

Magna parens terra est: The Gynecology of Gaia

By surveying unconventional births in the Greco-Roman mythical corpus—e.g., the birth of Erichthonius and Ovid’s flood myth—my paper gives insight into the widespread use of the earth as analogy and metaphor for the womb throughout the mythic and medical corpora. Rather than exclusively focusing on the empirical medicine, my project, instead, gives emphasis to the relationship between myth and medicine, and this paper will focus on how mythical chthonic births operate in tandem with scientific and medical rhetoric surrounding birth, female flesh, and the pregnant body.

The agonistic environment of the Hippocratic physician prompted proofs that pulled from material well-known to laypeople in order to explain the medical art and outcompete rivals. Medical authors commonly employed metaphors from domestic, religious, and agrarian spheres of life, and the opening of the Hippocratic treatise, *Diseases of Women* 1, demonstrates one such an analogy. In the author’s explanation of male and female flesh, he concludes that women are more porous and softer than men, which is why her flesh takes on more moisture. The clear proof, the author informs us, is to a raw material and product that would have been familiar through its household and cultural use: raw wool and woven carpets.

If each were soaked in water, the raw wool will soak up and retain more moisture than the densely woven carpet (Hipp. *Morb. Mul.* 1.1). Greco-Roman mythology provides further proofs of this conceptualization of wool, female flesh, and fertility (Hanson 1992): When Hephaestus lusts after Athena, she rejects him, but not before he ejaculates onto her leg. Athena wipes off the seed with a piece of wool and casts it to the earth, from which Erichthonius is later born and subsequently raised by Athena (Apollodorus *Bibl.* 3.14.6).

Of course, the association between the fertile earth and pregnant women is not novel, but evidently Athena is able to create a proxy womb through the usage of the exact material (wool) likened to female flesh in the medical corpus. Notably, although the story is old—Homer classes Erichthonius as a “child of Earth” (*Il.* 2.547-48)—the details with Athena and the wool are a later addition, making their mythological (and iconographic) appearance around the same time as the Hippocratic theory that details the moist nature of healthy, fecund, female flesh. Thus, the birth of Erichthonius settles nicely into this connection and confirms a wider cultural belief for the nature and ability of the fertile womb to take in moisture and sustain pregnancy.

The wetness of the womb finds more parallels in ancient scientific theories on spontaneous generation. The wetness of the soil, much like the wetness of the women, is crucial to the process of generating life and the theory spans many centuries (Lehoux 2017): Empedoclean fragments describe disembodied limbs, appearing from mixtures of the elements in the earth (*frs.* 153-157), Aristotle most fully covers the topic and reports how proper mixtures of water, *pneuma*, heat, and earth create life (*GA* 762a19ff), Lucretius agrees (*RN* 6. 797), and Pliny continues, claiming to have seen mice that are half-mud, still formulating in the moisture of the Nile (*NH* 9.84). The Hippocratics similarly engage with these ideas in their reckoning of creation in the womb; the womb was also thought to concoct mixtures of fluids during conception, where this female wetness and heat become essential components of embryology.

It is no surprise then, to find these ideas reflected in mythology, most famously in cases such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* 1.350-437, after the great flood. When Deucalion and Pyrrha are the last humans to survive the flood, it is not Pyrrha’s womb that repopulates mankind, but the earth’s, which has been imbued with excess moisture from Jupiter’s torrent, just like the Nile

(sic...*Nilus, Met.* 1.422-423). The mortal couple toss stones over their shoulders and into the earth, which spontaneously creates new human beings and other creatures.

The earth is the great womb, from where mortal beings originate and are nourished amidst moisture and heat. The earth is a natural analogy to plot similar processes onto women, the humans who create and nurture progeny. These medical and scientific concepts—the nature of female flesh and the creation of life in the womb— are two clear ways that mythology and science react to and inform one another. Ultimately, my paper aims to demonstrate that myth and medicine in antiquity continuously understand, construct, and pathologize the body in ways that reflect and reinforce the physiological ideas of the time.

Works Cited

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- Lehoux, D. (2017) *Creatures Born of Mud and Slime: The Wonder and Complexity of Spontaneous Generation*. Johns Hopkins University Press.