

January 2013

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Recommended Citation

Clark, Tabitha Ms. (2013) "The Wisdom of Athena," *Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/ojur/vol1/iss1/4>

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The Wisdom of Athena

The Greek goddess Athene, also spelled Athena, is widely associated with the functions of the brain and referred to as the goddess of wisdom, but what type of wisdom does she have? This essay will focus on Athena and the many facets of one of her main characteristics, wisdom. It could be said that the two sides of her wisdom are reflective of the melding and balance of the male and female traits she possesses. She exhibits the archetype of the trickster and displays a wily side that is deceptive and manipulative. However, there is also a side of her intelligence which resembles her father's archetype of being the sage counselor and advisor.

There are many circumstances and events which influenced Athena's character and created the intellectual side of her wisdom. A good deal of context must be considered and understood to fully comprehend how and why this aspect of her ability resembles her father's. According to myth, Zeus overthrew his father and rose to power with the help of Metis, the Titaness, who was the embodiment of "cunning intelligence"¹. Zeus then seduced Metis and she became pregnant. However, he learned that any son she bore was destined to be more powerful and would overthrow him. Thus, Zeus swallowed Metis and gave birth to Athena from the top of his head. It seems that her reputation for being intelligent had much to do with her unique birth for, "As her unusual birth might suggest, Athena was particularly associated with the activities of the head: she rivaled her father Zeus in wisdom and took after her mother, Metis, in possessing "cunning intelligence" (World Mythologies Text Book)². Her father was known for

¹ Simon Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17.

² Roy G. Willis, *World Mythology: The Illustrated Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 137.

being a wise, discerning, and just councilor and ruler, whereas her mother was known for helping Zeus, through her talent for trickery and deception, rise to power.

It is possible that having a man give birth to her, instead of a woman, put her more in touch with what was considered by the Greeks to be a more masculine manifestation of wisdom. Although female, and displaying the feminine attributes of intelligence, Athena also developed and exhibited what were considered to be the male characteristics, which her father possessed. Athena was said to be “a female child loyal to himself. In Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, Athena supports her father and the male side in general.”³ She not only possessed qualities which were considered to be masculine, but also identified and associated with males in general. “Being the favorite child of Zeus”, Athena had a special connection with her father which enhanced their similarities.⁴ This more masculine side of her wisdom also tied in with her role as a war goddess. Her “highly prized masculine qualities of strength and cunning in battle” actually made her a better “warrior goddess” than she would otherwise have been.⁵ Athena’s wisdom offset the “brutality and irrationality of the male war god, Ares”.⁶ Due to those aspects of her intellect inherited from her father, Athena was thus viewed “as a military figure” and “was revered by

³ Luke Roman and Monica Roman, *Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology*. n.p.: Facts On File, 2010. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed December 18, 2012).

⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Athena," accessed December 14, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/40681/Athena>.

⁵ Beth Cohen, *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

⁶ *Ibid.*

kings” as a “goddess of good counsel, prudent restraint, and practical insight”.⁷⁸ Subsequently, Athena was one of “the principal Panhellenic Greek deities”.⁹

However, Athena had this whole other side to her character and her intellect, which “took after her mother, Metis, in possessing ‘cunning intelligence’.”¹⁰ Athena was not only “cunning in many ways”, but was also deceptive and crafty.¹¹ She is not quite as well known for these aspects of her wisdom. She is more often thought of as an aloof, stately, sage goddess of war than for her more sly and manipulative traits. These aspects of her intellect are best displayed in Homer’s epic poem, *The Odyssey*. Athena almost exclusively shows her wily, scheming side in this narrative. “In myth, Odysseus was her particular favorite, since his skills of guile... and cunning were close to her own qualities.”¹² Odysseus constantly displays his craftiness and devious nature throughout the epic, and when he reaches the shore of his homeland Athena expresses to him her admiration of those traits. She tells him that,

“any man – any god who met you – would have to be
some champion lying cheat to get past you
for all-round craft and guile! You terrible man,

⁷ Roy G. Willis, *World Mythology: The Illustrated Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 136.

⁸ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Athena," accessed December 14, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/40681/Athena>.

⁹ Simon Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 11.

¹⁰ Roy G. Willis, *World Mythology: The Illustrated Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 136.

¹¹ Susan Deacy, *Athena* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

¹² Roy G. Willis, *World Mythology: The Illustrated Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 136.

foxy, ingenious, never tired of twists and tricks –
 so, not even here, on native soil, would you give up
 those wily tales that warm the cockles of your heart!
 Come, enough of this now. We're both old hands
 at the arts of intrigue. Here among mortal men
 you're far the best at tactics, spinning yarns,
 and I am famous among the gods for wisdom,
 Cunning wiles, too."¹³

Deception, illusion, and scheming were very admirable traits in *The Odyssey*. Athena not only possessed and enjoyed these traits but valued them. It is certainly easy to see why Odysseus was her favorite mortal.

Athena frequently put those values into action herself in *The Odyssey*. She was elusive and often in disguise while using trickery to achieve her goals. There is a persistent theme throughout the epic of appearance versus reality with Odysseus and Athena. As the maven of makeovers, Athena's most memorable trickeries and deceptions in *The Odyssey* are the disguises she devises for herself and Odysseus. She was often "appearing as friend, familiar, guest."¹⁴ At the beginning of the epic, Athena appears to Telemachus as Mentos, lord of the Taphians, an old friend of his father's who had just stopped by Ithaca to visit. Athena's disguise and trickery allowed her to inspire and lead the prince into an expository conversation about the problems going on in the palace. However, she most often, and famously, appears to Telemachus as Mentor, an Ithacan counselor who assists in protecting the young prince from the vicious,

¹³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 296.

¹⁴ Jonelle Husain and Allen Scarborough, *The Archetypal Mentor—Lessons from Homer*, 2.

murderous suitors and guides him through his coming of age. She also changes Odysseus' appearance on several occasions, either to disguise him or make him look more appealing, as the case of him washing up on the Phaeacian's island. Athena made him look "taller to all eyes, his build more massive now, and down from his brow she ran his curls like thick hyacinth clusters" and "so she lavished splendor over his head and shoulders".¹⁵ She made him more handsome so as to insure that he would find favor with the Phaeacians and compel them to help him. However, in other instances, she made him stronger and gave him a more formidable appearance so as to intimidate or gain people's "awe and respect" so that "he might win through the many trials they'd pose".¹⁶

Although it may appear as though Athena almost has a multiple personality disorder, the contrasting aspects of her wisdom actually serve to balance each other out. It is due to her well-adjusted nature that she is able to be the goddess of wisdom and war, as well as be so "closely identified with civilization and with the victory of civilization over barbarism"¹⁷ This makes her one of the most balanced, and powerful, immortals among the Greek deities. Her command of both feminine and masculine traits helps to keep order and harmony among the Olympians. Athena differed from and, some might say, was superior to Ares because "she represented the intellectual and civilized side of war and the virtues of justice and skill, whereas Ares represented mere blood lust".¹⁸ Athena's "unique combination of male and female traits makes

¹⁵ Ibid., 175.

¹⁶ Ibid., 192.

¹⁷ Beth Cohen, *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

¹⁸ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Athena," accessed December 14, 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/40681/Athena>.

her the ideal child for Zeus” because she “resembles her father but does not threaten to displace him or to disturb the world order he controls.”¹⁹ Athena plays a special, distinctive role in Greek mythology and traditions as a character who resolves conflicts between male and female prerogatives.

¹⁹ Beth Cohen, *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 62.

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