

## THE VULNERABILITY OF ATHENA

### *Parthenoi* and Rape in Greek Myth<sup>1</sup>

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#### 1. Introduction

It may at first sight appear inappropriate and inaccurate to speak of the 'vulnerability' of Athena, the virgin warrior who possesses male attributes and qualities and who repulses rape. However, this paper will focus upon the question of sexual vulnerability in order to demonstrate that although she ultimately resists rape, she is to a significant extent cast in the role of rape *victim*. As such, her experiences bear striking resemblances to those of mortal *parthenoi*, 'marriageable but unmarried females',<sup>2</sup> who are typically represented as incapable of resisting sex through their own initiative and as subject to some degree of violent coercion.<sup>3</sup> As I shall show, accounts of Athena's repulse of rape depend upon the partial application of models of vulnerable femininity, through the deployment of which the possibility of her domination by males is articulated.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, she departs from normative feminine restrictions, but only once the possibility of her susceptibility to male sexual attention has been raised.

I shall focus upon the best attested of the rape attempts, that by Hephaistos,<sup>5</sup> and position it within accounts of sexual relationships between males and *parthenoi*. Sections 2 and 3 will cover necessary preliminaries, the former outlining three broad categories of relationships which invite comparison and contrast with the Athena-Hephaistos encounter, and the latter plotting general similarities between Athena and the females in these other relationships. Section 4 consists of a discussion of Hephaistos' assault and its consequences and will constitute the key section. Finally, a concluding section, 5, will explore the logic behind the ascription to her of mortal female experience, and of her ultimate transcendence over it.

#### 2. Representations of *parthenoi*

The three sets of myths which will be considered in this section

comprise types of experiences of *parthenoi*. Some *parthenoi* may be placed in more than one category, but the division of material should aid clarity and anomalies will be indicated in notes. Valuable studies have been made of *parthenoi* in myth and society, and my analysis will therefore be kept as brief as possible.

Firstly, a number of myths concern *parthenoi* who reject normal female activities and wish to remain unmarried, typically being called *anumpheutos*, 'unmarried' or 'having no part in marriage'.<sup>6</sup> On account of their disposition, they remove themselves from the paternal *oikos* to the wilds in order to hunt with Artemis, the huntress who, like them, chooses to remain a *parthenos*, and, indeed, is *philoparthenos*, 'parthenos-lover' (Nonnus, *Dion.* 2.122). But in straying beyond male control, they are represented as having also placed themselves beyond male protection, and they are seen by gods and pursued by them for sex. The results of particular pursuits vary, but some irrevocable change in status does invariably take place, rendering the *parthenos* incapable of continuing her chosen manner of existence.<sup>7</sup> Two examples should demonstrate the pattern. Daphne wanted to remain unmarried and rejected normal feminine activities, choosing rather to become a huntress and companion of Artemis. She was seen and pursued by Apollo and fled from his advances, and when about to be caught, was transformed into laurel. Another *parthenos*, Aura, who was a huntress and an exceptional runner, was desired and pursued by Dionysos. She outran him, but later drank water which he had turned into wine, and whilst in a drunken slumber, was deflowered. She eventually gave birth to twins, killed and ate one, and would have eaten the other had it not been for the intervention of Artemis. She then threw herself into the river Sangrios and was transformed into a stream. Unlike Daphne, then, she suffers defloration and childbirth, but like her, undergoes metamorphosis.<sup>8</sup>

The second group of myths involves sexual intercourse between gods and *parthenoi*. The encounters generally take place when the females are temporarily away from the protection of the *oikos*, and precipitate the birth of offspring exceptional in some way. For example, Europa was picking flowers with girlfriends when Zeus saw her and abducted her disguised as a bull. He took her to Krete, where he had sexual intercourse with her and impregnated her with the triplets Minos, Rhadamanthys and Sarpedon, all of whom were exceptional: amongst the accomplishments accredited to Minos and Rhadamanthys are Kretan laws, whilst Sarpedon became founder of Miletos.<sup>9</sup>

Whether these *parthenoi* are raped or consent to some degree is

unclear. Whereas in the case of the first group consent is lacking, the pursuit motif highlighting their wish to resist male advances, here matters are more complicated. According to Mary Lefkowitz, females in Greek myth are not raped, but rather seduced or abducted, and their consent accorded importance (Lefkowitz 1993). She adduces examples such as that of Europa, arguing that gods ensure that the encounters are made pleasurable. Thus she writes that Europa was approached by Zeus while picking flowers in a beautiful meadow, and that the form taken by him was that of a beautiful bull breathing a saffron scent (Lefkowitz 1993, 25; for the saffron scent, see Hes. *Ehoiai* fr. 140). [However, although elements of consent and seduction are certainly present, they are combined with violent and aggressive features, and the encounter is portrayed as lacking mutuality.] Rather than mitigating violence, the setting serves to accentuate it. Europa picks flowers as an innocent pleasure, but this is an activity with strong sexual overtones, associated with imminent exposure to male sexuality (Foley 1994, 33–4; Sourvinou-Inwood 1991, 65).<sup>10</sup> Violence is more explicit in the abduction itself. In a fragment of Aischylos' *Kares* or *Europa* (fr. 99 Radt), a passage discussed by Lefkowitz, Europa relates how Zeus turned himself into a bull as a trick contrived so that he might abduct her from her paternal *oikos* by a κλέμμα...ἄμοχθον, a 'toilless theft' or 'fraud', on account of which, she exchanged the παρθένου σέβας, 'respect due to a *parthenos*' to be yoked, ἐξύγην to him. The κλέμμα is 'toilless' because, caught unawares, Zeus is spared the effort of pursuing her, the implication being that had it not been for the trick, attempted resistance would have ensued.<sup>11</sup>

