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COUTURE APHRODITE: AN EXPLORATION OF FEMININITY IN ADAPTATION FROM CLASSICAL GREEK MYTHS TO MODERN RETELLINGS

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ABSTRACT

Myths and storytelling have long been a major contributing factor in the establishment of culture within societies. In turn, these cultures shape attitudes and behaviors that define how certain groups are treated within that culture. The Greek mythological tradition was a major factor in the attitude towards and treatment of women in Ancient Greece. This paper seeks to examine one source of that attitude, the myths, and analyze the connection between myth making and cultural identity. What factors in Ancient Greek society led to the creation of these stories and in turn, how do those stories affect the culture as a whole? I will trace the evolution of these stories throughout history, from its ancient roots to the present. This analysis will include the myths in their earliest forms, extending to the use of their established tropes and viewpoints in later works. As such, analysis of modern adaptations of mythological stories will also be done. The tracking of this evolution seeks to understand how media and mythological portrayals of femininity affect cultural attitudes towards women. The research for this project will be accomplished using a variety of viewpoints, analyzing both the historical context and the myths themselves. The historical analysis will provide real world applications to the portrayals of women and femininity within the myths.

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Thank you to my family who always support my endeavors and allow me to explore and express my most authentic self. Thank you to my mom Princess, my aunt Joyce, and my little sister Aliyah, who all inspired me to explore a literature not bound by the patriarchy. Your strength is admired.

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COUTURE APHRODITE: AN EXPLORATION OF FEMININITY IN ADAPTATION FROM CLASSICAL GREEK MYTHS TO MODERN RETELLINGS

The prevalence and importance of the mythos as source of worldly explanation goes back to the earliest human civilizations. For thousands of years, people relied on stories of gods, monsters, and heroes to explain the workings of the world. These characters were used to describe natural phenomena, craft histories of important events, and shape culture. The Greek mythological tradition is one of the most enduring pantheons, with a rich tapestry of figures that have influenced many civilizations from the Minoans to the Romans and even the modern world.

The history of the interpretation of mythology begins with the literalness of belief in the ancient world. The Greeks truly believed in their gods and thought them to be present in their everyday lives. The importance of these divinities was clear in their participation in the lives of their followers, from the building of grand temples and worship places, to the sacrifices and prayers offered them at the altar, and the festivals and feasts held in their honor. Not only were these rituals the basis for religion and culture in ancient Greece, but they were also the basis of knowledge. In his introduction to the book, *Approaches to Greek Myth,* Harvard emeritus professor of Classics Lowell Edmunds states:

> "the so-called myth-ritual theory has had a longer life than any other…in its original form, the theory held that all myths originate from rituals, and in its most recent form, the one given it by Walter Burkert, it has been revised in terms of basic biological and sociobiological 'programs of action,' such as those governing maturation and initiation into society, that determine certain widespread narrative types." (Edmunds 15).

The impact of mythology as tool for statecraft cannot be understated. Lives are molded by language, and the rituals practiced from the language of myth, those stories of gods, monsters,

and men influence the culture. That "sociobiological" drive Edmunds alludes to include the manners in which people treated each other. Myth as daily performance speaks to its power, beginning in "childhood with the stories told by nurses and mothers. It continued in everyday life…it served as what we could call historical precedent in speeches. Before there was scientific geography, it served as way to locates oneself in space, as in the example of Phaedrus…but also in the historians." (Edmunds 15). The daily impact of the language of mythology blanketed the culture in its ideals.

The pantheon necessitated a performance from its followers. One such performance was between man and woman. How does the pantheon exert its force to create relationships? How does interpretation of the language of myth design and shape those sociobiological "programs of action"? Most importantly, how were these myths received in their contemporary periods and in their modern retellings? The performance these myths have necessitated have evolved over time, but one of the most lasting is its dictate on intergender relations. The way mythology portrays women has moved from the reigning patriarchal performance to one that centers women as the stars of their own production. The transition of the language of mythology is emblematic of the shift in cultural values. All the world's a stage; culture is the director and mythology is the script. As such, our actors put on a performance worthy of the times. Both the gods and the mortals featured in the original and retold myths embody the rise of feminist poetics in the Classics. Aphrodite, goddess of love, the witch Medea, and the schemer Clytemnestra, all portray the different ways in which female performance has evolved in mythmaking. Zeus, king of the gods, also plays a part in the performance as the eternal antagonist. His patriarchal contributions are essential to the evolution of a literary and mythological culture moving away from the aggressive power his masculinity represents.

