11-2017

Containing the Kalon Kakon: The Portrayal of Women in Ancient Greek Mythology

Dessa Meehan
Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>

Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meehan, Dessa (2017) "Containing the Kalon Kakon: The Portrayal of Women in Ancient Greek Mythology," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.
DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2017.070202
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol7/iss2/2>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Containing the *Kalon Kakon*:
The Portrayal of Women in Ancient Greek Mythology

Dessa Meehan

Western Washington University

(Bellingham, WA)

According to the *American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, mythology is defined as “the body of myths belonging to a culture” or “a set of stories, traditions, or beliefs associated with a particular group or the history of an event, arising naturally or deliberately fostered.”¹ Both of these definitions point out a vital component of mythology: the impact cultural history had on its inception. There is a clear connection between culture and fable; fables reflected society and, in turn, perpetuated societal relationships evident within the mythology. The associations between mythological portrayal of human characters mirrored the patriarchal society to which the folklore belonged, maintaining gender relationships already imbedded in the cultures that created them. Gendered relationships as portrayed in myth would not have been effective if they were not also a fact of life.

In ancient Greece, the portrayal of women in mythology as deceitful, manipulative, and the downfall of men corresponded with oppressive treatment and forced seclusion, which mirrored Greek patriarchal society. Through a discussion of three case studies, the myths of Pandora, Aphrodite, and Helen of Troy, this paper argues that the depiction of women in Greek mythology perpetuated their treatment in society as elite men used these legends as instructions

¹ *The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition*, s.v. “Mythology,” accessed June 5, 2016, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/mythology>.

detailing the correct way to deal with their female counterparts. Women were viewed by men as examples of what would happen if an elite woman was given even just a modicum of independence. Because of these lessons, instructional texts such as Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* drew upon the morals of the stories when teaching their audience the importance of keeping elite women solely in the domestic sphere. This forced gendered segregation was meant to mirror an idealized version of elite society. The examination of the mythic tradition in ancient Greece, as well as the way myths influenced education, leads to an effective analysis of the genre of instructional literature. Texts that were often used as educational tools, like *Oeconomicus* or Homer's epic poetry, deliver themes of patriarchy and male domination that are hard to miss: men were in charge; women were always subordinate to their male counterparts.

The Greek Patriarchy

Ancient Greece in the Classical period (5th and 4th centuries B.C.) was organized, politically and socially, in a patriarchy based in small city-states called *poleis*. Historian Mogens Hansen contends that traditionally, "a state is principally a territory, a *polis* is principally a people... a community of men ready to defend their society."² Men were the only ones able to participate in political, military, or social spheres, while women were never given the same rights in these domains throughout all of ancient Greek history, regardless of their individual social position in the community. Xenophon, in his work *Oeconomicus*, provides one of the clearest views on this male-female separation when he explains: "I think the god from the very beginning

² Mogens Herman Hansen, *Polis: An Introduction to the Ancient Greek City-State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 64.

designed the nature of women for the indoor work and concerns and the nature of man for the outdoor work. For he prepared man's body and mind to be more capable of enduring cold and heat and travelling and military campaigns, and so he assigned the outdoor work to him. Because the woman was physically less capable of endurance, I think the god has evidently assigned the indoor work to her."³ According to Xenophon's records, it is the *god*—a mysterious, male, mythological entity—who has made these separations part of the Greek way of life. By doing so, Xenophon not only examined the extreme influence the Greek pantheon had on each *polis*' society, but he also reinforced the relative positions of men and women by declaring that patriarchy was based on the natural order of things and the divine will of the gods.

