

WHOSE SEXUALITY IS IT ANYWAY? THE VIRGIN GODDESS AND ASEXUALITY IN
GREEK MYTHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the virgin goddesses of the Olympic pantheon, specifically Athena and Artemis, and asexuality in Greek mythology. The analysis consists of three chapters, each narrowing toward presenting Athena and Artemis as additions to the historical tradition of asexuality. The first chapter examines gender roles and sexuality in classical Athens, specifically identifying compulsory sexuality in society, the necessity of control of female sexuality, and the subversive nature of celibacy to the *polis*.

The second chapter analyzes gender roles and sexuality on Mount Olympus, looking to answer the questions of “why were only goddesses eternally celibate?” and “why were only certain goddesses eternally celibate?” This chapter concludes that only goddesses were explicitly celibate for three reasons: male gods’ sexuality did not impact their power, characterization, and spheres of influence like female goddesses’ sexuality did, entering into a relationship was inherently feminizing in a world wherein the masculine maintained more agency, and an eternal vow of celibacy was the best way to protect oneself from sexual violence. Furthermore, this chapter determines that Athena’s celibacy was tied to her role as protector of the *polis*; like the *polis*, she had to remain impenetrable. Artemis’ celibacy was tied to her role as goddess of transitory states and adolescence; she could not be confined within a relationship any more than she could be confined within city life, and her status as a permanent adolescent removed her from the world of sexuality.

The third and final chapter identifies asexual resonances in Athena and Artemis’ mythos, specifically in Athena’s birth story and Artemis’ request for eternal celibacy. Based on these resonances, this thesis recommends Athena and Artemis as additions to the asexual historical tradition. For all three chapters, primary sources either from or known to classical Athens are used and analyzed through secondary sources on classical Athens, Greek mythology, and asexuality.

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Introduction

Athena and Artemis are unique goddesses within the Greek pantheon. These two Olympians are a part of the trio of virgin goddesses; Athena, Artemis, and Hestia all chose celibacy and recused themselves from the sexual exploits of other gods and goddesses.¹ As outlined in *Homeric Hymn 5 to Aphrodite*, these three goddesses are the only ones to escape Aphrodite's thrall:

Yet there are three hearts which she cannot bend nor yet ensnare. First is the daughter of Zeus holds the aegis, bright-eyed Athena; for she has no pleasure in the deeds of golden Aphrodite, but delights in wars and in the work of Ares, in strifes and battles and in preparing famous crafts... Nor does laughter-loving Aphrodite ever tame in love Artemis, the huntress with shafts of gold; for she loves archery and the slaying of wild beasts in the mountains, the lyre also and dancing and thrilling cries and shady woods and the cities of upright men. Nor yet does the pure maiden Hestia love Aphrodite's works.²

Athena and Artemis are also unique in that their godly attributes include aspects more typically associated with both the male and female spheres of ancient Greek society, particularly those of classical Athens, which this thesis will focus on.³ Athena is the goddess of strategic warfare, crafts, weaving, wisdom, and the protector of cities. While crafts and weaving were both female activities and thus made sense to be designated to a goddess, warfare, wisdom, and protection of cities all fell under the male domain. Indeed, there is even a male Greek god of war, Ares; however, Ares represents the nonsensical and violent bloodshed of war, whereas Athena

¹ While Hestia is an interesting and critical character in Greek society, her role as goddess of the hearth meant she was not included in many primary sources, such as hymns and epics, and therefore this thesis focuses solely on Athena and Artemis.

² *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*: lines 7-22.

³ This thesis consistently refers to male and female "domains" or "spheres of influence," especially regarding figures who cross into the "domain" opposite their gender (i.e., a female goddess who associates or acts within the male domain). The "male domain" or "male sphere of influence" refers to concepts or activities more commonly associated with men and masculinity, especially in classical Athens; these were concepts or activities that the men in a society were more likely to engage in and that women did not usually engage with or were outright banned from engaging in. Examples include warfare, hunting, and politics. The "female domain" or "female sphere of influence" refers to the inverse; these were concepts or activities that were more commonly associated and engaged with by women and that would be unusual for a man to partake in. Examples included running and maintaining a domestic household, weaving, and child rearing. See Foxhall (2013).

embodies the strategic and intellectual aspects of war. Similarly, Artemis is the goddess of the hunt, archery, childbirth, the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and the wild. Hunting, archery, and spending time in the wilderness were mostly male activities. While practices vary between Greek city-states and cultures, women were generally expected to remain within the home, especially citizen upper-class women in classical Athens, where many of the sources used in this thesis come from. Although recent scholarship has revealed that this idea of the confined woman in classical Athens was more of an ideal than reality, women still rarely ventured outside of the jurisdiction of their husbands without sufficient and appropriate cause and certainly did not go into the wilderness to hunt.⁴ Artemis, a female, is the goddess of a domain inaccessible to the women who worshiped her.

Due to their unusual transcendence between the male and female domains, Athena and Artemis as characters in myth allow for a more nuanced and in-depth investigation into sexuality and gender in ancient Greece, specifically classical Athens.⁵ They defied gender norms in many ways and yet were still subjects in a patriarchal society, worshiped both by the oppressors and the oppressed. Their dominion extends over both male and female spheres of influence, and they are excluded from the many myths surrounding godly reproduction. Their mythos (collection of stories that, together, comprise their characterization and place within the larger mythology) also

⁴ Martin 2013: 74 and Robson 2013: 22.

⁵ The term “ancient Greece” is exceptionally broad, covering over 1,000 years and a broad swath of geographical and cultural diversity. This thesis focuses primarily on classical Athens, which includes the city-state of Athens and its surrounding lands/affiliates from 500 to 300 BCE. While certainly not representative of the entirety of ancient Greece, this thesis chose to focus on classical Athens for two reasons: one, many of the most relevant and intact primary sources used by this thesis, especially regarding life in the *polis*, are from this period, and two, classical Athens was home to several religious cults and traditions that are relevant to the topic of this thesis. Classical Athens was also strongly associated with Athena, one of the main figures analyzed in this thesis. This thesis includes primary sources that come from different times and places than classical Athens but seeks to integrate these with ideas and sources from classical Athens; moreover, some primary sources predate classical Athens and thus would have been known to the authors and population that the first chapter seeks to analyze. See Martin (2013) and Ludwig (2006).

offers unique insight into the nature of celibacy in Athenian society. Only goddesses were celibate in Greek mythology; there are no major male gods who are recorded as being eternally virgin. Moreover, only certain goddesses, half of the females in the Olympian pantheon, were celibate. Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, has several recorded sexual relationships, Hera is in an eternal sexual relationship with Zeus, and Demeter has a child with a god who is married to another goddess. Why, then, was it important that Athena and Artemis remain eternal virgins? Understanding why only goddesses, and only certain goddesses, were eternal virgins may add depth to Athena and Artemis' celibate existence and characterization. Through an exploration of celibacy in Athena and Artemis' mythos, this thesis identifies asexual resonances that may expand the historical tradition for asexuality.

What is Asexuality?

As defined by The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), a website founded for and by asexual people to share information and discussions about asexuality, “an asexual person is a person who does not experience sexual attraction.”⁶ Asexual communities such as the one defined on AVEN generally identify themselves by two core tenets: they do not experience sexual attraction and their sexuality (as in other sexual orientations) is not a choice but rather an intrinsic characteristic. Importantly, under a definition such as the one supplied by AVEN, asexuality is a lack of sexual *attraction* and does not necessarily entail a lack of sexual desire or sexual activity. Sexual attraction is an inclination to experience sexual acts (whether they be physical or fantasies) with a person, while sexual desire “refers to an urge for sexual stimulation (including potentially an orgasm) and may include both partnered and non-partnered

⁶ “Overview.” *The Asexual Visibility and Education Network*.

stimulation (e.g., masturbation).⁷ A person who identifies as asexual may lack a sex drive, find sex repulsive, or simply not be interested in sex. They may also have a sex drive, desire sex or masturbation, or participate in sexual relationships. Moreover, a person's sexual attraction has no bearing on other types of attraction, such as romantic or aesthetic attraction. For this reason, asexual people may identify themselves as straight, gay, or bisexual regarding their romantic orientation, formally known as heteroromantic, homoromantic, and biromantic asexuals.⁸ Recently, asexuality has become an umbrella term to encompass people who experience less-than-average sexual attraction or less desire for sexual activity. Although scholarship in this field is sparse, some academics have begun to differentiate an individual person's asexual identity from the asexual umbrella as a whole.⁹

Conceptually and historically, asexuality is set apart from other sexual orientations. It lacks the fundamental, uniting characteristic of almost every other sexuality: sexual acts. One symptom of this difference is the lack of a historical tradition or record of asexuality. Historians and academics have labored in the last few decades to construct a queer historic tradition, pulling stories out of history that were repressed, ignored, or forgotten.¹⁰ They have been outstandingly successful given the lack of source material, providing both representation and a historically continuous community for mainly gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Although some sexual orientations, such as homosexuality, may have been discouraged or banned in the past, they still exist in historical tradition.

⁷ Bogaert 2015: 364. However, other studies have found results counter to the ideas proposed by Bogaert. Prause & Graham (2007) found "content analyses supported the idea that low sexual desire is the primary feature predicting asexual identity" (341). Several scholars have attempted to resolve this discrepancy by proposing that the lack of desire commonly reported by self-identified asexuals is lack of sexual desire *for other people*, not a lack of sexual desire in general: in a sense, a lack of sexual attraction. See Brotto et al. (2008) and DeLuzio Chasin (2011).

⁸ Decker 2015: 20; Bogaert 2015: 365.

⁹ DeLuzio Chasin 2011: 715.

¹⁰ For a list of scholars who have worked to construct a queer historic tradition and how these ideas can be applied to constructing an asexual historical tradition, see Przybylo & Cooper (2014).

The same is not true of asexuality. Even today, asexual representation in media is sparse, as it is in the academic literature. The term “asexual” was not coined until the early 1900s, and asexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation was not fully established until the beginning of the 21st century. Mentions of what we would now consider asexuality or at least indicators of asexuality in humans first appeared in the medical literature of the 19th century as case studies of sexual disorders. Men who experienced low sexual attraction or desire were considered to have a mental defect, while women were labeled as “frigid” or “inexperienced.” Low sexual activity/desire as a mental disorder has been included in every edition of the DSM, although the definition has been expanded to fit evolving ideas about sexuality, especially since the publishing of the DSM V. The first mention of asexuality as a sexual orientation and not a disorder appeared in the *Asexual Manifesto*, published by Lisa Orlando, a member of the New York Radical Feminists, in 1972. Orlando and another member, Barbie Hunter Getz, formed the Asexual Caucus in response to not identifying within the other two established sexuality caucuses, Hetero and Homosexual. They described asexuality as “relating sexually to no one” and claimed asexuality was a political act against sexual oppression, although they both also identified with asexuality as a sexual orientation.¹¹ Wider public attention and the formation of an asexual community would come with the advent of online communities such as AVEN in the early 21st century. The relatively recent nature of asexuality as a defined term and community, as well as the continued lack of awareness today, makes looking for asexual figures in history difficult.

Nonetheless, other sexualities, such as homosexuality, lacked established terms and communities for much of their existence and yet still have historical representation, so this is not the only factor contributing to asexuality’s absence of historical tradition. The problem to be

¹¹ See Stremel (2022), Bogaert (2015), and AVEN.

solved lies in the fact that, even if historical figures did not outright identify as gay or even understand homosexuality, modern communities can infer their sexual orientation based on their documented behavior. An example lies in the focus of this paper: ancient Greece. Although Apollo was never labeled as bisexual, his numerous sexual encounters with both men and women, recorded in poetry and epics, provide substantial evidence in favor of his bisexuality. A bisexual person today can read the mythology of Apollo and find a common orientation with which they can identify. However, asexuality necessitates the *absence* of documented behavior; one cannot ascertain whether a figure did not experience sexual attraction by their actions. Someone who would now identify as asexual may have been forced by circumstances to have sex or may not have understood their identity and lived a sexual lifestyle. Conversely, historical figures may have abstained from sex and practiced celibacy for a variety of reasons, including religion, societal pressure, or (especially for women) to maintain independence; in of itself, sex or abstinence are not clear indicators of the strictest understanding of asexuality (such as the one provided by AVEN). An asexual person may not be celibate (a lifestyle wherein a person abstains from sex) and a celibate person may not be asexual. As Brunning and McKeever explain:

An asexual celibate is someone who does not act on their sexual desires; an asexual with a desire disorder will find that their sexual drive has diminished, or increased, in ways they find troubling. Neither person is sexually attracted to other people. To know that someone is asexual, like knowing that someone is bisexual, tells us little about the strength or frequency of their sexual desires and little about their motivations for having sex if, and when, they choose to do so.¹²

Moreover, in looking for the strict, modern definition of asexuality in history, we risk applying modern ideas about sexuality to people and societies that were fundamentally different.

¹² Brunning & McKeever 2020: 502.

