

Fall 2018

# Immortality in Literature: The Goddesses of Ancient Greece

Rebecca Lozier  
rgl9@zips.uakron.edu

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors\\_research\\_projects](https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects)

 Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Lozier, Rebecca, "Immortality in Literature: The Goddesses of Ancient Greece" (2018). *Honors Research Projects*. 807.

[https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors\\_research\\_projects/807](https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/807)

This Honors Research Project is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact [mjon@uakron.edu](mailto:mjon@uakron.edu), [uapress@uakron.edu](mailto:uapress@uakron.edu).

Rebecca Lozier

Heather Pollock

English Honors Project

Fall 2018

Immortality in Literature: The Goddesses of Ancient Greece

*"There is only one woman in the world. One woman, with many faces."*

– Nikos Kazantzakis

Studying the influence of ancient Greece on Western Civilization, understanding its fascination with the mythology of the past, reveals through the manifestation of that influence in art and literature details about the treatment of women during both ancient and Romantic time periods. Are they connected? How do their beliefs show themselves in the civilizations themselves? Examining the language and art used by Keats, Homer, and Shelley demonstrates the ways in which mythologies of women were used to establish restrictive and idealized feminine standards.

However, it is the treatment of women in mythology, literature, and art, that is the main concern here. Immortality achieved through lasting influence and writing is a fate sought by many throughout history. In this way, Western Civilization has made Ancient Greece eternal, and, by extension its women. Recognizing many of the creations of history are man-made forces one to ask how those men used the works of their times to portray women. Through an analysis of poems such as *Sleep and Poetry*, *The Iliad*, and *Adonais*, and the mythology at the heart of them gender imbalances in the cultures are examined. Additionally using art movements from both ancient Greece and the Romantic period

shows how each culture viewed feminine beauty standards. Both approaches shed light on how those beliefs manifested themselves culturally.

In looking at how patriarchal societies have historically viewed women featured in their collected narratives, one can see how their beliefs manifest in women's daily lives. The ideas and ideals created reflect larger patterns for how society structures itself and after what images it makes itself. These connections do not apply only to what is ancient and bygone.

The mainstream picture of beauty is constructed from cultural norms – which develop from historic power structures. The exchange of beauty for cultural power is significant. This demonstrates the power that images, stories, and historical power structures have to influence the collective conscience.

Mythology is embodied by the oral histories and literature of ancient Greece, as well as the images found on amphorae and other forms of visual art. Homeric epics like *The Iliad*, or Hesiod's *Theogony* – although not used here – provide the map to understanding Greek myth. The stories and images meted out through bards and playwrights become the culturally consumed and by which the ideas of mythology are understood. The art, whether in sculpture or on an amphora too become cultural icons to be consumed.

The poetry of Keats and Shelley is no different. Their reliance on the mythology they inherited through participation in a “western” education is further transmitted through their own works. Romantic poetry functions as classical mythology did for the ancient Greeks and Romans. Shelley and Keats differ in their depictions of women, just as the various goddesses in the Greek pantheon differ in how their myths and spheres of influence vary in what they meant for the culture at large. The mythical women in Keats's poetry

reflect how necessary beauty and purity intersected in the time period. Shelley's work continues the idea that women carry the burden of creation through their fertility and are only notable in their relationship to the men around them.

Using literature and art to understand history is necessary given the influence each one has over the other. Art history often refers to periods as reactions against each other. Here, in our, "triangle of influence," that is, the relationship between literature, art, and history, each piece reacts more with each other, more than they react against one another; but the idea that there is a cyclical and continual influence between components remains. Therefore, understanding a specific concept or idea from history, such as feminine beauty standards, requires looking at how the influence of literature, art, and history is reflected in the other areas. In order to fully understand women and beauty in the past, the exploration necessitates the same lens.

Before following the thread back to Ancient Greece, Western culture's treatment of the Greeks and Romans requires discussion. It is not an inflated claim, to say that Western Civilization has founded itself on those classical societies. The West prides itself on its principles, rules of law, and establishments of culture – much of which has been founded on ideals from classical times. Without even considering the Roman Empire's conquering of the European continent, the influence of classical society is still heavy.

The influence is engrained on Western culture. The use of Latin for mottos by public and private institutions implies a belief that ideas written in that way somehow carry greater weight. The ideas of philosophers, playwrights, and orators are recycled perpetually on the assumption that they are wise. The poets later referenced grew up steeped in a classically influenced culture. That which is considered to be a "classical

education” is one developed from studying the literature and philosophical teachings from the ancient world (Hebron).

The ideas and motivations of classical governments have carried down through the years and very directly influenced the development of governments and institutions throughout Western Culture. Democratic governments take inspiration from the Roman Senate. Republics harken to the Roman Republic of the Classics. Many historical figures have chosen to emulate these famous figures in order to recreate what they perceive as being a golden era of civilization. Napoleon is perhaps one of the most obvious examples. Ultimately it is no secret that this paper, itself, will be held to the standards built throughout Western Civilization and based on the Classics. While there is no shortage of evidence in its fascination and foundation, still, it is necessary to discuss this as a foundation for the following thread.

It is sensible to commence in a chronological manner; and, therefore, to begin with the Greeks. The idea of foundation demands looking at the roots of an idea. Poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats, discussed later, functions more as a branch of the lasting influence. In order to do justice to understanding what occurs later, what came before must be known. In other words, by looking at how men discussed women in ancient Greek mythology, we will be better prepared to understand why Keats and Shelley discuss them the way they do in their poetry.

