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Empowerment of Mortal and Divine Females in the Iliad: A Feminist Study of the Matristic Archetypes in Homer

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**Empowerment of Mortal and Divine
Females in the *Iliad*: A Feminist Study of
the Matristic Archetypes in Homer**

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The complex individual characters crafted by Homer in the *Iliad* are well known for their ability to transcend the given narrative situation of the siege of Troy due to a universality of psychology and spirit that creates timeless appeal. Perhaps surprisingly, this is as true of the supporting cast of women who are given secondary roles in the patriarchal epic as of the male protagonists. The purpose of this work is not to explore the dimensions of the Homeric evocation of the patriarchal but to focus on the epic female voice in such a system; it will be assumed that the mythic society evoked by Homer in the *Iliad* is decisively patriarchal and that this cultural structure introduces rigid existential limitations for the female, be she immortal or human. The specific cultural means, intellectual processes and historical directions of the Iliadic patriarch—even his specific localizations

and unfolding movements of his power—are all concerns which will have to be explored in other works.

This paper will present only the shadows of the archaic Greek patriarch insofar as his presence illuminates the search for voice of the epic female in the tense grasp of the Iliadic patriarch. The female characters lack nothing in depth or characterization and are as formally developed as any of the male warriors of the work. At first glance it may appear that the multiformity of Homer's females—from sea nymphs and Olympian goddesses to Trojan princesses and Achaean queens—allows for no connective impulse among them. Yet all the women in the *Iliad* are allied in their attempts to discover avenues of power where none are naturally or inherently allowed to them.

Thus, while the females in the *Iliad* have unique and divergent ways of approaching the invisible and sovereign structures of the patriarchal, all are united in attempting to evoke power and achieve voice within a system that inherently denies them both. All are fighting, knowingly or unknowingly, against the same mythico-cultural structures of the patriarchal and its varied manifestations. To these mythic women, then, nothing is a given: everything must be unearthed, seized and reclaimed. Thus the women of the *Iliad*, psychologically complex in word and action, are all women of necessity and direction, women of production and action. Passivity results in non-being in a patriarchal system that actively seeks to silence

the female body. There are no definite options for fulfillment of the female within such a system: on the contrary, very exact and exacting codes of behavior and propriety limit the lives of women to a point of erasure.

To become actors on the Iliadic stage, women must create their own structures, their own roads to completion. Hence, the Homeric female who achieves voice is, by her very nature as speaker, already a transgressor. Yet her insurrection is always creative; passivity constitutes an acceptance of prohibition and absurdity. Thus though each of the women in the *Iliad* is driven by different needs and desires and though each finds her empowerment in a patriarchal universe by different means, there is a common thread in their rebellious dialogues: all are trying to discover a place for the mother's voice in a patriarchal text.

How successful they are remains to be seen. Two mortal characters—Helen and Andromache—and four goddesses—Hera, Aphrodite, Athena and Thetis—achieve empowerment in the male dominated world of the *Iliad* and their avenues to ascendancy and emotional fulfillment are thematically comparable.

In the movements and reactions of these six mythic women, fundamental reactions to patriarchal authority are observable. With Hera there is a direct attack from a belligerent and dissident female position. With Athena, Helen and Aphrodite there is an acceptance of rigid patriarchal definitions to achieve inauthentic power. Lastly there are

the essentialist matriarchs, Andromache and Thetis, who stay within the cultural system of the father and yet do not accept his controlling codes and instead revive and reinvigorate the neglected value system of the mother. Thus each of the women of Homer finds her own way to rebel against the shadow of the father; some of these rebellions are more liberating than others. Ultimately, not all avenues to power for the female are equally emancipating. To be able to identify authentic evocations of feminine strength in the *Iliad*, achieving true empowerment can be theorized as containing three essential elements: it should endow the female with enough power to achieve her desires, it should be rebellious against a construct that does not allow the feminine a real voice, and it should remain constant to the principles of the matriarch without capitulating to the desires or definitions of male hegemony.

Only two females in the *Iliad*, one mortal and one divine, will eventually achieve an empowerment compatible with all three of these recognized elements. Only Thetis and Andromache, by remaining loyal to their matriarchal values, are able to fulfill a satisfactory position of feminine strength that can remain universally acknowledged as an authentic avenue of power for women past and present. In this exploration of the roles of the Homeric female, we will look first at the rebellious goddesses of Homer, all of whom are shadows of Gaea.