Constructing a historical tradition for asexuality and looking for asexuality in history can therefore be quite difficult. Nonetheless, a historical tradition is crucial for two main reasons: representation in the past is important for fostering and legitimizing communities in the present, and both asexual and allosexual (non-asexual) people alike may benefit from an analysis of how life, both past and present, may be lived outside the confines of a sex-based society—in other words, confronting compulsory sexuality.¹³ “Compulsory sexuality” is the idea that the assumed default status for human beings is to enter into sexual relationships and experience sexual attraction.¹⁴ This can notion cause pressure and isolation for anyone who does not identify within the bounds of “sexual.” Compulsory sexuality can be harmful to sexual people as well; people may enter into sexual relationships they are not ready for or feel as though their life is incomplete without a sexual partner. Studying figures not bound by a sexual lifestyle or expectations may give insight into how modern society can begin to mediate the harmful effects of compulsory sexuality.

The goal of this thesis is twofold: to question why goddesses, and only certain goddesses, were celibate while others were not and to analyze Athena and Artemis through a modern understanding of asexuality. The first goal necessitates a deep dive into sexuality and asexuality in classical Athenian society, Greek mythology, and Athena and Artemis’ mythos. Gaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between Athena and Artemis’ characterization and their status as eternal virgins in turn provides a foundation for identifying asexual resonances in their mythos, fulfilling the second goal. This thesis provides a more complex analysis of sexuality and asexuality in classical Athens while also demonstrating the ways that our modern understanding of asexuality informs our ideas about ancient Greek goddesses. In studying mythological figures

¹³ Bogaert 2015: 374-375.

¹⁴ Decker 2015: 62.

through an asexual lens, this thesis also attempts to begin adding to the asexual historical tradition.

This analysis unfolds over the course of three chapters. The first chapter looks at stories concerning the origin of sexuality in humans and the role of the *polis* in gender and sexuality. Based on an analysis of these ideas, this chapter has a few main findings: the presence of compulsory sexuality in classical Athens, the idea of the masculine and masculine relationships holding inherently higher moral value than the feminine, the threat celibacy posed to the *polis*, and how the *polis* itself necessitated the oppression of women and the complete control of female sexuality. Although modern society recognizes that gender is not binary, this project focuses on a male-female binary for simplicity's sake.

The second chapter specifically attempts to understand sexuality and gender in Greek mythology, based on the findings about the same concepts in classical Athens. Although the relationship between classical Athens and Greek mythology is not as direct as one might first believe, studying gender and sexuality in classical Athens still provides a critical background for the understanding and analysis of the Greek myths to be explored. As H.J. Rose proposes in *A Handbook of Greek Mythology*, a myth reflects the ideas and values of the people who created it; a myth had to draw on the storyteller's own experience, values, and ideas about the world. The main focuses of this chapter are the presence of compulsory sexuality in Athenian society and mythology, the interconnectedness of gender roles and sexual expectations on Mount Olympus and the pervasiveness of sexual violence in Greek mythology, answering the question of why only goddesses were eternal virgins, and identifying why Athena and Artemis, specifically, were celibate. The findings of this chapter focus on answering the main questions of this thesis: why were only female goddesses eternally celibate, and why were only certain goddesses virgins

while others were free to express their sexuality? In short, why were Athena and Artemis (and Hestia) the only virgin goddesses, and why was it so important they remain virgins in the first place?

The third and final chapter culminates in an analysis of Athena and Artemis as asexual goddesses through the lens of previous findings about the distinctive qualities of virgin goddesses. Special attention is paid to myths that contain resonances of asexuality, such as their origin stories and prominent relationships with other figures. Sections include Athena's birth story and Artemis' request for eternal celibacy. This chapter also presents Athena and Artemis as additions to the scant historical tradition of asexuality.

A New Methodology

Asexual studies as a scholarly field is basically in its infancy. Because of this situation, the pool of key literature is relatively small and undeveloped. However, dedicated scholars have begun producing academic literature on asexuality, especially in the last decade.¹⁵ Based on the barriers to finding asexuality in history already described, this thesis utilizes a methodology inspired by two pieces of asexual scholarship, "Asexual Resonances" by Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper and Elizabeth Hanson's dissertation, "Making Something Out of Nothing: Asexuality and Narrative."¹⁶ The best elaboration of what constitutes "asexual resonances" is written by Przybylo and Cooper themselves:

Here we are not bound to asexuality as a sexual identity category articulated in the West in the last decade or so, nor do we offer an alternative "measurable" standard for determining what constitutes asexuality. Rather, we shift our focus to a blurrier imagining

¹⁵ Examples include Przybylo & Cooper, Hanson, Bogaert, Brotto et al., Brunning & McKeever, DeLuzio Chasin, and Prause & Graham.

¹⁶ Ela Przybylo and Danielle Cooper, "Asexual Resonances: Tracing a Queerly Asexual Archive," *Read.dukeupress.edu*, 1 June 2014, and Elizabeth Hanna Hanson, "Making Something Out of Nothing: Asexuality and Narrative," *Loyola ECommons, Loyola University Chicago*, 2013.

of asexuality; we are attuned less to self-identified asexual figures than to asexual “resonances” — or traces, touches, instances— allowing us to search for asexuality in unexpected places. Such a queer broadening of what can “count” as asexuality, especially historically speaking, creates space for unorthodox and unpredictable understandings and manifestations of asexuality.¹⁷

Hanson’s dissertation extends this idea, proposing asexual possibility, wherein one may treat asexuality as a meta-construct equal to sexuality, which allows for broader understanding and application of asexuality in narrative:

My examination of the asexual possibility, then, stretches asexuality rather far from what we have come to expect from asexual-identified subjects and suggests the utility of a proposal like Chasin’s “that asexuality may not be as simple as a lack of sexual attraction and may, instead, be a meta-construct, analogous to sexuality.” Treating asexuality as such a meta-construct not only accommodates the considerable internal diversity of the asexual population but makes the concept more flexible for applications in which asexuality seems to be structurally opposed not to sexual attraction, strictly speaking, but to the implicitly sexual desire motivating, for instance, the movement of narrative.¹⁸

In this case, a meta-construct is a construct (idea) in philosophy that encompasses a number of other related constructs. DeLuzio Chasin explains this idea in depth and how asexuality as a meta-construct relates to sexuality as a meta-construct:

While the relevant sub-samples of a ‘representative sample’ of asexual people would share a common thread (i.e., they are all sub-samples of asexual people), it is plausible that different common threads could tie together different groups of asexual sub-samples. Namely, it is possible that one set of asexual sub-samples would share one asexual commonality, which would, in turn, be different from the asexual commonality shared by a different set of sub-samples... This would certainly be so if asexuality proves to be a multifaceted phenomenon described by several relating constructs, for example, pertaining to the presence, degree, and quality of attraction and desires, instead of described by a monolithic essence. After all, sexuality is often defined as a meta-construct encompassing constructs of attractions, desires, fantasies, behaviors, and self-identity even though these may not be related in the same ways for all people.¹⁹

For asexual studies, asexuality as a meta-construct would allow for diversity within the asexual community without having to stretch the definition of asexuality to encompass every discrepancy

¹⁷ Przybylo & Cooper 2014: 298.

¹⁸ Hanson 2013: 6.

¹⁹ DeLuzio Chasin 2011: 716.

and would allow for scholars to isolate different asexual resonances and propose different versions of asexuality as additions to the historical tradition.²⁰

This methodology acknowledges that it is difficult and anachronistic to look for the strictest definition of asexuality in historical figures. Especially when dealing with a society like classical Athens, whose ideas about sexuality were so different from the modern day, it would not be productive to impose modern ideas about sexuality onto characters such as Artemis and Athena. Moreover, as previously discussed, it is extremely difficult to conclusively determine whether a figure was asexual when operating under the modern, stricter definition of asexuality. This thesis instead analyzes works about Greek mythology for asexual resonances. Asexual resonances are subjective and could be anything from celibacy to rebellion against sexual norms and compulsory sexuality to a lack of described sexual behavior; anything that could suggest the presence of asexuality in a figure. This thesis commonly relates celibacy to asexuality, as celibacy is an asexual resonance that is relatively easy to identify. As stated above, an asexual person may not be celibate, and a celibate person may not be asexual, but when looking for behaviors that could be suggestive of asexuality in the past, celibacy is a strong indicator, as many (but not all) self-identified asexual people today are celibate.²¹ Celibacy is also less ambiguous in its ties to other sexual and gender orientations; for example, gender non-conformity could be an asexual resonance, but it could also just as likely indicate a gender identity rather than sexual orientation. In contrast, celibacy is more commonly associated with asexuality than with other sexual or gender orientations that could be gleaned from figures. Asexual resonances are undefined and personal, which makes them harder to quantify but also allows for an asexual historical tradition that is nuanced and inclusive. This methodology is used

²⁰ See also Chivers & Bailey (2007).

²¹ DeLuzio Chasin 2011: 718.

by several scholars to analyze a field (theater or Victorian literature, for example) through an asexual lens.²² This thesis acknowledges the limitations of this approach, including broad opportunity for interpretation and a small scholarly field to draw from. However, these limitations are also what make this thesis important: this thesis attempts to use a new methodology to add to a scarce historical archive by analyzing mythology and literature that are thousands of years old.

This thesis uses primary sources, such as poems, hymns, and epics, as the main focus of analysis, as well as secondary sources from both classical and feminist scholars focused on Athena and Artemis.²³ Moreover, ideas from several prominent scholars studying asexuality, including Przybylo, Hanson, and Bogaert, are used as a vehicle to analyze the primary texts. This thesis highlights primary sources that focus on sexuality in classical Athenian society and mythology and on Artemis and Athena. However, since these primary sources are translations, there is room for misunderstandings and mistranslations of the original text; this thesis uses a translation recommended by classics scholars to be as accurate as possible. Moreover, Greek mythology was never standardized, as different cults in different areas had variations in storytelling.

²² See Hanson (2013) and Przybylo (2019).

²³ Primary sources include Hesiod (2008), Homer (1990 & 2018), and Callimachus (2015). Works cited by classical scholars include Hubbard (2014), Martin (2013), and Hard (2022). Finally, works that combine classical and feminist (gender and sexuality) studies include Foxhall (2013) and Abbot (2001).

Chapter One: Gender and Sexuality in Classical Athens

One must keep in mind that the people of classical Athens viewed and expressed sexuality in a fundamentally different manner than we do now. To force cultural and mythological ideas from this time into a modern understanding of sexuality would be to ignore the cultural and historical context that shaped how Athenians lived their lives. This has been a problem with interpreting Greek mythology for almost as long as Greek mythology has existed; for instance, characters in Plato's *Symposium*, set during the classical period, struggled to interpret the relationship between Bronze Age heroes Achilles and Patroklos in contemporary terms.²⁴ If ancient Athenians struggled with anachronisms while discussing the sexuality of figures from their own mythological and cultural past, scholars today must tread even more carefully when applying modern labels and ideas to ancient stories. The same can be said for studying gender roles in classical Athens and in Greek mythology, which unavoidably overlap with sexuality.

This chapter explores gender and sexuality in classical Athens, specifically searching for asexual resonances and cultural context that informs the idea of a virgin goddess. The intersection between gender roles and sexuality will be examined to gain insight into why certain goddesses were eternally celibate. Included in this discussion are Athenian ideas about the origin of love, marriage, and the *polis*. Ultimately, this chapter forms the basis for the analysis of Greek mythology, which explores and uncovers why only (certain) goddesses were virgins, and for the discovery of asexual resonances in Athena and Artemis' mythos. The main findings of this chapter are twofold: gender inequality and the complete control of female sexuality were

²⁴ Hubbard 2014: 146.

fundamental to the functioning of the *polis*, and celibacy or removal from sexual life in human constituents was an existential threat to the *polis* and thus the Greek way of life.

The Origins of Love, According to Aristophanes

Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *Symposium* offers insight into how Athenians during the classical period viewed human sexuality, as a societal, mythology, and moral concept, as well as gender. Aristophanes divides human relationships into three categories: what we would now call heterosexual, male homosexual (or pederastic), and female homosexual. This narrative portrays humans as fundamentally sexual beings; humans who do not want sex are not mentioned (this is what we would now call compulsory sexuality). Although some relationships may have more intrinsic moral value than others, all three stem from the same source that is intrinsic to humans.²⁵ Ultimately, the two most important conclusions from Aristophanes' speech are that compulsory sexuality was present in classical Athens and that masculinity, and masculine relationships, was considered superior to femininity. Knowing how these ideas were perceived in classical Athenian society allows for an analysis of them in Greek mythology as well, both of which are key points to the argument of why only goddesses were eternal virgins.

The *Symposium*, depicting a debate between Athenian men about the nature of love, is attributed to Plato, a philosopher who resided in Athens during the classical period.²⁶ *Symposium* takes place at a victory banquet for the playwright Agathon and features several notable figures, including Socrates, a philosopher and Plato's teacher. Symposiums, particularly those in classical Athens as portrayed here, were drinking parties, meant to foster a sense of community among the

²⁵ Hubbard 2014: 143.