Greece, like all cultures, developed a mythology from various cults and oral traditions, and so, like many cultures, there will be differences in how or why phenomena came to be. Merriam Webster defines etiology as a cause or origin, or a branch of knowledge concerned with causes (Merriam-Webster). Although often considered to

indicate a false belief, or a belief out of time and fashion; mythology functions more as an etiology, an explanation for a happening or an origination, rather than something false. In a lecture, Professor Heather Pollock stated the following, “etiologies replace other etiologies.” A simple statement that is no less canny for its simplicity. The statement is meant to describe the ever-evolving nature of etiology. How, as the culture that creates them evolves, so do the etiologies that dictate their beliefs.

Given the treatment of etiologies, mythology is much more than old – and occasionally didactic – tales. Instead, mythology serves to better understand the cultures and the time periods that upheld the mythology they created. In his text, *Classical Myth*, Barry Powell describes myths as possessing a collective importance for the group they affect as a whole, in addition to the individual (3). In the case of the ancient Greeks, mythology not only functioned as an etiology for various phenomena but also as a cultural code.

Acknowledging the collective importance placed upon mythology allows for myth to be included in the intersecting influence literature, culture, and art have on one another. Particularly in ancient times, the intersection of literature and culture occurs in myth. Oral tradition and oral history serve as part of literature, up to and with the occurrence of written word as oral tradition carried beyond, given the exclusivity of literacy. Because mythology functions in the form of storytelling, the transference of history through that medium is necessary to explore in its relevance.

Whether a story has one or more believable threads is not important; what is essential is the impact of the story – what it gives us, despite our paths to that message. For instance, there are several threads of Persephone’s myth that compete and intertwine to

give us the origins of the seasons. Getting to the heart of the myth, and its place in the cycle of influence, serves as the vehicle for navigating how the classical civilizations understood women and beauty. Additionally, grasping myth's importance in the ancient past provides information as to how its influence carried across history. To understand the mythology is to understand the culture, to do this the social policies and ideals of that society must be laid bare. Simply put, Powell wrote, "Greek myths reflect the society in which they were transmitted, and to understand them we need to know something about the social life of ancient Greece" (35).

The Greeks were of Indo-European descent, having arrived in the area known later as Greece around 2100 BC, replacing the people who cultivated the land there before them (24). There, the Greeks thrived and struggled against a harsh landscape. Of course, as groups migrated from one area to another over time, they co-mingled with those in the areas they resided in. Due to this, the ancient Greeks' appearance would not resemble those that reside in Greece today, or are of Greek descent as time, climate, and migration influence appearance and genetics. That does not prevent us from using art, literature, and mythology to understand what the Greeks wanted to look like. Helen of Troy was renowned for her beauty, and described as having golden hair. Athena's shrewd grey eyes were part of what marked her face and character as wise and masculine. Hera, too, is given golden hair, in addition to her shrew-like reputation.

Imagery in mythology, coupled with understanding that ancient Greece was a patriarchal society, leads us towards the notion that because men controlled the imagery presented in mythology, they also controlled the standard of beauty given to women. Powell asserts: "However, in studying male and female gods in Greek myth we must

remember that all such portraits are the creations of Greek males, whose complex relationships with the other sex are a central theme of Greek myth” (211). Their creation and subsequent interpretation of their own mythology is reflected upon the very real women of the time – and as this paper argues, those in following eras as well. In continuing the idea of mythology as a vehicle for culture and ideas, noting that the culture was patriarchal is necessary. The maleness of myth and art and literature of ancient Greece should not be denied.

Take into consideration the assigned areas of sovereignty given to gods and goddesses within the pantheon. Zeus is the god of thunder and the head of the gods. Hera, his wife, is the goddess of marriage. Poseidon is the god of the sea. Demeter is goddess of the harvest. Hestia, a little-known goddess – later given greater importance by Rome – reigns over the hearth. Athena, although a goddess, is the goddess of wisdom, strategy, and craft and war. Ares was god of war; Hephaestus, god of the forge.

Although a brief capturing of responsibilities each god or goddess possessed, they are nonetheless telling. In the patriarchal society it would make sense for a god – a male – to be in charge of the other gods. It would also make sense to relegate the harvest to a goddess, as the primary role of women in ancient Greek society was housekeeping and child bearing. Roles are clearly divided into spheres, the domestic and the public – a theme historians see throughout much of human history. Patriarchal societies regularly delegate in the manner seen by the gods and goddesses in the Greek Pantheon. While this is not to say the Greeks invented the structure in question, it is meant to show how similarities and influence can be drawn across myth and life.

As stated before, the myth and the literature of ancient Greece are deeply connected given the culture's oral traditions. *The Iliad*, myths involving Hera's jealousy, the story of Aphrodite and Anchises, Actaeon's transgression against Artemis, among others all carry similar themes reflecting the Greek culture's gender roles. This idea, coupled with the anonymous origin of most myth creates a sort of ubiquity to myth. In a society that gave power to a select group of men, seeing a similar power dynamic in mythology shouldn't be surprising. As with all human myth, what happens in culture is reflected in the divine.

In Greek society, marriage was an arrangement between families for political or economic gain (Powell, 40). The goddess of marriage and fidelity, Hera did not get a pleasant marriage in myth. Often treated as nagging and conspiratorial towards Zeus, Hera's happiness in marriage is unimportant. The majority of mythology surrounding Hera has more to do with Zeus than it does her. Her shame at being jilted comes across as more of a joke rather than a critique. Despite Zeus's infidelity, Greek society placed great importance upon marriage. Yet, going into a marriage it was important for the woman to be virginal and for the man to be experienced. Marriage and childbirth were what made a woman a woman in Greek society. Despite her scheming, as it is described in myth, Hera remains relatively powerless in her relationship with Zeus. In *The Iliad*, Hera and Zeus clash over Thetis's request that Zeus protect Achilles. Hera protests and attempts to protect her beloved Achaeans and further protests Zeus's association with a former mistress, but Zeus only threatens her into submission (lines 661-683). In the marriage she held no power; Zeus as the man held all.