Hesiod's *Theogony* begins the language of myth. The *Theogony* tells the story of the Olympian victories over Kronos and the Titans. It also outlines the origins and genealogies of the gods. The *Theogony* establishes a cyclical, patriarchal language beginning with its introduction of the primordials, predecessors of the Titans. Hesiod writes of the Hekatonchires, "Cottos, Briareos, and Gyges, outrageous children…Grotesque, and fifty heads grew on each stumpy neck. These monsters exuded irresistible strength…And from the start their father feared and loathed them." (Hesiod, lines 150-155). Immediately, the mythology establishes patrilineal animosity from Ouranos, the sky, to his children. It gets worse when Kronos, father of Zeus, who wields the scythe his mother Gaia provides, "with his right he swung/The fiendishly long and jagged sickle, pruning the genitals/Of his own father [Ouranos] with one swoop and tossing them/Behind him, where they fell to no small effect." (Hesiod, lines 180-183). Ouranos' castration represents the start of a patricidal tradition. With it, Kronos takes supreme position as king. According to Hesiod, "later, Kronos forced himself upon Rheia,/ And she gave birth to a splendid brood…and finally/Zeus, a wise god, our Father in heaven/Under whose thunder the wide world trembles." (Hesiod, lines 456-462). Kronos proceeds to swallow his children with the exception of Zeus, who Rheia rescues, instead handing Kronos a rock to swallow. From there, "Vast Earth received [Zeus] when he was born/To be nursed and brought up in the wide land of Crete." (Hesiod, lines 483-484). Zeus grows up and frees his siblings from the stomach of his father, initiating rebellion as vengeance for Kronos' acts. The Titanomachy begins. After ten years of war, "There [Tartarus] the Titans are concealed in the misty gloom/By the will of Zeus who gathers the clouds" (Hesiod, lines 734-735). The Titans, predecessors of the Olympians, are usurped.

From Ouranos to Zeus, Hesiod details a heavenly hierarchy characterized by the usurpation of the father by the son. It is always a violent act that leads to the progression of the story. The language of myth could not be clearer: patriarchal power is never given; it is seized. This power is cyclical, stagnant, and ultimately replays a violence that results in the destruction of those who held power before. Moreover, patriarchal power cannot reproduce without the help of the women. The treatment of the goddesses under the rule of Ouranos and Kronos is horrific. Ouranos imprisons the first generation of his children, angering Gaia. After all, those are her children too. Kronos swallows his children out of fear after forcing himself on Rheia. In response, she deceives him and saves Zeus. Mythology progresses through the reactions of the goddesses, fighting against the tyrannical power of their husbands. They initiate the age of the Titans and the age of the Olympians. Through the goddesses, the story continues. Further, it is prophesied that a son between Zeus and Metis would produce an heir, "a son with an arrogant heart/Who would one day be king of gods and men." (Hesiod, lines 902-903). Learning from his predecessors, Zeus refuses to bear any more children with Metis after siring Athena. However, this does not stop Zeus from sleeping around the pantheon.

Hesiod depicts Zeus' carnal exploits with surprising straightforwardness. He describes Zeus' coupling with Leto as "mingling in love with Zeus Aegisholder." (Hesiod, line 925). Zeus' infidelity to Hera led her to pursue and torment Leto, cursing her to be unable to give birth anywhere on earth. For this, Zeus suffers no consequence. Zeus again "mingles in love" with Semele, whom he kills after she asks him to reveal his true form. For this, Zeus suffers no consequence. Zeus again "mingles in love" with Alcmene, mother of Herakles, after he disguises himself as her husband, Amphitryon, and rapes her. The language of the mythology excuses Zeus, even going so far as to assert that these women were fully consensual partners. "Mingles in

