

# Female Agency and Class in Greek Mythology: Insights from Sarah B. Pomeroy's *Women in Classical Antiquity*



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**Abstract:** *Greek mythology serves as a reflection of ancient Greek societal structures, particularly in terms of gender and class. This paper examines the varied portrayals of mortal women, goddesses, and demigoddesses, drawing on Sarah B. Pomeroy's *Women in Classical Antiquity*, as well as other scholarly sources, to explore how social hierarchies and gender-based privileges influence narratives, agency, and power dynamics. The analysis foregrounds three main arguments. First, divine beings such as Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite possess authority and agency that often transcend mortal limitations yet remain inextricably linked to patriarchal structures. Second, the paradoxes inherent in divine power—where figures like Athena are celebrated for their wisdom and martial prowess despite their familial ties to Zeus—demonstrate the intrinsic contradictions of gender and class privilege. Third, the status of demigoddesses, exemplified by figures such as Helen of Troy and Ariadne, highlights the ambiguous nature of hybridity, revealing both enhanced agency and reinforced marginality. These frameworks are applied to the examination of mortal women characters, such as Penelope and Clytemnestra, whose roles have been shaped by class, social expectations, and a rigidly prescribed gender order. Through an integrated gender studies perspective, the paper sheds light on the dynamic interplay between divine power and the constraints of gender-based hierarchy in the classical world.*

**Keywords:** *Greek Mythology, Gender Hierarchy, Class, Agency, Classical Antiquity.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Greek mythology occupies a central place in the cultural and intellectual history of the Western tradition. Its narratives not only reflect the complexities of divine pantheons and heroic endeavours but also serve as a medium through which issues of gender, class, and power are continuously negotiated. In her groundbreaking study, *Women in Classical Antiquity*, Sarah B. Pomeroy offers a nuanced account of how social hierarchies, mediated by class and gender, shaped the lives and narratives of women in antiquity. This paper extends Pomeroy's analyses to the mythological realm by comparing the portrayal of mortal women with that of

Goddesses and demigoddesses.

The mythological fabric of ancient Greece is intricately woven with stories that offer insight into the societal values and norms of the time. Goddesses, such as Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, are depicted with considerable power and authority; yet, their mythologies reveal subtle nuances in which their divinity is often tied to oppressive patriarchal structures. Conversely, mortal women, including figures such as Penelope and Clytemnestra, are depicted as operating within constraints defined by their class and social expectations—a dynamic further complicated by examples of demigoddesses like Helen of Troy and Ariadne. This paper explores the intersections of these narratives to highlight how divergent public roles, privileges, and limitations are formulated within Greek myth.

The discussion will be organised into several sections. The Methodology section will contextualise key academic debates regarding gender, class, and mythology, foregrounding Pomeroy's contributions alongside those of other scholars. The Analysis & Discussion section will develop three primary arguments regarding gender-based hierarchies and power dynamics between mortal women and divine entities, reviewing specific examples drawn from both Pomeroy's work and additional academic literature. Finally, the Conclusion synthesises the findings and articulates their broader implications for understanding ancient gender and class relations.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The field of classical studies has long grappled with the dual themes of gender and class. Sarah B. Pomeroy is among the most influential scholars whose work has reshaped our understanding of how women occupied public and private spaces in ancient Greek society. In *Women in Classical Antiquity*, Pomeroy argues that gendered norms and societal structures were deeply embedded in the fabric of classical life and that these structures continue to influence contemporary interpretations of myth and history [1].

Complementary to Pomeroy's analysis, Walter Burkert's *Greek Religion* provides an extensive account of the role that gods and goddesses played in both ritual and everyday life. Burkert emphasises the ritualistic and symbolic dimensions of divine power, illustrating how such power was utilised to reinforce social hierarchies and patriarchal structures. The narratives surrounding goddesses, as analysed by Burkert, underscore not only their exalted status but also the mechanisms through which these statuses are legitimised by their relationships with males. deities [2].

Sue Blundell's *Women in Ancient Greece* further refines

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these discussions by concentrating on the intersections of myth, literature, and gender studies. Blundell examines the portrayals of divine femininity and explores how mythic narratives serve as both vehicles for resistance to and reinforcement of gendered social orders. Her work situates the analysis of mythological narratives within a broader framework of socio-cultural dynamics [3]. Another significant contribution comes from Jean-Pierre Vernant's *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, whose research on the interplay between myth and society offers insight into how ancient narratives reflect ideological and structural concerns. Vernant's work elucidates how myth served not only as a means of explaining the world but also of reinforcing existing power relations—especially those between gender and class [4].

