
Greek Myth [course]

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Background Question: How is the Mother Goddess archetype embodied by Gaia and Demeter, and how has the Mother Goddess archetype changed between these two deities, and what core aspects of it have remained the same?

Gaia and Demeter: The Mother Goddesses

The association between the fertility of the earth and the generative powers of the mother can be found in countless different myths and cultures. The archetype of the Mother Goddess arises in order to deify this association between the fertility of the natural world and the fertility of the mother's womb. In Greek Myth the deities Gaia and her granddaughter Demeter best exemplify the Mother Goddess archetype. Though these two deities, one can see how the concept of the Mother Goddess has changed through divine generations, and what core aspects have remained unchanged: Gaia represents motherhood in its most literal form - to produce and nurture progeny, while Demeter represents motherhood in a more metaphorical sense. There are three key aspects of the Mother Goddess archetype that remain unchanged between Gaia and Demeter - both deities are perpetually conceiving new progeny; they both have the ability to use parthenogenesis; and lastly they share the role of nurturing humanity by controlling the production of food in the mortal world.

Mother Goddesses are eternally ready for impregnation, because of that they are perpetually with child in some respect. Gaia, being the permanently fertile earth, is the best example of this concept. In Hesiod's *Theogony* Gaia is depicted in eternal copulation with Uranus before his castration. Although her children cannot be born, her inexhaustible fertility allows her to keep conceiving new progeny, even without birthing them (Morford et al., 69). The fact that Gaia is permanently ready for impregnation is echoed in myth whenever there is an exchange of divine fluid (seed blood, etc...) and soil. For example when Hephaestus's seed falls to the earth when he tries to rape Athena, and from it springs Erichthonius. Although many accounts claim Athena is the mother of Erichthonius because the seed first fell onto her leg; she is not impregnated by the seed, but rather discards it to Gaia by throwing it onto the soil. In doing so, she impregnates the soil with Hephaestus's seed. The soil is Gaia's womb, and because the soil comes from a deity it is divine. Nothing of divine can go to waste, so like the seed of Hephaestus, the fertilized soil cannot go to waste either. Taking this into account, physically speaking Erichthonius is not the son of Athena, but Gaia and Hephaestus.

Demeter also exemplifies the idea of perpetually conceiving new children; this can be seen through Demeter's symbolic relationship with her daughter Persephone and the change of the seasons. Persephone's spiritual resurrection from the underworld each spring is symbolized by the seasonal budding of new shoots, which in turn die down into the soil in autumn to repeat the cycle (Morford et al., 346). Persephone's seasonal descent to the underworld is symbolic of her dying and returning to Demeter's womb. Demeter - being an earth deity - symbolically receives her daughter into her womb, just as the dead vegetation is received back into the soil. When Persephone emerges from the underworld, she is reborn as the daughter of Demeter, and as the new vegetation. Demeter will give Persephone rebirth for as long as the cycle of the

seasons continues. In doing so the fundamental cycle of life, death, and rebirth of plant life is preserved.

Parthenogenesis is the purest form of motherhood because it is procreation without any need of the male; a Mother Goddess is able to use this ability either literally or symbolically. Gaia best exemplifies this ability, because her parthenogenetic ability extends to both divine and mortal life. Whenever Gaia's pathogenesis is involved, it always ushers in a new era of some sort. The Greek Deluge myth is a good example of this concept, because through parthenogenesis Gaia ultimately creates an entire new race of human beings - the Age of Heroes (Morford et al., 102). At the end of the deluge, Gaia's body provides the key to regenerating the human race. "The great parent is the earth [Gaia]; I believe that the stones in the body of the earth are called her bones'...and [Deucalion and Pyrrha] tossed the stones behind their steps as they were ordered. The stones began to lose their hardness and rigidity and... soon the form of a human being could be seen," (*Metamorphosis I*. 392-414). The resulting generation - the Age of Heroes - is an autochthonic one because they were directly born from Gaia's own body via parthenogenesis. Although Deucalion and Pyrrha are the ones to cast the stones, they have nothing to do with actual transformation of stone to human beings. Also, there is nothing in the myth to suggest a coupling with Deucalion and Gaia, as there is no exchange of bodily fluids. This proves the Ages of Heroes is wholly Gaia's creation.

