

CHAPTER 4

THE GREAT GODDESS AND THE GODDESSES: THE DIVINE WOMAN IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY

MAIN POINTS

1. Feminist scholars and archaeologists have demonstrated that from the Paleolithic through the Bronze Age there is evidence of Goddess worship.
2. The fact that Goddess worship was widespread in early Mediterranean and European societies does not indicate that the human societies were matriarchal.
3. The Great Goddess occurs in myth systems worldwide. Greek myths: Gaea and Demeter; Roman myths: Ceres and Terra Mater; Egyptian myths: Isis; Sumerian myths: Inanna; Babylonian myths: Ishtar; Norse myths: Nerthus.
4. Before the male's role in procreation was understood, the creative powers of the female were attributes of the Great Goddess, who is associated with three functions—as the source of life, of death, and of rebirth.
5. The Great Goddess's triple nature is repeated in the patterns of heaven-earth-Underworld and maiden-mother-old woman.
6. When agriculture was developed, the Goddess was identified as a grain or earth goddess, responsible for the annual agricultural cycle.
7. One of the Goddess's symbols is the serpent, associated with the Underworld and with rebirth through the shedding of its skin. A related symbol is the World Tree, often depicted with a serpent twined around the trunk.
8. The moon appears, swells from crescent-shaped to full, disappears for several nights, and then reappears. In many myth systems, a moon goddess who mourns for a dead lover or child descends to try to reclaim the lost (or for some other purpose) and then returns to the upper world. The lunar symbol links life, death, and rebirth and associates the physical and spiritual worlds over which the Goddess presides.
9. The vessel in its various forms (jar, vase, chalice, grail, even cave), containing the secrets and waters of life, also often symbolizes the Goddess. The cow, sow, and birds may also function as Goddess symbols.
10. The division of the three aspects of the Goddess into separate functions may in part reflect the invasion of Europe by martial, patriarchal Indo-European cultures worshiping sky gods. The Goddess is absorbed into forms not threatening to the sky gods, such as virgin-wife-mistress.
11. Patriarchy creates a new archetype, the hero, focusing on individual achievements that are linear and perpetuate the hero's reputation through time. Thus death becomes terrible as well as final, and the hero's aim is now to achieve immortality and to resist accepting the cycle of life, death, and rebirth.
12. To justify, confirm, and retain its own power, patriarchy often transforms the positive attributes of the Great Goddess into negative attributes. Example: the snake (representing renewal of life) becomes a dragon, with whom the hero must fight. Zeus's battle with the dragon Typhoeus represents the young god's battle with the World Serpent, who is the archetype of female power, knowledge, and regeneration.
13. The most powerful manifestation of the Great Goddess in Greek myth is Gaea, the parthenogenetic source of the universe. Hesiod's Theogony moves the cosmos toward concentration of power in the male when, in the second generation, Gaea compromises with (or yields to) the masculine principle by reproducing sexually.
14. The castration and overthrow of Uranus may represent the ritual motif of sparagmos—dismemberment and eating of the sacrificial victim to ensure new life. Since the form of

violence involved in Hesiod's story is castration, the reference may be more ritually specific: to rites in which the male deity or consort is dismembered and consumed. Although the violence against Uranus may be interpreted as an instance of frightening Oedipal envy, from a feminine viewpoint it effectively perpetuates the power of the Goddess and of life.

NOTE: Battles between sky gods and world serpents are frequent mythic themes; in addition to Zeus's battle with Typhoeus, Greek tradition contains the stories of Apollo and the dragon Python (see Chapter 7) and Cadmus and the dragon (see Chapter 13). A parallel in Sumerian tradition is the battle between Marduk and the creator-goddess Tiamat; a Scandinavian parallel is the battle between Thor and the Midgaard worm, the World Serpent of the Norse myths. (Thor does not succeed in slaying the worm, however, until the final days of the world, the Ragnarok; seconds after killing the worm, he perishes from his wounds.) Another famous battle between hero and snake is told by the British tradition where Beowulf slays not only a female monster (Grendel's mother) but also a treasure-guarding dragon and by the Norse tradition where Sigurd slays the treasure-guarding, and virgin-guarding, serpent Fafnir. The theme of the hero slaying the dragon remains strong in Western culture, where it not only is familiar through the medieval image of St. George and the dragon but also persists in films and literature of today: from Moby Dick (updated in the shape of the shark in Jaws) to the alien mother-monster in Aliens 2 (slain by a female hero for a change).

15. Greek myth transforms the Great Goddess in her death-wielding aspect into an old hag, such as the Gorgon, or into a witch, such as Hecate. The maid and mother aspects of the feminine triad are reinvented in forms subordinate to Zeus: Athene, Hera, and Aphrodite.
16. Fear of the paralyzing or castrating goddess is reflected in the myths, as Ares is trapped and sexually humiliated by Aphrodite's jealous husband, and as heroes such as Heracles and Jason continue to feel trapped whenever they enter into relationships with women.

