her humanity.

Chapter 3: Athena and Artemis

“With all my heart, I hold with what is male—except through marriage. I am all my father’s,” (Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 737-738, spoken by Athena).⁴⁵ The virgin goddesses, Artemis and Athena, inhabit a very different space than their mortal counterparts. They are angry, vengeful, beautiful, and physical, and because of their deific status, they are not held to the same gendered standards, and so can perpetually exist in liminal spaces that are not possible for the previously discussed mortal women. On the surface, they lend themselves well to modern feminist interpretation. However, several of their myths are also very problematic. Because Greek religion was ultimately a civic institution, these goddesses were used to uphold the male-oriented social order, as shown in the quote from *Eumenides*. They are not independent female figures, separate from the mortal power structure, but are actually instrumental in maintaining the Greek way of life, misogynistic as it may have been. However, since Artemis and Athena no longer hold that civic function, they have been marginally co-opted by modern women. Many of the more problematic elements and stories have been done away with so that these goddesses now stand independent from the ancient social order. Instead, they exist as paradigms of individuality and empowerment. Divorced from the rigid storylines that limit Antigone and Helen, Athena and Artemis are much more malleable models for many aspects of womanhood. As such, this chapter will explore the ancient civic functions of Artemis and Athena, as well as their representation in poetry and theatre, and then will discuss more modern adaptations and interpretations of the goddesses. Artemis and Athena, while quite misogynistic in antiquity, are strong and passionate women, who can teach us much about accepting our own individual potential and using that to empower ourselves.

⁴⁵ Line numbering and translation from Sarah Ruden, 2016.

Ancient Greek religion, heavily influenced by previous Minoan and Mycenaean cultures, was a disunited system controlled in each polis by the differing governments. There existed many different cults across the Mediterranean for the Greek gods, culminating in different customs and practices based on the local culture. The traditional mythology that most people know of today comes to us from a variety of Greek and Roman sources, each written for various audiences and purposes. There is no single way to worship any of the deities, no unifying voice that one finds in modern monotheistic religions, but dozens of extant traditions and customs that culminate in a wider picture that is altogether rather unclear and hard to follow. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this chapter, we will be focusing on the most well-known of the functions that these goddesses once held, usually centered around the city of Athens.

Athena was one of the most important deities in Greece, alongside only Zeus and Apollo in popularity. As the patron of Athens, the city to which she lends her name that became the center of her worship, much of the polis' myths and customs revolve around her. She is generally regarded as the goddess of wisdom, warfare, and artisanry, but the solidification of her character as Pallas Athena can largely be attributed to Homer. Like other gods, there were many cults honoring different aspects of Athena, of which the most influential were Athena Polias, the protectress of the city, Athena Parthenos, the virgin, and Athena Promachos, the champion. As Athena Polias, she guards all of civilization, including cities, societal order, government, economy, and the people themselves. She protects their way of life, nurturing growth and ensuring generational continuance, displaying motherly characteristics that one would not usually expect from a virgin goddess.⁴⁶ Athena Parthenos is not altogether that different from Athena Polias in civic function, but she

⁴⁶ Karl Kerényi, *Athene: Virgin and Mother in Greek Religion*, trans. Murray Stein (Woodstock, Connecticut: Spring Publications, Inc., 1996): 17-18.

emphasizes her virginity and purity above all. Phidias' statue of the Athena Parthenos that stood in the middle of the Parthenon was the center of Athenian veneration, serving as the city's embodiment.⁴⁷ Finally, Athena Promachos represents the goddess' strategic military and athletic importance, leading soldiers to just victory. The statue by Phidias on the Acropolis was constructed in honor of Athenian triumph during the Battle of Marathon and the Persian Wars.⁴⁸ Taken all together as the singular Pallas Athena, she stood as the guardian of the Greek way of life, protecting the integrity of the cities and the customs held within.