²⁶ "At once a historical document, a philosophical drama that enacts abstract ideas in an often-light-hearted way, and a literary masterpiece, it has exerted an influence that goes well beyond the confines of philosophy." Destrée & Giannopoulou 2018: foreword.

participants and the broader population. Symposiums were more commonly associated with the aristocratic class, bringing together like-minded people to converse, compete, and identify potentially problematic relationships or ideas.²⁷ Symposiums were also, fundamentally, male affairs, as Cooksey explains:

These (symposiums) were also essentially masculine affairs, wine, song, but no women, the occasion for male bonding, the initiation of boys into the masculine world of citizens, and a vehicle for the transmission of its cultural traditions...A group leader was appointed, the *symposiarch*, charged with mixing the wine and directing the movement of toasts and conversations, the guardian of social order. Central to the tradition are the themes of education and initiation, involving the transmission of cultural memory through the performance of poetry and songs, memorized and performed by the boys.²⁸

This portrayal of the symposium as a male-centered occasion meant to pass down important cultural traditions and the status of *symposiarch* as guardian of the social order also explains why this thesis chose to focus on *Symposium*, and specifically Aristophanes' speech, as a point of analysis. A symposium was meant to be an occasion for passing down cultural values and traditions, and *Symposium* utilizes this existing framework as the basis for a philosophical work focused on *eros*. In doing so, *Symposium* highlights the cultural traditions of the time, at least as perceived by Plato, regarding *eros* and how the *symposiarch*, and the masculine authority he represents, protects and maintains the social order regarding *eros*. *Symposium* is thus a source that fulfills two key aspects of this chapter: it deals primarily with sexuality and is structured in a way that is meant to demonstrate cultural tradition, which together highlight the cultural tradition surrounding *eros* in classical Athens. This situation is a large part of what this chapter seeks to understand: how gender and sexuality operated in classical Athens. Aristophanes' speech was

²⁷ Cooksey 2010: 7 and Sheffield 2006: 8.

²⁸ Cooksey 2010: 1, 6.

chosen specifically as a point of analysis because it incorporates the former with Greek mythology, the subject of the rest of this thesis.²⁹

Symposium deviates from the normal rhythm of a symposium, however, in that, concerned about the amount of drinking at the banquet, a physician recommends they go around the room and make speeches honoring love; they pass speeches around instead of the drinking cup. One of these speeches is by Aristophanes, a contemporary comedian, who claims to shift the discourse in a new direction, namely the origin of human love and how mankind used to be entirely different:

The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was a man, woman, and the union of the two...the primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces.³⁰

Early humankind, each individual composed of what is now two whole humans, was too powerful and began to challenge the gods. The gods were torn about what to do: humankind's insolence could not go unchallenged, but the gods would lose the humans' sacrifices if they simply destroyed the human race. Zeus, ever the wise, produced a solution: split each individual into two, each with two legs and one face:

Each of us is separated, having one side only...and he is always looking for his other half.³¹

²⁹ Cooksey (2010) presents *Symposium* as the “dialectical counterpoint” to another of Plato’s works, *Republic*. “Both works explore what it means to be a philosopher, a ‘lover of wisdom.’ But while the *Republic* dwells primarily on grasping the nature of ‘wisdom,’ the *Symposium* shifts to the other side of the equation, seeking to understand what ‘love’ means and how it relates to the pursuit of wisdom” (pg.14). According to Cooksey, *Symposium* presents love as a process of enlightenment, moving from the individual to more abstract ideals, and highlights the effort necessary to lead to the philosophic process to fruition. In a similar vein, Sheffield (2006) relates *Symposium* thematically to some of Plato’s other, well-studied works, such as *Protagoras*, the *Meno*, and the *Republic*, claiming all belong to “the canon of dialogues concerned with moral education” (pg. 7). This is the stance taken by this thesis as well and is the reason why this thesis chose to focus on *Symposium* instead of other works when discussing sexuality in classical Athens: it deals primarily with ideas of *eros* and the transmission of societal moral standards, which reflect in mythology.

³⁰ Plato 1998: 24-25.

³¹ Plato 1998: 27.

Men who were separated from and therefore love women are what we would consider heterosexual, and Aristophanes claims adultery is common among both men and women in this type of relationship. Aristophanes insinuates this type of relationship is less virtuous but also necessary, and required by law and duty, to continue the human race:

Men who are a section of that double nature which was once called Androgynous are lovers of women; adulterers are generally of this breed, and also adulterous women who lust after men...When they (men who love men, who will become the great men and politicians of the *polis*) reach manhood they are lovers of youth, and are not naturally inclined to marry or beget children—if at all, they do so only in obedience to the law.³²

Women who love women are afforded half of a sentence, only mentioned as an alternate option for women to heterosexuality. Interestingly, this is the one type of relationship Aristophanes does not ascribe a moral weight to; what we would call lesbian relationships seem to be a complete non-entity to him, although it is equal in origin and strength to other relationships.³³ Men who love men are distinct from the other two in that Aristophanes seems to be mainly referring to the practice of pederasty and contributing to the ongoing (at the time) debate about its ethics.

Andrew Lear explains pederasty and its status:

[Pederasty is] the ancient Greek custom of erotic relations between an adult man...and an adolescent boy or youth... Pederasty was regarded by Greeks and by non-Greeks alike as a hallmark of Greek culture. Evidence also indicates that it was not only tolerated but the object of considerable social esteem. Approval was, however, not always unmixed: at times pederasty was viewed with concern... and possibly with disapproval by certain social groups.³⁴

It seems pederasty was common in classical Athens but also separate from what we would consider male homosexuality, between two adult men. Aristophanes' dialogue is notable because, in defending pederasty, he claims the practice is not shameless but rather the source of great men. He argues men who are valiant and especially masculine are drawn to similarly masculine

³² Plato 1998: 27.

³³ Hubbard 2014: 145.

³⁴ Hubbard 2014: 106.

men (or boys), and the ensuing relationship produces men entrenched in masculinity and suitable for leadership. In supporting pederasty, Aristophanes also shows how valued masculinity, sometimes fostered through sexual relationships, was in the culture, and how the lack of masculinity or presence of femininity weakened a man's usefulness and position in society.³⁵

There are challenges that correspond to using *Symposium*, and specifically Aristophanes' speech, to draw general conclusions about ideas and beliefs about gender and sexuality in classical Athens. However, what one might originally consider potential drawbacks to using this speech to discern ideals about gender and sexuality might actually be benefits: namely, that Aristophanes' version of the origins of human beings is an outlier in Greek mythology, that the concept of *eros* discussed in *Symposium* is more nuanced than the modern idea of simply love or desire, and that Aristophanes (in real life) was a comedian whose words cannot always be taken at face value. Aristophanes' speech is an outlier in the etiology of humanity and human desire in Greek mythology, with the more common origin story of humanity involving Prometheus and Pandora.³⁶ *Symposium* is one of the only pieces that includes Aristophanes' origin story for humanity, and it seems the story may have even been constructed specifically for *Symposium* and did not reflect what classical Athens regarded as humanity's mythological origin. However, this interpretation does not detract from the ideas about gender and sexuality in classical Athens, specifically the presence of compulsory sexuality and the superiority of the masculine, gleaned from Aristophanes' speech, because the speech does not necessarily need to reflect what was actually believed about human etiology as much as it reflects how contemporaries viewed gender

³⁵Aristophanes' discussion of pederasty could also be considered a thinly veiled joke at the expense of Pausanias and Agathon, and Aristophanes may not have actually been supporting pederasty as he does at face-value (see note 41). However, this thesis still maintains there is an overall theme of masculine superiority, especially given the masculine nature of the symposium itself.

³⁶ Robson 2013: 116.

and sexuality. After all, *Symposium* is not a debate or conversation about the specifics of Greek mythology, but rather an exploration and celebration of *eros* in classical Athens.

By reading the speeches given in *Symposium*, one can join the exploration of *eros* without bring too concerned with the historical or mythological accuracy of the story's setup. Furthermore, *Symposium* does not actually focus on the concept of love as modern readers understand it, but rather on the Greek notion of *eros*.³⁷ Eros was both a concept and a god. As a concept, *eros* could be defined as love or sexual desire, as well as desire for community, ambition, or even patriotism³⁸; this definition is important to keep in mind when considering the types of relationship the speeches are referring to, including Aristophanes'. The relationships in Aristophanes' story could be interpreted as love, as in an elevated connection between souls, or as an attempt to fulfill a base, irrational sexual desire.³⁹ The exact nature of *eros*, both as a concept and as a god, is ambiguous and is the subject of debate between many of the speakers in *Symposium*.⁴⁰ This nature is another reason why this thesis chose to focus on Aristophanes' speech: it explicitly deals with *eros* as a sexual or relational concept. *Eros* is framed as something that occurs between two people, the halves of the former whole, in an intimate, interpersonal context, resulting in a desire for completion that manifests as sex. Critically, this manifestation of desire as sex is what allows Aristophanes' speech in particular to demonstrate

³⁷ Eros as a deity is further explored in the next chapter.

³⁸ Ludwig 2006: 2.

³⁹ Obdrzalek 2018: 85.

⁴⁰ Sheffield (2006) addresses the nuances of *eros* in *Symposium*: "The Greeks of Plato's day categorized different kinds of love: *eros* quite commonly referred to erotic love, whereas *philia* was most commonly used for the love for friends and family. There is some degree of slippage between the two terms" (pg. 2). Sheffield also discusses Ludwig's emphasis on the potential non-sexual nature of *eros*: "He argues persuasively that it (*eros*) referred to intense desire (whether bodily or spiritual) and has a wider semantic range than the purely sexual. Eros, he argues, 'occurs in cases in which the desire, whether sexual or not, becomes obsessional and the subject of desire becomes willing to devote nearly all his or her life, time, or resources to achieving the goal'" (pg. 2). This section acknowledges these nuances of *eros* and specifically mentions them as a reason for focusing on Aristophanes' speech.

compulsory sexuality. The ambiguity of *eros* as a romantic concept also allows Aristophanes to rank the three types of relationships he presents by gender and morality, which allow us to glean the superiority of the masculine.

Finally, the historical Aristophanes, a real person who lived in Athens, was a comedian; as such, his account of the origin of love could be taken as a satire. While many aspects of his speech are indeed satirical (and called out by the other speakers), the ideas espoused by Aristophanes cannot be dismissed too quickly.⁴¹ Satire is often a method of holding up a mirror to the current state of society and could provide valuable insight into what Athenian society was like based on what and how the comedian decided to mock, especially since his plays were produced for the common people rather than the elite.⁴² Moreover, while the other speakers contest aspects of the speech, such as what the ideal goal of love truly is or the nature of *eros* itself, the main points this thesis seeks to take from Aristophanes' account are repeated in other speeches, such as the fundamental connectedness of humanity and sex, indicating that these ideas are indeed pervasive among the philosophers of classical Athens.

⁴¹ “Regardless of whether Aristotle is correct in this assertion, what is important here is that Aristotle identifies comedy as the poetic form in which poets lampoon, parody and satirize one another, and in the *Symposium* there is good reason to think that Aristophanes follows this tradition. Unlike Phaedrus, whose encomium of Eros was most likely pre-prepared, Aristophanes' speech appears to be (at least in part) an off-the-cuff satire of the speeches that precede it. This point is well recognized in the literature, and it is often argued by commentators that Aristophanes' description of Eros as a 'healer' at the beginning of his speech, and his descriptions of surgery and welding throughout his encomium, is added to mock the doctor Eryximachus; and that, despite Aristophanes' weak protestations to the contrary, in his discussion of 'manly' halfmen – those who are the halves of wholly male circlemen – he is indeed poking fun at Pausanias and Agathon – a fact for which we can be left in no doubt after Agathon's own encomium, in which he argues himself the 'softest' and 'gentlest' of all people. In light of our previous analysis we have good reason to think that Aristophanes' comments in praise of eros are similarly farcical... However, I do not believe that Aristophanes' assertion ought to be taken wholly as a joke. Although the comedian clearly does not believe that eros offers humans the promise of perfection, I wish to suggest that Aristophanes does see an important and genuinely praiseworthy role for eros in human life (and so satisfies Phaedrus' agenda that all speakers should praise Eros), though for far more modest reasons than the first three speakers in the *Symposium* would have us believe.” Hooper 2013: 576-577.

⁴² Ludwig 2006: 39.

Aristophanes's speech provides several points of insight, such as the presence of compulsory sexuality and the relationship between gender and sexuality in classical Athens, that are relevant to the topic of this thesis because they establish the societal basis for Greek myths that concern the same ideas. First, sexuality is presented as being intrinsic to human nature, as the very origin of humanity stems from sexual attraction and desire. The people in Aristophanes' story are literally incomplete without their other half and the sexual joining of the two; the only way to be complete, or at least seek the feeling of completeness, is to engage in sexual acts with one's other half.⁴³ This description highlights how classical Athens was a society built on compulsory sexuality. Sexuality is assumed and expected, enough so that to be removed from sexuality would be to be absent from the origin of humanity itself. While other speakers may challenge the truth of Aristophanes's origin story, none of them challenges the idea that *eros* is inextricably linked with humanity; hence *eros* is the subject of the entire piece. This explanation implies asexuality was not only uncommon in classical Athens but was also almost inhuman, an idea asexuality people still struggle with to this day.