The third category drawn upon in myths of Athena consists of representations of marriage. The picture of forcible abduction painted by Aischylos' Europa may be compared with attitudes expressed by females who voice anxiety towards marriage.<sup>12</sup> Marriage, too, is represented as a violent wrenching from a previous manner of existence. Indeed, close conceptual associations between rape and marriage have been analysed by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood (1991, esp. 65–82), who shows that both may be depicted as comprising violence and entailing female subordination. (Cf. Redfield's discussion of interplays between consent and coercion in marriage (1982, 191–3).) Sourvinou-Inwood points to images depicting erotic pursuits in which a male figure, often divine, pursues a female who runs while looking back, typically holding one hand towards the pursuer and lifting the other, the choice of moment giving the opportunity for the dramatic evocation of aggression, panic and impending violence. As she shows, these

images may have a marital context, and in some depictions, marriage is explicitly denoted, one of the indications being that a male figure holding a sceptre, who is likely to be the father, passively observes the pursuit (1991, 73–4). Paternal passivity may be accounted for in the nature of the father–daughter relationship. As James Redfield has shown, although the relationship was particularly intimate, daughters needed to be given in marriage: ‘the daughter is the member of the family closest to the father, since she is not a potential replacement and competitor, like his son, nor a link to another lineage, like his wife.’ Nevertheless, ‘the daughter is fated for marriage’ (1982, 187).

Within the programme of implicit violence against women in the visual depictions, indications of female consent are also apparent in that the female holds a hand towards the pursuer and eye contact is made.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, indications of possible female power are combined with a portrayal of sex as unequal and violent which conforms with societal attitudes and values.

Like all images, however, this set may be interpreted in more than one way. It may be viewed as containing elements of both repudiation and consent on the part of the woman, and as such could play on the tension in male perceptions between women as agents and as objects. The hand may be outstretched as an indication of protest or desire. A comparable provision for female power occurs in the view ascribed by Herodotos to Persian *logioi* concerning abductions of mortal females: δῆλα γὰρ δὴ ὅτι, εἰ μὴ αὐταὶ ἐβούλοντο, οὐκ ἂν ἠρπάζοντο, ‘it is clear that if they [women] had not wished, they would not have been abducted’ (1.4.2).<sup>14</sup> It is likely that female perspectives on such encounters would differ radically. As Brownmiller states in her ‘female definition of rape’: ‘if a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man, and the man chooses to proceed against her will, that is a criminal act of rape’ (1976, 18). However, attempts to recover Greek female attitudes are rendered problematic on account of the dominance in the sources of male attitudes and perceptions and the consequent difficulty, if not impossibility, of perforating male discourse.

### 3. Athena and mortal *parthenoi*

This section will consider ways in which representations of Athena conform to and deviate from those of mortal *parthenoi*. In so doing, it will pave the way for the more specific material in section 4.

Strong dispositional similarities may be identified between Athena and the *parthenoi* who remove themselves from civilised life. Although she is a warrior rather than a huntress, like them she engages in

masculine activities, resists marriage, and is called *anumφheutos* (Nonnus, *Dion.* 2.106). However, whereas they take themselves from civilisation in order to avoid male sexual attention and so that they may engage in masculine activities, Athena is closely associated with her father, and indeed in some sources, is located by his side (see Pind. *fr.* 154; Aelius Aristides 37.4). Furthermore, their rejection of sex and male-dominated society may be contrasted with her patronage of male concerns. However, the formulation accorded to her of closeness with 'the male' depends upon her rejection of marriage, a vital feature of the male-dominated society she strives to uphold. As Aischylos has her say in the *Eumenides*:

μήτηρ γὰρ οὐτις ἐστὶν ἢ μ' ἐγείνατο,  
τὸ δ' ἄρσεν αἰνῶ πάντα, πλὴν γάμου τυχεῖν,  
ἅπαντι θυμῷ, κάρτα δ' εἰμὶ τοῦ πατρός

No mother gave birth to me and I approve of the male in every respect,  
with all my soul, with the exception of undergoing marriage, and I am  
entirely of the father. 736–8<sup>15</sup>

She is said to uphold the male 'in every respect', 'with all my soul' and 'entirely', with her birth from the head of her father illuminating her preference. Reference to her mother Metis, in other sources of key importance in her conception and birth, is omitted (Hes. *Th.* 886 ff.; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.3.6; Chrysippus *fr.* 908 = Hes. *fr.* 343; Detienne and Vernant 1978, 107–30) with the result that feminine influence is diminished. However, she supports the male with a proviso: πλὴν γάμου τυχεῖν, 'with the exception of undergoing marriage'. Where marriage is concerned, her attitude concurs with that of the *parthenoi*.

Together with dispositional similarities, differences of location and character may therefore be identified. Moreover, a strong difference between Athena and these females is that while they reject normative feminine activities, she is patron of wool-working, the paradigmatic feminine practice (see e.g. Barber 1992, 105–6). In being associated with female activities, she may be compared with the second group of mythic *parthenoi*, those who are associated with the paternal *oikos* and who encounter sex on temporarily leaving it. In a visual depiction of Poseidon's pursuit of the Troizenian *parthenos* Aithra, Aithra is depicted carrying a wool basket, a detail which could serve to emphasise her association with the *oikos* (Vatican 16554, *ARV*<sup>2</sup> 252.47; Keuls 1985 fig. 266; *LIMC* I pl. 326 (Aithra I.2)). Further aspects of the Aithra myth will be discussed in section 5 below.