In poetry and literature, Athena held similar symbolic value as she did in religion. In Homer, she is the champion of the Greeks and often intervenes on their behalf, such as when she tricked Hector to stop running and face his death at the hands of Achilles (*Iliad*, 22.255-295) or her patronage of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. Outside Homer, Athena is often the protector of heroes, notably Heracles and Perseus, both Greek myths that are foundational. She is constantly guiding, giving advice, and providing tools to her heroes so they can achieve their goals. In this function as the wisdom goddess, she uses her intelligence and prompts the cunning of heroic men to just ends. However, despite being the goddess of women's crafts, such as weaving, Athena is rarely found helping other women in the way she is often helping men. She is occasionally found enjoying the company of Persephone, Penelope, or her favorites Chariclo or Pallas, but nevertheless, the most famous myth about Athena interacting with a woman is that of Arachne. In Ovid's version of the story, Arachne is a mortal woman and renowned weaver who boasts of her skills and challenges Athena to a contest.⁴⁹ While both made beautiful pieces, Athena could not find a flaw with

⁴⁷ Erica Simon, *The Gods of the Greeks* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2021): 227.

⁴⁸ Simon, *The Gods of the Greeks*, 210-214.

⁴⁹ While Ovid is a Roman poet who is writing in a much later period than Homer or the Athenian playwrights, I am still using his version of certain myths because they are the most well-known and influential

Arachne's and started to beat her with her shuttle until the girl hanged herself. Only then did Athena punish her for her hubris and lack of deference to the gods by turning her into something that hangs and weaves forever: a spider.⁵⁰ While this is a story ultimately about the arrogance of mortals and the importance of deferring to the gods in all areas (as it is immediately followed by the tale of Niobe), it still provides a helpful view of Athena's rather fraught relationship with women. Most of Athena's domains—war, wisdom, civilization—are male domains. Her only tangible connection to women is her patronage of weaving and similar artisanry, and as we see with Arachne, the most famous myth about Athena's weaving, it is not so much about supporting other women but punishing those who do not show the proper deference to the goddess and her mastery. Despite Athena being a woman, she exists solely to uphold the male society. This fact is also clearly represented upon the Athenian stage.

Naturally, due to Athena's importance in Athens, she is the god that appears most often on the dramatic stage. She plays a minor role in Sophocles' *Ajax*, where she protects Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus from the rage of Ajax after he is slighted by not receiving Achilles' armor. In the play, she causes Ajax to go mad and turn his anger on sacrificial animals instead of them. Ajax, who eventually comes to his senses, is ashamed of what he has done and falls upon his own sword thus committing suicide, which is one of the most disgraceful deaths for men in Greece. She also appears at the end of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* in order to allow Iphigenia, Orestes, and Pylades to escape the Taurians and return to Argos, thus cementing the new generation in the house of Atreus that was destroyed by Clytemnestra. Thirdly, the goddess also

variants that survive to us today. While Ovid had his own goals, his *Metamorphoses* was based on previous accounts of the myths written by the Greeks, many of which are now lost to us, so he is still a vital part of the mythography.

⁵⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1955), 129-133.

appears at the beginning of *Trojan Women* in discussion with Poseidon. Despite her support of the Greeks during the war, she wishes to make their journeys home difficult because they did nothing when Lesser Ajax raped Cassandra in her temple. Athena cares little that Cassandra was raped but more for the fact that it was in her temple—another example of her general lack of sympathy for women. For her, such blasphemy demands retribution because, although the Greeks destroyed the Trojans, they have lost the ways of the gods in the aftermath and deserve to be punished thusly. While this play is heavily tied to contemporary Athenian politics and the recent massacre at Melos, Athena's role in the fallout of the war is ongoing and occasionally contradictory to previous actions.

Despite Athena's many appearances on the tragic stage, the most important play for the topic of this chapter is Aeschylus' *Eumenides*. This play portrays the trial of Orestes after the murder of his mother Clytemnestra, who murdered his father Agamemnon, who in turn murdered their daughter Iphigenia. Apollo is arguing for Orestes' innocence by claiming that the retributive murder was just, and the Furies are arguing on Clytemnestra's behalf that the murder was not and Orestes is guilty of matricide. Athena presides over the trial, accompanied by a jury of Athenian men. Apollo, who claims that he is acting upon the will of Zeus, argues before Athena that Orestes did not commit blood murder because: "The person called the mother's not the parent. She only nourishes the embryo planted by mounting her, and for a stranger she keeps the shoot alive—if no god blights it. And I can prove my claim: without a mother there can be fatherhood. For this we have proof here [indicating Athena], the offspring of Olympian Zeus, not nurtured in the darkness of the womb," (659-665). Apollo argues instead that the mother is just a vessel for the father to have a child. She has no importance otherwise and therefore matricide is not possible. While this was not a widely held belief in Greece but one only put forth by certain radicals, it still expresses