Hera's mythology is reflective of her powerlessness. She remains faithful while Zeus does not. Their marriage is described as being a consequence of Zeus's desire for Hera. He

is the only lover Hera takes. Yet before even their wedding Zeus has taken several – making him the experienced ideal for a successful life and marriage. A woman could not become a woman, or *gyne* until after giving birth to a child. Marriage only defined a woman as *nymphé*. The lives of men were not held to same milestones, just as Zeus is not held back or defined by his marriage to Hera. For women to be defined by marriage and childbirth, to be so controlled by their husbands is shown further by the importance of maidenhood and the sexuality of females.

Homer's *Iliad* provides ample fodder for examination of gender relations in ancient Greece. More specifically, it illustrates how women were treated as prizes in terms of marriage, beauty and sexuality. The careful control of a woman's life, and her progression toward womanhood, revolves around male acceptance. Prospects required a woman be desirable, despite the fragility of her appeal; and men controlled what was desirable.

Briefly digressing from *The Iliad*, it is important to bring Hera back to focus. Zeus sought Hera but her appeal was fleeting and her need for fidelity seen in a negative light. In Hera's story, it is important to understanding how it was a woman's relationship with a man that defined her. She fit the ideal standard but her role as Zeus's wife transcends whatever individual myth she may have. Hera is first and foremost a beautiful – if not slightly nagging – wife. Hera is necessary to the discussion because of her treatment in mythology. The power dynamics between Zeus and Hera – Zeus being king of the gods, and Hera, his queen and goddess of marriage – left Hera trapped. Desirability turned women into prizes, as *The Iliad* demonstrates, and Hera was a prize that became less desirable once she was had.

Book One begins with Chryses, a priest for Apollo, begging for Agamemnon to give back his daughter; Agamemnon refuses, as he believes Chryseis to be his rightful prize (lines 19-37). The ensuing lines demonstrate a god's wrath against men until a seer elucidates how the wrath could be dispelled. Apollo demands for Chryseis to be returned to her father among other demands (lines, 111-118). This, Agamemnon is loath to do. In his initial rebuke of Chryses he boasts, "The girl – I won't give up the girl. Long before that, old age will overtake her in my house, in Argos, far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth at the loom, forced to share my bed!" (lines 33-36). He uses the control a man societally holds over a woman against the father, who, in a marital arrangement, might stand to make some gain from the pairing. Agamemnon emphasizes the control he will have over Chryses's daughter, revoking the control the father would have over his own daughter.

The objectification of females in *The Iliad* continues, again, when Agamemnon airs his grievances at having to give up his prize. He goes so far as to rank Chryseis above the wife he already has (130-134). The injustice done to Chryseis by being claimed as a prize and a possible slave is nothing compared to the injustice done to Agamemnon in asking him to return a daughter to her father. When no other man is willing to give up his own prized woman, Agamemnon threatens to take a woman from Achilles (lines 214-219). The appeal of Chryseis, her desirability, made her a prize, just as being able to hurt the pride of another man made Achilles's prize, Briseis, desirable. Both women are confined by their relationships to the men who have power over them. Females become desirable when they can offer something to the men around them.

The *Iliad* originated as an oral tale attributed to Homer. Men of privilege in Greece would have learned to memorize the epic as part of their education. Bards would have

recited the epic as part of their duties as public poets. Just as mythology reinforces power dynamics between genders, the literature of ancient Greece does as well. Similarly, they can be telling of the relationship between women and beauty during the time.

Continuing to use Homer's *Iliad*, the physical descriptors attached to the mythical women inform the reader and consumer of the myth are what marks a woman as beautiful. Hera, when she makes an appearance in the epic is described as "white-armed" (line 244), and also as having dark eyes (line 661) – one of her names as a goddess was the "cow-eyed goddess." The language surrounding the physical descriptors of females is revealing. The paleness associated with Hera implies a highborn woman unfamiliar with working outside. Pale skin can be read as beautiful because of its association with the higher class, a standard many women were held to or were taught to strive for. Although perhaps seeming arbitrary, the language is indicative of another way in which society regulated women.

The goddess Aphrodite may provide clearer examples. Both in how the language of beauty evokes societal restriction but also how the culture again used myth to control the narrative surrounding women. Sappho perhaps best encapsulates how the Greeks felt about Aphrodite when she wrote, "deceitful child of Zeus, I entreat you" (fragment 1). The Greeks were both enamored with and afraid of the goddess. Powell puts it simply: "Aphrodite...embodies the overwhelming power of human sexual attraction" (212). Because young men are not allowed access to girls before marriage it's understandable that they collectively imagine a goddess who is uninhibited and in fact promotes sexuality.

The myths and literature involving Aphrodite present a goddess unchained by the men around her, a goddess who flirts with mischief. Her association with sexuality, and also beauty, are the sources of that. Recall that a woman in Greek society would marry in

her teens, as soon after she begins menstruation as her family would be able to manage (Powell, 42). The necessity for marriage at a young age arose out of a fear for what a girl left uncontrolled by her father would do. The unknown and suppressed sexuality of females could bring about ruin. Aphrodite's blatant sexuality provides fuel to the fearful fire.