However, simple comparison is not possible, for representations of

Athena engaged in wool-working are typically conflated with indications of her role as masculine warrior. This blending in her person of normally disparate gender activities may be exemplified by Apollodoros' description of the Palladion, an armed statue of Athena: τῇ μὲν δεξιᾷ δόρυ διηρμένον ἔχον τῇ δὲ ἐτέρᾳ ἡλακάτην καὶ ἄτρακτον, 'in the right hand it held a spear lifted up, while in the other, a distaff and spindle' (*Bibl.* 3.12.3).<sup>16</sup> But close similarities to the second group of *parthenoi* are not thereby precluded. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, she is listed among the flower-picking companions of Persephone (*Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 424), an inclusion which demonstrates her affiliation with these females and which, given the sexual connotations of the activity, is revealing of perceptions of her sexuality. Although wishing to avoid sex, like them she may be represented as nubile.<sup>17</sup>

Dispositional similarities exist between Athena and women in depictions of marriage in their common reluctance to marry, the difference being that in spite of the resistance of the latter, the ceremony is completed. As we will see, however, Athena goes part of the way only through such a ceremony with Hephaistos. Unlike these females, she remains within the *oikos*, having secured the continuation of her close relationship with her father. In not marrying, she corresponds to the male in a fragment of Euripides' *Danae* (fr. 318 Radt), which details how a woman leaves her paternal home and then belongs no longer to her parents, while male children remain in the *oikos*, honouring the paternal gods and tombs. In this respect, then, Athena takes on the role of a male rather than a female child.

#### 4. The vulnerability of Athena

Representations of Athena therefore oscillate between being similar to and different from those of mortal *parthenoi*. I now wish to move from general to more specific considerations of the relationship between Athena and these women. I shall discuss the Athena–Hephaistos encounter and consider how the aggressive femininity displayed by Athena is intricately interwoven with elements of vulnerability comparable with those characterising mortal *parthenoi*.

According to one variant:

Ἄθηνᾶ παρεγένετο πρὸς Ἥφαιστον, ὅπλα κατακευάσθαι θέλουσα. ὁ δὲ ἐγκαταλελειμμένος ὑπὸ Ἀφροδίτης εἰς ἐπιθυμίαν ὤλισθε τῆς Ἀθηνᾶς, καὶ διώκειν αὐτὴν ἤρξατο. ἡ δὲ ἔφευγεν. ὡς δὲ ἐγγὺς αὐτῆς ἐγένετο πολλῆ ἀνάγκη (ἦν γὰρ χωλός), ἐπειρᾶτο συνελθεῖν. ἡ δὲ ὡς σώφρων καὶ παρθένος οὔσα οὐκ ἠνέσχετο· ὁ δὲ ἀπεσπέρμηθεν εἰς τὸ σκέλος τῆς θεᾶς.

Athena came to Hephaistos wanting him to fashion arms. But he, having been deserted by Aphrodite, began to desire Athena and started to pursue her; but she fled. When he came near her with a great deal of distress (for he was lame), he attempted to have sex with her; but she, being *sophron* and a *parthenos* would not suffer him to act thus, and he ejaculated on to the leg of the goddess. Apollodoros 3.14.6<sup>18</sup>

In going to Hephaistos to ask him to make weapons for her, Athena is accorded masculine and warlike features. Also, whereas mortal *parthenoi* would ideally be kept indoors, away from the male sphere, in order that the possibility of seduction or rape by males might be avoided, Athena, who is so closely associated with the male sphere, would be expected not to need to take such precautions.<sup>19</sup> It is when *parthenoi* leave their *oikoi* without male protection that sexual encounters occur. As we have seen, *parthenoi* who remove themselves from male control to the peripheries of civilisation encounter gods there, and females like Euadne and Aithra have sexual encounters on temporarily leaving the *oikos*. Also, *parthenoi* leave their *oikoi* and with paternal consent, go through the ceremony of marriage. Although Athena differs from these groups of females in key respects, by moving outdoors, she is represented as comparably vulnerable, for Hephaistos sees her and becomes attracted to her and launches a sexual attack, and, warrior though she is, she does not hold her ground, but flees. Clear parallels can be discerned with the pursuit and flight scheme typical in myths of females who leave civilisation for the periphery. Her vulnerability is further conveyed through the deliberate stress placed upon Hephaistos' lameness: he catches up with her πολλῇ ἀνάγκῃ (ἦν γὰρ χωλός), 'with a great deal of distress (for he was lame)'.<sup>20</sup>

At this point, however, a diversion is taken from the usual formula, for Athena repulses the rape attempt. She is accorded the desire characteristic of *parthenoi* to avoid sex, but, untypically, is successful in realising her wish. When mortal *parthenoi* are actually caught, sexual union occurs and, although, as we have seen, some manage to resist sex, they do so only through extreme means. Athena, however, retains her virginity though she is caught by Hephaistos, and, moreover, undergoes no change of status or form.

Similar factors to those involved in the Apollodoros narrative come into play in another version of the myth:

λέγει δὲ καὶ Εὐριπίδης περὶ τῆς γενέσεως αὐτοῦ τὸν τρόπον τοῦτον· Ἥφαιστον ἐρασθέντα Ἀθηνᾶς βούλεσθαι αὐτῇ μιγῆναι, τῆς δὲ ἀποστρεφόμενης καὶ τὴν παρθενίαν μᾶλλον αἰρουμένης ἔν τινι τόπῳ τῆς Ἀττικῆς κρύπτεσθαι, ὃν λέγουσι καὶ ἀπ' ἐκείνου προσαγορευθῆναι Ἥφαιστεῖον· ὃς

υς ας αυτην κρατήσειν καὶ ἐπιθέμενος πληγείς ὑπ' αὐτῆς τῷ δόρατι ἀθήκε τὴν ἐπιθυμίαν, φερομένης εἰς τὴν γῆν τῆς σποράς.

