

Sexual Uses of Myth as the Basis for a Male-Dominated Society

Jay Ryan Lawler Jr.

“It is for the man to take care of business outside the house; let no woman make decrees in those matters. Keep inside and do no harm!”

- Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* (200-201): Eteocles speaking

In world history, few societies have distinguished themselves as the ancient Greeks did. This great society was the birthplace of democracy, the site of the first Olympics and the home to many of the world's great minds. When thinking of ancient Greece, one sees the Parthenon, Themistocles' triremes and even men dressed in their chitons passionately debating in the Pnyx; however, certain images seem to be obscured from our memory, though they once formed the basis for a male-dominated society. These images revolve around sexuality. One does not always associate ancient Athens with sophisticated sculptures featuring exaggerated use of hermai, nor does one think of red-figure vases showing images of female self-gratification. In more recent scholarly works, ancient Greek sexuality has come to be associated with not just male-female sexual relations, but also with politics and the everyday lifestyle of Greeks; therefore, this paper will discuss sexuality's importance in the formation of a male-dominated society, primarily by using myths to establish the foundations for male superiority. Classical Greece came to be a society dictated exclusively by man's use of the phallus as a way of securing dominance over the female sex. Thus, this male-dominated society was founded on both violent sexual-based myths and myths involving national heroes' dominance over women, and this mythological ideology served as the basis for gender roles in a truly phallic Athenian society.

When examining this topic, one must account for the evidence at hand. Pieces of evidence, whether vases, paintings or literature, were created by men, for the eyes of men. The numerous pieces display a heavy reliance on the expression of male power over society. In this paper, male's expressions of power will be revealed through mythology containing sexual pursuits and exploitations of women. Along with this, to demonstrate the transfer of myths' message of male domination to society, the exploitation of prostitutes, and a woman's role in the oikos will be discussed as these were clear indications of masculine power of females.

The creation of the first woman must be discussed in order to lay the foundations for man's desires to dominate his fellow sex. Hesiod's works, *Theogony* and *Works and Days* both depict the creation of the first woman, Pandora. “In the *Theogony*, in particular, this first woman is given to humankind as a punishment.”⁴⁹¹ This newly created woman was to be beautiful, which would cause problems for man, as he would need to control his desires and lusts. “Then the gods and mortal men were struck with amazement when they beheld this sheer inescapable snare for men. From her descend the race of women, the feminine sex; from her come the baneful race and types of women” (Hes. *Th.* 588-591). Thus, Hesiod depicted this newly created gender as starting off as inferior to men. Women were described as being greedy, and Hesiod went on to compare them to a plague. “Women, a great plague, make their abodes with mortal men, being ill-suited to poverty's curse but suited to plenty” (Hes. *Th.* 592-593).

⁴⁹¹ Kirk Ormand, *Controlling Desires: Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Wesport: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 27.

Hesiod's *Works and Days* would provide justification for the status given to the female sex, due to Pandora's actions. In this work, Hesiod went further in describing woman's greedy ways. In fact, he portrayed the woman as being a consumer, but not a producer. Pandora opened a lid on a pithos jar, which would have stored food, oil and wine during the months before harvest, thus letting all of the evils out into the world and showing her desire to consume man's work.⁴⁹² Along with her consumptions, this act also exposed woman's lack of self-control in her desires. This depiction then provided justification for future generations of Greek men to subdue their women, as they were thought to be mistrustful from their very creation. Hesiod also portrayed women as sexually unrestrained. He warned his readers from trusting in women: "Let not a woman with buttocks attractively covered deceive you, charmingly pleading and coaxing while she seeks out your barn. He who trusts in women is putting trust in deceivers" (Hes. *WD* 373-375). Although no explicit reference to sex is mentioned, one can infer that Hesiod was aiming to reveal woman's persistent sexual needs and her sexual image when mentioning "buttocks attractively covered." Unlike women, Greek men were held to a higher standard, as they were to be self-restrained, but many scholars such as Brian Sparkes have noted, men often gave in to sexual desires outside of marriage (usually ending in no punishment). Hesiod's *Works and Days* then may have laid the foundation for the lustful, highly sexualized woman. "The image that men projected was that women were thirsty for sex all the time (as indeed for drink) and must be kept under control; they were weak and irresponsible, ever ready to yield to temptation and lacking the self-control that men possessed."⁴⁹³