Ancient Greek mythology, when it came to displays of male importance and power in the patriarchy, also upheld the prominence of men's positions in the community over the harsh attitude towards women. Greek myths were full of double standards for men and women, with male gods clearly getting the benefit of the doubt in most situations. According to Classics professor Barry Powell, "Although male gods regularly pursued mortal women, it was altogether shameful for a goddess to consort with a mortal man."⁴ By doing so, a goddess would have, for all intents and purposes, been placed on an equal playing field as male gods – in this case, in terms of amorous desires—thus necessitating some sort of recognition of a woman's contribution outside of their seclusion forcing men to give up some of the power that they desired to control. Homer's *Odyssey* applies this same idea of necessary seclusion when Telemachus states "Mother, go inside the house and tend to your own work... the bow is the concern of men, and to me most of all, since the authority in this house belongs to me."⁵ Telemachus ordered his mother

³ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, trans. Sarah Pomeroy (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 143.

⁴ Barry Powell, *Classical Myth*. 8th ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2015), 210.

⁵ Eva Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters: The Role & Status of Women in Greek & Roman Antiquity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 26.

to leave all militaristic action to him while she content herself with weaving and other acceptable feminine pursuits. If he had allowed his mother even the slightest bit of influence or opinion in ‘male matters,’ Telemachus would have effectively given up his sole authority in the household and elevated his mother, a woman, to a level of input previously designated to men.

As we will see below with some pointed examples, most of Greek myths portrayed women as deceitful, shameful, manipulative, and a scourge to man, thus necessitating male domination in order to keep women from fragmenting society. All three of the myths we will examine portrayed women as having multiple of these characteristics: Pandora was shameful and a plague upon society as she released all pain and suffering into the world. Aphrodite was deceitful, manipulative, and disgraceful by flaunting her sexuality in a way that would have equated to a prostitute amongst mortal women. Helen of Troy shamed her husband and her *polis* by leaving her family for another man; by doing so, she caused the deaths of countless warriors as her husband fought for her return. With these myths to guide their way, it is no wonder that those who could afford it – usually men of the noble class – kept their women in seclusion, as the fables clearly outlined the perils of allowing women to exercise independence.

The Greek patriarchy was evidenced not only in mythology and philosophical literature, such as that of Xenophon, but continued in the workings of the rest of society. Greek playwrights often had female characters in their tales; however, these characters were never played by female actors, as this would have necessitated a woman exiting seclusion and taking the stage. Rather, a male actor donned a female costume, exposing “one of the most marked features of Greek theatrical mimesis, namely that men are the only actors in civic theatre; in order to represent women on stage, men must always put on a feminine costume and mask.”⁶ Since these plays

⁶ F.I. Zeitlin, “Playing the Other: Theatre, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama,” in *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World*, ed. Laura McClure (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 105.

were performed for a predominantly male audience and all actors were male, both the audience and the performers contributed to the rigid patriarchy that was present. Seclusion of women was also a sign of high standing in a community, “indulged in by those who could afford it, and emulated by others striving for respectability.”⁷ If keeping women in isolation was a marker of status, it is clear to see how anyone desiring to gain social power and respectability would attempt to do the same. Using this understanding, it seems as if respectability equated to a male’s upholding of the patriarchy, or the dominance that men expected and exercised, which effectively secluded women and kept them in a male’s grasp.

Pandora: A Plague upon Men

One of the most recognizable stories of misogyny in ancient Greece was the tale of Pandora’s Box, a tale that recorded the imposition of the greatest affliction to man: women. Powell states, “The folktale of Pandora, like the biblical story of Adam and Eve, is etiological to explain the origin of woman, marriage, and suffering in the world.”⁸ From her conception by Zeus, Pandora was meant to be a punishment after Prometheus stole fire from the gods. As recorded in Hesiod’s *Work and Days*, Zeus upbraids Prometheus shouting, “You are glad that you have outwitted me and stolen fire – a great plague to you yourself and to men that shall be. But I will give men as the price for fire an evil thing in which they may all be glad of heart while they embrace their own destruction.”⁹ The entire formation of the idea of woman was as a

⁷ Susan Walker, “Women and Housing in Classical Greece: The Archaeological Evidence,” in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 81.