NOTE: Under the auspices of the patriarchy, powerful goddesses were often reinterpreted through the myth of the castrating goddess. The image of the spider-woman who traps her prey in her web persists in our own time in myriad incarnations of beautiful-but-dangerous temptresses. In the film *Fatal Attraction* (1987), for example, a happily married man has a fling with Alex, a sexually obsessed woman who will not accept her lover's rejection and resolves to destroy his life.

17. Although in Greek myth Hera is always aware of Zeus's superior power, she never submits comfortably to his direction. She is contentious and often opposes him, perhaps reflecting her own origin as a powerful, pre-Olympian deity—a representative of the Great Goddess.
18. Hera's position mythologically is complex and paradoxical: as goddess of lawful marriage and legitimate childbirth, she charts her own subordination.
19. The paradox of the Great Goddess's importation into the patriarchy and subordination to her "husband" Zeus is revealed in the persecution of Io—priestess of Hera whom Zeus has hidden in cow form—by Hera, herself called "ox-eyed."
20. Athene represents the wisdom aspect of the Great Goddess; because of her birth from the head of Zeus, she combines the male archetype with the domestic bonds of the female.
21. Athene's female aspect is represented by her association with childbirth and her role as goddess of weaving, as well as by the serpent coiled behind the shield of Zeus she bears.

NOTE: The ambivalence of the Greeks toward such a powerful female is revealed in one story that associates Athene with the spider-woman. Challenged by Arachne to a

weaving contest, which Athene loses, she turns her human rival into a spider, thenceforth called arachnids.

22. Aphrodite, as an embodiment of sexual attraction and love, was initially a powerful creative force, but under the patriarchy of the Greek myth she is transformed to a lesser figure of a flirt or a mistress.
23. Despite her youthful appearance, Aphrodite is a very ancient deity who participates in various archetypes: rising out of the sea, she is associated with the waters of life; her relationship with Ares signifies her dual role as goddess of love and war. Similar to other goddess-consort relationships (Isis and Osiris, Ishtar and Tammuz), Aphrodite's love for Adonis involves resurrection through love.

NOTE: The theme of the Goddess going all the way to the Underworld to search for her dead lover in order to bring him back is widespread in the ancient world. Although she does not go to the Underworld, Isis searches all over Egypt to find her dead husband, Osiris. Ishtar, powerful as she is, is only partially successful in buying her dead young lover, Tammuz, back from the land of the dead. Inanna goes to rescue her lover, Dumuzi. Demeter's search for Persephone is of course a related theme, although there is an important difference: Demeter is looking for her daughter, in effect her alter ego, not her lover. A Greek variation of the theme places the male in the role of the searcher going to the Underworld: Orpheus searches for his dead wife, Eurydice, in the land of the dead and almost manages to bring her back (see Chapters 8 and 9). The mythic theme is known in other cultures as well: among the Native American Modocs of the Pacific Coast, the culture hero Kumokum travels to the land of the dead to fetch back his beloved daughter but fails like Orpheus, and in an African myth, a young hero goes to the Underworld to free the young girl Wanjiru, who was sacrificed by her family. Of all these stories, only the story of Wanjiru has a completely successful ending: Wanjiru is saved, she and the warrior get married, and her family is ashamed for having sacrificed her.

24. Interactions of the beautiful Aphrodite with humans and divinities sometimes have tragic results. Example: She bribes Paris to choose her as "the fairest" of the goddesses and pays him with Helen, another man's wife. The result is the Trojan War. The paradox of beauty and danger in combination in one character may represent the Great Goddess's functions as bringer of life and dealer of death. It may also reflect feelings about the complexity of the human female.
25. Aphrodite's affairs sometimes cause grief to herself as well. Example: she loves Adonis, who is kept by Persephone in the Underworld and released annually to spend time with Aphrodite, much like Persephone herself. But Adonis is killed while hunting by Aphrodite's jealous lover, Ares, disguised as a boar. Adonis is transformed into the anemone, a flower that reemerges each spring. Like his Near Eastern counterparts Tammuz and Osiris, Adonis was the subject of a popular cult.
26. Artemis, one of the virgin goddesses, is also a deity of paradox. She is beautiful, but she also has a frightening power that springs from her independence. Perceiving any threat to her virginity, she defends her personal boundaries ferociously. Example: When Actaeon spies on her, she turns him into a stag to be devoured by his own hunting hounds—another example of the sparagmos motif.
27. Artemis inherits the chthonic (earth-related) aspect of the Goddess, being associated with the moon and Hecate. She is the guardian of women's mysteries and as guardian of wild animals, represents the power of instinct.
28. Hesiod attributes many varied powers to Hecate—in fact, the powers of all the gods—and he calls her the deity most honored by Zeus. For some reason, though, over time her connections to the Underworld have associated her with the dark, danger, and fear. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter announces that due to her active support of the two