For a woman to resist the control of a man automatically indicates an abundance of sexuality within her. Men would both desire Aphrodite while fearing what she was capable of. She, along with her son Eros, is credited with causing a number of Zeus's dalliances. For Aphrodite to be explicitly sexual and to cause discord within a marriage that features a goddess of marriage, is bold in its rejection of social norms.

Her power over men and their sex drive made her a threat. A woman who was not faithful would have been shamed, or worse, her behavior shames her husband. Consistent with Western Culture the onus of men's sexual desire and their actions upon it are placed on the very women deemed desirable. Greek myth propagates this. The root of desire is placed upon Aphrodite, and by extension women, who causes men to fall in love with women they should not. It causes women to be too beautiful to resist. By placing the root of desire with Aphrodite, they allow men to take no responsibility for their desire. The affairs of Zeus and the men who fatally sought Artemis prove this.

The adverse views towards women with seemingly wanton sexuality display themselves in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. As the hymn begins, the women whom Aphrodite cannot convince to adopt her lifestyle are praised. Artemis and Athena, as well as Hestia, are glorified for their unswerving devotion to virginity. "Three hearts alone Aphrodite can neither persuade nor deceive" (line 6). The group is juxtaposed with

Aphrodite to demonstrate how deceitful she is; her punishment is for Zeus to trick her, as she tricks others, into falling in love with a mortal man.

While it is common in Classical myth for gods to have affairs, either with immortal or mortal women, the standard did not extend to goddesses. Affairs with mortal men shamed goddesses just as it would a mortal woman. Aphrodite's liaisons with gods, although scandalous, did not carry the same weight as a romantic encounter with a mortal did. Zeus's trickery punished Aphrodite for causing others to give in to sexual desire.

The Greeks – who did not create Aphrodite given her eastern nature (Powell, 212-213) – curated the goddess' reputation while also punishing her for being who they made her to be. This serves as yet another demonstration of the close relationship of myth and the cultures that create it. The myth served the purpose of warning against women who resist sexual compliance.

Although Aphrodite was beautiful, being the goddess of sexual attraction and desire and beauty implies her own irresistible beauty. Helen, taking after her, is made a villain for being a beauty someone could not resist. Their sexuality compounded with their beauty turned their beauty into a weapon and a liability for the men and gods they encountered. Menelaus went to war to get his prize, Helen, back. Helen is known for having the face that launched a thousand ships. The wiles of Aphrodite cause many men to succumb to their sexual desire, against their will.

Beauty in the context of overt sexuality, specifically in women, makes the case for fallen women, or women who are to be feared for their brazenness. Beauty in the context of virginity, however, makes a woman desirable. Her adherence to the social code requiring girls to remain virgins until marriage somehow alters one's beauty to be something more.

Both Athena and Artemis are deities who chose to remain maidens. Given the path of marriage and children chosen for mortal women, the decision is an anomaly.

As the culture develops its mythology, so it would be necessary for Athena to remain unconstrained by pursuing sexual desire and marriage. In doing so she is able to fulfill the masculine qualities given to her. The goddess of weaving craft also covered strategy and wisdom. The femininity of one area is countered by the masculinity of the other. Having sprung from Zeus's head, Athena is able to transcend her feminine nature by her association with Zeus' head (231). Athena's mother is Metis – or Wisdom – and the association of the head and mind with wisdom would indicate Athena had more masculine qualities than feminine. A masculine nature in a goddess should have been problematic, but Athena's virginity gave her freedom that the traditional rites of womanhood could not. It would not stand to reason for something masculine to be controlled and restricted the way femininity was in ancient Greece. Athena was beautiful, but her beauty is not integral to her story. Her wisdom and her masculinity allowed her to remain outside of such social requirements.

Artemis, in contrast, is made to be more beautiful and desirable because of her eternal virginity. In rejecting the possibility of sex and marriage, Artemis avoids the transference of protection from her father to a future husband. In doing so she becomes elusive and unattainable to men, making her all the more desirable. Goddess of the hunt and the wild, Artemis is a maiden who retains her femininity by her association with the wilderness. If the mythology surrounding Aphrodite and the constraints placed upon women indicates rigid ideas about women, Artemis reinforces that. A goddess who is untamed and holds no desire for marriage but is not masculine as Athena seems out of

place. It is a threat, for a woman to be in control of her own life. Yet, the Greeks had a place for Artemis. The rules of society were clear; an unmarried woman was still a girl. Artemis then is in a state of perpetual girlhood. Still subject to her father, Zeus, he protects her virginity. Girls in ancient Greece were under the protection and control of their fathers, and therefore not a threat to men. Artemis becomes a threat to men when they trespass the boundary chosen by Artemis and protected by Zeus. Those men who threaten her virginity find themselves dead.

Much of what is known about ancient Greece has come from the archaeological discoveries made. Pottery and sculpture and architectural ruins have all been utilized to better understand the culture that produced and used them. In Greek culture art was just as important as sport and literature was just as important as philosophy. What is left of the Greeks' artwork, particularly their sculptures, provides a window into how the Greeks viewed themselves. Mythology informs us of what their ideals were, what they believed. Their literature is an extension of that. But their art can function as a visual aid when trying to grasp just how their ideas about women manifested themselves in terms of beauty. How artists presented both men and women may indicate what was valued, what was considered beautiful.

