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Honors Senior Project

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The Athena Effect: Strong Womxn or Straw Womxn?

The Athena Effect is an original model, or lens, for understanding our culture through our stories. It is found by tracing a pattern of masculinized womxn used as oppressive tools from ancient to modern myth.

SUMMARY

The Athena Effect describes how when womxn—specifically in art but also in life—act or appear masculine solely to obtain power, they are actually perpetuating patriarchy. When looking at characters within our mythologies, we are actually seeing the choices and values our culture mandates. Therefore, when we see our female characters using masculinity in this way, we are actually seeing our culture choosing to value masculinity and support it as the only avenue for power, which promotes patriarchal ideals. Athena serves as a potent symbol of this value set because she's often heralded as a powerful woman in the context of Greek mythology, but when you consider how she treats other womxn (she punishes and kills them) and what she cares about (she loves men and masculine ideologies), you see that she's actually subverting feminine notions of power. Moreover, her power within a patriarchy makes you question any laurels of “girl power,” especially when the actual womxn for whom she was the patron goddess (Ancient Athenian womxn) were actually horribly oppressed. Therefore, she serves as a short-hand for

this farce of powerful womxn within patriarchy, and how these figures further disarm us in the face of patriarchal beliefs.

DISCLAIMER

This model is not all-encompassing, and its shortcomings need to be understood in order to properly utilize the Athena Effect model. First, the Athena Effect operates on Westernized construction of a masculine/feminine binary. The gendered dichotomy that I will be referring to is not comprehensive, nor static, but simply some commonly associated characteristics. For context, masculinity is comprised of traits such as assertiveness, aggressiveness, reservation, coldness, and independence. In opposition, femininity is passive, nonviolent, empathetic, emotive, and cooperative. Second, this model does not account for other aspects of identity such as race, sexuality, class, and more. It therefore must be considered incomplete. Finally, the Athena Effect is not a critique of genuine gender expression, but rather the prioritization of masculinity by and/or for female characters.

WHO IS ATHENA?

Athena is a virgin goddess of wisdom, warfare, and weaving. She acts as the patron goddess of Athens, and in Greek literature, she makes frequent appearances to aid heroic deeds and quests. She is known for being just and rational. While a very powerful and revered woman, Athena has very little to do with womanhood. However, Athena started out as a Cretan goddess of protection born of an oral matrifocal tradition; her strategies are to subvert derision, not win a war. As Charlene Spretnak describes in her book *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece*, “[Athena] knew [her

worshippers] would never flourish in an air of strife, so she protected households from divisive forces and guarded towns against aggression” (92). Then, Cretan culture was absorbed and co-opted by Greek culture—which is deeply patriarchal—and in this process, “Athena was made into a cold and masculine daughter” (Spretnak 22).

HELLENIC MYTH

As the Greeks adapted Athena, she was encased in masculinity, and for all intents and purposes, she leaned into it. Athena’s Hellenic conception does not involve female anatomy or action; she is born from the head of her father, Zeus. In one retelling, Athena is a product of Zeus’s desire to dominate the Titanesses (Leeming and Page, 135). He rapes and impregnates Metis—the Titaness of knowledge and wisdom. Fearing a patricidal child, Zeus swallows a pregnant Metis whole. However, this favored parenting method does not meet his purpose, and Athena comes to term inside of him. Due to this, Zeus felt an unbearable pain in his head, and “[Hermes] cleaved open Zeus's skull and from the bloody breach sprang...Athena, fully clad in armor and helmet, with her shield and sword raised” (137). While Metis—or any other womxn—is not referred to, we see that Athena is alive, well, and ready to fight. Moreover, she is “In unquestioning service to the father from whose mind she had sprung,” and now the champion of wisdom and war (137). From this origin story, Athena is literally born a warrior, has no real mother to speak of, and appears as a literal brainchild of her father. Not only is she deeply masculine, but all potential femininity has been swallowed. Even in her birth, Athena is completely separated from womxn

In one of her more famous appearances—Aeschylus’ “The Eumenides” in *The Oresteia*—Athena plainly states her masculine allegiances: Athena (or Athene) comes to represent justice in the case of Orestes. As she gives the rationalization for her decision, she says, “There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth, / and, but for marriage, I am always for the male / with all my heart, and strongly on my father’s side” (Aeschylus 736-8). Here, Athena makes it clear that it is her masculinity that she values and gives her authority.

In the story of Athena and Arachne—popularly catalogued in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—Minerva (Athena’s Roman counterpart) is challenged by Arachne to test her weaving ability. As Ovid tells it, Minerva weaves scenes which depict how foolish mortals have gone against the gods and paid the price. Arachne—in a notably subversive move—depicts the many stories of gods sexually assaulting mortal womxn; Arachne’s work is flawless, and Minerva loses the challenge. Enraged, she punishes Arachne and turns her into a spider (Ovid 129-133). Minerva demonstrates a weakness in her feminine abilities, and a flaw in her character. She cannot succeed within femininity, and she hates the womxn who do.