the type of extreme patriarchal views that were nonetheless prevalent.⁵¹ After a tied jury, Athena casts the deciding vote, and as shown in the introduction of this chapter, she says, “With all my heart, I hold with what is male—except through marriage. I am all my father’s,” (737-738). In antiquity, Athena was no paragon of feminism but rather a strong proponent of the patriarchy controlled by her father. And thus, expressed through religious and literary representations, she supports the continuation of male dominance and female submissiveness within human society as well. While Athena is a strong female goddess, in no way can she be called a feminist, but instead is a tool in Greek religion to solidify existing power structures.

Greek characterizations of Artemis, like Athena, also aligned with the goals of the male-oriented society, though her place within Greek religion is less concrete. Generally, she is the goddess of the hunt, the wild, and childbirth, but she holds many other associations with war and death, children, chastity, and political assemblies. She is involved in human life but is always at a distance that can never be closed.⁵² In cultic history, she is the oldest of the goddesses, embodying many characteristics of other religions’ Mother Goddess. However, since the Greek system does not permit a true Mother Goddess, those characteristics were largely split up between various Olympian goddesses. Despite Artemis’ ancient cultic tradition, Homer writes her to be the youngest of the major Olympians, who is maidenly and incomparably *kalliste* (the most beautiful). Artemis is mainly the protector and avenger of animals—the *potnia theron* (Mistress of the Wild Animals)—who exhibits a “vengeance against a cruel death, or, expressed more positively, an intimate bond with every living creature, be it man or animal, and respect for its life as well as its

⁵¹ Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, “Introduction to Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*,” in *The Greek Plays: Sixteen Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, ed. by Mary Lefkowitz and James Romm, (New York: Modern Library, 2016), 141.

⁵² Simon, *The Gods of the Greeks*, 165.

death.”⁵³ Due to this connection with life and death, Artemis is understandably associated with Ares and war. Additionally, her bond with innocent and wild creatures, as well as her ancient association with childbirth, leads to Artemis becoming the nurturer of children, and she especially has many customs related to the transition between childhood and adulthood.⁵⁴ While Artemis seems a mostly rural goddess, she also had some functions within the city, such as at political assemblies. This seemingly odd function for a nature goddess likely came about because of the dining and ritual sacrifices that took place at assemblies preceding the democratic process.⁵⁵ Another of her urban functions was as *hegemonē* (leader) where the huntress becomes a shepherdess whose herd consists of city dwellers and those who migrate between rural and urban areas.⁵⁶ Artemis held many seemingly disparate functions in religion, involved with nature and mankind, but always separated from intimate connection with both men and gods.

While Homer's young and beautiful Artemis does prevail over most other depictions, her naivety and passivity do not. Most of her myths are about one of her favorites crossing a boundary or about her enacting vengeance against a Greek leader for not following proper sacrificial rites. Ovid tells multiple stories that fall into these categories, the most famous of which is likely that of Actaeon. There are different variations of the myth, written by both Greeks and Romans, but Ovid tells it that Actaeon accidentally sees Artemis bathing and turns him into a stag, and is then hunted down and brutally torn apart by his own dogs (*Metamorphoses*, 61-64). It is always a transgression to see a goddess naked, but this trope is especially common with Artemis because of her youth, purity, and beauty. Another story in a similar vein is that of Callisto, who is a companion of

⁵³ Simon, *The Gods of the Greeks*, 171.

⁵⁴ Simon, *The Gods of the Greeks*, 175.

⁵⁵ Simon, *The Gods of the Greeks*, 172-173.

⁵⁶ Simon, *The Gods of the Greeks*, 173-175.

Artemis, gets impregnated by Zeus, and turned into a bear. In Ovid's version, Callisto is resting in the woods after a hunt when Zeus appears to her disguised as Artemis and starts kissing her. Once she realizes that it is not Artemis, Callisto tries to fight off Zeus but is unable to. Her pregnancy is discovered while bathing with Artemis and the rest of her companions and she is banished from their company. Eventually, she gives birth to a son named Arcas and Hera turns her into a bear out of anger. Years later, when Arcas is fully grown, he nearly kills Callisto on a hunt, but Zeus prevents it by placing them both in the stars (40-45). The versions of the myth usually differ on whether it was Artemis, out of anger for her violation, Hera, out of jealousy, or Zeus, out of fear of Hera's rage, who turned Callisto into a bear. Whatever the case, Callisto is punished because she broke her vow of chastity to Artemis, whether or not it was with her consent, and was therefore not allowed within her company anymore. Companions of Artemis can only be those who are pure and have not transitioned to sexually active adulthood. She is a strict and vengeful goddess of those who break her rules, having no leniency in her way of life.

