

Greek Myths & Psychology - Athena Complex: The Male-Identified Woman

By Aphrodite Matsakis
Special to The National Herald

As psychoanalyst Dr. Jean S. Bolen points out in her twin books, "The Goddess in Every Woman," and "The God in Every Man," the ancient Greek deities can be viewed as symbols of various aspects of the human psyche, each valuable in its own right. Without our inner Aphrodite, we wouldn't know how to love; without our Demetra, how to nurture. Dionysus teaches us how to party and Zeus, how to take charge when needed. But, as every ancient Greek knew, the Olympians also had their dark sides and often competed and even fought with one another.

Every morning as I write my "to do" list, the goddesses who once lived with one another on Olympus continue their squabbling inside my head. Aphrodite reminds me that I need to go to the gym and wash my hair; Demetra, that my daughter needs this and my ailing parents need that. Nearby stands Artemis the mighty huntress and guardian of wildlife, ready to shoot me with one of her perfectly aimed arrows if I forget to feed the squirrels.

Since I'm divorced, at least I don't have Hera, goddess of marriage, on my case for somehow failing my husband. But there's no way to avoid Hestia, the lesser known but equally demanding goddess of the hearth, whose worship now includes computer repairs as well as the usual essentials of cooking and cleaning.

The goddess who gives me the most heartache, however, is Athena, the male-identified goddess of wisdom. Her expert planning skills show me how to meet the demands of the various goddesses in the most efficient way possible. But as I busy myself doing so, the helmeted Athena keeps whispering in my ear that what they require of me is of little importance. What really matters is being like her, a success in the traditionally male world of external power and achievement.

While in the past she was

days are over. If I (or any woman) expect to be taken seriously in today's world, not only must I earn money, but I must battle my way up the ladder to a position of status. This will require, however, that I don't show emotion or in any other way "act like a woman." Instead, I need to follow her example and "act like a man" – objective and impersonal at all times.

According to the well-known psychologist Carl Jung, male-identification, as embodied in this ancient goddess, is a major contributor to the internal stress and high rates of clinical depression in modern women. Male-identification does not refer to a woman expressing qualities or pursuing activities historically associated with men, but when, in doing so, she, like Athena (save for Athena's domestic skills) rejects those typically associated with women.

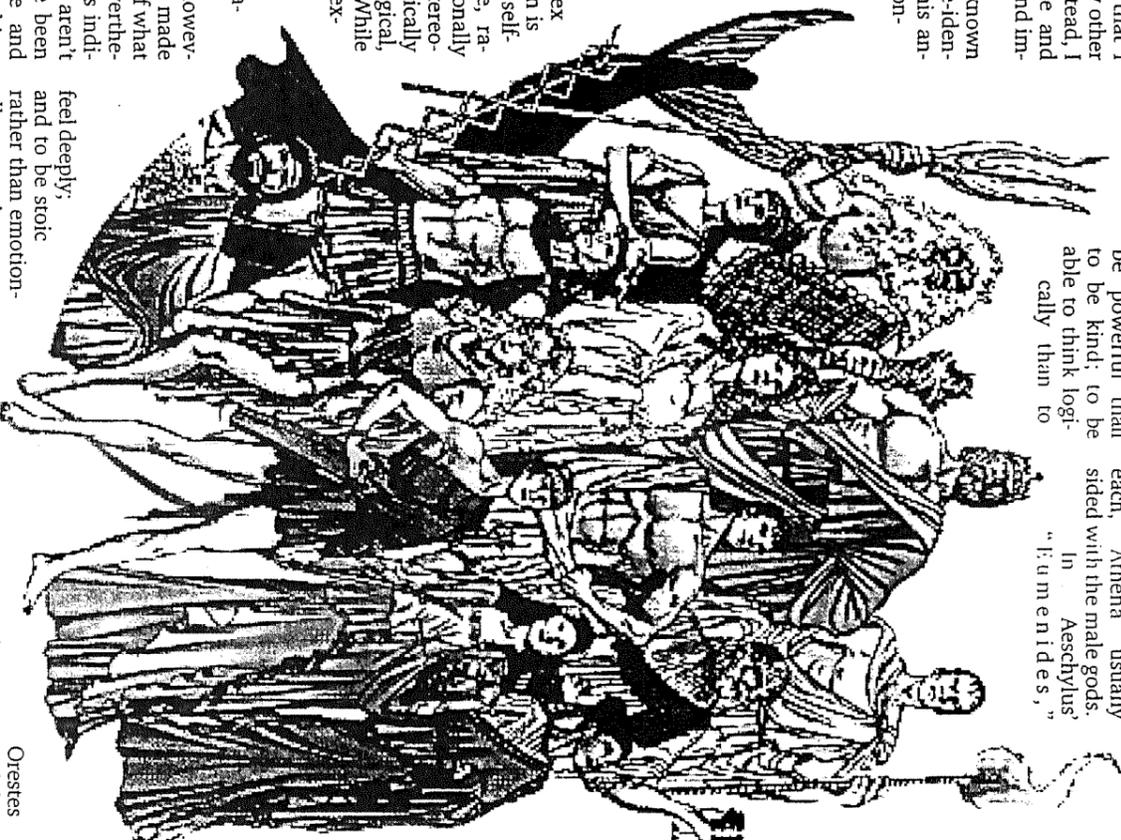
In the traditional male sex role stereotype, the ideal man is physically strong, decisive, self-confident, self-reliant, brave, rational, assertive and emotionally controlled. In contrast, the stereotypical woman is biologically weak, insecure, timid, illogical, dependent and emotional. While men have been expected to excel in the world of work, women usually have been expected to place a high value on family and on relationships.

