**Classics 1 Lesson 4: Women and the Myths**

**Women in Ancient Greece:**

When examining how women were treated in Ancient Greece, we run into difficulty, partly because it was so long ago that we don’t have a full record to look back on, but also because the history that has survived is written by men. We do have some knowledge of the time, and we know that women were very much second-class citizens in the rights that they had. Women could not vote, and some of the most famous and revered scholars, such as Aristotle, were clear in their writing that they did not perceive women as their equal. Education was given to women, but was aimed at making them good mothers and homemakers, and women were married to husbands that had made arrangements with their father, including paying a dowry. They did not have a say in their marriage, were usually married in their early teens, and effectively became the property of their husband, who had considerably more rights that they did. One other source of information, though, is to look to the myths for an idea of some of the **cultural practices** of that time and how women were seen and treated, with some interesting results.

**The Mistreatment of Women in the Myths:**

There is no doubt that throughout the myths women have the least power and often the worst experience. Following the Titanomachy and the division of the sky, the seas and the underworld, it was the three male children of Cronus who each took a portion. Whilst Cronus’ female children became gods and had considerable powers of their own, they were not in the conversation for any of the main leadership roles. This undoubtedly reflected a society in which women could not vote, never mind enter politics, and in which they did not have a stake in the running of things.

Shortly after Hades takes ownership of the Underworld, we run into another myth which places women at the centre. Hades abducts Persephone, whom he loves, and tricks her into eating some pomegranate seeds. Having eaten in the Underworld, she is now doomed to live there, though only for part of the year after Zeus intervenes (she was his daughter after all). That a woman could be abducted and tricked into marriage says a lot about the respect that was shown towards her by her husband, though some might point to her title of Queen of the Underworld as some evidence that she was given a prominent title and role, and therefore more powerful than the start of the myth suggests. The implications of this myth for the rest of the world also throw up themes which are important, and which interact with the role of women in society. Persephone’s mother, Demeter, was the god responsible for farming, and she was so distraught at the loss of her daughter for those parts of the year in which she was in the Underworld, that she prevents anything from growing, thus creating the seasons of the year (or an explanation for them). This places considerable power in the hands of Demeter, along the theme of fertility, and some have also suggested that it could be an **allegory** of the way in which daughters would be married off in Ancient Greece at twelve or thirteen and their mother’s grief at losing them.

There are countless examples of how women are treated in the myths, including the idea that Pandora was some sort of temptress to humanity, and that the inclusion of women in the previously male only world was some sort of explanation of illness, misery, poverty and other miseries. Another infamous female figure in the Greek myths is that of Medusa, the most famous **Gorgon** (a Gorgon being a woman who had snakes for hair). The myth of Medusa suggests that she was beautiful, and not originally a Gorgon, but that she was raped by Poseidon, and then turned to a Gorgon by Athena, who was enraged by this. This is a clear example of the victim being punished, which has been a feature of society throughout human history with regard to women and sexual crimes. As a Gorgon, Medusa was feared, as if anyone looked at her and caught her stare they would be turned to stone instantly. The myth concludes with her death at the hands of a famous hero, Perseus, who is able to use the reflection in a shield gifted to him by Athena – who clearly did not like Medusa at all - in order to avoid being turned to stone and to behead Medusa.

**The Affairs of Zeus:**

Throughout the life of Zeus, the most powerful and most widely revered god, he has children with many women who are not his wife. He is unfaithful and has many affairs, often deceiving the woman that he is having the affair with, such as by changing shape to that of an animal, or to that of the woman’s husband. He did this to Alcmene, who then gave birth to Herakles (Hercules) which is why he was so powerful, and became a god after his twelve labours.

As a result of his affairs, he fathered many children, some of whom became hugely significant in their own right. There is no agreement of the total number, but it is likely over 100 and could be over 150 depending on the accounts that you read, and scholars that you prefer. Of those hundred-or-so children, at most ten were with his wife, Hera. Some of the most prominent of Zeus’ children came from his affairs, including Pan, Perseus, Helen of Troy and Dionysus (one of the favourite gods of the Ancient Greeks, he was the god of wine!).