love" connotes a joyous pairing, when we know from many other sources that Zeus' conjugal activities were usually unwelcome. In so many of these stories, the patriarchal ideals of the time are put on the spotlight. Zeus is never punished for his actions. The pain and suffering he causes does not affect him at all and he just continues to hunt for his next victim. The portrayal of women in the *Theogony*, these goddesses defiled by Zeus, depicts submissive, demure women who are more than happy to let Zeus do what he wants with them. The last section of the poem, entitled "Goddesses and Heroes", continues this treatment of women as plaything, as servant to men. All the goddesses mentioned are only mentioned in the sense that they continue a male lineage by bearing their mortal lover's sons. Goddesses are not given due respect for the wonders they provide as masters of what they are goddesses of. In contrast, Zeus is given many epithets, "Zeus Aegisholder", "Father of gods and men", "the Storm King", and so many more. "Goddesses and Heroes" begins, "Now sing of the goddesses/who slept with mortal men/ And immortal themselves bore children like gods." (Hesiod, lines 972-975). Again, the emphasis is laid on the mortal men and the children bore them by the goddesses. The poem ends similarly, "Now sing of the women, Olympian Muses,/Word-sweet daughters of Zeus Aegisholder…" (Hesiod, lines 1029-1030). There is no further explanation of the exploits of the women or the goddesses. Throughout the entire poem, goddesses and women are accessories to the exploits of Zeus. They are not there to be characters in their own right, but only placed in relation to Zeus. This narrative framing of the myth encourages patriarchy. It minimizes the role of women in progressing the story and reduces them to background setting. Zeus, in so many pieces of media, is portrayed as a benevolent hero, savior of Olympus, greatest of the gods. In reality, his womanizing self-aggrandizement places him as one of the greatest antagonists in Greek mythology. He epitomizes the cultural norm of male privilege and abuse of power.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* depicts the goddess Aphrodite with a high amount of scorn. As the goddess of love, Aphrodite was responsible for all sorts of events that involved matters of the heart. Most important is the story of her own desire. The first fact of note is that Zeus was afraid that Aphrodite's beauty would cause a war between the gods for the right to marry her. As such, Zeus decrees that Aphrodite was to be wed to the god of fire and blacksmiths, Hephaestus. Aphrodite is forced into an arranged marriage, a loveless match. In no story does Aphrodite ever return Hephaestus' affections towards her, no matter what he does. Zeus' order to marry Aphrodite and Hephaestus shows the paradox of femininity. To Zeus, and really to all the gods, she is both threat and plaything. Zeus, as her father, can do with her as he pleases, and he exerts that power because he is threatened by her beauty. And even though that beauty is Aphrodite's greatest asset, it also leads to her own desires being ignored. The depiction of Aphrodite's affairs with Ares are depicted with startling difference in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Homer's *Odyssey.* Ovid shames Aphrodite, stating, "the Sun informed the husband/of the goddess, shedding light/on the very couch where two had sinned together!" (4.237-239). The word "sinned" here highlights the immense shame that Ovid depicts Ares and Aphrodite with. His version does not describe the tumultuous, loveless union between Aphrodite and Hephaestus. Ovid goes on to describe Hephaestus "[sending for] the other gods/inside to see the lovers where they lay/trapped in each other's arms most shamefully!" (4.253-256). Ovid makes Ares and Aphrodite out to be most horrible here, casting all the blame on Aphrodite. Hephaestus' jealousy, and his subsequent punishment of his wife, are seen as valid and justified.

Homer makes greater use of the goddess in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. His portrayal of Aphrodite is nuanced and fair, giving the goddess the means to show the complexity of female agency. Book eight of the *Odyssey* also outlines Aphrodite and Ares' amorous affair. Apollo tells

Hephaestus and he gets to work on his trap. Homer notes, "[Hephaestus] was so angry/at Ares" (8.274-275). This detail is incredibly important because it is a shifting of the language, and therefore the blame. He does not lay explicit blame on Aphrodite, instead acknowledging that Ares has a part in this as well. Furthermore, Homer emphasizes Aphrodite's free will in his version. He states that "[Aphrodite] was excited to lie down with him;" (4.295). Ovid fails to mention Aphrodite's emotions at all, and this acknowledgement gives meaningful context and power back to the goddess. It means that she gets her wishes followed instead of being a slave to the whims of the male gods. Yes, the shaming of Ares and Aphrodite still takes place in the *Odyssey*, with the gods "burst out laughing/at what a clever trap Hephaestus set." (4.326-327). However, the gods are quick to recognize that it is Ares who "owes/the price for his adultery" (4.332-333). At the song's conclusion, "Aphrodite/smiled as she went to Cyprus, to the island/of Paphos, where she had a fragrant altar and sanctuary." (4.361-364). In contrast to Ovid, Aphrodite's affair in the *Odyssey* ends with the successful execution of her will. Aphrodite was forced into a loveless marriage with Hephaestus, whom she despised. In Ancient Greece, women were not allowed to initiate divorce, so Aphrodite remained stuck. The only way she could express her desire was through her affair with Ares, who the poem clearly states she loved. Aphrodite's match with Ares makes a lot of sense as love and war are often intertwined. Her rebellion against those who would suppress her desire is an explicit message for her followers. It is a strictly feminist viewpoint to fight against the patriarchy and stand for yourself. Aphrodite rejected the transactional power of Zeus and Hephaestus, opting instead to follow her own desires with Ares.