Sex roles are changing, however, and many gains have been made in expanding the definition of what it means to be a woman. Nevertheless, dozens of recent studies indicate that the old sex roles aren't dead yet. In fact, they have been found to be more extreme and prevalent in the U.S. than in thirty other countries, including those where women have far less economic, legal and social power than in the U.S.

Another issue is that of valuation. Jung, who died in 1961, believed that male-identification in women reflected society's tendency

role over the female one. Modern observers and current research support Jung's view that in Western industrialized societies, it's usually more valuable to be powerful than to be kind; to be able to think logically than to

war and politics. Not only did she remain a virgin, but she tipped the balance of power between the gods and goddesses. Although there were equal numbers of Athena usually sided with the male gods. In Aeschylus' "Furibides,"



feel deeply; and to be stoic rather than emotionally expressive.

But the ancient Greeks already knew that. After all, it wasn't Hera or any of the feminine goddesses whom Zeus entrusted with the authority of his thunderbolt and to the world full grown and fully armed. ready not for the kitchen.

she had a mother. The spear-carrying Athena had little use for Aphrodite's perfumed ribbons and the only men she was interested in were heroes like Achilles and Ulysses where she served as an invaluable guide. Athena had no use for girlfriends either, unlike Artemis who sought the company of wood nymphs. Like the stereotypical man, Athena avoided the sticky invisible world of relationships and focused on pursuing tangible goals.

Lest this article seem to be overly focused on discrediting Athena, it must be emphasized that her brilliance, courage and moderation are worthy of worship. However, that her sympathies laid in the male camp cannot be denied. For example, when Poseidon rapes Medusa, one of Athena's virgin priestesses, Athena doesn't punish Poseidon. Instead she turns Medusa into a monster as punishment for losing her chastity.

That sex roles straightjacket both men and women is obvious. Indeed, the cry of both the women's and the men's liberation movements is that individuals need to be free to be themselves, regardless of convention. According to Jung, becoming one's true self requires divorcing oneself from societal expectations. For women, that required the integration of one's animus (alleged male traits) with one's self, while men have to integrate their anima (alleged female traits). Other major personality theorists, such as Abraham Maslow, describe self-actualized persons as being psychologically androgynous (male and female) in that they combine qualities typically associated with both sexes. Studies of highly creative or otherwise self-actualized men and women indicate that psychological androgyny increases an individual's effectiveness, sense of life possibilities and life satisfaction.

But the ancient Greeks already understood this. Although clearly patriarchal, they recognized the importance of honoring all the gods and goddesses; that is, all aspects of themselves. In Euripides'

doom for rejecting Aphrodite. In Euripides' "The Bacchae", Pentheus dies as a result of disrespecting Dionysus, the god known for his irrationality, a quality historically associated with women.

Furthermore, although the ancients cannot be considered feminists by any stretch of the imagination, in the myth of Psyche and Eros, there is clear recognition that in order for a woman to achieve her goals, she needs to develop the physical hardness, intelligence, emotional control, and steadfastness of purpose exemplified by Athena. This myth also addresses the question of how a woman can fulfill her self-chosen ambitions without becoming totally male-identified. The ancients don't provide us with a pat answer, for there is none. But they did leave us with an image that can serve as a guide.

In the myth, Psyche must gather wool from certain golden rams, which scholars such as Gisela Labouvie-Vief and Erich Neumann equate with male energy and power. She's about to do so, when an eagle cautions her that she could be attacked by the rams or burned by the sun's rays reflecting off their shining wool. The eagle then provides Psyche with the Athena-like ingenuity and fortitude she needs in order to gather the wool (the positive aspects of male strengths) without being destroyed in the process.

Psyche's challenge is every woman's – and man's – challenge: how to develop and utilize the productive and dynamic aspects of traditional masculinity, without obliterating aspects of their inner being considered female, such as the will-iness and ability to nurture others and to establish meaningful relationships, or any other aspect of the feminine self a person might hold dear.

Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D. is a counseling psychologist and the author of twelve books on a variety of psychological topics and of "Growing Up Greek In St. Louis". Visit www.matsakis.com for newsletters, articles and other