Hera reigns as the queen of the Greek pantheon. At first glance Hera may appear as an irrational being who

is moved to hate the citadel of Troy simply because she was deemed less beautiful in the infamous "Judgment of Paris" episode. Her divine motivations are infinitely more complicated, however, than those which fit within the mythical and literary plot of the Trojan saga. Hera, the queen of the Olympian gods and wife of Zeus, is empowered more by her bitter resentment at being reduced to an inferior position than by the unfavorable results of the "Judgment of Paris." She is the only one of the gods or goddesses who dares to question the supremacy of Zeus, himself the ultimate symbol of patriarchal dominance. Hera wants to destroy the citadel of Troy and will stop at nothing to see the great walls reduced to ashes: a destructive urge that symbolizes her origins in what now appears as a dissident feminine mythology. When Zeus stands in her way, she uses subversive techniques such as seduction and deceit to get her way, as when she borrows the girdle of Aphrodite to lure her overbearing husband from interfering in the battle (Book 14). She is consistently portrayed as a malicious, irrational and subversive deity. Her dilemma, and her demand for a power she does not wield, can be better understood if Hera is seen as the last remaining earth-goddess from an earlier subjugated matriarchal mythos.

It has been a major concern of Jungian psychological feminism to recognize vestiges of the matriarchal deities of earlier societies in the mythologies of patriarchal cultures such as that of the classical Greeks. Zeus is

the ultimate symbol of patriarchy, but his dominance over the people of Greece came into being only after he had invaded from the north. Zeus was a sky-god conquering the primarily female-centered cults of the early Mediterranean. Homer is not the only writer of Greek antiquity to depict this evolving conflict of the sexes on a cosmic scale. According to Sarah Pomeroy, in her work *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, Slaves*, such inter-gender divine conflicts are evident in the works of other archaic writers as well as in the works of Homer:

Hesiod details the divine progression from female-dominated generations, characterized by natural, earthy emotional qualities, to the superior and rational monarchy of Olympian Zeus. (2)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the full dynamics of this cultural invasion, but it is necessary to understand that at one point the Greek mainland worshipped earth-based female deities such as Gaea, Rhea and ultimately Hera. Consequently, Hera is a weak reflection of the earlier generations of earth-goddesses who have been subjected to male dominance. Joan O'Brien in her exhaustive study of the metamorphosis of Hera from a powerful earth divinity to a mere mischievous wife, *The Transformation of Hera*, asserts: "On one level, then, Homer's Hera rises out of the ashes of an earlier embodiment of matriarchal chaos" (111). Thus, Hera has intimate mystical connections to the fertility of the ecosphere

and the powerful creative aspects of the feminine mythos.

However, Hera's marriage to Zeus robs her of any real power in the universe. According to radical feminist Mary Daly in her work *Gyn/Ecology*, the cosmic marriage is a prevalent method for the male to achieve authority: "As patriarchy became the dominant societal structure, a common means of legitimization of this transition from a gynocentric society was forcible marriage of the triple goddess" (76). Zeus is now the ultimate dominant force in the universe and this, not a failure of Paris to affirm her beauty, leads to Hera's anger at being reduced to a secondary role. Her righteous anger may be legitimate and inspiring as a rebellious feminine statement, but her helplessness against the violence of Zeus is more comic than heroic:

Crucially, this Hera has no power to smite. However artfully she and Sleep tame Zeus, her machinations never presage cosmic ruin. They amuse, not frighten. Zeus may be outmaneuvered, but he has the power to smite as once before he subdued Typhon and her. This nurse of monsters has lost her bite (O'Brien 110-111).

Hera's apparent inability to achieve any real control over the affairs of the divine household combine with her overt subjugation by the patriarchal forces to make her an unimpressive figure. She has become a shadow of a primordial matriarchal goddess with only vague memories of that

deity's cosmic dominance.

However, Hera is not the only goddess endowed with cosmic feminine aspects. Other goddesses of the *Iliad* display powers of the earlier, primal "Great Mother" divinities, though like Hera they do so on a diluted scale. It is possible that, in the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal mythologies, the power of the older female divinities was diminished not only by marriage to the conquering gods but also by the division of an earlier goddess into new separate goddesses in order to dilute their original power.