⁸ Powell, *Myth*, 115.

⁹ Hesiod, “Works and Days,” in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), lines 55-59, accessed April 27, 2016, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?jsessionid=2796C5C0955EDC919D9D0DDF528E973C?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0132%3Acard%3D42>.

punishment for man's wrongdoing; Pandora was a deception, beautiful on the outside, while within she was filled with chaos, trickery, and ultimately, misery. Despite the fact that it was Prometheus, a male deity, who began the divine-mortal conflict, neither he nor Zeus were ever blamed for their part in releasing evil into the world. That designation was given solely to Pandora, a woman who would not have been created had Prometheus not stolen fire from the gods. Sorrow and pain were not caused by a man's folly; rather, they were caused by a woman's. The designation of blame is one of the most patriarchal themes of this tale: Pandora, though she is just as much a victim of Zeus' punishment as men, was the one who was declared responsible while Prometheus got off without blame.

The patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies continue throughout the rest of the story, especially when Hesiod chronicled Pandora opening the container: "By now the hands of the woman lifted the jar's heavy lid and allowed them [torment, pain, and disease] all to escape, planning the bitterest of sorrows for man. Hope only remained in a prison she could not escape... for the woman had replaced the great heavy lid. But the other numberless miseries were spread over all humankind."¹⁰ Hesiod states in no uncertain terms that it was Pandora who was responsible for afflicting the rest of society with evil and darkness; the only mistake men made was allowing women to enter their homes. Had Epimetheus turned Pandora away when she was sent to live with him, the box would not have been opened and evil would still lie safely tucked away, away from the prying and obviously destructive hands of women. Even the containment of hope in the jar clearly placed the blame of introducing evil into the world at Pandora's feet. She shut the lid of the container before hope could rush out and mitigate at least some of the effects of the newfound darkness. Hesiod states above that "the woman replaced the great heavy lid" but

¹⁰ Hesiod, "Works and Days," lines 87-92.

already “the other miseries were spread over all humankind.”¹¹ Pandora in a sense punished men twice, once by the original release of evil, and once by shutting in the one thing that could shine through the despair: hope. Pandora’s explicit depiction as the scourge of man gives us a glimpse of the ancient Greek view of women, namely that they are “weak, fickle, and opportunistic,” bound up in the unconscious desire to do harm to men.¹² Based on the so-called facts the Greeks had because of this written fable, it is clear that the oppression, isolation, and misogyny shown to women in Classical Greece was meant to keep women from inflicting any more destruction.

Pandora’s depiction as weak, deceptive, and the downfall of man correlated with male oppression and isolation of elite women in the Greek world. In *Theogony*, Hesiod writes, “Of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble, no helpmeets in hateful poverty, but only in wealth.”¹³ Hesiod attributed all evil and darkness to the actions of one woman; because of this, he urged the rest of mankind to control the women in their lives so nothing of the like might happen again. Helen King explains how, “For the Greeks, woman is a necessary evil, a *kalon kakon*; an evil because she is undisciplined and licentious, lacking the self-control of which men are capable, yet necessary to society as constructed by men, in order to reproduce it.”¹⁴ It is this view that explains why women were relegated to household duties while men were given the authority elsewhere. In the household, women could be shaped and molded by men to be obedient, submissive, and subordinate, three characteristics that would counteract the deceptiveness that Pandora displayed.

Xenophon chronicled this reality in *Oeconomicus*, recording the nobleman Ischomachus

¹¹ Hesiod, “Works and Days,” lines 91-92.

¹² Cantarella, *Pandora*, 28.

¹³ Hesiod, “Theogony,” in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), lines 591-593, accessed April 27, 2016, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text;jsessionid=DF4DFA267B7DB1D59A09257D8>.