*Arête*, meaning excellence, serves to explain why the stories and literature of the Greeks functioned the way they did. Every Greek man sought *arête*. The Olympiad, Panatheniac Games, Dionysian Contests each demonstrate the desire for excellence. Education was for men of privilege (the men who would fight the wars and make decisions about each city-state), and included both physical and intellectual arts. Poetry mattered as much as knowing the history of their city-state, and both mattered as much as being

physically fit. The whole of the person had to be excellent. The individual aimed to achieve *arête*.

The fixation with excellence is reflected in the art produced by the Greeks. "It has been said that the Greeks made their gods into men and their men into gods," Tansey and Kleiner describe the individualized pursuit of perfection by the Greeks in every facet of life (118). By believing in the ideals of *arête* the Greeks sought to become the ideals they set forth for themselves. They believed – and borrowed from older civilizations – their ideals into existence. It is important to note that in spite of rejecting anything that was not Hellenic, Greek art was heavily inspired by, and for a time mimicked, the art of neighboring civilizations as they came into their own. It is also necessary to note that the life they idealized was one only accessible to a small portion of society, the portion that in turn helped to create the culture and myths that allowed them to propagate their beliefs onto those around them and write their own history.

The development of sculpture in ancient Greece can be seen as the culture itself came out of the Dark Age of Greece. Through time in rediscovering various arts and through the influence of trade the Greeks sculpture work slowly became what it is recognized as being today. Egyptian and Eastern influence during their Orientalizing period gave the sculpture of that time the appearance of Egyptian works (119-120). The Egyptian obsession with stonework and stability can be seen in the forms. Slowly, sculpture began to focus on movement and figures depicted became more natural, less flat.

The *Kroisos* (6<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.) and *Peplos Kore* (531 B.C.) show the transition away from Egyptian sculpture norms towards what is recognized as Greek sculpture. Tansey and Kleiner use the sculptures to highlight the way that Greek sculptors idealized and worked

to perfect human form and its intricacies. The nudity of men in sculpture, using *Kroisos* as an example, demonstrates the concept of *arête*. Due to the fact that Greeks allowed their deities to have human forms sculpture can serve as exemplary of what those forms would look like. By idealizing human form in sculpture, the sculptor is able to show reverence and likeness to the gods and further the idea of *arête*.

During the Classical period, as Greek pride was at its height, statuary became even more life-like. Although much of what is known about Classical sculpture is taken from Roman marble copies, the Greek adherence to *arête* is still visible (145). In the herm version of Pericles, the ideal can be seen. Described as “classically aloof,” the face of the statue is meant to convey an idealized version of the individual (148). Just as mythology through literature influenced Greek life, art did as well.

Shields, war helms, weaponry, all decorate the many sculptures depicting the goddess of craft and wisdom. *Athena Parthenos* (5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), is perhaps the most famous example. Her masculinity and reputation are dependent on the removal of her femininity. When considering the sculpture of other women from ancient Greece – real or mythical the difference is evident. Because Athena is masculine she does not need to be beautiful to have purpose, she is wise and does not need to be fertile, her feminine qualities are sacrificed.

As the sculpture of Athena matches her mythological demeanor, do the depictions of Aphrodite. While the weapons and armor emphasized Athena’s masculinity, it is Aphrodite’s femininity and her sexuality that take precedence in her sculptures. Often nude, Aphrodite’s mythological realm is made visible. Even in her Roman iterations as Venus, her imagery stays the same. Although the ancient Greeks valued virginity in their

women, Aphrodite is seen nude because it is her body – her ability to manipulate the sexual desire of others – that is her power and also her appeal. The goddess's body is the ideal; the display of her nudity allows the sculpture to give visual representation to the beauty standards and aspirations of the Greeks.

Artemis, an eternal maiden, is depicted clothed in contrast to Aphrodite's nudity. The way in which the women are present in sculpture reflects the opinions of the Greeks who curated the myths surrounding them. Artemis's appeal is her chosen maidenhood. She cannot be tainted by sexual desire, and the men who seek her out find horrible deaths for themselves.

Be it in art, or in literature, the mythical women created and controlled by the men of ancient Greece outlived the society in which they originated. Art continued to carry on the legacy of the goddesses and the women they represented. As Western culture developed and time passed, the goddesses of ancient Greece did not fade into the background despite the constricting beliefs of ancient Greece.

In spite of Roman takeover and the absorption of the Greek pantheon into Roman forms, the Greek mythology and culture continued to thrive. Beyond the fall of Rome and the takeover by Christianity, the West continued to look at the Greeks as a source of inspiration and foundation.

A prime example of lasting classic influence on art can be found in the ruins delicately crafted or brought back for an establishment of the mythical and the ancient in a place far removed. Possessing them and constructing them was part of the fascination of what was ancient (912). Tansey and Kleiner place the art style of Neoclassicism as part of the greater Romantic Movement; although the love for the classical style transcended

Romanticism and carried on through the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (911). But there is discord in how neoclassicism and romanticism fit together, The National Gallery in London describes Romanticism as being a reaction against classical influence. Yet it is possible for both to co-exist.

Archaeology and the discovery of ruins across Italy and Greece fueled the fascination during the Romantic period – how could Europeans not find themselves enthralled by the discoveries? Having spent the years since the death of Alexander and the fall of Rome using their cultural creations as inspiration for their societies and art, the physical ruins would give more foundation to the places of old.

The intersection of classical art and architectural influences on Western art is representative of its lasting influence. The archaeological tours and expanded global knowledge presented the West with an influx of new and old, strange ideas and art. Turning to the classical styles was indicative of their turning toward mainstream standards of thought and beauty.