Ovid also captures a rendition of Medusa’s story. He says that Medusa was once quite beautiful, and she was raped by a god in a temple dedicated to Athena (or Minerva). Outraged, Athena responds by transforming the woman into a gorgon (106). Later, in the story of Perseus, Athena continues her campaign against Medusa by assisting Perseus in killing her by giving him a reflective shield (106). Athena sides with men and helps them to dominate other womxn. It is from these stories that we see the components of the Athena Effect; within the model, the female character:

1. Is separated from other womxn and seen to be "not like other girls"

2. Invokes masculinity to gain authority
3. Fails to succeed within femininity, and dislikes those who do
4. Dominates other womxn and actively supports men

This masculinized power does not give us true images of strong womxn, but instead promotes patriarchy. Athena, as a representation of culture, is coded as masculine in order to further patriarchy. Athena being a woman and yet clearly prioritizing masculinity is a response to male fear of powerful womxn—a true feminine strength would threaten patriarchy. This masculine caste sends the message that to be powerful, you must be masculine. By sourcing power in masculinity—and simultaneously explicitly depriving femininity of power—there is a careful balance at play in which womxn cannot obtain substantive influence. Not only are the womxn around Athena unable to share in the spoils and obtain their own authority, but they are continually diminished and harmed, even by Athena herself. Moreover, any power Athena seems to accumulate for herself is hollow—it does not correlate with any actual progress in the status or treatment of womxn. In fact, David Cohen describes in “Seclusion, Separation, and the Status of Women in Classical Athens”:

It is a commonplace of contemporary classical scholarship that in the classical period the political and social status of Athenian women was deplorably low. Relegated to the ranks of slaves and children, scholars suggest that they were even much worse off than the women of earlier and later periods of Greek history. (1)

In other words, despite having this powerful woman as their patron goddess, Athenian womxn still faced the full brunt of patriarchy in their culture.

WHERE DOES THE ATHENA EFFECT COME FROM?

This effect comes from the experience of being a womxn within a male-dominated society. One way to understand this experience is via the concept of panoptic patriarchal perception.

The first step in this process is grasping the lens a patriarchy presents. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey sets out “to use psychoanalysis to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him” (14). Mulvey’s theories represent the way film—as an art form and therefore a representation of our mythology—portrays and perpetuates our cultural realities. It is here that Mulvey coins the term “male gaze” to explain the experience of men being the viewers—this is their story—and women are objects to be viewed within that story (19-25). This vision of the world creates a base from which the Athena Effect may grow.

The next key to understanding this experience is how the rules of Mulvey’s male gaze may be internalized. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the Panopticon: a theory to understand society that comes out of an actual prison structure. Within this structure, the guards are in the center, and they can see the prisoners at all times. However, the prisoners are unable to know when they are being watched by the guard, they only know that there is

always a potential for them to be seen (Foucault 194-201). The Panopticon has many outcomes, but the most central to its purpose is regulation not through force, but through objectification of the prisoner. In this process, a prisoner internalizes and automatically reproduces this regulation (195). From this analysis, we can understand that cultural messaging is internalized by those who are within that structure. Therefore, within a patriarchy that relies foundationally on the male gaze, womxn internalize the rules of patriarchy and reproduce them. This construction of power is what lends the Athena Effect its potency.

These theories create a kaleidoscope of input that we can identify as a Panoptic Patriarchal Perception. Culturally, the intersection of the male gaze and a panoptic civilization creates an environment where womxn—both real and imagined—are trapped in the narratives of men and ultimately value themselves through the lens of that context.

This experience is summarized by bell hooks in *Communion: The Female Search for Love*:

Within patriarchal culture, the girl who does not feel loved in her family of origin is given another chance to prove her worth when she is encouraged to seek love from males....compulsive longings for male attention and approval indicate that she is rightly pursuing her gendered destiny, on the road to becoming the female who can be nothing without a man. Whether she is heterosexual or homosexual, the extent to which she yearns for patriarchal approval will determine whether she is worthy to be loved. This is the emotional uncertainty that haunts the lives of all females in patriarchal culture.

(xiv-xv)

In the most simplistic explanation, the Athena Effect is a product of womxn seeking self-love and validation within the confines of a patriarchy.

CONCLUSION: STRONG FEMALE CHARACTERS

The womxn who succeed within these boundaries are exemplified on the trope of the strong female character. A trope spotted in television, movies, comics, and literature, the “strong female character” is “A slick catsuit, quasi–martial arts know-how, and big guns (figurative or muscular)... In the absence of actual character development, she was too often all brawn and no brain” (Stuller). In the article “Tough, Cold, Terse, Taciturn and Prone to Not Saying Goodbye When They Hang Up the Phone” by Carina Chocano, this trope is dissected before readers:

[Strong female characters] reinforce the unspoken idea that in order for a female character to be worth identifying with, she should really try to rein in the gross girly stuff. This implies that unless a female character is “strong,” she is not interesting or worth identifying with. (44)

Chocano spells out how it is the feminine in female characters that is vilified and dispatched. These characters—and the real womxn they mirror—are permitted to exist, take up space, and involve themselves in conflict as long as they appear like their male counterparts, but with perfectly done eyeliner and female reproductive organs. “‘Strong female characters,’ in other words, are often just female characters with the gendered behavior taken out” (Chocano 44). While the case has been made that these characters are a means to scaffold genuine and complex female characters, there is an insidious outcome in placing stock in them: “Their strength lets them, briefly, dominate bystanders but never dominate the plot. It’s an anodyne, a sop, a Trojan Horse—it’s there to distract and confuse you, so you forget to ask for more” (McDougall). These characters aren’t just “not good enough,” they are a patriarchal tool to make us complacent.

These Athenas are used to convince us that we are “moving in the right direction,” when, in actuality, we are furthering a patriarchal narrative.

While the Athena Effect may seem to disarm some of the heroines we’ve filled our modern mythology with, it’s not a hopeless cause:

Wise women who love know that no matter the strength of patriarchy, women must assume accountability for changing our lives in ways that empower, for choosing to love, and for learning through love ways to overcome all the barriers that exist to keep us from being fully self-realized. (hooks 229)

The Athena Effect merely names a symptom of a disease; it does not mean we cannot inoculate ourselves and redeem our characters.

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