¹⁴ Helen King, “Bound to Bleed: Artemis and Greek Women,” in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 110.

as describing how his wife “had spent her previous years under careful supervision so that she might see and hear and speak as little as possible.”¹⁵ In regards to the noble class, “a girl’s upbringing is represented as the ‘taming’ or ‘breaking in’ of a filly, and marriage is the end of this process.”¹⁶ Ischomachus speaks of training his wife to become the perfect docile servant so that “she might become the sort of woman that she ought to be,” namely one that was the exact opposite of Pandora.¹⁷ Xenophon’s fictional account of his discussion with Ischomachus represented the idealized version of elite society for which all Greek men, especially elite Greek men, strove. Because elite men sought to emulate this instructional text, they modeled their own practices of female sequestration on Ischomachus’ actions; essentially, they used Ischomachus’ speech as a rulebook on how to isolate their women, gain respectability, and mold wives and daughters so that they were nothing like Pandora. The isolation of elite women seems to have been done for three main reasons: one, the protection of the Greek world by keeping the threat of women behind closed doors; two, in order to allow men to practice their misogynistic and patriarchal ideologies for reasons of status and power; and three, to ensure inheritance through the male line, since maternity was determinable while paternity was less assured. If women were kept within the household, learning, as stated above, to “see and hear and speak as little as possible,” they would have no desire nor ability to gain any sort of comparable influence to men.

Aphrodite: Goddess of Love and Desire

Mortal women like Pandora were not the only ones portrayed as deceitful and

¹⁵ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 139.

¹⁶ King, “Bound,” 111.

¹⁷ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 139.

manipulative; Aphrodite, the immortal daughter of Zeus, was relatively consistently represented as scheming, untrustworthy, and cunning. The Greek poetess Sappho described her in one of her poems as “Fancy-throned deathless Aphrodite, deceitful child of Zeus.”¹⁸ Aphrodite held remarkable power over the hearts of both men and women alike as she was known for being the goddess of love, sexual desire, and erotic appeal.¹⁹ She herself displayed all three of these characteristics, blatantly flaunting her sexuality in such a way that there was no doubt that Aphrodite was not the obedient, virginal elite woman the Greeks tolerated. Instead, she represented all ancient Greek men’s fears: an independent, sensual, promiscuous woman who carried on affairs despite the fact that “it was altogether shameful for a goddess to consort with a mortal man.”²⁰ One such instance is the tale of Aphrodite’s liaison with Anchises, a Trojan prince “with the form of a god.”²¹ Zeus made Aphrodite desire Anchises as a sort of payback for her trickery in making other gods lust after mortal women. He wanted to refute her claims “that *she alone* drove them to couple with mortal women, who bore them sons who were destined to perish” (emphasis mine).²² Zeus’ action of casting “a sweet spell of desire” upon Aphrodite was meant to prove that she did not hold exclusive power regarding love and desire; Zeus had the ultimate power of such feelings and was more than willing to exercise that power over his own daughter in order to prove his dominance over her.

After Aphrodite was struck with lust for Anchises, she flew down to Troy prepared to use all her wiles to seduce him: “Aphrodite stopped in front of the hero, disguising her height and form to resemble an unmarried maiden... But the moment the Trojan saw her he viewed her

¹⁸ Sappho, “Fragment 1 (Diehl),” in *Classical Myth*, 8th ed., by Barry Powell (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2015), 202.

¹⁹ Powell, *Myth*, 202.

²⁰ Powell, *Myth*, 210.

²¹ Sappho, “Hymn to Aphrodite,” in *Classical Myth*, 8th ed. by Barry Powell (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2015), 211.