Euripides tells the following story with regard to the birth of him [i.e., Erichthonios]. Hephaistos was lusting after Athena, and wanted to have intercourse with her, but she turned away from him and preferring her virginity (*partheneia*), hid from him somewhere in Attika, which they say was called 'Hephaisteion' after him. He expected to conquer her and attacked her, and received a heavy blow from her spear, and he released his desire, and the semen fell on the earth.

Eur. *fr.* 925 Nauck = Eratosth. [*Cat.*] 13

In the description of Hephaistos' desire for Athena and pursuit of her, the lack of mutuality typical in relationships between gods and *parthenoi* is brought into play. When she does not consent to sex, but rather turns away and hides, he searches for her. Underlying violence is indicated by the verbs *krateo* and *epitithemi*, connoting respectively the violence intended by Hephaistos and the violent attack he launches on finding her. However, his intense desire is matched by her strenuous wish to maintain her *partheneia*,<sup>21</sup> and she retaliates with reciprocal violence, attacking him with her spear.<sup>22</sup> To denote sexual assault, language of military conquest is used metaphorically, but in countering the attack, Athena employs actual martial techniques. Possible phallic connotations are present, with the male sexual advance countered by a symbol of itself, and the mutuality of the encounter thereby underscored.

In the representation of Athena then, indications of vulnerability and power, and inequality and reciprocal violence are interwoven. The possibility of her vulnerability is articulated in the ascription to her of characteristics typical of females in myth, but through her initiative it is rejected, and she is shown to have demonstrated her worth as an inviolable virgin warrior. Whereas the status of mortal *parthenoi* is changed in some way, whether through pregnancy, metamorphosis or death, Athena's status is demonstrated and reinforced, and she is seen to depart from normative feminine possibilities.

Comparable oscillations between vulnerability and invulnerability can be observed in a visual depiction of Hephaistos' pursuit of Athena on an Athenian red-figured vase by the Providence painter (*Fig. 1*), which bears strong resemblance to the vases considered in section 2 above.<sup>23</sup> The vase depicts a male figure in pursuit of a female who carries a helmet and spear, and who, on account of these attributes, can be assumed to be Athena. She looks back at her pursuer, making eye contact with him. That he is in pursuit is fairly clear in that his legs



are outstretched and the angle of his cloak suggests rapid movement. Given the literary variants of the encounter and, in addition, evidence from other visual depictions, it is reasonable to assume that the pursuer is Hephaistos.<sup>24</sup> A third figure is depicted on the other side of the vase, the identity and significance of whom will be considered presently.

The portrayal of Athena is similar in certain respects to that of mortal females in visual depictions of pursuit, in that like them, she flees while looking back at her pursuer. Once again, though, simple equivalence is transcended, for instead of being depicted lifting one hand and holding another towards the pursuer, she carries her spear in one hand and helmet in the other. These may be indications of how she will defend herself once caught.<sup>25</sup> However, since she is carrying arms, a further level of signification may be present which serves to reinforce the image of her as one being pursued, and to accentuate her vulnerability. It could be the case that the helmet and spear should be considered Hephaistos' gifts to her.<sup>26</sup> Although in the Apollodoros narrative, she goes to him to request that arms be made, elsewhere, Hephaistos takes the initiative in presenting them in an attempt to persuade her to have sex with him. According to Nonnos, *χωλὸς ἑὸν Ἥφαιστος ἀθελγέος εἵνεκα μορφῆς | ὤπασε ποικίλα δῶρα, καὶ οὐ παρέπεισεν Ἀθήνην*, 'being lame, Hephaistos offered manifold gifts on account of his appearance, and he did not persuade Athena' (*Dion.* 42.247–9). These gifts are presumably the weapons which as smith he is qualified to create and as warrior, she would be glad to receive. It could be the case that she is carrying her suitor's gifts in a manner

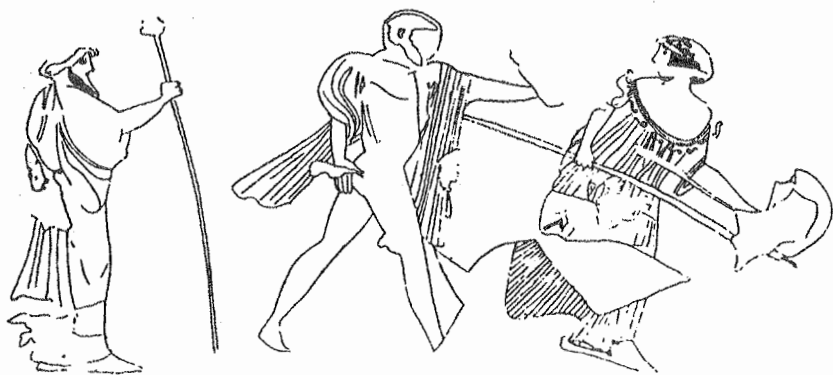


Fig. 1. Line drawing from Cook 1940.

comparable to the way in which, in homosexual pursuit scenes, pursued boys carry gifts such as cockerels and balls which are suitable to their status as *epheboi* and children (See Dover 1978, 92–3; Koch-Harnack 1983; Arafat 1990, 66–76). The homosexual analogy is revealing, for, like male youths, Athena moves freely in the male sphere, but like them is thereby vulnerable to male sexual attention.<sup>27</sup> However, while the boys' gifts are useless as objects of defence against sexual aggression, those presented to Athena take the form of weapons with which she may defend herself. In order to enhance his prospects, Hephaistos presents Athena with gifts intended to appeal to her and which befit her status, but ironically, the very gifts may be used to help repel him.