The other category of Artemisian myths are those in which she is avenging a wrong done in sacrificial practices. The Calydonian Boar is one of the most well-known examples of this. As Ovid tells it, King Oeneus forgot to sacrifice to Artemis for a successful harvest. In her anger for the slight, Artemis unleashed a ferocious boar upon Calydon, which destroyed their fields and cattle. Many great heroes came together to hunt the boar but it was Atalanta, a woman and devout follower of Artemis, who drew first blood. Meleager, who struck the killing blow and was in love with Atalanta, gave the spoils to her, despite his companions' anger because she was a woman who did not belong there. Meleager's uncles took the spoils from her and he killed them in retaliation. Meleager's mother then threw the log that was tied to his life force into the fire and Meleager died for his crimes. (190-195). Atalanta later receives an oracle that tells her marriage

will be her undoing, so she decides to live in the woods and spurn the company of men, declaring that she would only marry the one who could beat her in a footrace. After Atalanta had killed the many men she had defeated, Hippomenes, with the help of Aphrodite to spite Artemis, beat Atalanta and they married. However, driven by Aphrodite's lust, the two consummated in a temple to Cybele, and Cybele turned them into lions as punishment (252-257). Artemis' favorites are usually undone by Zeus, because of their beauty and sexual availability, or Aphrodite, to spite Artemis' rejection of love and sex. This is symbolic of the Greek woman's inability to remain a child forever as a companion of Artemis; they always must undergo the often violent transition into adulthood in order to continue civilization as mothers and wives. Artemis may be outside the normal spectrum of expected female behavior, but the temporality of her worship continues to cement the traditional patriarchal narrative. In order to be a good and successful woman, one must give up childhood, become a wife, and bear sons. The forces of this transition into adulthood—Zeus' supreme patriarchal leadership or Aphrodite's sexual maturation—always win out over Artemis' eternal purity for her companions.

Artemis has many appearances in poetry but she does not often appear on the tragic Athenian stage. While her only appearance is in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, she is heavily involved in the background of both *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Artemis' involvement in the Trojan cycle is minimal at best. The only event in which she plays a key role is while the Greeks are preparing to sail to Troy at Aulis. Through one act or another, Agamemnon has offended Artemis and in return, she has calmed the winds so that the Greeks are unable to sail for Troy. The seer Calchas tells Agamemnon that he must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia in order to appease the goddess and lead the army to Troy. He sends a message to Clytemnestra to send their daughter to Aulis under the pretext that she is to marry Achilles. Iphigenia, initially thrilled at the prospect

of marrying the greatest hero in Greece, eventually learns the truth. She, Clytemnestra, and Achilles all try to dissuade Agamemnon but he is under the pressure of the eager army and feels he has no choice unless he wants rebellion. Iphigenia consents heroically to her sacrifice, leading the chorus in a hymn to Artemis on her way to the altar. The ending of *Iphigenia at Tauris* after this point is widely considered by scholars to be an interpolation, but as it goes, Artemis replaces Iphigenia with a deer and transports her to her temple among the Taurians where she would remain for many years as a priestess, often performing human sacrifices for the goddess. Eventually, as portrayed in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Orestes would appear there and the siblings would leave together to re-establish the House of Atreus. Artemis does not physically appear in either of these Euripidean plays, yet she haunts the action in both of them. She demands sacrifice because of an offense on Agamemnon's part but shows mercy to not allow the innocent Iphigenia to die because of the cruel tricks of her father. Artemis is often angry at indiscretions but she does not allow innocents to die because of the failures of another, respecting the boundaries of life and death. The story of Iphigenia differs from the previously discussed myths of Callisto and the Calydonian Boar Hunt because Iphigenia did nothing to offend Artemis. Callisto broke her vow of chastity (of course, it was not her fault, but chastity is a requirement to follow Artemis) and Oeneus did not perform the proper sacrifices. Iphigenia, on the other hand, remained loyal and deferential to the goddess throughout, despite the cruelty of her father, and thus Artemis spared her. Someone is either in Artemis' good graces or they are not. She has a very strict code and is deliberate in when people are worthy of her friendship and favor and when they deserve her ire.