- goddesses in their sorrow, she would thereafter always be the companion of Persephone, Queen of the Underworld.
29. Hecate is connected to the Underworld and has powers of earth and sea. She has come to represent the death-giving aspect of the Goddess and has become associated with fear. She is identified as a witch or an older woman.
 30. The triad of Persephone, Demeter, and Hecate represents the three phases of a woman's life—maiden, matron, and crone. The phases of the moon—waxing, full, waning—are also associated with women's life phases and menstrual cycles.
 31. Demeter has all the functions of the Great Goddess except the capacity for parthenogenesis: Zeus is Persephone's father.
 32. As a nature myth, the story of Persephone represents the seed, planted underground and sprouting in the spring.
 33. As an etiological myth, the story explains why there are seasons.
 34. As a charter myth, the story sets up social practices, from the Eleusinian Mysteries and male-initiated marriage to the setting of a place at the table in honor of Demeter.
 35. The Eleusinian Mysteries were a nine-day event celebrated each September and October in Eleusis outside of Athens. Not much information is available about them because of their nature as a mystery religion for initiates. Rituals may have included a hieros gamos (sacred marriage) and an epiphany of the Goddess showing a seed of grain symbolizing rebirth. Participants in the mysteries were promised joy in the afterlife.
 36. The ritual may have incorporated elements from the worship of Dionysus during his festival, since he and Demeter/Persephone share some attributes.
 37. The Thesmophoria was a sowing ritual, practiced by women only, that involved placing sacrificed pigs in a gully with snakes, pine cones, and cakes in phallic shapes. After three days, women would descend into the pit and retrieve the material, which would then be mixed with seeds for next year's crop.
 38. The myth reconciles the Goddess with the patriarchy through the mediation of Zeus, who arranges the compromise between Hades and Demeter for sharing Persephone.
 39. The Persephone myth also reconciles the Great Goddess with patriarchy through the institution of marriage. Persephone's marriage is presented as legal rape and brings about her symbolic death and descent to the Underworld.
 40. Demeter embodies the triple aspect of the Goddess as mother, grain goddess, and goddess of the mysteries, as well as mother (Demeter), the maiden (Persephone), and the older woman (Hecate). Persephone has a triple aspect symbolized by Athene, Artemis (both of whom are with her in the fields prior to her kidnapping), and Persephone herself.
 41. The Persephone myth upholds female values: self-fulfillment in terms of continuity of the generations and the bond between mother and daughter, as opposed to the masculine archetypal experience of individuality and hostility between father and son.
 42. The Persephone myth presents the female principle as a source of agriculture through Demeter's teaching the secrets of life to Triptolemus.
 43. According to one myth, civilization owed its start to Demeter rather than to Prometheus; Prometheus's gift of fire (and thus civilization, including weapons) makes humans more independent of the gods but also creates antagonism between the two realms; Demeter's gift emphasizes bonding, reconciliation, and continuance.
 44. The Persephone myth explores the psychology of the individual woman's life cycles, both as mother and as daughter.

45. Persephone matures sexually and marries; the pomegranate symbolizes sexual experience but may also be an emblem of menstruation. Persephone eating the pomegranate may be compared to Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.
46. The Homeric Hymn to Demeter, probably dating from the seventh century B.C., tells about the abduction of Persephone; it also tells the story of Demeter's caring for the child Demophon and her attempt to make him immortal.
47. The story of Demophon serves as a charter myth for the mystery and models a way of achieving immortality through communion with Demeter.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Homeric Hymn to Demeter

key names of mythological characters mentioned:

(Reflecting the theme of this chapter, the male gods are identified below in terms of their relation to the goddesses, to break the patriarchal pattern of identifying the goddesses in relation to the male gods.)

Gaea, the parthenogenic earth goddess

Uranus, her son and spouse

Zeus, Hera's husband and Demeter's brother

Typhoeus, Gaea's offspring, a monster slain by Zeus

The Gorgons, three sister witches; best known is Medusa

Hecate, the death-giving aspect of the Goddess

Athene

Hera

Aphrodite

Demeter

Persephone (Kore)

Dionysus, the son of Semele

Hades, Persephone's husband

Artemis

Triptolemus, the holy child and first farmer of the Eleusinian myth

Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans

Adonis, Aphrodite's lover

Demophon, the child in Demeter's care

Actaeon, who is turned into a stag by Artemis and mutilated by his own hounds