

Female body politics: “The Powerful Female Body” in mythological stories¹

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Abstract

In this study, mythological aspects of the female body will be presented in relation to the powerful female body image. It is well-known that in ancient Greek culture, mythology was considered a source of power for male and female characters who were parts of mythological stories. However, the female power, or the power of being a woman, are considered significant for mythological female creativity, though its essence has always been neglected by the male oriented world. This man-made obstacle over female creativity has also been clarified in mythology, especially in mythological representations of goddesses or witches. On this basis, this paper aims to bring a close look to “the powerful women” as the mythological female heroines, witches and representatives in ancient Greece, namely Demeter & Persephone, The Amazons, Hecate, Medea and Medusa.

Keywords: The female body, Greek mythology, goddesses, witches, the powerful women.

Kadın bedeni politikası: Mitolojik hikayelerde “Güçlü Kadın Bedeni”

Öz

Bu çalışmada Kadın Bedeni'nin mitolojik yönleri, güçlü kadın bedeni imgesi ile ilişkilendirilerek sunulacaktır. Antik Yunan kültüründe mitolojinin, mitolojik hikayelerin birer parçası olan erkek ve kadın karakterler için bir güç kaynağı olarak görüldüğü iyi bir şekilde bilinmektedir. Ancak, önemi her ne kadar eril merkezli dünya düzeninde ihmal edilse de; kadın gücünün ya da kadın olmanın verdiği gücün, mitolojik kadın yaratıcılığı için önemli olduğu düşünülmektedir. Kadının yaratıcılığı üzerinde erkeğin sebep olduğu bu engel, mitolojide, özellikle tanrıça veya cadıların mitolojik tasvirlerinde detaylı bir biçimde ifade edilmiştir. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma, antik Yunan mitolojisinde kadın kahramanlara, cadılara ve isim vermek gerekirse Demeter ve Persephone, Amazon Kadınları, Hecate, Medea ve Medusa gibi mitolojik tasvirlere “güçlü kadın” gözüyle bir bakış açısı getirecektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kadın bedeni, Yunan mitolojisi, tanrıçalar, cadılar, güçlü kadınlar.

Introduction to ‘Mythological Stories’ concerning ‘Female Empowerment’

It has long been known that the earliest matriarchal cultures value women and female empowerment, and ‘The Minoan Culture’ can be considered one of the most well-known among them. Jane Ellen Harrison studies ‘The Minoan Culture’ in detail in her *Themis: A study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912) and Funda Başak Dörschel in her *Female Identity: Rewritings of Greek and Biblical Myths by Contemporary Women Writers* (2011), scrutinises Harrison’s works. Dörschel writes that “[...] The Minoan culture, which flourished on the island of Crete around 2000 BC, is the earliest known

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civilization of Greece and Harrison proposes that Minoan religion was matriarchal in nature [...]” (Dörschel, 2011, p.65). From this perspective, in addition to matriarchal culture, it is asserted that Harrison also studies mythological ‘Mother Goddesses’ in her *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903). It is expressed as follows:

[i]n her earlier work *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Harrison traces the cult of pre-historic Mother Goddess from Keres, the primitive spirits, to the cult of Demeter and Persephone and she claims that the Eleusinian Mysteries, dedicated to this mother and daughter, have originated from an earlier Mother Goddess cult. And she states that this earlier Mother Goddess is turned into a twofold goddess in Demeter and Persephone by the later patriarchal invaders. (2011, p.66)

Hence, as it is seen above, the Persephone and Demeter myth is about the empowerment of a mother as a woman as well as mother-daughter relationship. Thus, the empowerment of ‘Mother Goddess’ and her powerful female body is able to be explored under ‘Demeter-Persephone myth’ as one of the prominent examples.