Given this distinction as being highly sexed, women were often sexually depicted in art. Most notably, women were shown using large olisbos, or ancient dildos to pleasure themselves in the absence of men.⁴⁹⁴ A common theme among various vase paintings of the fifth and fourth centuries involved depicting women as being highly sexed. Often, these vases are focused on a woman's obsession with the phallus, sometimes an exaggerated obsession. For example, many paintings show women making use of numerous olisbos, along with dancing around phalluses of "monumental proportions."⁴⁹⁵ Also portrayed in a graphic manner was the treatment of female prostitutes in brothels. Many are shown performing numerous sexual acts at once, such as fellatio and intercourse, with multiple men at a symposium. In particular, one piece showed the graphic treatment of a female prostitute showed man's crude views towards lower classes of women. The prostitute was shown being lowered onto a phallus by two other men, truly revealing a sense of explicit male domination in the sexual sense.⁴⁹⁶

Now, in his work *Eumenides*, Aeschylus presented evidence of the ultimate male belief, as said by Apollo: "The mother is not parent of her so-called child but only nurse of the new-sown seed" (Aesch. *Eum.* 658-663). Thus, the man is the creator of life, as Zeus would also project in the births of Athena and Dionysus. Furthermore, Apollo continued, stating "The man who puts it there is parent; she merely cultivates the shoot-hosts for a guest-if not god blights" (Aesch. *Eum.* 658-663). Along with this belief, the gods' belief of so-called "pseudo-wombs" were crucial in securing male dominance over women.⁴⁹⁷ Now, we are drawn to Zeus and the births of Athena and Dionysus. "Athena was born, highly symbolically, from her father's head-that is, out of

⁴⁹² Ormand, *Controlling Desires*, 28.

⁴⁹³ Brian Sparkes, "Sex in Classical Athens," in *Greek Civilization: An Introduction*, ed. Brian Sparkes (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 251.

⁴⁹⁴ See figure 15.4 in Sparkes, "Sex in Classical Athens," 259.

⁴⁹⁵ Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 83-84; see figures 72-78.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86; see figure 79.

⁴⁹⁷ Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus*, 41.

patriarchal male fantasy.”⁴⁹⁸ Zeus’ head thus served as a male womb of some sort. Along with this, Dionysus’ birth also revealed that women were only temporary hosts of the fetus. “Zeus impregnates a mortal woman, Semele; when her pregnancy is well advanced, he destroys her with his thunderbolt, removes the fetus from her body, and sews it into his thigh.”⁴⁹⁹ The sexless births of gods served as the basis that a man’s phallus was the creator and giver of life, while women, although the only sex biologically capable of reproduction, were not even considered the parents of their child. Myths similar to Zeus’ prove that the phallus’ importance was at work early in the securing of male domination and creation of influential Greek gods.

Mythology in the Greek world often served as a foundation for the creation of the state, and these myths primarily focused on the successes and trials of so-called heroes. Myths not only explained the creation of the known world, but of the process of men coming to dominate their female counterparts. Some of the first myths to explicitly showcase male domination involve the Amazon warrior-women, and their struggles against great male heroes. The Amazon mythologies contained scenes of triumphant Greeks defeating the strange race of warrior-women; these were crucial to the development of a male-dominated society. Herodotus noted that “ever since then the women of the Sauromatae have followed their ancient ways; they ride out hunting, with their men or without them; they go to war, and dress the same as the men” (Hdt. 4.116). This race of warrior-women uniquely based their society on feminine dominance over men. Herodotus continues, noting “in regard to marriage, it is the custom that no maiden weds until she has killed a man of the enemy” (Hdt. 4.117). This race was in no way similar to ancient Greek women, who were secluded in the household for a majority of their lives. In terms of sexuality, Amazons differed greatly from Greek women in that Greeks were highly regarded for their beauty, with Helen serving as our best example. “Her face is frighteningly like that of an immortal goddess” (Hom. *Il.* 3.154). On the other hand, Amazon women would have seemed disfigured to the ancient Greeks. “They have no right breast; these are removed by their mothers when they are babies, by cauterization with a special bronze instrument, so that all the strength and bulk of the removed breast are directed to the right shoulder and arm.”⁵⁰⁰ Ancient Greek men would have used these Amazon myths to procure their dominance over the world’s best women.