Collectively, these scholarly contributions provide a solid foundation for the current analysis. By examining the texts through both feminist and socio-historical lenses, this paper builds upon these academic works to explore the differential treatment of mortal women versus their divine and demi-divine counterparts in Greek mythology.

### III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis that follows is organized around three central arguments. First, the divine status of goddesses confers upon them a form of power and privilege that is often unachievable by mortal women. Figures such as Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite engage in narratives that celebrate their divinity and authority while simultaneously intertwining their identities with male-centric expectations. Second, the paradox of divine power arises when considering that the roles and agency of many goddesses remain reliant on their associations with male gods. Athena, for example, is both a mighty warrior goddess and the daughter of Zeus—a relationship that reflects the broader societal reliance on patriarchal legitimization of power. Third, the narratives surrounding demigoddesses such as Helen of Troy and Ariadne reveal the complex nature of hybridity in Greek myth. Their mixed heritage both empowers and limits them, creating intersections of agency, desire, and constraint that mirror the experiences of mortal women like Penelope and Clytemnestra.

#### A. Divine Privilege: The Case of Goddesses

Goddesses in Greek mythology are depicted as embodiments of multiple forms of power-intellectual, martial, and sexual—that are often unavailable to mortal women. Athena, as the virgin goddess of wisdom and warfare, exemplifies the pinnacle of divine authority. Her strategic acumen and martial prowess are celebrated in epics and hymns, setting her apart from mortal femininity. Yet, her status is not without its complications. Despite her martial authority and seemingly autonomous role, Athena's power remains contextualised within the overarching patriarchal framework of the divine. As Zeus's daughter, her legitimacy and ability to wield authority are tethered to her male counterpart. This ambivalence reveals that even in the realm of divinity, female power is circumscribed by a relational framework that privileges male figures.

Hera, the queen of the gods, further illuminates the dynamics of divine privilege. As the consort of Zeus, she

occupies a unique position where her authority is both affirmed and undermined by her marriage. Hera's role as a protector of marriage and family stands in stark contrast to the destructive anger and jealousy that often mark her mythological narratives. In many classical texts, her power is projected as an extension of her status as a wife rather than as an independent source of authority. This duality reflects how gender roles in Greek mythology are intricately tied to class and lineage, with divine privilege often resting on the validation of masculine authority.

Aphrodite, the classical embodiment of love and beauty, represents another nuanced expression of divine womanhood. Her domain of influence—desire, and beauty—is celebrated alongside the unfortunate reality that her power is derived mainly from her relationships with male gods and mortal heroes. Myths frequently underscore her allure as a potent yet dangerous force, situating her both as a benefactor and a threat. Her capacity to inspire both love and destruction is revelatory of how divinity can serve as a double-edged sword. While her beauty and desirability grant her considerable influence, they also render her vulnerable to exploitation within male-dominated narratives. The cases of Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite thus illustrate that divine privilege, while immense, is invariably conditioned by connections to male authority and patriarchal definitions of legitimacy.

#### B. The Paradox of Divine Agency: Reliance on Male Associations

A fundamental paradox in Greek mythology is the interweaving of divine female agency with male relationships. Athena's identity, for example, is inherently framed by her being the daughter of Zeus. Although her standalone qualities, such as wisdom and martial skill, are celebrated, her legitimacy as a goddess remains implicitly dependent on her direct descent from the chief deity. This dependency can be interpreted not merely as a narrative convention but as a reflection of ancient Greek ideas about the transmission of power through male lineage. In a society where male patrilineality is synonymous with authority and status, even the most independent goddesses must negotiate their jurisdiction with their male counterparts.

Similarly, Hera's power is indelibly linked with her status as Zeus's wife. Her ability to exercise authority as queen of the gods rests in part on the legitimacy conferred by her marriage, and her challenges within her myths often stem from the ambiguities inherent in this relationship. While Hera is portrayed as a robust and multifaceted character, her narrative is consistently marked by the tensions of power that stem from being defined by a dominant male figure. The elevation of her status, therefore, involves a complex interplay between her intrinsic qualities and the social and mythological expectations of marital fidelity and female subservience.