Second, sexuality is fundamentally linked to gender. To relate the origins of love, Aristophanes must first describe the original three genders, and how they shape the sexual desire of their halves. Sexuality is based on one's gender as a whole human and what gender they are

⁴³ There is debate among scholars as to whether Aristophanes presents this completion as attainable or fundamental to human nature. Hooper (2013) seeks to answer this question in his piece: "Far from being a tragedy in which we are supposed to lament the impossibility of achieving perfection, I suggest that the Net of Hephaestus passage is supposed to show us that 'perfection' is an illusory goal that is completely foreign to human nature, and that the moral of this speech as a whole is that people can live a flourishing and satisfying existence, but only if we give up on the desire to transcend our deficiency" (pg. 568). Obdrzalek (2018) argues that this goal is fundamental to human nature, which Plato then uses to propel his argument about Forms: "What is Aristophanes' view of human nature? Our central feature is that we are incomplete; this gives rise to the desire for completion. The desire for completion, in turn, causes us to seek to embrace another— either as a futile means to regaining our original state or as an attempt to forget our yearning for completion" (pg.75). This thesis contends that Aristophanes', and later Plato's, speech conveys the idea that the *desire* for completion is fundamental to human nature, not necessarily the completion itself, and thus compulsory sexuality can still be properly gleaned from Aristophanes' speech.

attracted to as a half-human. Third, relationships and people subscribing to more masculine gender roles are of higher value to society. Aristophanes claims that relationships in which a masculine man induces or attracts masculinity in another man are the types of relationships that produce prominent politicians and societal leaders. He also implies that these are the most virtuous types of relationships, based less on sexual desire and more on elevation of the mind. Indeed, Diotima's speech later in *Symposium* espouses a similar idea: contemplation and practice of good love leads to wisdom and virtue on par with the gods; in this context, it is unclear exactly what Plato means by "good," only that it is related to virtue and beauty.⁴⁴ Throughout *Symposium*, a common theme is the differentiation between *eros* as base, sexual desire or as love, virtuous and elevated. From Aristophanes' perspective, relationships imbued with masculinity embody *eros* as love the most, implicitly associating masculinity with virtue. Thus, Aristophanes' speech shows not only how gender and sexuality are linked but also how certain genders and gendered qualities are valued over another.

Overall, Aristophanes' speech in Plato's *symposium* is at once an entertaining mythological story, a satire, a philosophical position, and a window into views about gender and sexuality in classical Athens. From this speech, we learn that sexuality is seen as fundamental to human nature (which indicates the presence of compulsory sexuality) and that gender and sexuality are linked, with the masculine being valued over the feminine, which will contribute to the discussion about how the gender of the gods was linked to their sexuality.

⁴⁴ Plato 1998: 52.

The Role of the Polis

To understand how gender and sexuality were expressed in classical Athens, one must first understand the foundations of the culture which they operated in, as that context shaped gender roles and sexual expectations. At the heart of Athenian life was the *polis*. The polis, or city-state, was the primary method of societal organization in ancient Greece, especially in city-states like Athens and Sparta, which will be the focus of this thesis. The polis encompassed the city itself, as well as the surrounding farmland and rural villages, and was composed of citizen men and women, foreigners and non-citizens, and slaves.

In *Politics in Classical Greece: The Nature of the Polis and the Origins of the Rule of Law*, Thomas Curran presents the idea that:

It is therefore the state, rather than the people, that possess sovereignty. It, not the people, grants rights; and its authority must be inviolable. It might in theory, and in reality it often did, attempt to reach into every sphere of human activity without exception.⁴⁵

This demonstrates the dominance of the concept of the *polis* over its citizens. Because the rights of the people were provided by the *polis*, the power of the *polis* extended far beyond just the political. Rather, the *polis* also governed and shaped the personal lives of its citizens. The actions of citizens thus served to maintain order and further the goals of the *polis*. The desire to create, preserve, and continue the *polis* led to the control of female sexuality and the renunciation of celibacy among mortals, especially mortal women.⁴⁶ The control of female sexuality is a theme we see repeated in the Greek pantheon, a theme which shows part of the reason why only female goddesses, not male gods, were celibate: male sexuality did not need to be regulated as female sexuality did, so celibacy, the ultimate regulation of sexuality, was not necessary for male gods.

⁴⁵ Curran: 1989

⁴⁶ This section specifically focuses on relatively upper-class, citizen women in classical Athens because they are who we have the most sources about. Non-citizen women, slaves, courtesans, and more all existed in classical Athens and would not necessarily conform to all of the ideas presented about women in the *polis*.

The idea of celibacy in mortals as something that runs counter to the goals of the *polis*, a antisocial and immoral lifestyle, is less relevant to the study of the divine pantheon but provides a glimpse into what asexuality might have been like for a human and demonstrates that asexuality was something recognized by classical Athenian society, if only as something to be avoided. To the Athenians, politics and sexuality were linked, implicitly as stated above or explicitly, as Paul Ludwig explains in *Eros and Polis: Desire and Community in Greek Political Theory*:

A recurrent feature of ancient Greek political discourse was the assertion that erotic passion was a causal factor in the emergence and maintenance, as well as the decline, of the Greek *polis*.⁴⁷

This relationship is also especially relevant to the subject of this thesis, as Athena (a virgin goddess who is the subject of chapters two and three) embodied the *polis* and its preservation as part of her divine domain.

Polis generally had patron gods to whom festivals, temples, and sacrifices were dedicated as official state activities to secure the god's continued blessing and protection. Although Athens is best known for having Athena as its patron goddess, Athena was also the patron goddess of Sparta, and both city-states worshiped her in different ways that reflected their cultural values. The *polis* was based on the idea of citizenship as an equalizer (in theory, though not always in practice), as well as a method of political and cultural cohesion.⁴⁸ All, or at least most, free citizen men were expected to participate in *polis* politics, although the level of power given to poor citizens vs the elite varied by city-state. Classical Athens embodied this idea even more strongly, as it was a democracy wherein every adult male was expected to participate in political life.

⁴⁷ Ludwig 2006: 1.

⁴⁸ Martin 2013: 53.

Participation in the politics of the *polis* fell upon the men, as well as did farming, war, and socializing/philosophizing outside of the home. Women, especially free women, were in charge of the domestic sphere. With slaves to do menial household tasks, free women became the heads of their households, in the sense that they ran the affairs of the household and family (the man of the house was still ultimately in charge). Women raised children, wove cloth, managed the slaves, oversaw food and resource stores, nursed the sick, and handled the household's finances. The *polis*, and the household as a mini-*polis* (*oikos*) for individual families, relied on the labor of women, despite lacking the same rights and political presence as men: "households thus depended on women, whose work permitted the family to be economically self-reliant and the male citizens to participate in the public life of the *polis*."⁴⁹

Marriage was foundational to the functioning of the *polis*. The *polis* was based on the idea of a cohesive community, wherein it was every (male) citizen's duty to engage in politics and culture as much as possible. However, in order to produce the population needed for the next political class, which would dominate every aspect of society and shape the uniquely Athenian way of life, the *polis* needed reproduction. Because of laws concerning inheritance and social expectations of ideal citizens raised in a domestic unit, this reproduction necessitated marriage. In marriage, a woman went from being under the guardianship of her father or male kin to being under the guardianship of her husband. Except in rare circumstances, women could not be their own guardians; classical Athenian society, especially amongst upper-class citizens, saw women as unable to control or rule themselves. The reasons for this marriage system and for the limited rights of women are explained by Thomas Martin in *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*:

A dual concern to regulate marriage and procreation and to maintain family

⁴⁹ Martin 2013: 68 and Roy 1999: 1.

property underlay the placing of the legal rights of Greek women and the conditions of their citizenship under the guardianship of men. The paternalistic attitude of Greek men toward women was rooted in the desire to control human reproduction and, consequently, the distribution of property.⁵⁰

In classical Athens, the bride was expected to be young and inexperienced, whereas the groom was significantly older and already well-versed with the politics and social scene of the *polis*. This differential in both age and experience was meant to cement the man's role as head of the family and guardian of his wife. Before the wedding ceremony, the bride was expected to dedicate her girlhood girdle to Artemis, marking the beginning of her transition into womanhood; this act demonstrates both the link between Artemis and asexuality and also Artemis' control over adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Childbirth, not the marriage itself, was what certified the marriage's validity and made the child-bride into a woman. Marriage was also tied to citizenship and thus to social identity and status. In classical Athens, only a child of two citizens was eligible for citizenship and, later, almost all marriage between citizens and non-citizens was banned. Because Athens at this point was a democracy, citizenship status became even more important, as it determined whether someone could vote. Marriage between citizens was thus a way to promote, protect, and regulate the community central to the *polis*. This regulation of who could get married, and to whom, demonstrates the *polis* had a vested interest in encouraging the production of a greater quality and quantity of citizens.

Thus, the continuation of the household and the *polis* itself was seen as dependent on the oppression and domination of women through marriage. For the same reasons, female sexuality was also highly regulated by law and social customs, especially in classical Athens. As Allison Glazebrook and Kelly Olson explain in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*:

Marriage, more generally, was also seen as the most effective way to contain women and their sexuality. While self-control was a defining feature of the

⁵⁰ Martin 2013: 69.

male citizen and something a man was thought to possess innately, a woman's nature was thought to lack it. Control of her desires had to be imposed from outside and achieved through guardianship and marriage, as well as through strict codes of behavior and veiling in public.⁵¹

While men could have sex with slaves, foreign concubines and prostitutes, and adolescent men, women could only have sex with their husbands. Women were also expected to remain virgins until marriage. Female sexuality was highly regulated because the purpose of marriage was the production of legitimate heirs. Adultery was considered not just a crime against the husband and household, but a crime against the entire community. A man who slept with another citizen's wife could also be harshly punished by the offended husband, corporally and even to the point of death, although it seems this extreme was less common. In instances like this, the man was treated as the true offender, while the woman was seen as a more passive victim; this treatment could be due to the fact that women were not expected to be able to control their sexual desires in the first place, whereas men were expected to be innately moral and self-controlled.⁵² A female adulterer would just be submitting to her uncontrollable sexual impulses, as was the nature of the female gender. A man would be the only one with enough agency to have actually committed a crime. Nonetheless, women could still be punished for adultery, by divorce and stripping of citizen privileges. By analyzing marriage and its importance to the *polis*, we can learn two things: one, the oppression of women and tight regulation of female sexuality were considered necessary for the good of the marriage and the *polis*, and two, female sexuality needed to be so regulated because women were seen as having little ability to control their sexual impulses, implying women do not have agency in their own decisions and ethics. This view of

⁵¹ Hubbard 2014: 75.

⁵² Hubbard 2014: 76.

women, as morally removed, impulsive beings, explains why the sexuality of female goddesses might have been more explicitly categorized and controlled than that of the male gods.

Sexuality and *eros* are also linked explicitly to the *polis* and its community. Aphrodite,⁵³ goddess of love and beauty, was often associated with female sexuality, and the god Eros, either with both being primordial gods or with Eros as Aphrodite's son. One of Aphrodite's epithets was Pandemos, meaning "of all the people." In Plato's *Symposium*, Pausanias claims the epithet of Pandemos differentiates Aphrodite Pandemos from a related but different goddess, Aphrodite Urania. The epithet of Urania refers to one of Aphrodite's origin stories, wherein she is born from the sea foam generated when Heaven's (Uranus) genitals are cut off and cast into the sea by his son Kronos, effectively ending Uranus' role as king of the universe.⁵⁴ This history would make Aphrodite a primordial goddess, older and arguably more powerful than the Olympian gods. Aphrodite Pandemos, Pausanias argues, is the version of Aphrodite who is the daughter of Zeus and Dione, making her one of the second-generation Olympians. According to Pausanias, Aphrodite Urania was the goddess of Platonic, pederastic love, while Aphrodite Pandemos was the goddess of heterosexual love and pleasures of the flesh.⁵⁵ This distinction between the versions of Aphrodite imparts moral value on different types of *eros*; pederastic love stems from an *eros* that is older, more powerful, and more heavenly, whereas love between especially heterosexual couples comes from earthly pleasure and acts, devaluing such an *eros* in comparison. This analysis supports the conclusion made above about Aristophanes's speech: relationships steeped in masculinity, and by extension masculinity itself, are of a higher moral and celestial value. Moreover, a pederastic relationship came with the understanding that the

⁵³ Aphrodite and Eros as deities are covered further in the next chapter.

⁵⁴ Hubbard 2014: 222.

⁵⁵ Hubbard 2014: 222.

adult man would strive to impress the adolescent by performing more exceptional acts than usual, and in turn the adolescent would attempt to emulate this higher standard. Such a relationship was thought to create an upward spiral for both members of the relationship, producing even more capable and virtuous citizens.⁵⁶ The contribution these pederastic relationships made to facilitating political leaders and a more educated, virtuous political class is valued, at least in Plato's *Symposium*, over the heterosexual relationships that produce the next class of citizens and secure the future of the *polis*. Heterosexual relationships were necessary, a duty that must be carried out for the sake of the *polis* to supply the community. In contrast, pederastic relationships elevated the community produced by heterosexual marriages to an elevated, enlightened political class.⁵⁷

In reality, there is little evidence that cult practices reflected this interpretation of Aphrodite's epithets.⁵⁸ Instead, the epithet Pandemos seems to refer to Aphrodite's role as a goddess who unites the citizenry of the *polis*.⁵⁹ Thus, Aphrodite's domain extended further than love and beauty as social constructs; she was also a political goddess, necessary for maintaining the community that was fundamental to the *polis*. On every level, *eros* was tied to the *polis* and the political.

While the desire to preserve and promote the *polis* motivated the control of sexuality, and especially female sexuality, it also led to an effort to control both men and women who rejected sexuality. In an observation that is especially relevant to the topic of this thesis because it explains how celibacy would be discouraged due to its negative effects on the *polis*, Thomas Hubbard and Maria Doerfler note in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexuality*:

⁵⁶ Ludwig 2006: 29.