As we have seen, in depictions of erotic pursuit, the possibility of sexual attraction on the part of the females may be posited in that they are depicted looking back at their pursuers and reaching a hand towards them. On the vase, the depiction of Athena differs in that she holds weapons instead. Like them, however, she does make eye-contact with her pursuer. Through the reproduction of this standard feature of erotic pursuit scenes, this representation of her is closely related to that of mortal females, with the result that the principle of vulnerable femininity is alluded to in delineating her. It may also be the case that the eye-contact connotes desire on her part for her pursuer. This need not contradict the literary material in which Athena is represented as inimical to sex. The nexus of values as discussed in section 2 above may be being drawn upon, so that interplays of attraction and repudiation are present. Moreover, if such intimations are present, the force of the test which she must undergo is enhanced. The possibility of desire on her part is proposed, only to be rejected with her subsequent repudiation of Hephaistos' advances.

It can be established with some certainty that the figure depicted on the other side of the vase is Zeus. In contrast to the perceptible motion on the part of Athena and Hephaistos, this figure appears to be stationary. Corresponding with his passivity, in the majority of literary variants, Zeus consents to Hephaistos' attempted rape, since he has betrothed her to Hephaistos.<sup>28</sup> It is possible that the vase, too, refers to this attempted marriage, especially given that, as we have seen, certain vases depict erotic pursuits which take place in the context of marriage. Moreover, as we saw, some of these include a figure who is likely to be the father and who, as is the case here, holds a sceptre. The front and back of vases need not necessarily be related to one another, but given both the parallels with other vases depicting erotic pursuit and

the similarities to non-visual variants of the myth, unity of subject may be posited.

In the accounts depicting Hephaistos' assault as an attempted marriage, Athena's vulnerability is intensified in that her closest male relative complies with the attempt. Conforming with the expected behaviour of fathers, Zeus, in spite of his closeness to his daughter, consents to her marriage and makes no attempt to prevent it, and it is left to her initiative to deviate from the normal pattern of female behaviour. The possibility of her subordination and consequent incorporation into male-dominated society is thus posited and then rejected. She remains permanently transgressive, never completing the rite of passage from *parthenos* to married woman. As the passage from Aischylos' *Eumenides* discussed above demonstrates, she is wholly on the side of the male *πλὴν γάμου τυχεῖν*, 'with the exception of undergoing marriage'. In order to formulate this closeness with the male and remain with her father, she refuses marriage and thereby rejects a vital feature of the society she strives to uphold.

Because of the closeness of Athena to Zeus and of Zeus' betrothal of Athena, their relationship could serve as a mythic paradigm for father-daughter relationships, which, as we have seen, are intimate yet involve the father giving his daughter to another man in marriage. But whereas other father-daughter relationships are necessarily temporary, through Athena's actions the normal father-daughter relationship is subverted. Her attitude towards marriage is represented as characteristically feminine, but her successful rejection of it transcends normative feminine possibilities. In her case, the consequences of successful bridal resistance are demonstrated, and exceptionally, she secures the continuation of her close relationship with her father.

It is worth considering Zeus' behaviour in more detail, for, where another divine virgin, Hestia, is concerned, he *deviates* from the precept that a virgin should be married. Like Athena, Hestia had no wish to marry. She, however, retains her virginity with the full consent and assistance of Zeus. She came to him and swore that she would remain a *parthenos*, and Zeus supported her, giving her instead pride of place at the centre of the Greek household.<sup>29</sup> The contrast with the Athena-Zeus relationship emphasises Athena's complete reliance upon her own resources. In being seen to reject male advances on these terms, she is given the greatest opportunity to demonstrate her warlike femininity.

Comparison between Hephaistos' attempted rape of Athena and rape-attempts upon two other goddesses, Hera and Artemis,

demonstrates further that it is not simply because Athena is immortal and the other *parthenoi* mortal that she is capable of resisting male sexual advances. In the Gigantomachia, a number of goddesses, of whom Hera is one, participate in the protection of their community, a role reserved for men in the world of humans (see further Loraux 1992, 15). However, in participating in this most masculine of activities, Hera's vulnerability to rape is exploited by Zeus when, in the course of the battle, he induces the giant Porphyryion to assault her sexually. According to Apollodoros' account:

Πορφυρίων δὲ Ἡρακλεῖ κατὰ τὴν μάχην ἐφώρμησε καὶ Ἥρα. Ζεὺς δὲ αὐτῷ πόθον Ἥρας ἐνέβαλεν, ἥτις καὶ καταρρηγνύντος αὐτοῦ τοὺς πέπλους καὶ βιάζεσθαι θέλοντος βοηθοὺς ἐπεκαλεῖτο· καὶ Διὸς κεραυνώσαντος αὐτὸν Ἡρακλῆς τοξεύσας ἀπέκτεινε.

Porphyryion attacked Herakles and Hera in the course of the battle. But Zeus inflicted on him desire for Hera, and when he ripped her clothes and intended to use force, she called for help; and Zeus killed him after he had struck him with the thunderbolt, and Herakles had shot him with an arrow.

1.6.2

Unable to defend herself, Hera calls for male assistance. Her vulnerability is thereby disclosed. By way of contrast, Athena, with no male to defend her, resists rape through her own resources.