²² Sappho, “Hymn,” 211.

form in amazement, wondering at her stature, her beauty, her glorious garments.”²³ It is notable that Aphrodite chose the unthreatening disguise of an unmarried maiden in her quest to seduce Anchises because this disguise, as well as her response, emphasized Aphrodite’s deceitfulness. Sappho explains that the goddess puts on a disguise because she did not want her godhead and divinity to frighten Anchises after he opened his eyes; yet Aphrodite later lied to Anchises when he asked her what goddess she was, as it is not readily apparent through her disguise.²⁴ Instead of answering his question with the truth, that she was in fact Aphrodite, she blatantly lied to Anchises, stating, “Anchises, noblest of humans born on the face of the earth, no goddess, of course, am I. Why liken me to the immortals? I am no more than a woman.”²⁵ Her deceit is obvious in her response. She did not want Anchises to know her true identity because he would not otherwise have slept with her.²⁶ As soon as he discovered who his bedpartner really was Anchises exclaimed, “It was you who led me astray... for the mortal man who mates with a goddess undying can never again be a man.”²⁷ The lies and manipulation, in effect, caused Anchises to lose his very identity of being a man. The fact that these lies and manipulation were caused by a goddess’ rather promiscuous desires was just another level of grief, as it proved the consequences – loss of power and loss of face – of giving into a woman’s demands.

Aphrodite’s adulterous affairs were not consigned to mortal men; her shameful behavior can also be found in relation to other members of divinity. One such instance was Aphrodite’s disastrous affair with her brother Ares, god of war. Homer described how the pair “lay together

²³ Sappho, “Hymn,” 212.

²⁴ Sappho, “Hymn,” 212.

²⁵ Sappho, “Hymn,” 212.

²⁶ Note that Zeus, in many of his sexual liaisons with earthly women, also disguised himself in various forms including a shepherd, swan, and ant. However, notably different from Aphrodite, Zeus did not suffer condemnation as a result. He was not seen as manipulative or deceitful, two characteristics that were attributed to Aphrodite’s show of promiscuity. Instead, Zeus’ behavior was part of the natural order of things, accepted in the Greek way of life as another aspect of patriarchy.

²⁷ Sappho, “Hymn,” 214.

in the house of Hephaestus secretly; and Ares gave her [Aphrodite] many gifts, and shamed the bed of the lord Hephaestus.”²⁸ Both Ares and Aphrodite committed the sin of adultery in Hephaestus’ palace, yet because of her power over love and lust, it seems as if Aphrodite was ultimately the one blamed for the indiscretion. Even Hermes, after witnessing the snare that Hephaestus fashioned lying over the couple, stated, “Thrice as many bonds inextricable might clasp me about... but that I might sleep by the side of golden Aphrodite.”²⁹ Even though Ares was wrong to cuckold Hephaestus and sleep with his wife, all of the gods saw the reason for him doing so as a reaction to Aphrodite’s beauty and promiscuity. Aphrodite’s behavior and reputation of being promiscuous was seen as the wrong, whereas gods’ and men’s contribution to the encounter was something that could not have been helped, because Aphrodite’s desirable spells completely ensnared them. There was nothing the men could do to escape the wanton lust of Aphrodite, and in this she served as an example of all women.

Aphrodite’s depiction as manipulative, deceitful, and promiscuous influenced men’s treatment of women by applying the same characteristics as part of a woman’s nature. Pygmalion described his view of women when he was “critical of faults which nature has so deeply planted through their female hearts.”³⁰ Pygmalion, though a character in myth, represented the generalized Greek male opinion of the nature of women, namely that they are misleading, shameful, and need to be held in the firm grasp of man. Eva Cantarella explains the idea further: “Rigorous respect for the division of roles and obedience, then, are the virtues one expects from a woman, together with modesty and fidelity – all typical virtues of a subordinate woman... The

²⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 8.267-279, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0136%3Abook%3D8%3Acard%3D250>.

²⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 8.340-342.

³⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Brookes More (Boston, MA: Cornhill Publishing, 1922), 10.244-245, accessed April 28, 2016, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0028%3Abook%3D10%3Acard%3D243>

Homeric woman is not only subordinate but also the victim of a fundamentally misogynistic ideology... the Homeric hero mistrusts women, even the most devoted and submissive of them.”³¹ With Aphrodite’s portrayal as uncaring about pre-established societal rules, ancient Greek men learned that they could not trust any woman’s obedience or character, thus condemning them to a life under misogynistic policy. For if an immortal goddess could not obey the rules of society, how would flawed, mortal woman? The safest place men could keep their women was safely locked away in the house, away from the temptations of adultery and other sins. Separated from and subordinate to men, there was no way elite women could use the wiles that nature had given them to tempt men into their grasp.