The witch Medea, daughter of King Aeetes and granddaughter of the Sun, was long vilified for her actions against the hero Jason. Medea's story is the heart of patriarchy's keen

weapon against the woman: jealous or crazy or both? Euripides' *Medea* offers a sophisticated take on its eponymous character, a rarity given that Medea is both a woman and a foreigner. Medea's vengeance upon Jason is posited as both heinous and understandable. Medea's opening speech outlines the horrors that women are put through, detailing the extreme measures she is driven to due to her circumstances. Medea laments, "of all creatures that have life and reason, we women are the sorriest lot" (Euripides, lines 229-230). She goes on to list the burdens that come with womanhood: the dowry to buy a husband, the fear of whether he will be a good man, threats of violence, dealing with infidelity. Medea has been betrayed by her husband, who casts her aside in pursuit of a "local", "suitable" bride from Greece. This betrayal is the crux of the play, the motivation behind the acts she commits. Anne Burnett, in her essay "Medea and the Tragedy of Revenge", states that: "in neither of these realms, the personal or the general, is it simply the misdemeanor of sexual infidelity that Medea would avenge." (Burnett 14). For the Greeks, a marriage pact is one of the most serious oaths. For them, an oath is not merely something you can renege on. It is a promise to be fulfilled by any means necessary. Therefore, "it was not just the negative act of adultery that violated Jason's oaths, it was his positive substitution of a new pact for the old, and it is this that is seen as his essential crime." (Burnett 14). The dance between Medea and Jason exemplifies the power of the patriarchy to gaslight and manipulate, especially in the face of a threatening woman. Medea recounts:

> "this is the worst charge I have to say against your total lack of manliness… I saved your skin, as all the Greeks know who boarded the Argo with you, when you were sent to master the fire-breathing bulls with yokes and to sow the deadly field; and the dragon which guarded the golden fleece and, never sleeping, protected it with its many coils, I

> killed it and held up the light of safety for you. As for me, after betraying my father and my home I came to Iolcus near Pelion." (Euripides, lines 464-483)

This speech recounts the suffering and sacrifice Medea endured to aid and be with Jason. The play does not spend much time with Jason and Medea's turbulent beginning to their relationship, beginning instead with Jason's betrayal. This speech serves as a reminder to Jason how much a woman suffers just to be at the mercy of a man in marriage. These trials are metaphors for the trials they endure. Jason begins to gaslight her in his retort: "I think that Kypris, god of love, was the savior of my expedition, and she was the only one of gods or men." (Euripides, lines 526-527). Like Zeus, Jason refuses to take accountability for his actions. Medea essentially asks him to validate her part in his successes, yet he refuses to give her credit. He continues, "First you make your home in Greece instead of an alien land and you experience justice and the rule of law, not merely brute force. All the Greeks are aware that you are a wise woman, and you have fame. If you still lived at the ends of the earth, no one would know your story" (Euripides, lines 535-540). Jason condescends to Medea and tells her that she is a nobody without him. The vengeance of Medea is ignited because of Jason's constant mistreatment. He ends by saying, "There should be some other way for men to produce children. Women would not have to exist at all. And then humanity would be saved a lot of trouble." (Euripides, lines 572-574). Jason is explicit with his misogyny. All these serve to help an audience reckon and identify with Medea's actions. Euripides never defends Medea, he simply presents her as a real woman with complex emotions, motivations, and actions.

Clytemnestra's story bears a sad similarity to Medea. Both women are driven to heinous acts due to their mistreatment at the hands of their husbands. Both stories give rise to early feminist icons that represent rebellion against the patriarchy and show the oppression of women.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* paints the consequences of a power-mad king and his scorned wife. *Agamemnon* characterizes Clytemnestra as a malevolent schemer. The chorus, which here represents the people of the polis, onlookers to the action. They seem to despise Clytemnestra and question her femininity constantly. Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon* is shrewd, decisive, and aggressive in her actions, all qualities that the language of myth has so far denounced in a woman, as in Medea. Clytemnestra states, "That is my boast, teeming with the truth./I am proud, a woman of my nobility/I'd hurl it from the roofs!" (Aeschylus, lines 609-611). In response to her declaration to the Herald, the chorus' leader warns that "she speaks well, but it takes no seer to know/she only says what's right." (lines 612-613). Here, Clytemnestra is treated condescendingly and unseriously. Her status as queen is questioned and her declarations are seen as lies. The leader also tells her that her speech is "Spoken like a man, my lady, loyal, /full of self-command. I've heard your sign/and now your vision." (lines 355-357). Again, Clytemnestra is compared to a man. While this can be read as Clytemnestra's subversion of gender roles, the chorus' criticisms seem spiteful in nature. They call her a man not to praise her leadership or cunning, but to rebuke them. It is these same subversions of gender norms that allows for her to carry out her revenge. Clytemnestra succeeds in making Agamemnon step on the cloths as he is welcomed home because Agamemnon does not want to seem womanly. In the same way Clytemnestra is mocked for her "self-command", so too must Agamemnon display that quality. Instead, he states that "only the gods deserve the pomps of honor/and the stiff brocades of fame/To walk on them/I am human, and it makes my pulses stir/with dread." (lines 915-918). Because of this, Clytemnestra taunts her husband, and his pride forces him to acquiesce to her demand. He steps on the cloths. The language of myth dictates certain actions and attitudes during intergender communication. As the man, Agamemnon had to convey strength. Not