Like Athena, Artemis successfully resists rape through her own initiative. However, the means whereby she does so are significantly different from those employed by Athena. An attempted rape is attributed to Alpheios, who, in some sources, pursues her to Ortygia where she loses him, and elsewhere, attempts to take her by force while she takes part with her companions in a festival (Pind. *Pyth.* 2.7; Schol. Pind. *Pyth.* 2.7; Paus. 6.22.5; see further Zajko 1993, 68–70). The motif of festival rape is used, whereby young female worshippers who are temporarily away from the *oikos* become prey for rapists (see Eur. *Ion* 545–54; Men. *Epit.* 450–4; *Sam.* 38–50). Of course, Artemis is not located within the *oikos*, but dwells with her female companions on the periphery of civilisation, but the vulnerability of a female in such a situation is evoked. However, she deceives the would-be rapist by smearing her face with mud. Whether through deception or escape, then, she averts rape through her own resources. Athena, in contrast, fails to conceal herself from Hephaistos when she hides from him and is caught when she flees, but, on being caught or discovered, is given an opportunity to demonstrate her warrior virginity. Artemis, however, does not possess such pugnacity, as is demonstrated in another rape attempt, by Orion, in which a one-to-one encounter does take

place and he gets as far as lifting her *chiton* (Nonnus, *Dion.* 4.338). Rape is averted not because Artemis wards him off, but because the Scorpion comes to her aid and fatally wounds him. Like Hera, then, she requires external assistance.

Like Athena, Hestia and Artemis are not restricted by the limitations that govern mortal females in that they retain their virginity without suffering punishment. However they, and Hera, too, are shown to be incapable of relying upon innate strength to resist rape or marriage, whereas in Athena's case, the possibility of vulnerability to sexual attack is rejected.

But with Athena's repulse of Hephaistos, the dialogue between vulnerability and invulnerability attains only partial resolution, for as we will now see, in subsequent events, sexual connotations continue to be present. Moreover, a child, Erichthonios, is born as a result of the encounter, positioning Athena in the particularly vulnerable female category of unmarried mother.

In Apollodoros' account of the events occurring after Hephaistos' ejaculation, Athena wiped the semen from her leg to the ground with wool and Erichthonios was born from the fertilised ground. She nursed him and wishing to keep secret his existence, placed him in a basket with two guardian serpents which was given to the three daughters of Kekrops with strict instructions that they should not look inside. They disobeyed and she became furious. According to Burkert, 'the paradox of the identity of virgin and mother is something which the myth recoils from articulating' (1985, 143). I hope to show, rather, that it is in fact *central* to the myth. As Sissa shows, *parthenoi* could be unmarried mothers (1990, 87–104).

As we have seen, in order to wipe Hephaistos' semen from her leg, Athena uses a piece of wool. The choice of this object may appear random, but it begins to acquire meaning when her role as patron of woolworking is taken into account. Her choice of this quintessentially feminine object emphasises her femininity. Furthermore, there is evidence that wool was used as a form of contraception in the ancient world (Soranus 1.61–2; see Riddle 1992; Hopkins 1965, 134; Noonan 1966, 16). From this, Athena can be seen to be obviating possible pregnancy. In some sources the name of Erichthonios is said explicitly or implicitly to be derived from *erion*, 'wool' and *chthon*, 'earth' (Etym. Magn. s.v. *Erechtheus*; cf. Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.14.6; Schol. Hom. *Il.* 4.8). The etymology may be fanciful, but some at least saw his name as commemorating Athena's successful rejection of rape and avoidance of pregnancy.<sup>30</sup>

Simultaneously, however, her role in the birth might be celebrated. Hephaistos' semen fertilises Ge only after it has come into contact with Athena. Through Athena's vulnerable femininity, Athenians could consider their culture hero and ancestor to be the child of their chief deity, so that they, in a sense, are descended from her. As Burkert writes, 'Athena, the virgin, thus comes within an ace of being the mother of the ancestral king' (1985, 143).<sup>31</sup> Two other derivations are attested. In some sources, the name Erichthonios is derived from *eri-*, 'very' and *chthon* (Eur. *fr.* 925 Radt = Eratosth. [*Cat.*] 13). This derivation too is apt, rendering the child 'the very chthonic one', an appropriate name for a child born from Ge. Elsewhere, his name is derived from *eris*, 'strife' and *chthon* (Fulg. *Myth.* 2.14; Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 1.17; Hyg. *Fab.* 116; Hyg. *Poet. Astr.* 2.13). Whereas the derivation from *eri-* and *chthon* focuses on the fertilisation of Ge and the birth of Erichthonios, this one hinges on the Athena–Hephaistos encounter. The derivation from *erion* and *chthon* adduces features contained in both, pertaining both to the failed rape and to the fertilisation.

Parallels may be drawn between the events which follow the birth of Erichthonios and representations of certain mortal *parthenoi*. Further fluctuations may thereby be discerned between the ascription to Athena of vulnerability and invulnerability. For example, Euadne, impregnated with Iamos by Apollo, attempted to hide her pregnancy. When her child was born, she abandoned him on the ground, in spite of her distress at so doing, fearing disgrace should her sexual activity be discovered.<sup>32</sup> Because Iamos was destined for greatness, as a prophet and founder of an eminent *genos*, he received divine-sent protection in the form of two serpents who nurtured him (Pind. *Ol.* 6.45–7).