Xenophon also supported the segregation of women as a means to control them, protect the household, and keep women from succumbing to their natural lustful desires. Looking at the conversations between men described in *Oeconomicus*, it is easy to deduce that they believed women were good for two things only: household management and childbirth. Xenophon wrote that Ischomachus taught his wife “to consider herself guardian of the household laws” and that it “seems natural for a decent woman to be concerned about her children and not to neglect them.”³² In the former excerpt, Ischomachus effectively shut his wife inside the walls of their home, telling her to be the guardian of those laws (a sort of pseudo-independence) while he took care of outside matters, matters that were much more important than anything domestic. In the second excerpt, the responsibility of childbirth and rearing the children was placed solely upon the shoulders of the wife; there is nothing in the passage that implies Ischomachus took any great interest in child raising. Aphrodite had neither the responsibility of managing her husband’s household, despite the fact that she was temporarily married to Hephaestus, nor the responsibility

³¹ Cantarella, *Pandora*, 27.

³² Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 159.

of raising her children, as they were all immortal, and thus she was able to practice her wiles on unsuspecting men. Obviously Ischomachus, and Xenophon by extension, hoped that, with the responsibilities of the household and children, women would be kept far from anything that might unleash their buried deception and manipulatively.

Helen of Troy: The Face that Launched a Thousand Ships

The legend of the Trojan War is unique in this paper in its portrayal of women as deceitful and full of wrongdoing because it places the blame of the war's instigation on two women – one divine and the other human – rather than focusing on one or the other. Both Aphrodite, an immortal member of the Greek pantheon, as well as Helen, King Menelaus' mortal wife, played integral parts in the origin of the conflict, and neither of them positive. Aphrodite's role was less direct than Helen's, but no less impactful to the decimation of the city of Troy. In the story of "The Judgement of Paris," Aphrodite, along with her divine family members Hera and Athena, fought amongst themselves about who was the most beautiful goddess and was to receive the prize of a golden apple.³³ The Trojan prince Paris was brought in by Zeus to be an impartial judge in the matter; each goddess promised him something of value if Paris should choose them as the fairest. "Hera offered domination over all the world; Athena offered a glorious military career; but Aphrodite offered him the best prize – the most beautiful woman in the world."³⁴ All three goddesses were portrayed in their argument as envious and vain, willing to use all of their powers regardless of the consequences in order to gain the status of 'Fairest.'

³³ Lucian, "The Judgement of Paris," in *Lucian's Dialogues*, trans. Howard Williams (London: George Bell and Sons, 1907), 38.

³⁴ Powell, *Myth*, 529.

Aphrodite specifically had no problem offering Paris the most beautiful woman in the world despite the fact that she was already married to King Menelaus and would not have been given up without a fight. It was Aphrodite's obvious disregard of the consequences – as well as societal institutions like marriage, the household, and her *polis* – that sparked the beginning of the Trojan War. Such was the power of the goddess of love.