According to feminist psychologist Jean Shinoda Bolen in her work, *Goddesses in Everywoman*:

The Great Mother goddess became fragmented into many lesser goddesses, each receiving attributes that had once belonged to her. (21)

Aphrodite and Athena are examples of this division. Significantly, neither of these goddesses taken singly provides a satisfactory model for the woman that is both constant to the feminine psyche and rebellious against male domination.

To begin with, Aphrodite is simply a temptress or a prostitute on a grand scale. Still, Aphrodite, like Helen on the mortal level, uses her sexuality and the value given the female body by the male libido to get what she wants. In a perverse way, this is empowering. Aphrodite's body, the hyper-idealized female body, is thoroughly objectified:

it is a visually subservient body used to satisfy the scopophilia and voyeurism of a society controlled by men.¹

In the *Iliad*, Aphrodite works primarily through other characters such as Helen and even Hera. We can observe the Aphrodite principle at work when Helen's beauty keeps her safe from reproach in Troy. The elders of the city are mesmerized by her physical aspects, and cannot find a way to chastise Paris for his judgment in bringing the fateful female within their citadel (3. 165). Similarly, as mentioned above, in Book 14, Aphrodite helps the queen of the gods as to seduce her husband, by allowing her to use a magical girdle filled with deceptive sexual power. Aphrodite has found a way to compete in the patriarchal universe but only by prostituting her own body, or the bodies of other females, to the desires of the

¹Aphrodite holds all of the sexual power that was originally a part of the earth-divinity but was balanced by other powers. It is fitting that Homer chose to portray Aphrodite as the child of Dione and Zeus and not of Uranus. This is the genealogy of "Aphrodite Pandemos," mentioned in the *Symposium* of Plato as the goddess of profane physical passion and the protectress of prostitutes. She is juxtaposed to "Aphrodite Urania," who transcends vulgar lust and represents an intellectual, nonphysical union. The Aphrodite depicted by Homer, though deceptively portrayed as good-natured and innocent, is undoubtedly the former.

dominant men.

Athena, goddess of wisdom and strategy, also finds a way of competing within the patriarchal system. Her approach at first seems to work quite admirably. She is the greatest war divinity in the *Iliad*, second only to Zeus in prowess, and her stratagems place her far above her half-brother Ares, who represents the bestial side of war. While Aphrodite may have originally been a matriarchal warrior goddess, these female origins have been erased and she is now intimately connected to Zeus—who birthed her from his head—and thus her strength is derived from the patriarchy itself and not from her femininity. She has become masculine in her characteristics as a warlike goddess driven towards excellence by reason and intellect. Somewhere along the way, Athena lost her femininity by trading it for masculine strength. She has betrayed her feminine roots by forgetting her origin as a maternal being.

So far—with Hera, Aphrodite and Athena—we have observed a variety of very realistic reactions of women to male domination, none of which has been a complementary or satisfactory approach for a universally liberated female. These are the same reactions of post-modern women in the contemporary environment that remains predominantly controlled by males. Sarah Pomeroy speaks of the parallel: “The fact that modern women are frustrated by being forced to choose between being an Athena—an intellectual, asexual career woman—or an Aphrodite—a

frivolous sex object—or a respectable wife-mother like Hera shows that the Greek goddesses continue to be archetypes of human existence” (9). If these were the only options for women, mortal or divine, the situation would be grim indeed for the women of the *Iliad*. There is, however, one other goddess outside of the Olympian pantheon, who has found a different way of approaching the dilemma of being female in a patriarchal cosmos.

Thetis, the caring, nurturing and divine mother of Achilles is the best option for liberal feminist women to admire in the *Iliad*. Thetis is a symbol of virtuous motherhood that suffers for the life principle and the preservation of the child. She has neither capitulated into the lascivious desires of a male godhead—her husband is aloof and does not appear in the work—nor has she given up her strictly feminine attributes of compassion and motherhood. Yet she enjoys an independence and freedom of action that the other women, mortal and immortal, seem to lack. She has gained her solitude and has not had to subjugate her body nor reject her own desires as a female being. With her femininity and self-respect intact, she is still able to deal with Zeus, the enduring symbol of paternal hegemony, and ensure favors from him, not by prostituting her body like Aphrodite or becoming masculine like Athena, but by utilizing her specifically feminine powers for her own benefit.