Demeter, like many later-generation goddesses, does not have Gaia's power of parthenogenesis in the literal sense; she cannot create other deities or mortals without need of the male. However her control over vegetation echoes this innate ability of having control over life. This ability is a symbolic form of parthenogenesis, that comes from being directly descended

from Gaia - the original Mother Goddess. “[Gaia] she is significant in all periods, either maintaining her own identity or lurking behind...more complex and sophisticated concepts of female deities...Rhea, Hera, Demeter..are all wholly or in part deities of fertility,” (Morford et al., 63). Demeter parthenogenetic ability is what allows her to have control over the birth and death of vegetation. There is no passage in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* that alludes to any influence of a male deity or exchange of divine bodily fluids, so this ability to control the birth and death of vegetation comes wholly from her own identity as a Mother Goddess descended from Gaia. In the Rape of Persephone, Demeter and Gaia are shown to have an important relationship with one another when it comes to fertility. Gaia is the ever-fertile earth, and Demeter decides when and what vegetation will come forth from Gaia's body. In this myth Demeter's control of Gaia's progenerative abilities is best exemplified when Demeter makes it so that nothing can grow on the earth by refusing to let Gaia send up new shoots from the seeds buried in the soil. “The earth would not send up a single sprout, for Demeter of the lovely crown kept the seed covered,” (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 2. 257-260). This passage appoints Demeter as a mediator between Gaia's bounty and humanity. Until the Rape of Persephone, Gaia was the sole progenitor of plant life and food, but in this myth Demeter comes forth to regulate the flow of plant growth. This control of vegetation also is what allows Demeter to fulfill the third key aspect of a Mother Goddess - to become a divine nourisher.

The Mother Goddess's domains also entitles her to the power to determine if humanity is to be provided with food or not, and thus plays the important role of the divine nourisher. Gaia and Demeter are both divine nourishers of humanity because all food of mortals comes from them. Gaia represents the fertile earth from which all food grows, and Demeter is the mediator to allow (or deny) humanity access to Gaia's bounty. For example In the Golden Age of Man

where humanity is peaceful, Gaia rewards their virtue by giving humanity abundant food on her own accord. “[During the Golden Age of Man] Gaia willingly, untouched, not wounded yet by hoe or plough, gave all her bounteous store; men were content with nature’s food unforced,” (*Metamorphosis I*. 99-102). The Golden Age of Man represents the time when Gaia was the only divine nourisher, rather than sharing her domain with Demeter. However, the Rape of Persephone is a turning point in the production of food, because in this myth Demeter takes on the role of a second divine nourisher alongside Gaia. After of the Rape of Persephone, Demeter sends her messenger Triptolemus to spread the agricultural way of life to humanity (Morford et al., 347). Demeter’s creation of agriculture represents her rise to power as a second full-fledged Mother Goddess, because she now has fulfilled all three key attributes of a Mother Goddess; is permanently conceiving, has parthenogenetic abilities, and is a divine nourisher. With the institute of agriculture, the earth will no longer “give freely on its own” as it had during the time before Zeus and the Olympians were in power. Between The Golden Age of Man and the Rape of Persephone, the way in which humanity receives nourishment from the Mother Goddess(es) has become a much more complex system. Gaia is the first part of the system - the permanently fertile earth. Demeter is the second part- the advent of agriculture which allows humanity to harness the earth’s natural fertility. Demeter’s daughter Persephone, although not a Mother Goddess herself, represents the end product of the system - budding shoots that turn into ripe grain. Just as Persephone is the child of Demeter, so too does she represent the “child” of food production.

The Mother Goddess archetype is one the most well-known archetype in myth, and its influence in myth ultimately stems from the three core principles of the archetype - perpetually conceiving progeny, parthenogenesis, and the divine nourisher. Gaia and Demeter are the two

most important and influential embodiments of the Mother Goddess in Greek Myth because they utilize these three aspects in their own unique ways to bring out the Mother Goddess's power to the fullest. The power of these two Mother Goddesses stands strong even in the patriarchal bias of Greek Myth. In this light, Gaia and Demeter's influence in myth is can be seen as a hidden principle of female identity and power, one that stems from the innate progenitive abilities of the female. It is a female power that has managed to survive in a society that heavily favors the male. By celebrating the Mother Goddess, the role of the female in myth maintains a small triumph. It is a reminder that no matter how the female is viewed, the mother's generative power remains undiminished.

Work Cited

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