As noted in his work, *Kinship Myth in Ancient Greece*, Lee Patterson argued that myth often served as a sort of political tool, in securing familial or political dominance over one another or for personal gain.⁵⁰¹ Therefore, many prominent Greeks would have based their origins on ancient Greek heroes, such as Herakles, who would have been depicted as being victorious over this group of warrior-women. Heracles’ Labors, primarily his ninth labor concerning the securing of Hippolyta’s girdle, serves as an ideal example of male’s dominance over strong women. “Only the bravest, smartest, and wiliest of Greek heroes can overcome an Amazon-and then only through rape or killing.”⁵⁰² Heracles perfectly fit this description. From these Amazon myths stemmed the belief that women were suspicious characters, and that they should be kept down by men. Most notably, the story of Heracles’ confrontation with the Amazon queen Hippolyta proves male’s dominance over even the most powerful of women. In order to cleanse himself of his shameful past, Heracles “then received a Command to bring back the girdle of Hippolyta the Amazon and

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 40-41.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁰⁰ Mary R. Lefkowitz, *Women in Greek Myth* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 3-4.

⁵⁰¹ For example, in chapter five of his book, Patterson reveals Alexander’s political uses of myth, which he used to surpass his heroic ancestors.

⁵⁰² Kay Retzlaff, *Women of Mythology* (New York: Michael Friedman Publishing, Inc., 1999), 54.

so made the expedition against the Amazons” (Diod. 4.16.1). The powerful queen challenged Herakles to take her girdle, thus prompting him to defeat Hippolyta’s best warriors one-by-one. “Then he joined battle with Prothoê, who, they said had been victorious seven times over the opponents whom she had challenged to battle” (Diod. 4.16.2). Herakles’ flawless defeats of the greatest of women showed that men were superior in every way. Once Herakles’ had defeated all challengers, his confrontation with Hippolyta revealed a female submission to a male’s dominance. “And Heracles, after thus killing the most renowned of the Amazons and forcing the remaining multitude to turn in flight, cut down the greater number of them, so that the race of them was utterly exterminated” (Diod. 4.16.4). This myth showed that women once challenged man’s superiority, only to be easily defeated, thus laying the foundation for a male-dominated society.

Scenes of rape and seduction in mythology also served as a basis for securing male dominance over women. “Unlike goddesses, who struggled to enjoy their pursuits of mortals, gods took their pleasure where they liked, and suffered few emotional traumas as a result; the traumas were for their lovers to cope with.”⁵⁰³ Most prominently, Zeus’s numerous pursuits of women display signs of man’s supremacy over far-less superior females. First, Zeus’ pursuit of Europa, although not violent nor containing rape, shows woman’s inability to restrain herself from sexual pleasures. “So came he into that meadow without affraying those maidens; and they were straightway taken with a desire to come near and touch the lovely ox, whose divine fragrance came so far and outdid even the delightful odor of that breathing meadow” (Moschos *Europa* 89-91). Europa, given her female tendencies prescribed to her through previous myth, could not resist Zeus’s pursuit. “There went he then and stood afore the spotless may Europa, and for to cast his spell upon her began to lick her pretty neck. Whereat she fell to touching and toying, and did wipe gently away the foam that was thick upon his mouth, till at last there went a kiss from a maid unto a bull” (Mosch. *Europa* 91-95). With this, Zeus abducted Europa to her dismay, but she could do nothing to stop it; therefore, due to her feminine weaknesses, Europa was unable to fend off Zeus’s sexual tricks.

Now, a majority of Zeus’ pursuits did involve rape and seduction. Once again, these pursuits all demonstrated male’s domination over the female sex. Zeus has been referred to as the “master rapist,” and his pursuits became a popular topic among Greek anecdotes and literature.⁵⁰⁴ As evident in Europa’s abduction, Zeus tended to rely on tricks to deceive his targeted women, whether he be posing as an animal or even a mortal man. One of Zeus’ mortal pursuits was Semele, which turned out deadly for her. “Semele was loved by Zeus because of her beauty, but since he had his intercourse with her secretly and without speech she thought that the god despised her; consequently she made the request of him that he come to her embraces in the same manner as in his approaches to Hera” (Diod. 4.2.2). Due to her strong jealousy, Hera persuaded Semele to bring Zeus to her in a more god-like way, which would ultimately prove fatal. This hints that mortal women were easily persuaded, once again due to their prescribed weaknesses through previous myths. “Accordingly, Zeus visited her in a way befitting a god, accompanied by thundering and lightning, revealing himself to her as he embraced her; but Semele, who was pregnant and unable to endure the majesty of the divine presence, brought forth the babe untimely and was herself slain by the fir” (Diod. 4.2.3). As mentioned above (note 8), this sequence of events created the opportunity for Zeus’ pseudo-womb (he sewed the fetus into his thigh), which rendered mortal women basically useless; out of this came Dionysus.