⁵⁷ Ludwig 2006: 28.

⁵⁸ Hubbard 2014: 222.

⁵⁹ Hubbard 2014: 222. Hard 2022: 181.

Despite featuring three virgin goddesses, mainstream greek religion offered little incentive or approval of life-long chastity for its human adherents. Official cult was far too closely identified with the interests of the *polis*, which depended on healthy population growth and civic engagement, neither of which was consistent with ascetic withdrawal.⁶⁰

Based on a model of classical Athens with the *polis* as its foundation, it logically follows that celibacy would be counter to societal goals and customs. The *polis* relied on the growth or at least maintenance of its citizen population, especially once certain *polis*, such as democratic Athens, began restricting the right of citizenship to people born of two citizen parents.⁶¹ Citizenship was a coveted position, determining not only inheritance and property rights but also the right to participate in government (at least for men). Laws prohibiting the marriage of citizens with non-citizens demonstrate how important the union and procreation of citizens was to secure the citizenry.⁶² If a citizen were to renounce sexuality, they would be denying the *polis* its next generation of citizens, which was critical to the *polis*' political and social structure. Moreover, celibacy was also often associated with withdrawal from society altogether (a relationship that will be explored later in this chapter), and a citizen who withdrew from the *polis* would be rejecting their duty to the state. Citizens (especially male citizens) not only had the privilege to participate in politics but were duty-bound to be as involved as possible. To withdraw from society would be to threaten the very cohesion that the *polis* is known for and depended on.⁶³

This background provides societal context for the goddesses who are analyzed later in this thesis: although the goddesses are eternally celibate by choice, such a decision would not be approved of in a human life because it would run counter to the cultural and societal force of the

⁶⁰ Hubbard 2014: 172.

⁶¹ Hubbard 2014: 84.

⁶² Hubbard 2014: 84.

⁶³ Martin 2013: 52.

polis. Why, then, would a practice that is detrimental to Athenian society and the *polis* be a critical part of the mythos for some of the most important goddesses in the pantheon, especially the goddess responsible for the *polis* itself? This is the question that this thesis and its subsequent analytical chapters attempt to answer.

The role of the *polis* in gender and sexuality in classical Athens is important for two main reasons. One, the very nature of the *polis* as it was structured necessitated the oppression of women and the control of female sexuality.⁶⁴ This structure provides evidence for why and how classical Athens was a patriarchal society, which in turn sheds light on the issue of virgin goddesses. We would not have to ask the question of why only goddesses were eternally celibate if gender roles in classical Athens were equal; moreover, a motivated desire to control female sexuality suggests that the virgin nature of certain goddesses may have been stressed because only female sexuality was tightly regulated. Male gods, like male humans, could have sex with almost whoever they wanted without affecting their spheres of influence or vice versa, whereas a female goddess' sexuality would be strongly correlated with her divine domain. A male could be associated with feminine things and still be free to express his sexuality however he liked, whereas a woman's sexuality had to be carefully determined based on whether she interacted more with the masculine or feminine domain. In short, male sexuality was inconsequential, but female sexuality would send a message or set a precedent that marriage and children, the future of the *polis*, were not required and that women could have lives outside of the home, which would threaten the very fabric of the *polis*.

⁶⁴ Oppression of women refers to the legal and social discrimination against women based on gender. This judgement includes confining women to the house and excluding them from politics. The control of female sexuality refers to a more abstract concept, wherein how and why women were allowed to have sex was of relevance to the entire community and thus required regulation on the personal, social, and political levels.

Two, because of the importance of sexuality to the *polis*, renouncing sexuality could be seen as a threat to classical Athenian society, culture, and values. A good citizen is one who fulfills their duty, both to civic engagement and to producing the next generation of citizens. To reject these duties that were critical to the function of Athenian society would make one a bad citizen; this rejection would ascribe a negative moral value to celibacy amongst humans. Additionally, *eros* was tied not only to the production of the next generation of citizens but was also responsible for creating the most educated and virtuous community (of men) possible. Overall, it seems Athenian culture would have frowned upon asexuality and its expression in humans. However, Athena, the embodiment of the power of the *polis* and source of political wisdom, was herself celibate. This combination ties into the point made above that sexuality and gender are linked, with female sexuality requiring careful control and male sexuality being a mode of enlightenment and community: if a male god had power over Athena's domain, it would be unthinkable for him to renounce sex. However, since Athena was female, her sexual expression would be closer to that of Aphrodite Pandemos, as only men could be involved in the enlightening pederastic relationships. To lose control of Athena's sexuality would be to lose control of the *polis*; both must be heavily guarded, by men, against the dangers of female sexuality, lest it should threaten the *polis* itself.

In studying the role of the *polis* in classical Athenian gender and sexuality, we find two points that offer insight as to why virgin goddesses exist. First, gender inequality was fundamental to the functioning of the *polis*, as was the complete control of female sexuality. The same gender inequality and control of female sexuality visible in the polis will also prove to be the norm amongst the Greek gods. Only female sexuality needed to be controlled, so only female goddesses needed to remain virgins to properly represent their domains; male gods' sexuality

had no impact on the rest of their characterization. Second, celibacy or removal from sexual life in human constituents was an existential threat for the *polis* and thus the Greek way of life. Among the goddesses, this expectation was true for only some, as at least some goddesses' domains required them to engage in sexual relationships. This requirement helps answer the question of what only certain goddesses were celibate.

Concluding Remarks

Examining gender and sexuality in classical Athens provides critical context for the study of gender and sexuality in Greek mythology, specifically regarding the subject of this thesis: the virgin goddesses. Human nature was understood to be intrinsically linked to sexuality; the very existence and origin of humanity was based on the idea of humans as sexual beings. This understanding necessitates a high level of compulsory sexuality in classical Athenian society: sexuality was expected and assumed, and anyone who deviated from the sexual path was an unnatural outlier. This same logic did not apply to the gods, as their origin and nature stemmed from a different source; however, the gods of Greek mythology were fully anthropomorphized and human-like. Thus, even though asexuality was possible among the gods due to their different nature, it was still a deviation from the norm that had to be intentionally asserted rather than assumed. This situation is compounded by the idea that celibacy was harmful to the foundation of classical Athens, the *polis*. To reject sex would be to reject one's duty to the *polis* and threaten the very fabric of society. However, Athena, the embodiment of the *polis*, was a virgin herself; this dichotomy will be examined further in later chapters but can be partially explained by gender roles.

Classical Athens was built on a foundation that required the oppression of women and complete control of female sexuality. The preservation of the *polis*, its citizenry, and its future were all dependent upon the complete domination of women. Moreover, the masculine held a higher moral value than the feminine, especially in its contribution to society and culture. Relationships with women required constant regulation, barely preserving morality; relationships with men were morally elevating and enriching both sides. With female sexuality requiring such iron-fisted control and such potential for disaster, it makes sense that important goddesses would be designated eternally virgin. The necessity of controlling female sexuality becomes even more important when it enters the immortal realm, as the consequences become cosmic. This elevation into the immortal realm is examined in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Gender and Sexuality on Mount Olympus

Chapter One discusses gender and sexuality in classical Athens, and Chapter Two elevates (literally) this discussion to the divine pantheon itself. Armed with knowledge from Chapter One, we can begin a proper exploration of the nature of gender and sexuality in Greek mythology, and why the virgin goddesses were so distinct.

The virgin goddesses were unique because they deviated from sexual norms, such as compulsory sexuality and the domination of women, both in classical Athenian society as a whole and amongst the Greek pantheon. The *polis* and the society it supported relied on the oppression of women and domination of female sexuality, and the society on Mount Olympus, home of the gods, was not so different. Although gender roles and sexual expectations were less rigid for goddesses than mortal women, Greek mythology still relied heavily on the, mostly sexual, domination of female goddesses. Several of the most popular Greek myths, such as the abduction of Persephone by Hades, also hinged on an act of sexual violence. To be a virgin goddess was one of the only ways to protect oneself from the sexual violence routinely experienced by other goddesses and to isolate oneself from traditional gender roles.

The main reason only goddesses, and not male gods, were eternally celibate was because of the interconnectedness of gender roles and sexuality: sexuality determined the role and status a female goddess could have. Male gods were not subject to the same limitations—their sexuality was separate from their position in the universe, and thus they did not need to be eternally celibate to gain more agency or protect themselves from sexual violence. For female goddesses, however, their sexuality was linked to their position on the gender hierarchy, so it was necessary for them to be explicitly celibate in order to enjoy some privileges inherent to male gods.

Only some Olympian goddesses were virgins because of sexuality's relevance to their characterization and sphere of influence. Hera, as goddess of marriage, had to have legitimate children with her husband and thus could not remain celibate. Aphrodite, as goddess of love, would run counter to her characterization and position as overseer of love and passion to be celibate. As goddess of agriculture, Demeter could not be celibate because her sexuality and fertility was linked to the harvest. The virgin goddesses were celibate for many of the same reasons. Hestia, who is not explored in this thesis but who is the third virgin goddess and goddess of the hearth and home, was a virgin because she represented the core of the domestic sphere which could not, as a married woman would be, taken from her father's home into her husband's. The hearth, central to every home, had to remain within the household. Athena had to be "impregnable" as the divine manifestation of the *polis* itself.⁶⁵ Finally, Artemis, who was associated with transitory concepts such as the transition from girlhood to adulthood, was perpetually an adolescent and thus, by the standards of Athenian society, could not engage in sexual acts.

Ultimately, this chapter finds that only goddesses were eternally virgin because of their requirement to obtain agency and freedom, and that Athena and Artemis specifically were eternal virgins because of their spheres of influence and characterization, which enables the exploration of asexual resonances in Athena and Artemis' mythos in the next chapter.

Compulsory Sexuality

As in the mortal world, compulsory sexuality was the norm on Olympus; divine beings were expected to be inherently sexual, and to deviate from this norm was so unusual it had to be

⁶⁵ Hubbard 2014: 170.

explicitly stated, over and over again, in the mythos. This is the position occupied by the virgin goddesses, who are unique in how they did not participate in the gender and sexual norms of the other gods. Compulsory sexuality was so fundamental to Greek myth that it is explicitly a foundational concept to the creation story.

As recounted in Hesiod's *Theogony*, which tells the creation story of Greek mythology, sex was necessary for the creation of the universe as we know it. Eros, the divine embodiment of erotic desire, was one of the first primordial deities to emerge from the Chaos that preceded the universe. Eros was born at the same time as Earth and Tartarus, which made him older than Heaven, Ocean, and the Titans: sexual desire literally preceded the sky. The first act of creation was actually asexual, wherein Earth, desiring companionship, gave birth to Heaven by herself. Eros' presence from the dawn of time was necessary, however, for every act of creation that came afterwards. Under Eros' influence, Earth and Heaven became the first divine couple, producing most other components of the universe, including the Titans, who would become the predecessors of the Olympian gods. *Theogony* also placed Aphrodite's birth prior to the Olympian gods: she was born from the sea foam stirred up by Heaven's genitalia as they are thrown in the Ocean by his son, Kronos. By cutting off his father's genitals, Kronos effectively usurped his father as king of the universe, a pattern which continued with Kronos' son, Zeus. This order of events would make Aphrodite of the same generation of the Titans, older and arguably more powerful than the Olympian gods.⁶⁶ When she stepped out of the sea to be "born"

⁶⁶ In Homer's version of Aphrodite's birth, she was the daughter of Zeus and Dione, making her a second-generation Olympian like Athena and Artemis. In her affair with Ares, this Aphrodite gave birth to Eros, making Eros a third-generation god under the control of his more powerful mother. Eros as Aphrodite's son was mischievous and permanently child-like, less of a primordial power and more of an annoyance, although still capable of great and tragic deeds. However, Homer's account did not address the creation story. Without giving his own version of the creation story, there is no way to know whether sexuality was or was not fundamental to the universe in Homer's works.

on the island of Cyprus, Aphrodite was attended to by Eros and Desire. Hesiod described primordial Eros as:

The most handsome among the immortal gods, dissolver of flesh, who overcomes the reason and purpose in the breasts of all gods and men.⁶⁷

And Heaven-born Aphrodite had dominion, for both gods and men, over:

the whisperings of girls; smiles; deceptions; sweet pleasure, intimacy and tenderness.⁶⁸

The creation story demonstrates just how ingrained compulsory sexuality was in the mythos. Sexuality was fundamental to the fabric and continuation of the universe, as well as every myth that came afterwards. Further evidence of the inherent assumption of sexuality was the fact that *The Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* began, not with a story about Aphrodite, but with a listing of the virgin goddesses as the few exceptions to her all-encompassing power. To not engage in sexual acts so deviated from the norm that it had to be mentioned before the norm was even explained. This explanation was required several times, moreover, as evidenced by the repetition of the “virgin” epithet in Athena and Artemis’ mythos. This ingrained concept of compulsory sexuality is what made the virgin goddesses so distinct.

Why Only Goddesses?

As mentioned above, Greek mythology is a reflection of the society that created it, including some of its views on gender and sexuality. Compulsory sexuality permeated both. Classical Athenians recognized that the gods, while anthropomorphized, were also occasionally governed by different rules than humans, including in gender roles and sexual expression. While gender roles and sexual expectations were slightly less rigid, Olympus was still a place where

⁶⁷ Hesiod 2008: 6.

