

Gender, myth, and mythmaking

Long ago, there was only water. God wanted to rest, but there was no land to sit upon. God then sent an animal to the bottom of the primeval ocean to collect a little bit of mud. When brought to the surface, the mud expanded and became the earth we now live upon. This is one of many myths explaining the creation of the world and humankind. But myths do not only reflect and explain perceived reality. They also convey powerful messages about how this reality should be and how people should behave: like the mythical gods, they construct realities and identities.

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Mythical fears of the female body

When God creates the earth, he often gets help from animals such as turtles in Central Asia, swallows among the Yakut and geese in Southern Siberia. Other cosmogonic myths tell of the emergence of the earth and human beings out of a cosmic egg or a primordial body being dismembered. In all these creation myths there is a remarkable absence of the role of women in the creation of the earth and of human beings. Myths about the origin of the world and humankind often tell of self-sufficient non-females who create and procreate. This denial of the role of women in procreation is mirrored on the social level, for example in male initiation rites where young boys are reborn as men without the help of women, or in the exchange of women by men in marital relationships whereby men become the creators, the birth-givers of society. Art too can be seen as a desire to imitate female procreativity, projected onto male artistic creativity.

A recurring theme in creation myths is men's stealing of women's secrets. Widely spread are myths about the bullroarer. The bullroarer initially belonged to women, but was later stolen from them by men. Since then, the bullroarer has had to be kept secret from women, by punishment of death (Fox Keller 1992: 46). Having access to a (stolen) secret means having access to autonomous power, in this case, male power from which women are excluded. But the secret guarded by men serves another purpose as well. The theft of a female secret is often associated with castration symbols, which hints at feelings of insecurity lurking underneath the surface of narratives about male power.

An important cause for the insecurity of men is the female ability to procreate located in the womb. The womb is a domain of possible autonomous female power that has to be contained. In order to prevent women from using their formidable power, men felt the need to control them by stealing their procreative secret. Thus, myths about male power are at the same time narratives about deep-seated fears of women's birth-giving power in the female body.

The myth of matriarchal prehistory

Many myths tell about the origin of patriarchal society: long before written records, society was centred around women and values thought to be feminine. At a certain time a great change occurred and since then society has been dominated by men (Eller 2000). At present, feminists use this myth of matriarchal prehistory to create a promising historical precedent. But what does it mean for the future of women? The matriarchal myth presents female iden-



Lilith, goddess of the Underworld, representing chthonic wisdom and death as a natural cycle of life.

Sumerian sculpture, terracotta, around 1950 BCE.

Eller, Cynthia. 2000. *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future*. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 25.

tity as something universal, timeless and biologically determined. The veneration of women in prehistorical society is explained by the capacity of the female body to bear children. The matriarchal myth thus presents an archetypal picture of femininity that links women inevitably and stereotypically to their bodies, childbearing and the life-giving forces of nature.

These stereotypes were once used to justify the subordinate position of women in society. If the same stereotypes are used to reevaluate women and to create a positive female identity, they confirm the sexist assumptions upon which patriarchy is based. Apart from this, the matriarchal myth doesn't contain the same restricting archetypal images of masculinity, implying that men are more free to choose who they want to be than women. The myth of matriarchal prehistory thus cannot give women a future in which they can construct their own identities according to individual preferences, values and temperaments.

Mythmaking

Mythology not only refers to the corpus of myths from around the world; it is also about theories of myth, with their own ideologies and gender biases. Several leading theorists on mythical heroes restrict heroism almost exclusively to men. If, as they argue, important aspects of heroic lives consist in establishing a (sexual) relationship with a literal or symbolical mother and attaining a position of power, this only allows for male heroes. Including female heroes would undermine their theories. Supposedly objective theories about myths turn out to have their own ideological biases.

Just like myths, theories on myth construct realities and hide fears of losing power. According to Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, myths can be described and studied objectively with the help of Western rational science. This apparent objectivity, however, conceals ideology. *The Golden Bough* not only attempts to explain the stories of others; it is also a narrative about the construction of a masculine, white identity rooted in

rational, reliable science able to keep its opposites, the body and irrationality, under control.

Myths and theories about myth do not live in a void. Each time the general tale of a myth is told, it makes contact with a specific context. The gender of the audience, its familiarity with the local environment and folklore, social marginalization and a genre's adaptation to the official religion are all factors that exert considerable influence on the

interpretation and content of myths. In the same way, theories about myth are grounded in social and ideological contexts. Neither myths nor theories about myths are narratives with fixed meaning. They also have unofficial meanings hidden underneath the visible surface, meanings that can be activated by researchers or by retelling a myth in a new context. Perhaps every time we tell or write about a myth, we create a new one: myths are in a constant process of being made and remade.

Myth and gender studies

Gender studies focus almost exclusively on gender as a social construct that has little to do with anatomy. But we cannot discard anatomy so easily: as many myths show, biological anatomy plays an important role in the construction of social gender identities. This does not have to mean, however, that anatomy is destiny. Although we cannot get rid of our male or female bodies, we can change the images of our bodies previous generations internalised over the ages. Mythology, understood as both the corpus of myths and theories on myth, helps us understand the mechanisms that have formed male and female iden-

tities in the past and present, and can direct us in the process of reconceptualising gender in the future.

However, we are not only men and women. The relationships between gender and identity are more complicated than the mythical binary opposition male/female. What we are or want to be is determined by a complex intersection of other identity forming categories as well, such as ethnicity and class. This is a story that myths do not tell, but needs to be told and further investigated. <

References

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