No matter how patriarchy wants to distort the empowerment of women in mythology, mythological female characters’ power can be clearly observed. Edith Hamilton describes the beginning of the story of ‘Demeter and Persephone’ in his *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (1942) as follows: “Demeter³ had an only daughter, Persephone⁴, the maiden of the spring. She lost her and in her terrible grief she withheld her gifts from the earth, which turned into a frozen desert. The green and flowering land was ice-bound and lifeless because Persephone had disappeared” (Hamilton, 1999, p.55). Demeter⁵ is the goddess of grain who is also known as the goddess of earth and fruitfulness. She is the Mother goddess. She controls fertility in nature and on earth. To put briefly, she is an empowered woman. However, when her beloved daughter, Persephone, is abducted, Demeter causes calamities and troubles for earth and all humanity by showing her vengeance and power against whatever is responsible for it.

That year was most dreadful and cruel for mankind over all the earth. Nothing grew; no seed sprang up; [...] It seemed the whole race of men would die of famine. At last Zeus saw that he must take the matter in hand. He sent the gods to Demeter, one after another, to try to turn her from her anger, but she listened to none of them. Never would she let the earth bear fruit until she had seen her daughter. (1999, pp.58-59)

It is prominently evident that the linearity of pre-history and mythology, concerning mythological stories, have been shaped by women. In other words, the matriarchal culture has been dominant and authoritative in shaping humanity. However, in order to change and erase the matriarchal power over creation, patriarchy challenges and replaces everything which powerful women handle. It is probably not possible for patriarchy to reach its target when ‘the origin’ is considered. Thereby, Betty Bonham Lies in her *Earth’s Daughters: Stories of Women in Classical Mythology* (1999), concerns the significance of mythological female creativity.

Here, the purpose is to show the power of women and their body politics. Additionally, how these powerful women use their bodies despite patriarchy is seen and reflected in mythological narrations. So, the following reference will be about ‘The Warrior Women: The Amazons’. As it is known, the Amazons are “famous for their warlike qualities” (Lies, 1999, p.75).

³ The Mother Goddess (The Goddess of Grain), Roman Name: Ceres (Lies, 1999, p.x).

⁴ The Queen of the Underworld, in Latin Proserpine, Roman Name: Proserpina (Lies, 1999, p.x).

⁵ For further description of Demeter, see Lies’ *Earth’s Daughters: Stories of Women in Classical Mythology*, (Lies, 1999, p.142).

What makes the Amazons famous is that they isolate themselves totally from men. So, men are strictly excluded from their society. Therefore, the Amazons only raise female children who later become warriors just like them and they never let male children live with them and for this reason, they either kill the boys, or send them away to other places. The Amazons:

were warriors who could, and did, compete against the best male soldiers, and usually won. Their mother was Harmony, a nymph who loved peace, but their father was the fierce god Ares, and his descendants took after him. They worshipped Ares as the god of war and Artemis as the virgin goddess of female strength and hunting. How strange it must have seemed to male warriors to see these women, bows in hand, riding into battle! [...] And yet the Amazons were beautiful as well as warlike. But they did not go to war just for the fun of it. They only fought when they had good reason to. (Lies, 1999, pp.75-76)

Thereby, ‘the Amazons’ are powerful women and they use their powerful bodies against the things or men who threaten them. As Gregory Staley writes in his “‘Beyond Glorious Ocean’: Feminism, Myth, and America” (2006):

The Amazons represent female desire as well, as Cixous has shown, but a desire in which the women prevail so as to preserve their independence: ‘[The hero] dominates to destroy. She dominated not to be dominated; she dominates the dominator to destroy the space of domination.’ (Newly Born Woman, 116) The Amazons have long been popular figures among the women who challenge patriarchy, from Christine de Pisan to H           and beyond [...]. (Cixous qtd. in Staley, 2006, p.228)

On this basis, above mentioned women are considered women heroes, and the following references will mention a group of women who are called witches by patriarchy because of their extraordinary power or qualities, so men accuse them of being mad and call them ‘witches’.