⁶⁸ Hesiod 2008: 9.

femininity was viewed as inferior to masculinity, double standards existed in terms of who could have sex, with whom, and why, and sexual violence was common. These dynamics also provide the grounds to answer the question “why were only goddesses, and not male gods, eternal virgins?” The answer can be divided into three main points. Unlike male gods, a female goddess’ sexual behavior was tied to how she was characterized and perceived amongst the gods and what role she played within a relationship dynamic, so celibacy was a way to maintain agency. Sexual behavior, especially of a female goddess in relationship to a male god or man, was also feminizing, and maintaining masculinity was important to the power hierarchy. Finally, a vow of eternal chastity was a way to protect oneself from the sexual violence that was so common on Olympus. The inseparable nature of gender and sexuality on Mount Olympus led to the necessity of a virgin goddess, but not a virgin god.

While female goddesses could, and did, engage in activities more commonly associated with the male domain and that would be generally inaccessible to mortal women in classical Athens, at least part of the divine hierarchy still hinged on the superiority of masculinity. An example lies in Homer’s *Iliad*, wherein the gods became deeply invested and intertwined with a human war between the Greeks and Trojans. Although Athena is most well-known for her role in warfare, almost all of the Olympian goddesses engaged in combat during the Trojan War. For the human women in the *Iliad*, fighting was out of the question; women were mainly mentioned as spoils of war, to be taken as slaves by the victors. Female goddesses were able to play a more active role, outright joining the battle or influencing the tide of victory through chosen humans. Athena bested Ares, the god of war, in combat, proving herself his superior in battle, and empowered Greek heroes to turn the tide in their favor.⁶⁹ Hera was also extremely active in the

⁶⁹ *Iliad*, Book V, lines 835-863.

war, acting in direct opposition to Zeus' orders several times and even seducing him to sleep to allow herself more freedom to fight. Artemis did not play a large role in the *Iliad*, mainly acting as a background character in support of the Trojans and her brother, Apollo. When Artemis chastised Apollo for refusing to fight Poseidon, Hera berated her, claiming Zeus made Artemis "a lion among women, and [he] lets you kill them whenever you chose" but that she was not Hera's equal in power.⁷⁰ Indeed, Hera then beat Artemis with her own bow, a humiliation that sent Artemis running into the lap of Zeus for comfort. This scene demonstrates that, while there were power differentials among the gods, they might have been more based on generational differences than gender ones. However, the *Iliad* also contains scenes where gods are mocked for acting in a feminine manner, suggesting femininity was still something to be looked down upon. When Aphrodite was wounded in battle by Diomedes (assisted by Athena), she was mocked by Athena and Zeus for her effeminate nature:

"Father Zeus," said she (Athena), "do not be angry with me, but I think the Cyprian (Aphrodite) must have been persuading some one of the Achaean women to go with the Trojans of whom she is so very fond, and while caressing one or other of them she must have torn her delicate hand with the gold pin of the woman's brooch." The sire of gods and men smiled, and called golden Aphrodite to his side. "My child," said he, "it has not been given you to be a warrior. Attend, henceforth, to your own delightful matrimonial duties, and leave all this fighting to Ares and Athena."⁷¹

Athena's insult explicitly mocks Aphrodite's association with what was considered the female sphere at the time: love, matrimony, and the domestic. Zeus implies that, because Aphrodite is concerned with the domestic sphere, she cannot also be a capable warrior. In general, the gender of a deity mattered less than their gender expression in terms of how powerful they could be. Athena was a female goddess, but she acted in a more masculine manner, forgoing femininity, and thus was able to be on the same level as the male gods. While

⁷⁰ *Iliad*, Book XXI, lines 468-497.

⁷¹ *Iliad*, Book V, lines 416-430.

gender roles were less restrictive on Mount Olympus, the masculine was still considered superior to the feminine, and the way in which a deity expressed these gender traits determined their place in the hierarchy.

Female goddesses also had more freedom of sexual expression than mortal women, although myths surrounding the goddesses' sexual exploits are far less numerous than those about the male gods. Although less common than the male gods, female goddesses could have children with mortal men and engage in sexual relations with other divine beings. However, they were more likely to be shamed for doing so. Male gods having mortal children with human women were common, with numerous epic heroes being the mortal children of Zeus, including Herakles, Perseus, Sarpedon, and Helen of Troy (who is not strictly an epic hero but who is a notable figure in epic nonetheless). Poseidon was the hero Theseus' father, and Asclepius was the mortal son of Apollo who became the god of medicine after his death. In general, most heroes in Greek epic or mythology were the children or descendants of, mainly male, gods. There are a few notable exceptions, which illustrate the different standards between male gods and female goddesses. One of the most famous Greek heroes, Achilles from the *Iliad*, was the son of a mortal king and a goddess, Thetis. There are two main myths that explain how Thetis came to be married to Achilles' father, Peleus, and both frame the marriage as a humiliation explicitly against Thetis' will. In one story, Thetis was being courted by Zeus and Poseidon, but a prophecy predicted that Thetis would bear a son that would surpass his father in strength. Fearing usurpation, the gods decided the safest course of action was to force her to marry a mortal and only bear mortal children, who could not possibly overpower the gods. In the other story, Thetis rejected Zeus' advances out of respect for Hera, whom she had raised, and so Zeus punished her by forcing her to marry a mortal man. Either way, Thetis was strongly against the

marriage, and Peleus, with divine help, had to kidnap her and physically force her into the union.⁷² In some versions of the story, Thetis tried in vain to make her first several children with Peleus immortal, killing them all in the process, until she was stopped at Achilles; she resented her mortal husband and the mortality of her son. Thetis left Peleus shortly after Achilles' birth, although she was present for the rest of Achilles' life to offer him aid and petition to Zeus on his behalf. Another famous warrior in the *Iliad*, Aeneas, was also the child of a goddess, Aphrodite, and a mortal man, Anchises. Aeneas was one of the few people to escape the destruction of Troy, and the *Aeneid* by the Roman poet Virgil recounted his epic journey from Troy to Italy, where his descendants were prophesied to establish the Roman Empire. Zeus struck Aphrodite with desire for Anchises in retribution for all of the mortal women she had coerced him to sleep with. Under the guise of being a human maiden, Aphrodite slept with Anchises before revealing her true nature, lamenting the disgrace of sleeping with a mortal man:

I will have a great disgrace, in the eyes of the immortal ones, a disgrace that will last for all days to come, without end, all on account of you (Anchises). My trysts and stratagems with which I used to get all the immortal gods mated with mortal women, used to be feared by them. For my power of *noos* used to subdue all of them. But now my mouth can never again boast about this among the immortals. I have gone very far off track, in a wretched and inexcusable way. I have strayed from my *noos*. I got myself a child beneath my girdle, having slept with a male mortal.⁷³

The final lines of the poem consist of a warning from Aphrodite, threatening Anchises not to tell anyone she was the mother of Aeneas, which Anchises failed to do and was subsequently punished. Although part of Aphrodite's shame came from her falling prey to the same tricks she used to play on the other gods, her main concern was how she had deviated from what was acceptable amongst the gods, especially because she was going to bear a child to a mortal man. For both Thetis and Aphrodite, sleeping with a mortal man was a humiliation,

⁷² Hard 2022: 429-430.

⁷³ Homer 2020, *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*: lines 247-255.

forced on them by Zeus. The goddesses had no agency in the act and brought shame upon themselves, damaging their reputation among the gods. Zeus and other male deities frequently sired mortal children without any damage to their reputation and of their own free will. Only when the female goddesses slept with mortals or had mortal children was there reason for shame among the gods.

This contrast between male gods siring and female goddesses birthing mortal children demonstrates how sexual expectations were different for male and female Olympians. The same disparity exists with extramarital, divine affairs. Zeus and Poseidon, especially, had numerous documented affairs with other deities; Zeus had so many children outside of his marriage with Hera that they made up half of the Olympic pantheon. In contrast, Aphrodite was married to Hephaestus, the god of the forge, without her input or consent. When she began an affair with Ares, the god of war, Hephaestus designed a special net to catch them in the act, holding them for display and humiliation among the gods. The male gods laughed at their predicament, while the goddesses stayed home for shame. The lovers were eventually released when Poseidon vouched that Hephaestus would get his dowry back that he paid for his unfaithful wife.⁷⁴ Of course, Ares was also humiliated and shamed during the incident, but the crux of the issue was that Hephaestus had paid for a wife who embarrassed and was unfaithful to him. This story portrays Aphrodite as almost a possession of Hephaestus; she does not have any dialogue, with only the male gods speaking. She also faced punishment for cheating, which did not extend to any gods who cheated on their wives. Male gods could often sleep with whomever they wanted, both divine and mortal and men and women, without shame, coercion, or repercussions. Like in classical Athens, only female sexuality was regulated. The goddesses did indeed have freedoms

⁷⁴ *Odyssey*, Book VII, lines 340-453.

that mortal women did not have—they could and did have affairs and sleep with immortal and mortal men, actions which would have led to permanent social shunning at best, and death at worst, for a human woman. Nevertheless, the dynamics of sexual expression on Olympus mirror those within classical Athens: the institution functioned on the control of female sexuality. The stories of Thetis and Aphrodite also shed light on a broader theme: a goddess entering a sexual relationship with a mortal man or god was inherently feminizing and humbling, as it put the goddess in the domestic role of the relationship dynamic. In the Athenian mind, for a woman to engage in a sexual relationship was for her to submit to her male partner, leading to a reduction in power that extended into other aspects of her life. Abstaining from sex provided a goddess a way to maintain her power in the pantheon as a whole.

Although it remains important, when drawing connections between the divine and mortal realms and their treatment of women, to remember the Olympian gods were not human and did not have to act as such, some of the dynamics the goddesses experienced within the divine pantheon can be recognized by women even today: having to act in a more masculine manner and to shun the feminine part of yourself to gain power, and double standards regarding male and female sexuality. The Greek goddesses did enjoy more power and discretion than most women in classical Athens, but they were still constrained by expectations of feminine behavior and sexual expectations. Another aspect of Greek myth highlights gender and sexual roles on Olympus by demonstrating what else might motivate a goddess to deviate from the norms: routine sexual violence.

Despite the differences between mortal and divine gender and sexuality that allowed slightly more agency and freedom to female goddesses, the pervasiveness of sexual violence in Greek mythology toward goddesses and women shows Olympus was still, fundamentally, a

patriarchal institution. Sexual violence was very common in Greek mythology, almost exclusively perpetrated by male figures against female ones. Along with the gender and sexual dynamics analyzed above, sexual violence also provides a reason why goddesses specifically might choose to be celibate: protection. A few examples, notable for the fact that they include the three elder male gods, are Zeus' courtship of Hera, Persephone and Hades, and Demeter and Poseidon. After several early marriages, including to Athena's mother Metis, Zeus became enamored with his sister, Hera. Zeus wanted to enter into a sexual relationship with her, but Hera, being the future goddess of marriage, wanted to preserve her virginity until marriage. There are several versions of how Zeus ultimately wooed Hera, but this thesis uses the cuckoo bird story proposed by Pausanias in his *Description of Greece*, as it explains why Hera was associated with the cuckoo bird in art and statues. Unable to sleep with Hera outright, Zeus resorted to trickery. Summoning a storm, he appeared to Hera as a cuckoo bird, drenched and disoriented by the rain. Hera took pity on the bird and either held it to her chest or put it under her robe for protection, whereupon Zeus transformed back into himself and raped her. To conceal her shame and legitimize the loss of her virginity, Hera married Zeus, on the condition that she be his permanent wife and Queen of the Gods.⁷⁵

In another well-known myth, Hades desired to have his niece, Persephone, as his wife. Persephone herself was a result of Zeus raping his sister, Demeter, goddess of the harvest and agriculture. Hades asked Zeus' permission to marry Persephone, consulting neither Demeter nor Persephone about the decision. However, since Zeus was Persephone's father, he had a right to give her away, and so he authorized the marriage. Waiting for Persephone to be alone or perhaps luring her with a flower, Hades sprang from the Earth and abducted her. The whole story is told

⁷⁵ Pausanias, Volume I, Book II, Chapter XVII.

in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, which emphasizes Persephone's fear and suffering and the indifference of those who could help her:

He seized her against her will, put her on his golden chariot, and drove away as she wept. She cried with a piercing voice, calling upon her father, the son of Kronos, the highest and the best...She was being taken, against her will, at the behest of Zeus, by her father's brother.⁷⁶

Traveling the world in her grief for her lost daughter, Demeter refused to let anything grow on the Earth. Fearing the extinction of humanity, and thus the loss of humans' sacrificial offerings, Zeus finally relented and ordered Hermes to bring Persephone back to her mother. However, in her hunger, Persephone had eaten some pomegranate seeds from Hades' Garden. By law, someone who ate the food of the underworld had to stay there. A compromise was ultimately reached between Demeter and Hades, again with no input or consent from Persephone, whereupon Persephone would spend a third of the year in the underworld and the other two-thirds with her mother; this story explains the harvesting seasons and why the Earth does not produce food during the winter. The main characters of this story are Hades and Demeter, as Persephone does not have any agency and does not ultimately impact the outcome of the story. Persephone was the victim of rape and marriage by her uncle, with her father's consent, and was only given some recompense due to the power of her mother, not her own suffering. While traveling the world looking for her daughter, Demeter was also raped by her brother, Poseidon, god of the sea. Poseidon followed Demeter in her travels, wanting to sleep with her, so Demeter tried to hide herself by transforming into a horse and hiding amongst a grazing herd. Undeterred, Poseidon transformed into a stallion and raped her, which ultimately led to the birth of the divine horse Arion.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Homer 2020, *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*: lines 19-21, 30-31.