Major themes in Romantic works were beauty and death. Fascination with the mortality of human life, juxtaposed with the lasting idealized beauty of antiquity made classical subjects popular. Reflecting on the Romantic period's fascination with ruins, Korsmeyer passes across the idea that ruins draw attention because the parts left behind, tarnished by time, allow the beholder to imagine what the whole could have been (431). Although considering the idea to be pervasive and ultimately not fulfilling, Korsmeyer continues on to establish ruin's relationship to the sublime. Age value, to the Romantics, served to place both the object and the viewer in place in the vastness of time.

In that way poets such as Shelley subvert the larger mainstream narrative. The darkness in Shelley's poetry and the longing in Keats's are far more emotive than the crisp columns of classical style. They embody the ruins and their greater perceived meaning.

Figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Napoleon felt that the Neoclassical style gave power to the ideals they espoused (914). Since Napoleon famously envisioned himself another Caesar, it would follow that his use of Neoclassicism served as a means of subtly reinforcing that idea. In a similar manner the Romantics harnessed the emotions of the epics and the dramatic themes to create work that captured the viewer.

Tansey and Kleiner, in an attempt to find middle ground in defining the Romantic art movement, refer to it as, "a way of perceiving the world, above all, with strong feelings," (904). Individualism and feeling trump Neoclassical order in Romanticism, but the Greek influence is not left behind. The ruins were made important by their age value and reflection of times wear on that which is not eternal. Romantics were enamored by their perceived idea of the classical era. Just as Western culture picked and chose its classical influence, Romantics did as well. They chose heroes and idealism, nature and mythology as their inspiration (905-906).

Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781), although not a depiction of an ancient Greek woman, could be thought to evoke the classical beauty of Greek sculpture. While it is understood in their time the sculptures would have been painted, time eroded the paint and those in the Romantic period would have been familiar with the unpainted appearances. The dramatic pose of the female subject appeals to the provocation of feelings, a staple in romantic art, but her dressing and appearance are remnant of Greek sculpture. Fuseli's subject could be easily envisioned as a woman carrying an amphora or lounging on a couch in classical

sculpture. The idea of classical beauty derives from the depictions of women and goddesses in the classical period.

Although much of Romanticism sought to portray sublime themes in nature, its intersection with the Neoclassical movement reiterate its importance to understanding how Greek influence manifested itself in the society and literature of the time.

At this time, people were particularly looking to the classics for inspiration and guidance. The French Revolution came about in a time of unrest and growth. Social structures were changing and revolution was an undercurrent to the political tension of the time (Abrams, 1-2). Neoclassicism became the art movement of stability, emulating the Roman and Greek architecture and art for the purpose of espousing Roman and Greek philosophy in their own society. Romanticism found itself aligning with the spirit of revolution; which, on the surface may seem to distance itself from Western Civilization's roots, but rather allows the participants to embrace the individualism coveted by the ancients – Greeks in particular.

The intersection of the Neoclassical and Romantic movements, both in art and literature, occurs at the influence of the ancients. Where they diverge lies in what each group took from the past to guide and shape their present. Napoleon – who sought to become a Caesar-like figure – had been the face of the revolution, and the spirit of change. But when he came to power he too was an aggressor and a man seeking to create his own dynasty (2). The Post-Industrial Revolutionary England found itself in an identity crisis for both laboring and gentry classes. The poets were not immune. It is no wonder that artistic and literary movements preoccupied with nature and idealism, in whatever form, emerged after the Industrial Revolution and government instability.

For the Romantic poets, society did not hold the inspiration or the healing balm to the unrest. Instead, it was the individual. Exploring one's own mind and soul allowed for connections to greater understandings and finding meaning beyond the world around them. The presence of ancient ruins and the tangible effects of time and history caused wonder at the past and the immortal. What could withstand time? The Romantics knew they could not; a preoccupation with death was a common poetic theme (13).

The Greek preoccupation with *arête* – in every aspect of life – resonated with the Romantics. Within the Romantic Movement, the lasting influence becomes a fixation of what was, Byron having professed 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens to be a Golden Age (Hebron). Just as Western culture idealized the Greeks, so did the Romantics. Through this pursuit of heightening the individual the idealized woman reemerges as beauty personified. Mythological women and the supernatural were common. Poets additionally found themselves students or followers of ancient philosophy, such as Platonism (Reisman, 2).

Romantic poetry functions as mythology did for the ancients, by capturing the intangible and communicating the deeper complexities of nature: both human and earthly. Romantics used the intangible to explain phenomena and the mythical to give feeling to the individual by forgoing the rigid logic of modern life. Using the supernatural and the mythical allowed the poets to convey extreme beauty and deeper imagery that would resonate with both its poet and its reader (Abrams, 12-13).

This is reflective of how mythology was used and created in ancient culture to explain and explore the world around them and their own natures. Through the same lens mythology and its manifestations in art, literature, and society were examined in ancient Greece, so will the mythology found in Romantic poetry be assessed. The lasting influence

of antiquity, particularly and specifically, in the Romantic period allows for insight into the culture's perceptions of women and beauty.

Although William Wordsworth believed the inclusion of mythology was paganism, it did not stop the other Romantic poets from invoking the muses and using classical myth to create their works (Hebron). John Keats, notable for both his poetry and his early death, was deeply influenced by his classical education. Despite not choosing poetry for his career until 18, at a young age Keats attempted to translate the whole of the *Aeneid* into English. Later, his poems such as *Lamia*, *Sleep and Poetry*, and *Ode to a Nightingale* each explore escapes directly influenced by Greek mythology. In turn his own portrayals of beauty and women in his poems reflect the idealism found in Greek sculpture and mythology.