Hippolytus, unlike many other stories involving Artemis, shows her interactions with another goddess, namely Aphrodite. Artemis and Aphrodite understandably have a rather antagonistic relationship. Artemis is a virgin goddess who is forever a young maiden. Aphrodite

is the goddess of sex and beauty, and thus she holds no power over Artemis. *Hippolytus* is about mortals who get tangled up in this feud. Hippolytus is a devout male follower of Artemis who has vowed chastity. Aphrodite, angry at his lack of reverence for her, plans vengeance against Hippolytus by forcing his stepmother Phaedra to fall in love with him. Lamenting at her feelings and realizing that Hippolytus was told about her shameful love for him, Phaedra hangs herself. Theseus, Hippolytus' father and Phaedra's husband, returns and finds a letter on his wife's body that says Hippolytus raped her. Out of anger, Theseus curses his son and causes him to be fatally injured. Artemis then appears to clear everything up, telling Theseus that his son did not rape Phaedra and that this whole situation was because Aphrodite resented Hippolytus' chastity. Artemis could not interfere because it was the goddess' will but she vowed to get revenge. She promises that Hippolytus will be honored and then promptly leaves before he can die, very bluntly telling him, "This destruction is your lot. And so farewell. I may not stay to watch you die, be tainted by your dying breath. I see that you are near the end now," (1436-1439).⁵⁷ While human death is unclean and cannot mix with divinities, Artemis is quite unsympathetic to her devotee's death, only promising revenge and honor, but not providing comfort in any way. This is not unusual for gods, but it highlights Artemis' distance from the human experience and her lack of understanding even for her most devoted followers. Of course, Hippolytus is a rather unique follower of the goddess. Borne of an Amazon, he is a man who eschews sexuality, which is very unusual in ancient Greece and often promotes an idea of femininity. Just as with women, men are expected to transition into adulthood and produce sons. A man who has no wish to do this is hardly a man at all. Due to his deviancy, Hippolytus is punished with death, thus making an example of him to show that his behavior is unacceptable. Male devotion to Artemis in this way is not common

⁵⁷ Line numbering and translation from Rachel Kitzinger, 2016.

in Greece, and this loyalty has a time limit because of social necessity, unlike the lifelong ability to worship Athena. It is necessary that Greek men and women transition away from Artemis in their childhoods to fulfill the social expectations of their adulthoods in Athena's civilization. In addition to Hippolytus' unusual Artemisian devotion, he is also very misogynistic, which seems antithetical to Artemis' usual functions. He decries women saying, "Oh, Zeus, why place in the light of the sun this fraud, this blight on human existence: women! If you wanted to sow the human race, you didn't need women to provide the means," (616-619). Hippolytus, a devout follower of Artemis, a goddess who by all modern standards is one of the preeminent feminist deities, describes himself as "superior in all self-control [*sōphrosunē*]" (1365) and is an extreme misogynist. His devotion to Artemis is accompanied by a revulsion of women and a feeling of superiority because he possesses *sōphrosunē*, usually a feminine trait but one he believes only men can truly exhibit. He is using Artemis' vow of chastity to separate himself from society, not because of his responsibility in adulthood but because he finds women detestable, thus perpetuating the male-dominated social order. This misogynistic aspect of Hippolytus on behalf of Artemis, in conjunction with Athena's invalidation of motherhood, shows that these goddesses, no matter what their modern interpretations may be, were not feminists in antiquity. They were tools of the patriarchy in order to support and legitimize masculine superiority, even if it seems counterintuitive to their most fundamental functions. Feminism was not an idea that was extant in these writings, but now, in our vastly different world, we can use these old stories to write a new narrative that supports and uplifts our own way of life.