⁵⁰³ Richard Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology* (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2004), 97.

⁵⁰⁴ Keuls, *Reign of the Phallus*, 51.

Thus, Semele's fate disclosed woman's primary role in the Greek world, to reproduce. Zeus's pursuits also reveal a simple, yet prominent message: Greek males may do as they please, often times without repercussions. "The head of the household had power over everything and everybody within his family, could have sex with anybody he liked and dictated the sex lives of any under his roof."⁵⁰⁵ Zeus, the king of the Gods, and his dominance over women, undoubtedly laid the foundations for the unabridged power and privilege of Greek men.

Lastly, the story of Tereus should be examined to further this discussion on male's use of myth in justifying his superiority and solidifying the roles of Greek women. This story presented multiple justifications for which Greek men to base their superiority. Tereus ruled over the Thracians, and acting as mediator in a boundary dispute for the Pandion, king of Athens, married Procne, Pandion's daughter, who bore him a son, Itys.⁵⁰⁶ However, Tereus' story would come to reveal the strength of a woman's beauty, and her persuasive ways, which Hesiod once warned against. Once again, this story would justify man's need to subdue his female counterpart, due to her persuasive and consuming ways. "Unfortunately Tereus, enchanted by the voice of Procne's younger sister Philomela, had fallen in love with her."⁵⁰⁷ As mentioned previously, married men were able to do as they wanted sexually, without punishment. Given this, Tereus pursued his target. Tereus would then be forced to take drastic action, in order to ward off Procne, who had been proposed to be dead by Tereus, in pursuit of her captive sister. "Afterwards he married Philomela and bedded with her, and cut out her tongue" (Apollod. 3.14.8). However, this action did not stop Philomela from communicating with her sister, Procne, as she would portray her distress in a weaving.

Now, Procne's next actions brought up another important justification for man's subduing of women. "And having sought out her sister, Procne killed her son Itys, boiled him, served him up for supper to the unwitting Tereus, and fled with her sister in haste" (Apollod. 3.14.8). Therefore, Apollodorus' message conveyed that women were prone to acts of rage, which validated man's need to control female tendencies through his domination. "And being overtaken at Daulia in Phocis, they prayed the gods to be turned into birds, and Procne became a nightingale, and Philomela a swallow. And Tereus also was changed into a bird and became a hoopoe" (Apollod. 3.14.8). Tereus' transformation into a hoopoe thus represents him being a foolish man, for giving into the temptations of women. This then serves as a warning for men, to beware the temptation of persuasive women.

The world of ancient Greece has been extensively studied for many years, and it is often marked by its sharp distinction between man and woman. Throughout this paper, the uses of myth to secure male domination in society have been discussed. In doing so, numerous ancient sources have been used, all produced by men for men, as women had little to do with the arts and literature. This paper sheds light on the fact that myth had many uses in ancient Greece. From simple enjoyment to establishing kinship ties, myth serves as a means of providing evidence for an argument; in this case, providing evidence that men were to dictate their lesser counterparts, women. Noted from the beginning of this paper, using Aeschylus' work to highlight the traditional view towards the female sex, women simply had no place but the oikos. Beginning with the creation of the first woman, Pandora, women were to be mistrusted, as they were considered a punishment and act of revenge by almighty Zeus. Throughout Greece, women, although the only

⁵⁰⁵ Sparkes, "Sex in Classical Athens", 251.

⁵⁰⁶ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths: Volume One* (Aylesbury, UK: Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd., 1960), 165-166; see also Apollod. 3.14.8.

⁵⁰⁷ Graves, *Greek Myths*, 166; see also Apollod. 3.14.8.

sex capable of reproduction, were not deemed a parent of their child, but rather only a transient host of some sort. In Greek myth, national heroes were at work, often showing their successes and triumphs; specifically, these heroes proved to overcome even the best women in the case of the Amazon women-warriors. While female goddesses struggled with their pursuits of mortal beings, gods simply left emotions aside, pursuing their own sexual desires. Primarily revolving around Zeus' exploits, his stories revealed man's pursuit and seduction of women, ending in the birth of powerful sons and daughters. Tereus' story revealed the temptation of women, while also showing their possible fits of rage and anger. Overall, examining Greek myth leads to the discovery of a foundation of male-dictated values, which would come to rule and define society.