In *Sleep and Poetry* Keats begins by creating a natural, beautiful escape and expounding upon the serene and moving beauty of that landscape. Lines 77 through 89 Keats juxtaposes the briefness of human life with the immortality of beauty in the natural world. "Like a strong giant and my spirit tease/Till at its shoulders it should proudly see/Wings to find out an immortality," ends the passages exploring the beautiful escape described (Keats, lines 82-84). The next stanza begins, "Stop and consider! Life is but a day," a reminder of how human mortality is a brief glimpse into the immortal beauty of the idealized world set down by Keats (85).

Later, the Nymphs encountered in the poem personify beauty. White shoulders and averted gazes characterize the femininity of the nymphs (105-110). The creatures embody the idealized beauty Keats earlier described. As the poem progresses and the speaker moves through the idealized landscape, there are references to more mythology from Greece. But the purpose goes towards examining and praising Poesy, or poetry in the poem.

The most beautiful all of the idealized landscape created, Poesy is given feminine qualities. Keats famously desires to overwhelm himself in Poesy for ten years, acknowledging that Poesy will outlast man. Its beauty is immortal, like the nymphs and dreamscape.

The feminization of Poesy is suggestive when viewed with the depictions of the nymphs. The nymphs, in lines 113 and 115, are seen as accomplished in various domestic tasks associated with their gender. The cultural era in which the poem occurs is one where women of privilege were required to be accomplished, not in manual labor, but instead in areas falling within the private sphere. Like in Greek mythology, women of importance were used as models of what every woman should strive to be, or not be, like. The aspects of life over which Greek goddesses presided over reflected the gender roles women were assigned to in Greek society. Their beauty became the ideal beauty all women should strive for. By personifying poetry as a woman, *Sleep and Poetry* assigns the role of timeless beauty to women. The female subjects studied by Keats in *Sleep and Poetry* are relegated to accomplishments women of privilege during the time would have been. Their beauty and ability to dance become their merits by which they are valued.

In *Lamia*, Keats explores a different area of Greek mythology – the sexual woman. Aphrodite's overt sexuality was the boon to men. It reinforced the rules oppressing the women of the time. *Lamia* by Keats explores a female character that is the intersection of Aphrodite's various qualities. She is beautiful, an enchantress, and plainly sexual, it is her beauty and perceived love for the men in the tale that make her sympathetic (Abrams. 378). This woman is found out to be a snake, deceitful yet enchantingly beautiful. The Romantics' association with Platonism reveals a belief that children, through their innocence are pure and closer to heaven (Reisman, 2). Due to the emergence of

Christianity, virginity and purity became intertwined in their relationship to the status of women. In Greek times, a woman's currency was her beauty, as was her desirability, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries beauty and purity were important factors in a woman's desirability.

Exploring Lamia's maiden beauty given to her by Hermes allows her to snare Lycius. In her virginal beauty she is compared to goddesses and nymphs, as if her virginity makes her all the more alluring to Lycius (Keats, lines 185-265). Lycius is made gullible by her beauty; he cannot resist her. She is compared to Venus (line 48). In comparing Lamia to Venus, Keats is invoking the mythology surrounding her. The irresistible beauty, compounded with her manipulation of men's desire, implies Lamia will be the same with Lycius.

The Greeks saw Aphrodite, Romans Venus, as something both to be revered and feared. It was a reflection of their own conflict with the power of desire and the beauty of women. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were no different in their confusion. The relationships women had with men, marital and parental, controlled their destiny in the upper classes. Unlike ancient Greece, a woman was required to be more than a virgin; her quality of character and adherence to social mores also greatly affected her desirability and social currency. A woman who was not sexually pure, or submissive in her demeanor was as good as a fallen woman. Keats's poetry reinforces the rules and restrictions placed upon women. Men still feared the power they gave women by making their beauty paramount to their desirability. A woman who acted upon her sexuality, even in minor ways, or resisted the restrictive behavioral policies demanded of her was not to be trusted.

The illusions that surround Lamia in the poetry reflect the illusion of her beauty and purity. She is a trick; no pure and beautiful woman would be a snake like Lamia. Her

deception cost Lycius his life. The tragic ending is similar to the myths in which Aphrodite would meddle in the lives of men and gods.

Although the depictions of women and beauty contrast greatly between *Sleep and Poetry* and *Lamia*, each one reflects the societal beliefs of the time period. In an age that sought out the ideal and beauty, women became the poetic vehicle for beauty. The importance placed upon beauty and purity in women is representative of the strict and narrow constraints placed upon them. Like ancient Greece, the Romantic period was one characterized by patriarchal structures. History and society were still created and controlled by men.

In the poetry the onus of desire continues to be placed on women, like it was in Ancient Greece. A woman must be beautiful to be desired. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, she must be accomplished to be worthy of society.

Shelley, perhaps more than other Romantic poets found himself enamored by the idea of the ideal as well as Platonic principles. *Arête* was to be the solution to the failures of man. But the pursuit of that ideal was part of Shelley's lifelong exploration of knowledge (Abrams, 414). Having left England in 1818, Shelley spent the remainder of his life traveling Italy. This combined with his privileged classical education would have made him well-versed in the classics. Shelley's poetry uses the influence of antiquity to establish what he believes to be the Golden Ages.

