

## Male and Female in Classical Myth and Literature

In the last ten years, feminist approaches to literature have brought change into even the conservative field of classics. The most important redefinition is that between sex and gender: sex is biological/anatomical while gender is social/cultural. Gender differences are extensions and elaborations on biological differences, including the expectations of society and individuals for roles and aspirations of men and women. Many societies have incorrectly assumed that gender differences are determined by sexual differences; with a feminist shift in focus, more attention is being paid to the relationship between men and women in classical culture, though the lack of source material written by women hampers this.

However, even then men were speculating on women. Some of these ideas are seen in two supposedly different modes of thought, myth in Hesiod's *Theogony* and philosophy in Plato. A long oral tradition lies behind the 8th century writings of Homer and Hesiod, the earliest surviving authors of Greek literature (which has many Near Eastern parallels). *Theogony* narrates an elaborate genealogy as the universe comes into being through the process of mating. Violent intergenerational and male-female conflict arises, with a progressive decrease in female power. After Chaos came into being, Gaia (Earth) arose and Eros (the procreative urge). Gaia gave birth to and then mated with Ouranos (Sky), but he eventually forced her new offspring back into Gaia's womb, until she "devised a crafty and evil scheme" and produced a sickle and recruited her son Kronos to castrate Ouranos and oust him from his throne.

Kronos married his sister Rheia and fathered children on her but then swallowed them up to prevent a son from overthrowing him. Rheia tricked her violent husband, hid away Zeus until he matured & came back & then, when Rheia (following Gaia's advice) tricked Kronos into vomiting out Zeus' five siblings, ousted Kronos from the throne. The gods in the second generation are more anthropomorphized and subtler (more guileful) than those of the first, but Rheia is less imposing than Gaia. In swallowing his offspring and carrying them in his body, Kronos was usurping Rheia's maternal role.

Zeus later tricked Metis (wisdom) into entering his belly so he could avoid the prophesied birth of a son who would oust him. Zeus did bear from his own head his & Metis' daughter, Athena, but not a son; therefore, Zeus would not see the fate of mortal men who are surpassed by their sons. Thus, Zeus, instead of swallowing his offspring (as Kronos did) swallowed their mother, robbing her of her role & using guile (formerly a female weapon). Normally, the sex difference between male & female is that females give birth & males do not; the gender difference is that females are guileful -- but both of these attributes are usurped by Zeus. Cleverness (Metis), once swallowed by Zeus (the male) ceases to be shown as guileful.

The emergence of scientific thinking did not remove male fears of the female role in reproduction, as is seen in 5th century medical writings, where the male role is portrayed as more important.

In Plato's *Symposium* the dinner party topic is "love", Socrates' version of which (learned from a wise old woman named Diotima) is defined as a longing for immortality through

production of offspring. The passion for procreation has as its lowest form the bodily (new physical beings who will take the place of their parents) & men who see this as good love women and produce children. Those whose procreancy is of the spirit and who wish to produce wisdom (poetry, works of art, law codes, etc.) turn not to women but to men; male homosexual relationships are vn men reach true virtue, they attain immortality too.

Hesiod and Plato both deal with attempts to attain immortality, the highest form of which is shown to be not physical reproduction, which requires women and eventually displaces the father, but procreative power detached from women and located in men (literally in Hesiod, linguistically in Plato). The middle road in Plato used a procreancy metaphor for the production of works of art. As men become metaphorical child-bearers, women get passed over or neutralized while men become spiritual procreators. This shows a basic misogyny; men knew they depended on women but tried to picture ways to minimize that dependency by spiritualizing offspring.

A lively question and answer period ensued, in which the impact of such metaphors and the male takeover of society, including female sexual roles, was examined in the light of gender differences long accepted as inevitably sex-linked, even to our own days -- with the attendant consequences for society and the subjugation of women.