Thetis ensures the favor of Zeus for her son, the warrior Achilles, by reminding Zeus that she came to his

aid when the other gods and goddesses rebelled against him (1. 533). Similarly, when her son needs new armor, Thetis turns to the lame smith god Hephaestus and he is obliged to help her because she once saved him when he was hurled from Olympus by his father, Zeus (18. 433). Thetis uses a system of reciprocal kindness, a cleverly feminine system that functions harmoniously and effectively within the patriarchal world. She has found a way to remain female and wield power without losing her feminine dignity or capitulating to the rigid demands of patriarchal culture.

The methodology of feminist liberation of the goddesses is repeated on the mortal plane. These reflections of the Olympian macrocosm can be seen in the two most important mortal women in the *Iliad*: Helen and Andromache. One is the cause of the war. Helen, who is the Greek queen, has followed her Trojan prince, Paris, away from her matronly duties in Sparta, thus setting the states of the two men against each other. The other is the wife of Hector, Andromache, who is a living symbol of the hearth and the "home" principle: a stark contrast to the brutal warfare occurring outside the city gates. Thus the value systems of Helen and Andromache, namely "passion" and "domesticity," are in specific opposition to each other as they embody eroticism and devotion to the hearth.

Helen, the mortal counterpart to Aphrodite, contains most of the same negative feminine aspects of extreme sexual objectification observed in Aphrodite. Thus,

Helen is no more of a positive female archetype than the frivolous goddess she emulates. However, Helen's actions may be interpreted as somewhat more liberated, if not more radical, because of her rejection of the matronly duties of a compliant and submissive Greek mother. The patriarchal system has turned motherhood away from the natural ideal of Thetis and the mother-goddess, and institutionalized it to the point that it has lost its mystical connotations. Males of high class in classical antiquity used concubines and female slaves for sexual fulfillment and noble women only for necessary procreation. Any love or passion in this system seemed left to chance. Helen actively rebels against this sterile system by willingly eloping with Paris, a charismatic and exotic prince who provides an opportunity for erotic adventure and escape from domestic routine. Some would say that Helen was forced to go against her will by the goddess Aphrodite, but as in many cases in the *Iliad*, the goddess here is more of a psychological projection of the internal potentialities of Helen than an actual being. The goddess is simply her libido anthropomorphized.

Helen has done what few women can do. She has chosen a mate and left behind the duty to husband and child. Paris may not be much of a choice, but on some level, Helen can be admired for her power to beguile men and for her rejection of contemporary values. What is perhaps even more amazing about this classical evocation of a "radical feminist" is that she gets away with it as well

as she does. Menelaus, her husband, must go after her, but in the end, he cannot harm her because: "Since Menelaus was king by virtue of his position as Helen's husband, he might lose the throne if he lost her" (Pomeroy 21). This type of matrilocal inherited kingship ironically traps Menelaus in a paradox where he must chase after his rebellious wife but he must not punish her with death as the law commands. Perhaps Helen is not an ideal feminist heroine, but she at least finds some release from the exacting confines of the prevailing patriarchal system.

At the other extreme, Andromache, the gentle and compassionate wife of Hector, is the human parallel to the underlying "Great Mother" mythos. Andromache is most fully portrayed in two scenes—a meeting with her husband in Troy and later a speech of lamentation upon his death—which Homer fills with the pathos of human existence, making the Trojan noble woman a tragic figure in the work. Andromache confronts her husband in an emotional scene when he enters the citadel for a moment and is about to return to the carnage of war. She meets her husband and brings their child Astyanax with her as she attempts to persuade him to take a defensive stance, and thus save their family:

Possessed is what you are, Hector.