The reliance on male associations is not limited to the Olympian goddesses. Even Aphrodite's complex station in the Pantheon is illustrative of this dynamic. Her power to incite love and desire, and consequently to disrupt societal norms, is inextricably linked to her interactions with male gods and heroes. In various myths,

her influence precipitates conflicts and alliances that ultimately reinforce the centrality of male authority within the mythological hierarchy. This underlying dynamic suggests that the manifestation of divine agency for women in Greek mythology is profoundly ambivalent. It offers power and authority while concurrently subjecting those very attributes to gendered constraints defined by male prominence.

### C. The Ambiguity of Hybridity: Demigoddesses and Mortal Women

Where divine and mortal realms converge, the figure of the demigoddess brings to the fore the contradictions inherent in mixed heritage. Helen of Troy, often hailed as the epitome of beauty, is a prime example of this complexity. Born of Zeus and a mortal woman, Helen's ambiguous identity endows her with both divine allure and human limitations. Her beauty, which is said to have launched a thousand ships, confers upon her a sort of agency and power that transcends mortal capabilities. Yet, it is deeply ambivalent and fraught with consequences. As portrayed in Homer's *Iliad* [6], Helen's narrative serves to underscore how the interplay of divine and mortal elements can simultaneously empower and constrain a woman. On one hand, her beauty and semi-divine status place her in a position of significant influence; on the other, her mixed heritage leaves her vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by male figures who seek to control or define her legacy.

Ariadne is another figure who embodies the paradoxes of hybridity. Traditionally depicted as a mortal princess associated with both divine favour and tragic fate, Ariadne's mythology offers rich insights into how mixed heritage impacts female agency. Although she is granted specific privileges through her association with the god Dionysus later in her narrative, Ariadne's earlier depictions as abandoned by Theseus and forced to navigate a treacherous world highlight the precariousness of her position. Her transformation from a mortal princess into a figure infused with divine power exemplifies the fluidity and ambiguity of identity in Greek mythology. This metamorphosis also emphasises that the intersection of divine lineage and mortal status does not automatically grant complete agency; instead, it creates a liminal space where power and subjugation coexist in a state of perpetual tension.

In contrast to these demigoddesses, mortal women such as Penelope and Clytemnestra represent more straightforward examples of gender expectation and class influence. Penelope, the faithful wife in Homer's *The Odyssey*, is celebrated for her intelligence, patience, and loyalty- qualities that have traditionally been valorised as the virtues of a noblewoman. However, her agency is circumscribed by the social expectation of female virtue and passivity. Despite her resourcefulness, Penelope's role is primarily defined by her husband, Odysseus, and the patriarchal order within which she operates. Her constrained autonomy is emblematic of the broader limitations for mortal women in classical literature.

Clytemnestra, in stark contrast, is portrayed as a powerful yet transgressive figure in texts such as Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* [5]. Her narrative of vengeance and assertive resistance to her husband's authority marks her as a challenge to conventional gender roles. Yet, even Clytemnestra's extraordinary behaviour is ultimately interpreted through a

lens of moral ambiguity, one which underscores the societal discomfort with female power that deviates from marital subservience. Her actions, shaped by the expectations and limitations of her class and gender, reveal how mortality, as opposed to divinity, carries an inherent set of constraints that define what is considered acceptable feminine behaviour. Thus, while mortal women like Clytemnestra may exhibit moments of profound agency and rebellion, these attributes are continually measured and often diminished by dominant social mores.

These examples collectively demonstrate that class and gender, as manifested through the lens of divine, demi-divine, and mortal statuses, interact in complex ways to determine female agency in Greek mythology. Holy women are endowed with privileges that elevate their status, but these advantages are not absolute; they remain tethered to patriarchal structures and the expectations of male lineage. Meanwhile, mortal women are often relegated to a smaller sphere of autonomy, with their roles heavily dictated by class expectations, social norms, and the pervasive influence of male authority. The intersection of these forces creates a layered and, at times, contradictory portrayal of femininity in Greek mythology.

## IV. RESULTS

### A. Divine Primacy and the Illusion of Unrestricted Agency:

Goddesses like Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite enjoy elevated statuses that ostensibly afford them unparalleled agency. However, a closer analysis reveals that their powers remain deeply intertwined with and dependent upon male authority figures. Their divine status, while symbolically potent, is circumscribed by culturally constructed expectations about lineage and marital fidelity. As Pomeroy argues, even the most powerful of these figures cannot fully extricate themselves from a framework that privileges male dominance.