⁷⁷ Hard 2022: 127.

These three examples are meant to demonstrate the pervasiveness of sexual violence amongst the gods, and how even powerful goddesses could not defend themselves. Almost every goddess was subject to sexual violence at some point, except for the virgin goddesses. By swearing an oath to Zeus to remain eternally celibate, the virgin goddesses had divine, established protection against advances from male gods. With a few exceptions, including a quickly rebuffed advance by Hephaestus, the virgin goddesses were indeed excluded from myths of sexual violence. On a broader level, sexual violence against goddesses placed them in an inferior position, compromising their agency and power. The virgin goddesses gained a certain amount of elevated status and equality with male gods through exemption from sexual violence.

Ultimately, only goddesses, and not male gods, were eternally celibate for three reasons. One, unlike female gods, male gods' sexual acts did not influence other aspects of their mythos or characterization. A god could have only one life partner or have sex with as many divine and mortal beings as possible, and neither would impact how they were perceived by the other gods and their level of power in the pantheon. For female goddesses, however, sexuality was linked to their characterization and reputation among the gods, as to be a sexual being is to enter relationships with men or gods that relegates one to the domestic sphere. Two, female goddesses could gain more power and agency by acting in a masculine manner, which sometimes necessitated the absence of sex. Entering into a sexual relationship with a man or god was inherently feminizing, which made one lesser on the power scale of Olympus. Celibacy was one way to maintain a more masculine characterization and thus greater degree of agency. Third, declaring oneself eternally virgin and swearing an oath in front of Zeus seemed to be one of the most effective ways of protecting oneself from sexual violence. However, not all goddesses were celibate, which begs the question of why the above benefits of celibacy only applied to certain

goddesses. The next section explores why Athena and Artemis' characterization and spheres of influence necessitated celibacy and its effects.

Athena and Artemis

The above section explains why only goddesses were celibate. This section seeks to analyze why only *certain* goddesses were celibate. Just as Demeter, Hera, and Aphrodite had reasons specific to their characterizations, cult practices, and spheres of influence to be sexual goddesses, so too did Artemis and Athena have the same types of reasons for remaining celibate. As the goddess and protector of cities, specifically the divine manifestation of the *polis*, the inviolability of Athena's virginity represented the inviolability of the *polis* itself. In contrast, Artemis was associated with and had dominion over transitory states, specifically the transition from girlhood to womanhood (adolescence), civilization to wilderness, and childbirth. Her nature of permanent adolescence and lack of grounding in any one area necessitated celibacy, as adolescent, unmarried women could not engage in sexual acts and to be transitory was to not be rooted in a domestic household, as a sexual, married woman would be expected. The very nature of the goddesses, and what they represented, determined and was determined by whether they would be more appropriate as sexual or celibate beings.

Before addressing why Athena and Artemis' characterization and spheres of influence necessitated eternal virginity, this thesis briefly explores why the other main Olympian goddesses, Demeter, Hera, and Aphrodite, were not eternal virgins. By analyzing the reasons certain goddesses engaged in sexual relations, the subsequent discussion of why certain goddesses did not engage in sexual relations is shown in deeper contrast. Demeter, Hera, and Aphrodite's sexuality was fundamentally linked to their spheres of influence and

characterization. As goddess of the harvest and agriculture, Demeter was characterized as a motherly goddess and strongly associated with fertility. Some cult practices confirm this connection between sex, fertility, and the harvest. For instance, the Thesmophoria festival, held yearly in Athens, involved the cults of Demeter and Persephone, wherein female members engaged in ritualistic acts involving genitalia and sexual speech. These rituals include handling pastries shaped like male genitals and throwing piglets (symbolic of female genitalia) into a pit with the aforementioned pastries.⁷⁸

The cults of Demeter and Persephone were often linked or sometimes blended completely, symbolizing Demeter's matronly role in the mother-daughter archetype. For a goddess whose sphere of influence was essentially the fertility of the earth and whose characterization was built upon the concept of motherhood, Demeter had to be a sexual goddess, both so she could continue to bring about the harvest and so she could have a daughter in the first place. As the goddess of marriage, Hera was meant to represent the archetype of the domestic wife. Although, as mentioned above, she indeed diverged from some accepted behaviors for mortal women, such as openly challenging her husband and violently punishing the women her husband had affairs with, she still fulfilled the duties expected of a wife: she ran the domestic household, bore Zeus legitimate children, and ultimately bowed to her husband's wishes. As discussed in Chapter One, the very foundations of the *polis* depended on women marrying and having children. Olympus was not much different, and Hera had to engage in sexual acts at least to provide her husband with children, as was her societal and moral obligation. Finally, it seems obvious why Aphrodite, associated with love, desire, and beauty, would be a sexual goddess:⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Hubbard 2014: 218-219.

⁷⁹ However, Aphrodite was not always solely associated with sex and romance. In some places, such as Sparta, Aphrodite was strongly associated with war, and in Athens she presided over the communal bonds that brought together a population for the sake of their *polis* (hence her epithet, *pandemos*).

Consistent with her function as a goddess of sex, Aphrodite is herself sexually active in both myth and cult. Her adulterous union with Ares is recounted in the *Odyssey*, but in her worship as well she is often paired with a male deity conceived of as her consort, usually Ares or Hermes. The sexual activity of deities may also help define the divine personae of these gods; their relationships with heroes, heroines, or other gods of the pantheon have psychological appeal for human worshippers, who are, after all, very much preoccupied with sexual thoughts and experiences in their daily lives.⁸⁰

The virgin goddesses had many of the same reasons for remaining celibate. As in the case of the sexual goddesses, Athena and Artemis' characterization and spheres of influence (and sometimes cult practices) necessitated they remain eternal virgins and vice versa. In short, Athena's virginity was tied to her role as the divine manifestation of the *polis* itself. Hubbard and Doerfler articulate this idea in a chapter of *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, "From Asceticism to Sexual Renunciation:"

Athena's role as defender of the city, presiding from her temple on the acropolis, casts her impregnable virginity as a symbol of the city's inviolability. Even despite her allegiance with the Greeks, Troy can only be taken once her image, the Palladium, has been removed from its citadel...Just as Hestia's virginity represents the continuity of domestic space, Athena's virginity insures the intact survival of the political realm.⁸¹

To have Athena, and therefore the *polis*, be "penetrated" was a threat to the Athenian way of life, just as celibacy in mortal women was a threat. Engaging in a sexual relationship or marriage would have relegated Athena to a lower position within the relationship, being dominated or in some way reduced in power, which would also represent a reduction in the power and importance of the *polis*. However, the *polis* was meant to precede everything else, more important than any other ties or institutions. For Athena to be in a relationship would be for something else to take higher priority than the *polis*, which was inconsistent with the way the Greeks, especially during the classical period, shaped their political and cultural identities.

Athena's eternal virginity and role as protector of the *polis* were inextricably linked, so Athena

⁸⁰ Hubbard 2014: 223.

⁸¹ Hubbard 2014: 170.

had to remain a virgin throughout her mythos to preserve and protect the society that created and worshiped her.

“From Asceticism to Sexual Renunciation” also outlines part of the reason why Artemis’ nature and sphere of influence necessitated celibacy:

A goddess of the hunt, Artemis oversees a sphere of activity that is frequently associated with adolescent initiation and, like all initiatory domains, imposes strict segregation of the sexes: all male in the everyday human world, in Artemis’ myths the hunting band is inverted to become exclusively female...the hunter’s wild domain is a place of refuge from from the tame domestication of the city and its sexual institutions of marriage and family.⁸²

As the goddess who oversaw the transition from girlhood to womanhood, Artemis was portrayed as a permanent adolescent, guiding girls into adulthood but going no farther with them. The practice mentioned in Chapter One in which married women dedicated their girlhood girdle to Artemis demonstrates this point. As an adolescent girl, Artemis could not engage in sexual relationships, as to do so would violate Athenian ideas about coming of age and womanhood. To be sexual was to transition into womanhood, something Artemis could never do. Artemis’ brother, Apollo, was also an eternal young man. Because he was a male, he could still engage in sexual relationships, although he more often engaged in relationships akin to pederasty than heterosexual unions.⁸³ Artemis’ status as an adolescent is indicative of a broader trend in her spheres of influence: she oversees transitory states. Civilization to wilderness, girlhood to womanhood, childbirth (the womb to the world)—all of these key points of transition were Artemis’ domain. To engage in sexual acts or get married was to become grounded. For mortal women, this position was literal: once a woman transitioned from her father’s house to her husband’s, she rarely left the home, trapped in the same place for the rest of her life. To have sex

⁸² Hubbard 2014: 170.

⁸³ Hubbard 2014: 170.

would symbolically limit the very freedom and transience that Artemis represents. In line with her characterization and spheres of influence, Artemis remained a virgin.

Concluding Remarks

The gods of Olympus were not human, and in many ways their society was structured differently from the mortal world. However, in terms of gender and sexuality, specifically in regard to females, Olympus was fundamentally not that different from the classical Athenian *polis*. Compulsory sexuality was inherent to Greek mythology, just as it was to classical Athens. The masculine was portrayed as having an intrinsically higher moral and power value than the feminine, although gender expression seemed to matter more than the gender of a deity itself. Female sexuality was also much more regulated than male sexuality, with female goddesses facing shame and consequences for sexual acts that male gods engaged in with no repercussions. Sexual violence was also extremely common in Greek mythology, demonstrating the patriarchal nature of Olympus. These comparisons help to conclude why only goddesses were virgins: female sexuality determined one's place in the divine hierarchy in a way that male sexuality did not. For male gods, gender and sexuality were distinct, but for female goddesses, gender and gender expression, and thus the consequences of that gender expression, was tied to sexuality, including celibacy. A female goddess' position as an eternal virgin could elevate her status, in some ways, to that of a male god; the male god did not need to be celibate because he did not require elevation in the first place. Furthermore, a goddesses' specific characterization and sphere of influence (i.e., goddess of ...) were tied to whether she would be better suited to a sexual or celibate existence. As the goddess of the *polis* and a masculine-presenting goddess, Athena's celibacy represented the indomitability and inviolability of the *polis* itself. Artemis was the goddess of transitory states, such as adolescence, and was celibate for two reasons: entering

into a sexual relationship would be too confining and adolescent girls could not engage in sexual relationships. Based on this in-depth analysis of the qualities and circumstances of celibacy in Greek mythology, specifically regarding Athena and Artemis, the final chapter uses all of the accumulated knowledge above to search for asexual resonances in Athena and Artemis' myths and present them as additions to the asexual historical tradition.

Chapter Three: Asexual Resonances in Athena and Artemis' Mythos

In the previous two chapters, the questions “Why were only goddesses virgins?” and “Why were only certain goddesses virgins?” are answered. In doing so, the thesis focuses on ascertaining why and how Athena and Artemis’ characterization and spheres of influence shaped their celibacy and vice-versa. Having uncovered the nature of celibacy both in classical Athens and Greek mythology, this chapter uses these conclusions to inform an investigation into asexual resonances in Athena and Artemis’ mythos. As discussed in the introduction, Athena and Artemis’ eternal celibacy does not definitively tie them to an asexual identity, although celibacy in itself could be considered a resonance of asexuality. This chapter analyzes Athena and Artemis’ mythos through a modern lens of asexuality, identifying asexual resonances that, combined, suggest the presence of asexuality. The stories this thesis focuses on, based on the concentration of asexual resonances to be found within a single narrative and representativeness of Athena and Artemis’ natures, are Athena’s birth story and Artemis’ request to Zeus for eternal maidenhood. Athena’s birth story provides two strong asexual resonances: her birth itself is presented as an asexual act and her characterization from birth presents her as someone who defies gender and sexual norms. Athena’s preference for the masculine, first articulated at her birth and continued throughout her mythos, and a tendency for her to be perceived (by herself and others) as the “son of Zeus in female form” also contribute to her occupation of the space outside of gender and sexuality lines. Artemis’ request for maidenhood is so full of asexual resonances that it almost feels like an addition to the asexual historical tradition in itself. Based on the discovery of asexual resonances in both stories, this thesis presents Athena and Artemis as additions to the asexual historical tradition.