Mythic depiction of ‘Powerful Witches’

Myths are seen as the product of men in which men distort women according to their own taste. As D  rschel states: “[i]n myths, culture, thus civilization is shown as a product of men, on the other hand women’s roles are confined to the private sphere” (D  rschel, 2011, p.97). As Mark Shorer asserts in *William Blake: The Politics of Vision* (1946): “[m]yth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of a man in the universe [...]” (Shorer qtd. in Guerin, 1966, p.156). Hence, this thematic point can be considered to be the motto of ‘Feminist Criticism of Myths’ through which feminists “[...] call attention to the androcentric nature of myths in which the world is interpreted through the lens of the discourse of men” (D  rschel, 2011, p.97). So, according to D  rschel: “women in myths are defined first and foremost by their domestic duties and they are defined by their relation to men; as daughters, wives, lovers or mothers” (2011, p.97). But, if those roles attributed by patriarchy for women are rejected then women are called either evil doers, devils, monsters, or witches⁶ because myths, which are produced throughout history, are expressed by the male discourse. However, powerful women representations in mythological references, mainly in ‘Greek mythology’, are condemned by patriarchy because the male scope sees that these powerful representations of women are the products of witches or evil sources.

On this basis, ‘Hecate’⁷, as one of the leading figures of witches in Greek mythology takes her special place. Hecate is considered one of the most powerful witches among others. It is expressed that when Hecate “was well disposed toward someone, Hecate would grant anything the person wished for: victory

⁶ As Sivriođlu stated etymologically: “once witch meant to be a wise woman” (Sivriođlu, 2016, p.9).

⁷ For further details about Hecate, see Lies’ *Earth’s Daughters: Stories of Women in Classical Mythology* (1999), p.155.

and glory in battle or in athletic contests, success in fishing or farming in fact prosperity in any endeavor. She concerned herself equally in the affairs of the great and the small: she was a wise advisor to kings, and the nurse of the young" (Lies, 1999, p.155). Despite the fact that patriarchy condemns witches, Hecate is a woman who provides a source of power for men. Thus, even men accept her power in Greek mythology. Therefore, it might be probable that in Greek mythology, one of the leading themes is about the fear of women in which women and power are mostly associated with one another, so, this fear becomes a major scope for men.

Another influential witch in Greek mythology is 'Medea⁸'. She is very beautiful and powerful, yet full of vengeance hence, she becomes one of the most feared witches of all. How Medea is transformed from a beautiful woman and a princess, into a witch is due to the fact that she loves deeply and passionately. It is this passion that makes Medea such an empowered, but alarmingly dangerous-evil woman. The passionate love affairs and infidelity change Medea dramatically. Medea is described as follows: "[f]rom her very earliest childhood, Medea was adept in the arts of sorcery. [...] Medea was the niece of the great enchantress Circe. Like her aunt, the princess was a devotee of the goddess Hecate. By the time she reached young womanhood, she was unsurpassed in the powers of witchcraft" (1999, p.158). Moreover, Medea's story can also be about the betrayal in which Medea is assumed to betray her father for a stranger, Jason. At the end of the story, it is seen that Medea does anything for Jason. She even kills her own brother and her own children, so she sets her revenge on Jason in the end. Consequently, it is asserted that "[e]verything Medea had done, good and evil alike, she had done for him" (1999, p.161).

The story of Medusa⁹, on the other hand, can be considered another influential mythological story in which the empowered and fearful woman image is again reflected. It is written that "[t]he story of Medusa is one of the most frightening of the transformation stories, for not only was the punishment of this woman unjust, but her metamorphosis made her a terrible monster who brought suffering to others" (1999, p.162).

Medusa's empowered and fearful description causing terror among men is expressed because "Medusa was one of the Gorgons" and "for the reason that whomever looked at them was turned instantly into stone" (Hamilton, 1999, p.200). Gillian M. E. Alban in her article entitled: "Medusa as Female Eye or Icon in Atwood, Murdoch, Carter, and Plath" (2013), explores Medusa as "the electrifying archetype, with her starring eyes and snakes for hair, petrifies her object" (Alban, 2013, p.163). According to Alban, Medusa's mythological story makes her a powerful female icon in which woman's psychic power is expressed.