Two millennia later these goddesses are no longer religious figures, but they are still heavily influential on the ideals of Western culture. Like much of ancient Greek culture, the figure of Athena saw a resurgence in popularity during the Renaissance, becoming a symbol of the arts

and human progress. Additionally, she was often the patron of female rulers, such as Elizabeth I, Marie de Medici, and Catherine II.⁵⁸ By the late eighteenth century, she had also come to symbolize freedom and democracy. For example, a statue of Athena sits in front of the Austrian Parliament Building in Vienna and she is depicted on the Great Seal of California. Her position in Greece as the symbol of their civilization was easily adapted by countries looking to establish new political freedoms and democracy as an inheritance from the glory of Athens. These representations largely disregarded the gendered aspects of Athena, but rather focused on her functions as the protector of civilization as a whole. Beyond Athena's abstract political symbolism, her place in modern feminism is rather conflicted, as there the gendered connotations of the goddess cannot be ignored. Her misogyny in mythology is not an insignificant criticism, but other feminists see her as a symbol of female empowerment because of her powerful position in the patriarchal Greek pantheon. Perhaps it is better to think of Athena as an archetype for female power and equality, but still existing within the gender binary, usually without complicating our notions of gender, roles, or the social constructs of femininity or masculinity. She is successful and intelligent, but she does little to challenge socially constructed systems of power beyond her position in the "man's world." She is dismantling the master's house with the master's tools, a method that is certainly not universally agreed upon by modern feminists.

Of course, some feminist thinkers consider Athena in a slightly different light. Goddess feminism, a movement arising in the 1970s that worships the divine feminine, draws on aspects of Athena, especially her "qualities of diplomacy, logical thinking, wisdom, courage and political

⁵⁸ For examples, see Thomas Blenerhasset's *A Revelation of a True Minerva* (1582) for Elizabeth I, Peter Paul Rubens' Marie de Medici Cycle (1622-1624), and Jean-Pierre-Antoine Tassaert's *Catherine the Great as Minerva Protectress of the Arts*.

astuteness, and is ruled by her head not her heart.”⁵⁹ The usefulness of Athena’s wise warrior archetype is undeniable, but the goddess’ divorce from her own heart and lack of many intimate connections with other women makes Athena hard to use as a holistic model for feminism. However, Athena’s problematic gender relations can also be seen in a positive light. The goddess’ ancient representation is rather androgynous and she exists in the liminal space between men and women. Christine Downing, in examining lesbian mythology, something that necessarily complicates social constructs of heterosexual cisgender femininity, says,

Athene serves as powerful testimony to a view of women as strong, active and creative rather than as by definition passive and weak. By reminding us that such qualities are not exclusively masculine but as much part of our own female being as our vulnerability, receptivity, openness to feeling, Athene may help us to recognize the obvious: that contemporary lesbian women who choose or are given the designation "butch" are fully, indeed quintessentially, women—not masculine, not men in women's bodies. Their refusal to be "femme," to conform to conventional expectations about female dress and demeanor, body image, and lifestyle is a celebration of women's strength and of independence of male-defined values.⁶⁰

Athena, while seemingly a supporter of the social system but still working for success within it despite the system’s many problems, can simultaneously be seen as challenging it too. Because these goddesses have such complicated and conflicting characteristics, they are malleable enough to fit many different archetypes, and thus able to advance the narratives of conflicting ideologies.

Artemis is significantly less problematic than Athena for adaptation into feminist ideology, though she less easily fits into the narrative of equality in a man’s world in which Athena seems to thrive. In contrast, Artemis is much more rooted in the body and heart, shunning essentialist femininity and being unapologetically independent. Rightfully, Artemis has been heavily associated with female physicality and athleticism. Female athletes have long been eschewing

⁵⁹ Kathryn Rountree, “The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 43, no. 2 (July 1999): 152.

⁶⁰ Christine Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 186.

traditional gender norms by participating in the “masculine” world of sports. In a book from 1994, Pamela Creedon examines the media representation of female athletes, where it is essentially impossible to be a successful girl and a successful athlete simultaneously. In the patriarchal view, women are supposed to be soft, nonaggressive, and family-oriented. They believe that this is incompatible with the female athlete who sacrifices her femininity and womanly duties for masculinizing exercise. Creedon suggests using Artemis and the Amazons to dismantle the separation between femininity and physicality, where it is possible to be both a woman and an athlete.⁶¹ These mythical women break the gender binary by refusing patriarchal expectations and following their own passions, thus defying societal norms and rewriting our contemporary narrative in a way that leaves room for female athletes to do the same. The world of female sports has changed considerably in the thirty years since Creedon’s examination with the development and success of numerous professional women’s sports leagues and the diversification of sports media. Despite this, many female athletes continue to struggle with their athleticism and the gender roles that society expects of them, especially when they look to start families. With the continuing development of women’s sports, Artemis continues to be the embodiment of defying those entrenched gender expectations, where it becomes possible to be both a woman and an athlete. Here, each person can establish her own definition of what it means to be a woman.