stepping on the cloths would have presented him as weak. Clytemnestra asks, "Perhaps, but where's the glory without a little gall?" (line 934). At the same point in the play, Anne Carson's translation of *Agamemnon* has Agamemnon retort, "You're like a bulldog. It's not very feminine." (line 633). Clytemnestra plays into these gender roles to initiate her plan.

A new telling of Clytemnestra's story allows for a clearer look into her mind, told in the first person. Jennifer Saint's *Elektra* recounts the *Agamemnon* from the perspective of Clytemnestra and updates the language of myth. Firstly, Clytemnestra is centered in this telling. She is embraced for her complexity and depth. Unlike Aeschylus' version, which emphasizes a "man-like" Clytemnestra who is a bad wife, Saint's version does away with this completely. Nowhere is Clytemnestra compared to a man; all her power and cunning is strictly feminine. Furthermore, the first-person perspective allows for a fuller understanding of her rage and motivation. She states, "is [Agamemnon] so stupid, so self-absorbed, that he think I could forgive or forget [Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia]? That I would welcome him back like a wife, even as his prized captive quakes in another room?" (Saint 204). Moreover, at the news of Helen's return to Sparta, she thinks, "so, Helen has returned unpunished…The man she had married could not find it in his heart to murder someone he loved for the sake of his war—unlike his brother [Agamemnon]." (Saint 205). Again, Clytemnestra's justification for her actions is front and center. There is no equivocating here. The modern retelling of Clytemnestra frames her not as a murderer, but as a loyal mother. She does all of this for Iphigenia. Even in her moment of death, Clytemnestra shows her devotion. She states, "there is nothing I can give Elektra that would ease one tiny part of her suffering. As long as I am alive, it devours her from within…the only gift I could give my children was for me to be gone from them forever. I hope it eases their pain, I think, as I close my eyes." (Saint 280-281). This new, updated language of myth

completely erases the importance of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra's revenge on him is but a small part of her story here. In Aeschylus, that revenge takes up the entirety of *Agamemnon.* While Clytemnestra may have been the protagonist, she is still secondary to Agamemnon, who must not be forgotten as the eponymous character. Saint gives life to the inner workings of Clytemnestra's mind, explicitly.

At the end of *Agamemnon,* Clytemnestra enters the palace triumphantly with Aegisthus after killing Agamemnon. Medea flies away to Athens on her dragon-pulled chariot after exacting her vengeance on Jason. Both women escape. The treatment of both women in their original portrayals conveys trauma, after trauma, after trauma. Nevertheless, both women can be read as having won. This result is interesting because the language of myth still defines these women as under the thrall of patriarchal society. Yes, Medea runs away to Athens, but she runs away to the safety of another king. Yes, Clytemnestra struts into the palace, but her power is short-lived as she is murdered in retribution by her children. Aphrodite may have her affair with Ares, but she is still a woman. The narrative will still blame the woman. In all this, Aphrodite, Clytemnestra, and Medea all perform for the male gaze. All use it to their advantage. But the history of interpretation progresses when we see these women as more than performers. The portrayals of these mythological figures show women struggling under the thumb of patriarchy, yet all succeeding to get their desires one way or another. No myth is dead. Their beauty lies within their mutability, their adaptability. These stories move away from the patriarchal tradition when we remove them from it. Interpretation imbues language with power. The framing of these stories can be fixed and reimagined if we use the correct language to position them. Stories are reflections of the societies that tell them, and society can change these mythological stories to

center oft-forgotten women and give them voices, not just bodies. May they never again wear their bodies as apologies.

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