Helen was a victim of Aphrodite's selfish schemes, cast under a spell of love that wasn't of her own making. Though this is true, Helen was still portrayed as a cause of the Trojan War since she abandoned her husband, family, and kingdom in favor of a younger, more virile lover.³⁵ In Aeschylus' drama *Agamemnon*, he recorded that King Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter in order to "prosecute a war fought over a woman."³⁶ There is no mention of Paris' part in Helen's disappearance nor Aphrodite's influence over the event; instead, the entire blame of the war is placed, by the male poet Aeschylus, solely on Helen's shoulders. Her beauty was a curse. Paris desired to have Helen as a lover because she was the most beautiful woman in all the world; Menelaus, his brother Agamemnon, and their individual armies followed Helen to the shores of Troy in order to bring that beauty back to where she belonged. Even the elders of Troy did not condemn Menelaus and Agamemnon for blockading the city, stating in Homer's *Illiad*, "No one can blame the Trojans or yet the Achaeans with fancy shinguards for enduring so much and so long for such a beautiful woman."³⁷ Yet they also go on to say, "Let her sail away to her country, and not be left here in Troy, a scourge to us and our children."³⁸ There is no doubt that both parties in the war – the Trojans and the Achaeans – blamed Helen and her beauty for

³⁵ Lucian, "Judgement," 48.

³⁶ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Herbert Smyth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), line 225, accessed April 30, 2016, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0004%3Acard%3D218>.

³⁷ Homer, "The Illiad," in *Classical Myth*, 8th ed. by Barry Powell (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2015), 521, line 3.155-156.

³⁸ Homer, "Illiad," 3.158-159.

causing the conflict, but neither was either side going to give up and allow the war to end. As women were not present on the battlefield, violence between men was what perpetuated the Trojan War; yet because Helen's abandonment of her home *polis* was the origin of the conflict, it is she who is ultimately blamed for every warrior's death.

Even Helen recognized her depiction as the downfall of the city and a punishment to men. When speaking to King Priam of Troy, she described Agamemnon as "ruler of an empire, combining the wisdom of kings with a soldier's courage and skill. Brother-in-law to a slut."³⁹ Helen specifically referred to herself as a slut when describing her brother-in-law. Most likely, this self-reference was Homer reminding his male audience both of the cause of the Trojan War as well as the dangers of falling prey to a woman's attractiveness. Later in the dialogue, Homer describes Helen as "the glory of women."⁴⁰ The dichotomy between his description of Helen as a slut and the glory of women is telling. If Helen has already been designated as a slut, a scourge to Troy, and a punishment for all the men fighting for her, how is she still the glory of women? This effectively placed all other women below her in terms of male expectation of obedience. If Helen was promiscuous, so were all other women; if Helen caused destruction and devastation, so could all other Greek women; if Helen had the ability to cause a war and bring turmoil to the entire Greek world, so did all other women. Plato explains in *The Republic* that Homer's epics were the main source of education for young elite men; he states that "Homer [was] the educator of Greece" and that he encountered many Greek nobles that believed "every man ought to model his life on the poet."⁴¹ With this in mind, we can see that Greek men took Homer at his word; they heard the lessons that were taught in his transcription of the myth and obeyed them. In order

³⁹ Homer, "Illiad," 3.178-179.

⁴⁰ Homer, "Illiad," 3.224.

⁴¹ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Raymond Larsen (Wheeling, IL: Harlan-Davidson, 1978), 314, line 10.606e.

to keep their world from repeating the disastrous fate of the Trojans, men needed to censor and separate women from the public realm; only then could there be any possibility of a relatively peaceful life.

Helen's abandonment of her home *polis* in Mycenaean Sparta and subsequent move to Troy were almost worse than the actual seduction. According to K.J. Dover: "To seduce a woman of citizen status was more culpable than to rape her, not only because rape was presumed to be unpremeditated but because seduction involved the capture of her affection and loyalty; it was the degree of offense against the man to whom she belonged, not her own feelings that mattered."⁴² A cuckolded husband was insulted twice: once by his wife when she gave her affection to someone else, and once by his wife's lover when he accepted that affection. In order to prevent this possible scenario – whether the seduction culminated in rape or consensual sex – elite men segregated their women so as to prevent adultery from happening, thus ensuring any resulting children's paternity. The story of Helen of Troy explained to men, quite clearly, the consequences when this segregation was not enforced. With this history in mind, Classical Greek noblemen strictly imposed the misogynistic policy. The situation of Helen's abandonment was not a scenario any Greek husband wanted to experience, not only because he would lose his wife but also because he would lose face in the public eye. Preventing this from taking place was paramount to any Greek male. The solution? Forced seclusion and oppression of all possible Greek women so that they would not fall victim to "the blindness and folly that Aphrodite injected" and therefore disrupt male dominance.⁴³

⁴² K.J. Dover, "Classical Greek Attitudes to Sexual Behavior," in *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*, ed. Laura McClure (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 22.