Your courage is going to kill you,

And you have no feeling left

For your little boy or me, the luckless woman

Who will soon be your widow. (6. 426-30)

Though Andromache is pleading with her husband, Homer makes a point of portraying her with honor and dignity, presenting her relationship with her husband as one of equality. This scene is made more poignant as a foreshadowing of what will happen to this noble family after the war has run its course. In the *Iliad*, Hector is killed by Achilles and his funeral ends the epic. His body is brought back to Troy, which leads to the second important scene for Andromache. As she cradles the head of her dead husband she laments the grim future she knows awaits her when the Achaeans finally take Troy. She will be sold into slavery to some Greek chieftain, and her son Astyanax will be hurled from the ramparts to a grisly death. Thus, the family unit is sacrificed to the brutality of battles waged by men in a society where war is an integral part of the patriarchal universe.

In her appearances, so filled with the tragedy of the feminine everyday, Andromache speaks the language of the earth-goddess that acts as preserver of life in contrast to the savage, heroic code that dominates the *Iliad*. Andromache is the greatest objector to the idea that men must become murderers as they display their bravery on the battlefield. Hector, defender of the Trojan people, lives and dies by the heroic code that demands such brutal conduct in war. The need for violence and destruction as a means to redemption is an inherent part of the patriarchal organization and has been recognized as an unconsciously

motivated compensation for the lack of the feminine ability to give life: "The male sense of barrenness, then, breeds hierarchical structures of violence, epitomized in war" (Daly 361). Andromache is a symbolic juxtaposition of the female life principle and matristic ethics as opposed to the destructive aspect of the patriarchy. Homer, a fundamentally polyphonic author, gives her a strong voice of dissent, and her questions about why men must slaughter each other remain largely unanswered or unanswerable within the patriarchal text of Homer's *Iliad*. Like Thetis, Andromache is a strong female character in the *Iliad* who still holds the essential life-preserving values of the matriarchy intact while using compassion and intellect to retain power and equality within the patriarchal universe.

Ultimately, each of the women of the *Iliad* approaches the problem of patriarchy in a specific and deliberate way. It is this extraordinary ability to capture multiple consciousnesses and psychological realities within a single work that render Homer a remarkably multiphonic writer who achieves a depiction of his culture which is epic in its inclusiveness. Yet even as Homer honestly depicts the feminine principle within a predominantly patriarchal text, there is still a sense that these women can never completely escape the controlling system of patriarchy. For the women of the *Iliad*, there is no ideal, external position from which to wage war against the father's jurisdiction: all are woven into the fabric of their culture, inseparable from the dominant males who deny them easy

assertions of power. Accordingly, in the *Iliad*, their rebellions must exist within the invisible, all-encompassing body of the father. For all their dynamic action it is apparent that the cosmos will remain primarily male-oriented. No matter in which direction these women seek spiritual and ethical refuge, there is still a central pull of imperceptible and omnipresent patriarchal domination that exerts itself in every conceivable instance.

Finally, it is precisely because of this indefatigable presence of the male that the females who are most effective at achieving empowerment within patriarchy are those who recognize its multifarious, inescapable reality and develop more intricate ways of circumventing its ontological stipulations. Undoubtedly, Thetis on the divine level and Andromache on the mortal are the two females in the *Iliad* who are best able to achieve power within the system of the father. Neither can escape the patriarchy directly, yet both can escape institutionalized notions of sickly motherhood as a regimented and dissected enterprise and recover their own matronal language as mothers, achieving a personal effectiveness from within. Consequently, while still under the constraints of the male, they naturally subvert and challenge the dominant patriarchal structures of violence and subjugation by speaking directly from the ethical codes of reciprocity and compassion belonging to the female. Thus, Andromache and Thetis are the only women who achieve all of the criteria stipulated at the beginning of this essay: they acquire power; they are

fundamentally rebellious; and yet they remain true to their female nature.

Homer wrote the *Iliad* in a time period removed from ours by a span of nearly three millennia, but the basic attributes of gender and the male/female interrelationships of the book remain as strikingly relevant today as they were in the time of Homer. The voices of these epic women, these rebellious and hysteric goddesses and mortals who challenge patriarchal dominance, are, in their radically searching actions, as comparable to the post-millennial women of the present day as to the women of the Achaean epoch of petty kingdoms. Marginalized by the conquering sky-god, the mother-goddess within these women finds empowerment through the unique power of the female. Their return to the essential nature of matristic and biolithic womanhood subverts repressive male authority and, one likes to think, may someday right the distorted patriarchal world-view of violent individualism and savage war.

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