The beautiful snake goddess of the life force, Medusa, whose name means "ruleress" or "queen" [...] was raped by Poseidon. This [...] took place on the altar of Medusa's alter-ego, the goddess Athene, who declared herself born of her father Zeus, and who notoriously cast her vote against the mother in Orestes's trial, forgetting that she was the child of Metis and one who inherited her wisdom. Athene punished the rape victim Medusa by demonizing her with snakes for hair, making her stare petrify beholders into stone. (2013, p.166)

⁸ For the overall story, see *The Quest of The Golden Fleece* (Hamilton, 1999, pp.160-180). Also see *Jason and The Argonauts in Apollodorus: The Library of Greek Mythology* A new translation by Robin Hard, (Hard, 1997, pp.48-57).

⁹ For the overall story of Medusa, see Lies' *Earth's Daughters: Stories of Women in Classical Mythology*, (Lies, 1999, p.162). Moreover, for further information about "The Story of Medusa", see Edith Hamilton's *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* Part Three: The Great Heroes Before The Trojan War / Perseus (Hamilton, 1999, pp.196-). For further analysis, see also Marija Gimbutas' *The Living Goddesses*, ed. Miriam Robbins Dexter (1999), pp.25-26.

Overall conclusion

Consequently, in regards to female mythological stories depicted so far, it can be clearly stated that men are more likely to see such empowered women as horrific, fearful and monstrous because patriarchal efforts evaluate these women myths from a traditional scope. As a result, the previously mentioned women myths are reflected unpleasantly. However, these female icons are considered to be the sources of empowerment for women. Therefore, it seems that patriarchy’s attempts to smear those powerful female icons look futile.

On this basis, by depending upon the current analyses, what is noteworthy is that those female myths, scrutinised so far, have partially been shaped by patriarchy. However, through such myths, it is also possible to observe that patriarchy, unconsciously shows women as stronger and empowered, but fearful and merciless creatures causing death and evil for men. If ‘the creation’ is considered, females are responsible for giving birth, life and everything. Thus, negative perspectives have consciously been put and shaped by patriarchy. In fact, what patriarchy shows is the consistency of women if the positive and negative images are considered carefully.

Therefore, it is possible to express that women are the source of life; they give birth and the life-path starts. However, it should be known that women can cause the fall at the same time not just because they are evil but, because they are empowered. Hence, in a patriarchal sense, it is utterly natural for men to put shame on these female-oriented myths in which women are empowered.

On this scope, patriarchy’s partial expressions might be the eminent reason for feminist women writers to challenge this inconsistent dichotomy that patriarchy created through myths. So, women writers work for both positive and negative associations of patriarchy against women. In other words, women are grateful that men created the female monster image to show women negatively. But, for women, this negativity shows women’s empowerment and women re-shape then convert these myths to use this negativity as being part of positivity showing the power of female-myths.

Lastly, women are empowered, they know their bodies better than men and women also know the politics of their bodies, they know they are fertile, they know they can cope with the difficulties they come across, they know how to struggle with men and patriarchy. For this reason, men should understand the existence of women. Because women are aware of patriarchy’s wicked policies in which they are negatively expressed, as stated hitherto, either as evil doers or monsters in every man-made myth. However, women know that even if they are associated with death or birth, it is not an important issue for them, contrarily, what concerns women is that they are against distorting facts in which patriarchy performs to form their sexist dualities. Yet, men should know that even if it is futile for women to re-shape the myths that patriarchy created, women changed, change and will change this man-made tradition. If women cannot change this panorama, then it should be known that they are happy with having images of death and other negative attributions because these attributions make already empowered women stronger, and they prefer death and evil qualities rather than ‘being passive and subjugated’. As S. Yumiko Hulvey expresses in her “Myths and Monsters: The Female Body As The Site For Political Agendas” (2000): “[i]f women today cannot be revered or worshipped as the creators of life, they prefer to be feared as agents of death, as decreed by myth, rather than bow down meekly as the oppressed Other” (Hulvey, 2000, p.88).

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