The idea that the most powerful god could have so many affairs, and that he could father so many children, suggests that affairs were not a hugely **taboo** subject to the Greeks, who of course worshiped Zeus above all others. It was, however, the case that this was reserved to men, as women were expected to be married to one man and not to have affairs, whilst men could have multiple partners and frequently did. Women were the property of their husbands, and it was the case that a husband could kill another man without any punishment if his wife was unfaithful, whilst no such option was available to women.

**Strong Women in the Myths:**

As we have already established throughout this course, there were plenty of strong female characters in the myths, and it is not the case that every female suffers or has no power. Gaia is the mother of all the earth, and she colludes with her children to get rid of Ouranos and then Cronus for their treatment of her other children, the Hecatonchires, perhaps demonstrating the protective nature of mothers. Similarly in a sense, in some accounts it is Athena who breathes life into the first men, created by Prometheus, so that we can say that every man was brought into being by a woman. Athena is a strong woman, who is more often the powerful one in any situation in which she was placed (you will recall that she turned Arachne to a spider). She is the goddess of wisdom, which seems to suggest that women could be seen as intelligent by the Ancient Greeks, though the extent to which this extended to mortal women is not clear. She is also a warrior god, and is frequently depicted in armour, though she is seen as the brains behind war, with Ares the god responsible for the violence of war. The city of Athens, the capital of Greece, is named after her, and she was certainly a god who was worshipped by the Greeks.

Other notably strong women, are some of the other gods, who have immense power, but chief among them is Hera, Zeus’ wife (and sister). She is the goddess of marriage, among other things, and is the Queen of the gods, as wife of Zeus. That he was unfaithful is well known, and so she was jealous and spiteful, often punishing those who Zeus had had affairs with. One such story involves Io, who Zeus had turned to a cow when he heard Hera coming so that he would not be found out. Suspicious, Hera asked for the cow, and then chained it up under the guard of Argus, a creature with 100 eyes, who could watch over the cow eternally. Zeus convinced Hermes to kill Argus, which Hera was distraught about, and she placed his eyes decoratively on a peacock, which explains the way peacocks look. Hera’s name also lives on in the form of Herakles (Hercules) which literally means Glory of Hera, though he too was born of an affair that Zeus had, perhaps undermining that respectful title. She was, however, a powerful and feared god, and it is said that even Zeus feared her, or at least what she would do to his lovers.

**Classics 1 Task 4: Women and the Myths**

Please complete this week’s task as a word document and return it as an attachment on teams. The document title should be PUPIL NAME Classics week 4.

**Part A:**

There are so many women throughout the myths, some of whom we have been able to study, but many that we have not yet mentioned. Choose a woman from Ancient Greek mythology, it may be one we have studied, or one we have not, and write a short biography of her. Cover any basic information that you can find (was she a god, mortal, a nymph etc) and then outline any myths that she is involved in (not necessarily all of them, especially if you choose a major god).

**Part B:**

Throughout this lesson we have seen different examples of the way that women were portrayed in the myths – **in less than 300 words**, give your opinion of how you feel woman are treated by the myths.

**Part C:**

Once again, if you have been keeping a glossary of words in bold throughout the lessons, then there are words for you to add, which is voluntary.

**Next Time:**

In the next lesson we will turn our attention to war, with some of the most famous myths centred around the Trojan War, a war which really did take place.

**Further Reading:**

If you would like to learn more about how women were treated in Ancient Greece, this video does a good job of explaining it - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWWzIIIFLQw>

One of the biggest authorities on the Classics in the UK is Professor Mary Beard, and in this article (an interview about her book) she talks about Women in Ancient Greece – <https://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-ca-jc-women-and-power-20171228-story.html>