Athena's Birth Story

Athena's birth was unusual, even by the standards of the immortals. Hesiod's *Theogony* tells the creation story of the cosmos, from the birth of the universe to the establishment of the Olympian gods. A recurring pattern in the establishment of divine hierarchy is the usurpation of father by son. The first ruler of the universe, Heaven, was overthrown by his son Kronos, and Kronos was in turn overthrown by his son, Zeus. Zeus, having heard of his grandfather's downfall and having personally orchestrated his father's downfall, was rightly paranoid that he would suffer the same fate. When Zeus married his first wife Metis, he was given a prophecy by his grandmother, Earth, that Metis would first bear him a daughter, a "pale-eyed daughter, Tritogenia, with courage and sound counsel equal to her father's" and then a son who would overthrow him.⁸⁴ Zeus was craftier than his predecessors and, instead of imprisoning his children, he went straight to the source and imprisoned Metis herself by swallowing her whole. Metis was renowned for her wisdom, "the wisest among gods and mortal men" so Zeus swallowing her meant she could reside in his head and provide him with guidance without producing a disastrous son.⁸⁵ However, Metis was already pregnant when Zeus swallowed her. Sometime later, Zeus experienced an agonizing headache. Desperate for relief, Zeus ordered Hephaestus, his son and the blacksmith for the gods, to split his head open, from wherein Athena emerged fully grown and armed for battle.

Athena's birth is recounted in *Homeric Hymn to Athena*:

I begin to sing of Pallas Athene, the glorious goddess, bright-eyed, inventive, unbending of heart, pure virgin, savior of cities, courageous, Tritogeneia. From his awful head wise Zeus himself bare her arrayed in warlike arms of flashing gold, and awe seized all the gods as they gazed. But Athena sprang quickly from the immortal head and stood before Zeus who holds the aegis, shaking a sharp spear: great Olympus began to reel horribly at the might of the bright-eyed goddess, and earth round about cried fearfully, and the sea

⁸⁴ Hesiod 2008: 29.

⁸⁵ Hesiod 2008: 29.

was moved and tossed with dark waves, while foam burst forth suddenly: the bright Son of Hyperion stopped his swift-footed horses a long while, until the maiden Pallas Athene had stripped her heavenly armor from her immortal shoulders. And wise Zeus was glad.⁸⁶

Athena's emergence from Zeus' head is also briefly recounted in the *Theogony* when Hesiod lists the important children of Zeus amongst the gods. Notably, every other child of Zeus is listed alongside their mother, while Athena is said to have come from only Zeus:

And by himself, out of his head, he fathered the pale-eyed Tritogeneia, the fearsome rouser of the fray, leader of armies, the lady Atrytone, whose pleasure is in war and the clamor of battle.⁸⁷

Callimachus' *Hymn to Athena* contains similar language, implying there may be two versions of Athena's origin, one where she is the daughter of Zeus and Metis and another where she is fathered by Zeus alone:

What Pallas nodded assent to was fulfilled, since Zeus gave this to Athena alone of his daughters, to bear all honors belonging to her father. Bath-pourers, no mother bore the goddess, but the head of Zeus. The head of Zeus does not nod assent to falsehoods...daughter.⁸⁸

One can identify asexual resonances in Athena's mythos from the moment of her birth. Although she is technically the daughter of Metis and Zeus (at least in some versions of her origin story), her epithets and iconography typically credit Zeus as her only parent, "birthing" her from his head. Unlike Zeus' other children, Athena is born to him alone, and her emergence from his head symbolizes her connection with wisdom and power. As such, her origin story lacks the sexual acts (oftentimes sexual violence) and birth trauma of other gods. Interestingly, she is also one of the only children of Zeus who is not originally targeted by Hera to punish Zeus for his adultery; this fact implies Hera does not consider Athena's birth to be associated with any sexual

⁸⁶ Homer 2020, *Homeric Hymn to Athena*: 1-17.

⁸⁷ Hesiod 2008: 30.

⁸⁸ Callimachus 2015: 245.

act or unfaithfulness. Hera's lack of ire may also be because Metis was married to Zeus before Hera, so any copulation with Metis would not be infidelity. However, Athena was born after Zeus married Hera, as Hephaestus, the son of Zeus and Hera, is the one who splits open Zeus' skull to allow her to emerge. Hera and Athena share an amicable relationship, joining together in the *Iliad* to fight both the Trojans and Zeus himself on behalf of the Greeks. The absence of Hera's jealousy, which is so prominent and vicious that it centers in many myths about heroes and gods alike, indicates she views Athena as the daughter of Zeus alone, not another goddess with whom she has to battle for Zeus' affection.⁸⁹ Athena seems to be produced more from thought and divine wisdom than any sexual act.

Another asexual resonance in Athena's mythos, present at the time of her birth and continued throughout her mythology, is her nuanced position between the masculine and the feminine. Athena's characterization is what we might today call gender-queer; she was born and continues to identify as a female but associates herself in every regard with the masculine domain. She explicitly aligns herself with everything male in the play *Eumenides*:

It is my duty to give the final judgment and I shall cast my vote for Orestes. For there was no mother who gave me birth; and in all things, except for marriage, wholeheartedly I am for the male and entirely on the father's side.⁹⁰

As discussed in Chapter Two, Athena's exclusion of marriage in her self-characterization is reflective of the interconnected nature of gender and sexuality (and therefore marriage) in classical Athens and on Mount Olympus. If we consider asexuality as a meta-construct (just as sexuality is a meta-construct) as proposed in the methodology, an explicit and recurring instance of deviating from gender roles and identity could also constitute a trace of asexuality. Many parts

⁸⁹ Perhaps the most famous example of Hera's jealousy and wrath towards Zeus' other children is the story of Herakles.

⁹⁰ Aeschylus 2004: lines 734-744.

of Athena's mythos, such as her birth and Orestes' trial, portray her as a male in everything but body, and many of her characteristics and epithets, such as her role as protector of cities and deity of warfare and wisdom, align her with the male domain. Athena conforms to neither gender nor sexuality expectations, just as asexuality as a meta-construct encompasses a whole new realm outside of the expected.

Artemis' Request for Maidenhood

Artemis and Hestia both explicitly request eternal virginity from Zeus, who, nodding his assent, is able to grant such a request with the full force of the laws of the universe. Such a vow from Zeus provides an additional layer of protection; anyone who sought to undermine or take Artemis' virginity would be defying Zeus' order and challenging Zeus himself. Callimachus' *Hymn to Artemis* recounts how Artemis, still a young girl, sat on her father's knee and asked him for all of the things she desired for her immortal life:

Beginning with the time when sitting on her father's knees— still a little maid— she spake these words to her sire: "Give me to keep my maidenhood, father, forever: and give me to be of many names, that Phoebus may not vie with me."⁹¹

Artemis' first request of her father, even before her request for her iconic bow and arrows and her chosen cities, is to be able to remain eternally celibate. Although this request may seem like a small point, it is actually very consequential to Artemis' characterization: Artemis' bow and arrows are her symbols, and she is almost never portrayed without them. Many of her epithets and most prominent myths revolve around her status as an archer. And yet, archery is not her primary concern—virginity is. Sexuality, or lack thereof, is critical to her. This concern is

⁹¹ Callimachus 2015: 117.

confirmed by lines later in the same poem, wherein all of Artemis' specifications revolve around virginity and adolescence:

“But give me to be Bringer of Light and give me to gird me in a tunic with embroidered border reaching to the knee, that I may slay wild beasts. And give me sixty daughters of Oceanus for my choir— all nine years old, all maidens yet ungirdled...”⁹²

As any Athenian hearing this story would know, a tunic with an embroidered border reaching to the knee was a characteristic sign of young girlhood, as women wore floor-length clothing. A short tunic allows for more freedom of movement, whereas adult, married women would have no need for such freedom, as they were largely confined to the domestic sphere. A short tunic is practical for hunting, yes, but also symbolic of a child-like carefreeness which only exists during the period of virginity.

Moreover, her request that her attendants also be maidens, ungirdled— also associated with girlhood and Artemis—is indicative of another common theme in her mythos: just as she is eternally celibate, she expects everyone around her to also maintain celibacy, with potentially disastrous consequences if one of her attendants or friends deviates from virginity. One of the more common examples was the nymph Callisto, a companion of Artemis. Zeus raped Callisto and, upon finding out she was pregnant, Artemis turned her into a bear as punishment for “straying.”⁹³ Artemis' insistence that her companions remain virginal young women like herself means her very existence is inundated with asexual resonances. Her celibate lifestyle, prioritization of celibacy in her own life and others, and explicit association with all things non-womanhood (not sexually active) all provide asexual resonances that make Artemis and her mythos a promising addition to the asexual historical tradition.

⁹² Callimachus 2015: 117.

⁹³ Hard 2022: 152-153.

Concluding Remarks

Athena and Artemis' mythos are steeped in asexual resonances. Several more of their myths contain asexual resonances and examples of sexual and gender nonconformity,⁹⁴ but the above two examples were chosen because the whole story, as well as its component parts, contains traces of asexuality. Both goddesses explicitly existed outside of the realm of sexuality, inhabiting the meta-construct of asexuality instead. In Athena's case, even her birth, to which sex would normally be considered fundamental, existed outside of the normal sexual realm. Just as she existed outside the bounds of regular sexuality, so too did Athena inhabit the ambiguous space around and between typical gender roles. She conformed to neither ideas about sexuality nor gender. Artemis, in contrast, surrounded herself with a cohort and lifestyle that challenged the idea of compulsory sexuality, creating perhaps the first and only mini-society in which compulsory sexuality did not exist, and she punished intrusions of sexuality into this sphere violently. Although extreme in her methods, Artemis managed to create and preserve a refuge from compulsory sexuality, offered to asexuals and allosexuals alike (as long as they remained eternal maidens). Overall, the number and importance of asexual resonances in Athena and Artemis' mythos make them both candidates for addition to the asexual historical tradition. Although we cannot prove they identified as asexual, that was never the goal of this thesis from the beginning; attributes and actions of Athena and Artemis could and should be considered parts of an asexual historical narrative.

⁹⁴ See the story of Artemis and Orion and Hephaestus' attempted rape of Athena.

Conclusion

The answers provided to the research questions of this thesis are neither exhaustive nor conclusive. It is nearly impossible to determine definitively why classical Athens designated only goddesses, and only certain goddesses, to be eternal virgins. However, by examining the roles of gender and sexuality (and consequently asexuality) in classical Athens and amongst the gods of Mount Olympus, we can discern themes and common ideas that may provide some clarification.

Compulsory sexuality, the idea that sex is assumed to be an intrinsic part of life and even humanity itself, was present in classical Athens. For this reason, deviations from the norm, such as celibacy, were so unusual they had to be repeatedly emphasized, such as in the epithets of the virgin goddesses. The *polis*, the fundamental unit of Athenian society, relied on the oppression of women and the complete control of female sexuality, as well as the absence of celibacy and asexuality among humans. Not foundational to the *polis* but imbued within society was the idea that the masculine held inherently more value than the feminine. In the mortal world, this idea manifested as the belief that great men who embraced the masculine (sometimes by engaging in relationships with other men) would form the backbone of the *polis*, making up the political class whose moral obligation was to be as involved as possible in civic duty. On Mount Olympus, home of the gods, the superiority of the masculine over feminine led to a hierarchy based on gender expression, with the more masculine being greater in power. This hierarchy allowed the perpetuation of pervasive sexual violence against female goddesses by male gods, and also led to a difference between the celibate and non-celibate goddesses, as to enter into a sexual relationship with a male god (female-female relationships were never an option) was feminizing and therefore power reducing. Based on characterization and spheres of influence, Athena was

an eternal virgin because she represented the “impregnability” of the polis, and Artemis was an eternal virgin because she oversaw transitory states, including adolescence. After finding several reasons why Athena and Artemis were celibate, compounding the reasons goddesses were celibate and reasons specific to the individual goddesses, this thesis then explores asexual resonances within Athena and Artemis’ mythos. This thesis finds several asexual resonances, particularly within Athena’s birth story and Artemis’ request for virginity, leading to the claim that Athena and Artemis could be considered additions to the scant historical tradition for asexuality.

Due to the number and variations of Greek myths retained from various city-states and authors, this thesis has been forced to choose some key samples to illustrate its points. As a result, variations in the mythos and nuances among the gods, specifically relating to the etymology of Athena and Artemis and how they arose from pre-Mycenaean deities, may have been lost. This thesis attempts to choose the most relevant and commonly cited versions of myths, but a great deal has not been covered or oversimplified. Another limitation of this thesis is that its author had to rely on English translations of primary sources, which may have been skewed in translation.

This thesis could be expanded in many ways with further research. Analyses could be conducted into the lives of celibate human women in classical Athens, although there are few records of such women having existed. One could also search for stories about celibate human men and how they related to the *polis*. It may also be useful to explore celibate humans within Greek mythology. This thesis only focuses on the goddesses Artemis and Athena, but further research could be conducted about human virgins, such as Hippolytus, or the third virgin goddess, Hestia. One might also investigate virgin deities in other cultures and how their

celibacy manifests. Finally, this thesis strongly encourages further research into the topic of asexual studies. Asexual scholarship is scant and in its infancy, and any attempts to provide additional analysis or present new additions to the asexual historical tradition would be beneficial to both asexual scholars and underrepresented asexual people.

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Biography

Taylor Allen enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin in 2020 as a member of the Plan II Honors Program and a biology major. Having discovered an interest in the human mind and behavior, she transferred to the psychology department her sophomore year. She decided to pursue the topic of this thesis thanks to the influence of a few Plan II classes on gender and sexuality and a childhood obsession with Greek mythology. She has enjoyed her time at UT Austin immensely and is especially grateful for the positive impact Plan II has had on her college career. After graduating, she plans to take a much-needed gap year, wherein she will travel the world, read for pleasure, and spend time with her two dogs, Bevo and Jinglebell. After her gap year, Taylor intends to attend law school.