Artemis, like Athena, also brings inspiration to the Goddess feminism movement. However, instead of intellectualism, Artemis stands as a defender of women and is deeply connected to nature. This sect of feminism is focused on reconnecting with nature and the body, all while deconstructing the hierarchical power structures of gender, race, class, and ethnicity that

⁶¹ Pamela J. Creedon, “From the Feminine Mystique to the Female Physique: Uncovering the Archetype of Artemis in Sport,” in *Women, Media, and Sport: Challenging Gender Values*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1994), 276-278.

permeate Western culture.⁶² This combatting of somatophobia accompanied by an ecofeminist bent is incredibly Artemisian. In mythology, Artemis is wholly in possession of her body and she does not allow others, especially men, to dictate what she does with it. Additionally, she deliberately removes herself from human civilization and enjoys the splendor of nature. She is incredibly in tune with the natural world and herself in a way that is not often found in Western cultures, and goddess feminists believe that she can provide a framework for them to do the same. Unlike Athena, it is hard to place Artemis within the “man’s world” at all, but rather she seems to thrive in spaces that challenge the gender binary and traditional Western ways of thinking about the world.

In addition to Artemis’ somatic and natural associations, she also lends herself well to deconstructing heterosexual cisgender domination. In mythology, Artemis is almost exclusively found in the company of other women. Callisto’s initial positive reception of Zeus-disguised-as-Artemis implies that intimate contact between Artemis and her companions was not uncommon. It is no surprise that lesbian communities have claimed Artemis and her hunters as one of their own due to their separation from the male social order and their exclusive company of other women. She is the ultimate woman’s goddess: patron of all the female physiological processes, confidently possessing her sexuality, and fiercely independent. In Downing’s words, “In Artemis’ realm what the love of women most deeply signifies is the love of our womanly selves. Her refusal to give herself expresses her respect not her rejection of the other. Her essential chastity expresses not frigidity but passion. She gives herself to her own passion, her own wildness, not to another, and encourages us to do the same.”⁶³ Artemis is steadfast in her own identity and is not willing to

⁶² Rountree, “The Politics of the Goddess,” 151-152.

⁶³ Downing, “Lesbian Mythology,” 189.

compromise any of herself in the face of injustice or cruelty. She does not fight for power in the system like Athena, but exists apart from it in a way that empowers herself and those around her, completely disregarding the roles that society would thrust upon her.

While feminists have had much to say about the applications of Athena and Artemis, one of the most important insertions of the goddesses into mainstream popular culture is Wonder Woman. The comic book heroine's association with feminism and patriarchy is complex, but nevertheless, she breaks boundaries. Wonder Woman's primary influences were Athena and Aphrodite, embodying diplomacy and wisdom but also love and beauty. Additionally, Wonder Woman's actual name is Diana, the Roman equivalent of Artemis. Wonder Woman has blended the intelligence, beauty, and physicality of all three goddesses since her introduction in 1941. At her conception, Diana was breaking boundaries as a progressive, strong, and smart superhero, but she was simultaneously submitting to traditional gender roles. She is ambiguous: performing similar heroic functions as Superman or Batman, but negotiating the traditional gender binary and often subject to sexual objectification.⁶⁴ The ebb and flow of Wonder Woman's progressivism largely follow the political inclinations of any given period. The 1940s saw women in the workplace while men were at war, and thus Wonder Woman empowered the goals of first and second-wave feminists. However, with the postwar return of men and their reasserted hegemony, in turn, Wonder Woman became more traditionally domesticated, marrying Steve Trevor and becoming his secretary, thus suppressing her power to promote a culturally acceptable idea of patriarchal femininity.⁶⁵ However, the progressivist reclamation of power returned in the 1960s and continued with additional intersectionality with race, gender, and sexuality alongside the rise

⁶⁴ J. Lenore Wright, "You are a Wonder Woman," in *Wonder Woman and Philosophy: The Amazonian Mystique*, ed. Jacob M. Held (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017): 23.