In certain respects, similarities exist between Athena's situation and that of Euadne. Athena, too, takes pains to hide the existence of the child and is never *fully* in control of the situation, as is made clear by her reliance upon the Kekropidai, her failure to keep secret the existence of Erichthonios and her anger once the basket containing him is uncovered. Moreover, the choice of serpents to guard both children indicates that they were seen as appropriate guardians for new-born children of gods and *parthenoi*.<sup>33</sup> But Athena's actions differ from those of Euadne in that it is Ge and not she herself who gives birth to Erichthonios, and also in the strong measure of control she exercises over the situation. Whereas Euadne leaves her child on the ground to die, Athena takes Erichthonios out of the ground, that is, from Ge, in order to nurse him.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, she herself arranges for

the child to be taken care of, providing him with guardian serpents and entrusting the basket containing child and serpents to the Kekropidai. Representations of unmarried mothers are drawn upon in delineating Athena, but in her divergence from Euadne, she is seen to transcend their experience, so that her difference from them is underscored.<sup>35</sup>

### 5. The logic of rape in the myth of Athena

Representations of Athena as potentially, but not ultimately, vulnerable to male sexual aggression emphasise her difference from other females. The possibility that she, too, may be defeated or dominated is articulated and, with her successful repulse of sexual aggression, rejected. Her prowess as warrior and suitability as protectress is demonstrated and reinforced, her departure from models of mortal femininity befitting the *Parthenos* who aligns herself with male values and society.

However, her connections with mortal *parthenoi* can still be accorded importance in that she operates as a mediator between males and females. This role may be exemplified by her involvement in the deceit and defloration of Aithra by Poseidon and a rite said to have been inaugurated thereafter. Pausanias relates how, in order that Poseidon might have sex with Aithra and impregnate her with Theseus, Athena appeared to her in a dream, telling her to go to the nearby island of Sphairia to pour a libation. Here, Poseidon had intercourse with her. She then founded a temple to Athena Apatouria and instigated a custom whereby, before marriage, Troizenian *parthenoi* would dedicate their girdles to the goddess (Paus. 2.33.1). In all likelihood, Pausanias derives the epithet from Athena's *apatan*, 'deceit', of Aithra (cf. Frazer 1898, 284 on Paus. 2.33.1). Troizenian *parthenoi* subsequently perform a symbolic dedication of their virginity to the deceitful goddess prior to their own exposure to male sexuality.<sup>36</sup>

As a virgin goddess, Athena is an appropriate deity to be worshipped by *parthenoi*. In myth, she is shown to be comparable to mortal females, represented like Aithra as rape victim and unmarried mother, and like the *parthenoi*, as wife-to-be. However, similarities can be traced only to a certain extent, for she is not restricted to perceived restrictions governing mortal femininity, and sanctions deceit and defloration by males of young females. In her intermediary role between *parthenoi* and males, she fosters male dominance and control over women through sex and marriage.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Versions of this paper were delivered at the 'Loxbridge' ancient history graduate conference, Oxford 1994, the Oxford Gender in Antiquity seminar, the Rape conference in Cardiff, and at postgraduate seminars in Cardiff, Reading and Newcastle. I am grateful to the audiences at these meetings for their advice and criticism. I am thankful to Daniel Ogden and David Noy for drawing my attention to references for, respectively, lameness and contraception. Also, I am thankful to David Harvey and Paul Goring for their pertinent comments, and especially to Keith Hopwood for his invaluable guidance and assistance throughout the writing of this paper. All references to ancient sources are taken from N.G.L. Hammond and H.H. Scullard (eds.) *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, second edition, Oxford 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Although longwinded, this translation is more suitable than 'virgins'. As Sissa writes, 'the Greek word *parthenos* does not unambiguously signify the perfect integrity implicit in our word virgin' (Sissa 1990, 76; see also the discussion in 73–123). Athena maintains her 'integrity' and can therefore be labelled 'virgin'. However, as I shall show, similarities with mortal *parthenoi* are ascribed to her, with the effect that distinctions between her and these females are blurred.

<sup>3</sup> As several studies have shown, *parthenoi* might be considered ambivalent, masculine, dangerous and in need of taming, but through rape and marriage, their perceived threat might be seen to be suppressed. See King 1983; Seaford 1987; Smith 1992, 87–8; Vernant 1980, 23–5.

<sup>4</sup> On interfaces between mortal and immortal femininity, see Loraux 1992. She shows that while the femininity of goddesses is different from that of mortal females, divine femininity cannot wholly be separated from mortal femininity. Indeed, 'a goddess is not the incarnation of the feminine, yet she often represents a purified, and even more often a displaced, form of femininity' (1992, 43).

<sup>5</sup> Another rape attempt is attributed to Pallas, whom some sources name as father of Athena. She is said to have repulsed his advances, killed and flayed him, and created her *aegis* from his skin (Tzet., *Schol. on Lycoph. Alex.* 355; Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.28.2; Ampel. 9.10; Arn. *Adv. Nat.* 4.14; Cic. *Nat. D.* 3.59; Firm. *Mat. Err. prof. rel.* 16). The possibility also exists of attempted rape by Zeus, the figure whom the majority of sources give as father of Athena, and with whom she is generally portrayed as being in the most intimate of relationships. According to Arafat, a scene depicted on a skyphos by the Lewis Painter (Leipzig 638; *ARV2* 973.6; Arafat 1990 fig. 3.107/4.58; pl. 27) 'seems to be a form of pursuit involving Zeus and Athena...Athena (almost certainly) is looking back, although Zeus is standing' (1990, 81; cf. 102). The vase may tentatively be used as evidence for father–daughter rape in that her pose is characteristic not only of females on vases depicted fleeing from pursuing males, but also corresponds to a depiction of Athena herself fleeing from Hephaistos which will be discussed in section 4. On visual depictions of pursuit of females in general, and of Athena in particular, see the discussion below.

Conflict is present in another of her father–daughter relationships also, for Herodotos writes that according to the Libyans, Athena was daughter of



Poseidon, but μιν μεμφθεϊσάν τι τῷ πατρὶ δοῦναι ἑωυτὴν τῷ Διί, τὸν δὲ Δία ἑωυτοῦ μιν ποιήσασθαι θυγατέρα, 'having found fault with her father for some reason, she gave herself to Zeus, that he should make her his daughter' (4.180.5). Tantalisingly, however, no reason for the conflict is given. Also, in certain sources (Clem. Al. *Protr.* 2.28.2; Ampel. 9.10; Firm. Mat. *Err. prof. rel.* 16), Hephaistos is named father of Athena. His attempt, too, may therefore be read as attempted father–daughter rape. These issues are beyond the scope of this paper and will be reserved for future discussion.