In choruses from *Hellas*, the section entitled "The World's Great Age," Shelley refers to the Earth as female. "The world's great age begins anew,/The golden years return,/The earth doth like a snake renew/Her winter weeds outworn," in referring to the cycle of both the seasons and life Shelley speculates the return of a golden age (Shelley, lines 1-4). In

making the earth feminine Shelley draws upon the fertility of women and associates it with the passing of seasons. Shedding the old and dark to be replaced with the new and golden Shelley shares his own beliefs in a coming new age. The golden age to Shelley would most likely be much like 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Greece, having once referred to the time in Athens as a golden age (Hebron). Shelley's affinity for ancient philosophy and understanding of myth allow him to recycle the idea of women controlling the rebirth of ages. Demeter's sorrow and search for her daughter, and Persephone's eventual eating of the Underworld's seeds, related the changing of seasons to women. "Another Athens shall arise," Shelley continues foreseeing the recurrence of mythical feats (25). The world of ancient Greece, be it of the past or the one to come, is preferable to the one where men kill and die.

Shelley, in his poem *Adonais* on the death of Keats, makes women eternal. In the poem he calls upon a Mother to mourn her son Adonais. In mythology, Adonis is the lover of Aphrodite and their story is tragic. Altering the name to Adonais, allows Shelley to interject Judeo-Christian culture to reaffirm the idea of Mother. In the poem, Shelley turns Aphrodite into the mother, instead of lover, of Adonais while also combining her with the Muse Urania (lines, 9-36). By making Adonis into Adonais, and then the son of Aphrodite, called Urania in the poem, Shelley gives him godlike qualities. The Muse Urania was associated with astronomy. Astronomy being a study of the heavens, and Urania also being a term to describe Aphrodite's birth from the genitals of Uranos gives the Adonais in the poem otherworldly origin. In classical myth the sons of gods live tragic but heroic lives. Shelley gives these attributes to Keats in the poem. The capitalization of Mother is interesting as it could be read to imply the Mother as Mother of all things, as Lucretius does in his work *On the Nature of Things* (Abrams, 458). Like in *Hellas* the rebirth and cycle of

the world and universe are female, again carrying the responsibility for things outside of men's control. The seasons invoked by Shelley to mourn, Spring and Autumn are female, cannot continue their work in their grief (136-138). Like Demeter in her sorrow for her lost Persephone, the mythical women of the poem cannot move on without their ideal man – Adonais. The Mother even wishes she were not immortal and tied to time, that she may give herself to Death for Adonais to live (231-234).

In Shelley's poem, the women are left indisposed by their grief. They are the Mother and so they are Mourner too. Women in the poem, like in both ancient Greece and the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries continue to be defined by the men around them. The natural associations, which the mythical characters already possess, imply they are beautiful. Shelley does not need to communicate their pale skin and shining eyes, the already established idealized beauty standard allow for him to simply give them mythical properties to seal their idealization.

Attributed physical descriptions in both of the poets' works coincide with the widely held ideal beauty standards. Beauty was paramount to a woman's value. In Keats's her beauty was both a balm for the male speaker and a testament to her virtue. In Shelley's her beauty is implied by her mythical properties. The ideal beauty image carried down from Pale shoulders of Hera and the golden hair of Helen is made tangible through sculpture.

The mythology created by men – and perpetuated by Ancient and Romantic poets – to make sense of, and order the world around them, held long lasting implications for the literary and poetic treatment of women. The embodiments of beauty, desire, and fertility, the mythological women of Greece are vehicles for the ideas and cultural rules of the men who controlled their time. The universality of the themes they represent, coupled with the

lasting influence of the ancient art and literature, allowed for their cultural value to continue to be tied to the needs of men in their respective cultural times. So long as ancient Greece remains a foundation of Western culture, these mythical women will never die, instead being used to understand and control the larger narratives and ideas they have come to represent.

## Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Abrams et al., vol. 2, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Norton and Company, Inc., 1962, New York.
- Fuseli, Henry. *The Nightmare*. 1781, Tate, London.
- Hebron, Stephen. "The Romantics and Classical Greece." The British Library, May 15, 2014.  
[www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics-and-classical-greece](http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-romantics-and-classical-greece)
- Homer. *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. *Classical Myth*, Powell, trans. Howe, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson, 2012, pp. 218-223.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. *The Humanities in the Western Tradition*, Bouchard et al, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Cengage, 2013, pp. 5-47.
- Keats, John. *Lamia*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Abrams et al., vol. 2, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Norton and Company, Inc., 1962, New York, pp. 377-394.
- Keats, John. *Sleep and Poetry*. *The Great Romantics*, Washburn, Rosen, Quality Paperback Book Club, 1993.
- Korsmeyer, Caroline. "The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 72, no. 4, Fall, 2014, pp. 429-435.
- Kroisos Kouros*. 6<sup>th</sup> cen. B.C., The National Archeological Museum of Athens.
- Peplos Kore*. 531 B.C., Museum of Classical Archeology, Cambridge.
- Phidias. *Athena Parthenos*. 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.
- Powell, Barry B.. *Classical Myth*. trans. Howe, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson, 2012.
- Reisman, Rosemary M. Canfield. Ed. *Critical Survey of Poetry: Romantic Poets*. Salem Press, 2012.

Sappho, *Hymn to Aphrodite*. Classical Myth, Powell, trans. Howe, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., Pearson, 2012, pp. 213-214.

Shelley, Percy B. *Adonais*. The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. Abrams et al., vol. 2, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Norton and Company, Inc., 1962, New York, pp. 457-470.

Shelley, Percy B. *Hellas*. The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. Abrams et al., vol. 2, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., Norton and Company, Inc., 1962, New York, pp. 454-456.

Tansey, Richard G., Kleiner, Fred S., *Gardiner's Art Through the Ages*. 10<sup>th</sup> ed. Harcourt Brace and Co., 1996.