⁶⁵ Wright, "Wonder Woman," 27-28.

of third-wave feminism in the late 1980s.⁶⁶ Wonder Woman exists in an ambiguous place between intersectional feminism and traditional patriarchy. She is constantly negotiating between these spaces as the contemporary politics of the late twentieth century developed, transitioning from traditional heteronormative femininity to more queer and progressive notions of gender at various times throughout her history. Through Wonder Woman, this insertion of Greek goddesses, who themselves negotiate the boundaries of the essentialist gender binary in antiquity, showcases the inherent ambiguity of using figures from an ancient patriarchal system to comment on the politics and social structures of modernity. However, the use of past symbols legitimizes the commentary and provides a frame of reference for the audience to compare. This legitimization of progressive social commentary to challenge traditional patriarchal norms is one of the most important continuing influences of Artemis and Athena.

The goddesses are useful paradigms for the legitimization of feminist arguments because of their ancient origins, but they are also problematic because of the society in which they developed. Applying patriarchal symbols to fight patriarchy can be a losing battle. They are the embodiment of using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, yet feminists disagree on the effectiveness of such tools. Athena is clearly misogynistic and supportive of the ancient Greek social order. She upholds that civilization. Yet she is one of the most important deities and is a powerful woman who is intelligent, strong, and respected. No other goddess in Greece holds as much authority. It is little wonder why she is attractive as a model of female empowerment in a man's world. On the other hand, Artemis is fiercely independent from the enforced social order. She exists solely for herself, the natural world, and for the justice of those without the resources to protect themselves. She is the woman's goddess in all aspects. She appeals to all intersections of

⁶⁶ Carolyn Cocca, "Negotiating the Third Wave of Feminism in 'Wonder Woman,'" *PS: Political Science and Politics* 47, no. 1 (January 2014): 98.

feminists, but especially appeals to athletes, those who want to reconnect with the earth, and queer identities. These goddesses, despite all of their contradictions and liminalities, are nonetheless invaluable as archetypes for certain feminist ideals. Historic examples and cultural symbols are always instrumental in any sort of societal change. With these models, it is possible to empower ourselves and fulfill our own potential in spite of the social traditions that might expect otherwise. These paradigms pose different definitions of womanhood, just as there is no correct way to be a woman or perform femininity. We must each choose our own path and choose what our identity should be, but together with models from the past and modern philosophies, we continue to progress toward having the ability to reach that potential.

Conclusion

People often ask what the point is in studying history, and especially what the point is in studying classics. Why do we care what happened in the past, why is it relevant? In my opinion, nothing occurs in a vacuum, everything is always influenced by everything else, even things that happened in the very distant past. Situations that happen to us now nearly always have a relevant historical allegory, even if the exact technologies or circumstances might change. Everything has always happened before. It is in this light that we can turn to the past to find advice and opinions about how to move forward, how to move beyond where we are now. Here, we can examine the cruel optimism and bold conviction of Antigone, or Helen's fight against dehumanization, or the different models of performing femininity of Athena and Artemis. By looking to the distant past, we can find a framework for moving toward an imminent future.

Each of these four women, controversial as they may be, has something valuable to teach us about being a woman in a patriarchal world. Antigone became a martyr for what she believed in, providing inspiration for countless minorities fighting against oppression, yet she was still doomed to die before she got to see any positive change. She can provide us with a framework for inclusionary politics, but we should all strive to live to see that better future. On the other hand, Helen of Troy was fated to fail from the start. Demonized and fetishized, she had her agency and humanity stripped from her, yet she fought tooth and nail for her survival and an inkling of dignity. Helen teaches us to fight for our humanity, even when the whole world has turned against us trying to decide for us what we are. As for Athena and Artemis, they provide two very different, yet still completely valid, archetypes for performing femininity. Whether that means success inside the broken system or divorcing yourself from that system entirely is an individual choice, but both allow us to choose our identities and potential paths.

There is no single definition for what it means to be a woman, but we can look to the past for models of behavior that may inspire us in ways that present circumstances do not. Whether considered feminist or not, these women rebel against assigned gender roles and give voice to silenced minorities. They are influential and inspirational, otherwise history would have no interest in preserving them, and we must use everything we can to empower ourselves and advocate for positive change. If the present, while championing its own modern beliefs, can look to the past for inspiration and guidance, only then can we work toward a more enlightened and improved future for everyone.

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