⁴³ Homer, *Odyssey*, 4.260.

Conclusion

Cultural portrayal of women in ancient Greek mythology is both a representation of and an influence on the treatment or place of Greek women within society. Men were in charge; women, even those of a comparable status, were never seen as equal to their male counterparts. In part, this reality was due to the lessons imparted through instructional literature. Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* strongly implies, if not blatantly states, a desire to seclude elite women for the benefit of the male members in the Greek household, necessitating impersonal treatment in order to mold a wife to distinct and exact specifications. Hesiod's letter to Perses in *Works and Days* is nothing if not an attempt to instruct property owning Greeks on agricultural techniques.⁴⁴ Though, at its heart, it did not seem as if the treatment of elite women and instruction in the agricultural arts are in any way connected, the fact that Hesiod wrote his treatise on farming as specific instructions meant to be followed shows how he also expected his warnings about women to be heeded. Hesiod's description of Pandora as the downfall of all mankind was meant as a warning to men about the perils of allowing women out of seclusion.

There is no doubt that ancient Greek instructional texts were meant to keep elite men in charge. In fact, in the texts examined above, not once do the women discussed have their own voices. All the texts were written about men and only had male characters in them. Ischomachus, when mentioning his wife, states how she learned "to see and hear and speak as little as possible."⁴⁵ In neither *Theogeny* nor *Works and Days* did Pandora ever respond to the allegations and blame against her; her guilt was just accepted by the male readers, intended as a warning against allowing women power or independence. The degree of male control over the female

⁴⁴ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 27-34.

⁴⁵ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*, 139.

population, especially amongst the elites, was astounding. Ancient Greek elite women were a necessary evil, filled with undesirable characteristics necessitating their complete and utter domination. *Oeconomicus*, as well as the educational aspects of Hesiod's and Homer's epic poetry, were used to strictly enforce the seclusion of elite women in Classical Greece, rather than acknowledge their contribution to society in the form of progeny and taking care of the household. Instructional literature drew upon the negative characteristics of women in mythology like Pandora, Aphrodite, and Helen of Troy. By doing so, Greek noblemen saw how a woman's independence could lead to disaster. Since Xenophon, Hesiod, and Homer were used in the raising of elite male youths, the fictional accounts of Greek mythology were treated as fact, thus perpetuating elite Greek women's treatment in society as the bane of men's existence. Women in mythology were commonly portrayed as devious, manipulative, hazardous to men, and deceitful. Their actions in the stories culminated in realization of ancient Greek male fears: namely that women would become promiscuous, disloyal, and uncontrollable. In order to keep this from happening, ancient Greek men exercised the practice of seclusion, forcibly separating women from men and barring them from authoritative positions outside of the household, for this was thought to be a solution to combat women's innate trickery and keep men firmly in control. At no time in Classical Greece do women's voices resonate as greatly as those of men, enforcing the idea that, despite feminine portrayal in mythology, it is men who are ultimately in charge of society.

About the author

Dessa Meehan recently finished her undergraduate degree (*Magna cum Laude*) at Western

Washington University double majoring in History and Anthropology-Archaeology. She also minored in Geographic Information Science, Arabic and Islamic Studies, and Latin. Her research interests center around comparative women studies in classical civilizations, especially within the Roman Empire. She will continue her education in the MSt Classical Archaeology program at University of Oxford during the 2017-2018 academic year, with the eventual goal of obtaining PhD and leading archaeological excavations.