

Girls to Women, Heroines, and Monsters: Female Subjectivity in Transition

The precipice of adulthood for girls in ancient Greece was not so much one moment as a series of pivotal transitions overseen by Artemis, spanning the time just before marriage, marriage and the birth of a first child. Many ancient stories, culled from ancient sources and discussed by Johnston, Larson, Lyons and Pache within discrete theoretical frameworks, depict the fate of girls who do not reach adulthood—which was marked by the birth and survival of the first child in marriage. These girls, pursued, raped or killed sometimes along with their newborn infant, are often transformed into natural objects (such as animals, stars, rocks or plants), into heroines worshipped at cult shrines or into physically hideous and violent spirits. The worship of a heroine often addressed ills that had already, or might, beset the community where a girl and/or her infant, was wronged or murdered. The havoc that female spirits wreak, on the other hand, was not imagined to be local; they kill girls and infants regardless of location. Their mobility coupled with their frightening visages and violent acts often obscure their origins as vulnerable girls. Notably, when young men are violently killed, they may be transformed into natural objects or become heroes. They do not become “translocal” violent male spirits. In the following, I attempt to address why only girls on the precipice of adulthood may be transformed into monstrous female spirits.

Scholars within and outside classics attribute the creation of monstrous females to male anxieties, fears, and desires, and they argue that monstrous females have normative functions: they are warnings or incentives to coerce women into conforming to social demands which most often include marriage and motherhood (Cohen, Murgatroyd, Ng). In this view, female monsters are born from a male imagination and they give evidence of how men deploy imaginary creatures to police the social boundaries of woman’s lives they seek to impose. I argue that these

monsters may be interpreted as creations of female anxieties, grief and anger, and that they are thus creations of *female* imagination and subjectivity. Like Susan Deacy in her work on virgins in flowery meadows, I seek to find intimations of female subjectivity in unexpected contexts, namely, in ancient tales about the transformations of girls in female monsters who kill infants and young mothers. I explore stories of transformations of girls into monstrous spirits in order to recover and reimagine girls' responses to the perils of navigating their transitions to adulthood, especially the live birth of their first child.

My case studies include the story of Psamanthe, who with her infant Linus, was wrongfully murdered by her father, and Poine, her avenging avatar, with a human torso and snaky bottom, who kills girls and their newborns. Though a spirit, Poine is eventually killed, and Psamanthe and Linus become heroized. The murder of Poine emphasizes that female avenging spirits and heroines are alternative transformations of girls who die prematurely and/or whose infants die. In other words, had Poine lived, I posit, Psamanthe and Linus would not have been heroized in cult. I also discuss Gello, Lamia and Mormo, once young girls who, although they died prematurely along with their infants, did not receive cult worship and became female monsters who kill infants and girls. To support my analysis, I consider childbirth in ancient Greece to provide a historical context for these tales (Demand, King). I also supplement ancient material with ethnographic and historical studies of La Llorona, a figure in Mexican American folklore (León). These studies document the participation of women in creating and sustaining tales of La Llorona's violent baby-snatching and suggest ways of interpreting Greek female monsters as products of female grief and anger, not only male fears.

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