### B. Male Association as a Source of Paradoxical Power:

The narrative construction of female divine power is inherently paradoxical, as it is both empowered by and subjugated to male associations. Athena's celebrated wisdom and martial ability are constantly juxtaposed with her identity as Zeus's daughter, while Hera's authority is undermined by the expectations tied to her role as wife. This duality is central to understanding how mythological narratives negotiate the balance between female autonomy and patriarchal regulation.

### C. Hybridity and the Constrained Agency of Demigoddesses and Mortal Women:

Figures like Helen of Troy and Ariadne, who embody the intersection of mortal and divine attributes, illustrate the intricate interplay between agency and constraint. Their ambiguous statuses illustrate that a mixed heritage does not result in an absolute transfer of divine agency but instead generates new forms of limitation and exploitation. In contrast, mortal women such as Penelope and Clytemnestra are fully enmeshed in a system. Where class and gender expectations diminish their autonomy, these dynamics



highlight the broader manifestation of gender-based hierarchies, wherein divine or semi-divine status does not translate to unrestricted power, but instead creates distinct yet equally confining spheres of influence.

Each of these arguments advances an understanding of the inherent tension between divine privilege and gender-based limitation, illustrating that an inescapable interplay between autonomy and subjugation marks narratives of feminine power in Greek mythology. The negotiation of these tensions serves as a mirror reflecting broader societal norms in classical antiquity, where the distribution of power was intricately linked to both divine status and patriarchal institutions. The paradoxes inherent in the sacred and mortal portrayals suggest that the ancient Greek mythological corpus is far more complex and nuanced than a straightforward celebration of feminine empowerment might imply. Instead, these narratives highlight a fluid boundary between power and oppression- a boundary that is continuously negotiated through both myth and ritual. The interplay of divine favour and mortal limitation thus provides an enduring lens for examining contemporary issues surrounding gender and class.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the examination of class and gender in Greek mythology, as articulated through the comparative analysis of mortal women, goddesses, and demigoddesses, reveals a sophisticated and deeply ambivalent system of social hierarchy. Drawing on Sarah B. Pomeroy's foundational work, along with the insights of Burkert, Blundell, and Vernant, this paper has demonstrated that divine power, while impressive, is inextricably linked to male authority and cultural expectations. The case studies of Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite underscore that even the loftiest of divine figures remain indebted to patriarchal constructs that define their roles and limitations. Moreover, the examples of Helen of Troy and Ariadne highlight the tenuous nature of hybridity, where the interplay of mortal and divine characteristics creates a dual-edged form of agency that is both empowering and repressive.

Meanwhile, mortal figures such as Penelope and Clytemnestra serve as poignant reminders of the constraints imposed by class and gender within ancient society. Their roles, carefully circumscribed by social mores, reveal that female agency in the mortal realm is often forcibly limited by external expectations and internalised norms. Together, these narratives demand a reconsideration of female power in classical antiquity- a power that is never absolute but is continuously negotiated within a complex matrix of privilege and limitation. This study contributes to our understanding of ancient Greek mythology, enabling us to reflect on the enduring echoes of these mythological hierarchies in contemporary constructions of gender and class. As the analysis shows, the intersection of divine power and gender-based privilege remains a fertile field for academic inquiry- a space in which ancient myth continues to speak to modern

concerns about agency, inequity, and the politics of representation.

## DECLARATION STATEMENT

I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

- **Conflicts of Interest/ Competing Interests:** Based on my understanding, this article has no conflicts of interest.
- **Funding Support:** This article has not been funded by any organizations or agencies. This independence ensures that the research is conducted with objectivity and without any external influence.
- **Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate:** The content of this article does not necessitate ethical approval or consent to participate with supporting documentation.
- **Data Access Statement and Material Availability:** The adequate resources of this article are publicly accessible.
- **Author's Contributions:** The authorship of this article is contributed solely.

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**Prerana Sana** is a scholar of English Literature who has completed her Master's degree with a strong academic focus on classical texts, gender studies, and feminist literary criticism. Prerana's work aims to re-evaluate the roles and representations of women in literature, seeking to restore agency to voices often overlooked or misrepresented in dominant narratives. Her approach blends traditional literary analysis with contemporary critical theory, engaging with themes of power, identity, and resistance. Although early in her scholarly journey, she aspires to make meaningful contributions to literary and cultural studies through further research and publication.

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