<sup>6</sup> These myths are catalogued and discussed in Zajko 1993.

<sup>7</sup> As Zajko writes, 'none of them remain permanently as virgins in human form in the wild; either they are raped or they are transformed into a part of the natural landscape' (1993, 178–9). Cf. Smith 1992, 88.

<sup>8</sup> Daphne: Ov. *Met.* 1.452 ff.; Parth. *Amat. Narr.* 15; Paus. 8.20.2 and 10.7.8; Serv. *Aen.* 2.513; Nonnus, *Dion.* 2. 100–14; see further Zajko 1993, 91–3. Aura: Nonnus, *Dion.* 48.242–973; see further Zajko 1993, 82–3.

<sup>9</sup> See Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.5.7; 3.1.1 ff.; Hes. *Ehoiai fr.* 140; Diod. Sic. 4.60.3; 5.78.1; Ov. *Met.* 2.836 ff.; *Fast.* 5.603 ff.; Hyg. *Fab.* 178; Theophr. *Hist. Pl.* 1.15; Pliny, *HN* 12.5; Aesch. fr 99 Radt.

<sup>10</sup> See also Foley's discussion of the sexual significance of meadows: 'meadows in Greek myth are liminal sites, associated not only with a transition to sexuality and fertility but also with the underworld... The motif of abduction from a meadow and a group of maidens suggests the girl's readiness for marriage' (1994, 33–4). The significance of Athena as an accompanying maiden will be discussed below.

<sup>11</sup> Strong parallels may be identified between the experiences of Europa and those of Persephone. Prior to her abduction by Hades, Persephone was engaged in flower-picking when temporarily away from the protection of her mother Demeter. She was entranced by the beauty of the flowers, but all was not as it seemed. The flowers had been placed there in order to deceive her and while seduced by their beauty, Hades intervened in order to carry her off (see esp. *Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 1–20 with the commentary of Foley 1994). Elsewhere, however, she is represented in a manner consistent with the women in the first category in that she is said to have wished to remain a virgin. See e.g. Ov. *Met.* 372–5 where she is accorded a disposition consistent with Diana (i.e. Artemis) and Pallas (i.e. Athena), and Zajko 1993, 112–13.

<sup>12</sup> See Seaford 1987 for discussion and references and also Lucy Byrne's chapter in this volume.

<sup>13</sup> According to Lefkowitz, this is indicative of desire on the part of the female for her pursuer (1993, 22); this is corroborated by Seaford, who shows that the eyes were considered a channel for erotic passion in ancient Greece (1990, 84).

<sup>14</sup> These stories concern Io, Medea and Helen (1.1.1–1.4.4) and deal with abduction of women rather than intercourse with them (*contra* Walcott 1978, 139–40, where abduction and rape are affiliated). On female consent in these accounts, see Tom Harrison in this volume. It is not apparent to me whether the statement is intended as a remark about the specific stories just told or as a generalisation about women.

<sup>15</sup> For discussion and references, see Sommerstein 1989, 229–31.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Hom. *Il.* 733–42, where before putting on her *aigis* and going to fight, she removes the dress she wove herself.

<sup>17</sup> On flower-picking and sexuality see notes 10 and 11; on Athena as sexually attractive see Loraux 1992, 24: ‘she is desirable enough to be pursued by lame Hephaestus’, and my discussion below.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. schol. Hom. *Il.* 4.8; Hyg. *Poet. Ast.* 2.13; Eur. *fr.* 92 Radt (Eratosth. [*Cat.*] 13); Nonnus, *Dion.* 42.247–51. The attack as a failed marriage: Fulg. *Myth.* 2.14; Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 1.17; Hyg. *Fab.* 116; Etym. Magn. s.v. *Erechtheus*; Lucian *Dial. D.* 13; Antig. *Car.* 12. This story is described by Cook as ‘a crude, not to say, ugly, narrative’ (1940, 218).

<sup>19</sup> These restrictions would in likelihood only apply to upper-class women, and possibly only to Athenian women living in the city of Athens in the classical period. However, societal norms as well as actual features of society are being drawn upon here. As David Cohen has demonstrated, using the model of modern traditional Mediterranean societies, norms and realities need not necessarily concur (1991, *passim*).

<sup>20</sup> Given the close association made in ancient Greek between lameness and excessive sex drive (as may be exemplified by the proverb ἄριστα χολός οἰφεῖ: see Henderson 1975, 157), it could be the case that Hephaistos’ lameness serves to intensify his sexual desire. That the lame Hephaistos was considered to possess a strong sex drive may be inferred from the twisted and ithyphallic appearance of potters’ *hephaistoi*: Ar. *Av.* 436; schol. Ar. *Av.* 436; Poll. *Onom.* 7.108; Faraone 1991, 11; 1992, 55, 104, 134; Gager 1992, 59, 67 n. 14. Implicit contrast may be present between Hephaistos’ desire, which, being excessive, may be labelled ‘hubristic’, and Athena’s resistance. She is labelled *sophron*, and *sophrosyne* is characteristically contrasted with *hubris*: see Fisher 1992, 111. The precise significance of the adjective *sophron* is difficult to establish, given its range of possible meanings (see Fisher 1992, 13; North 1966) but given the circumstances and Athena’s well-attested desire to maintain her virginity, intimations of chastity are likely to be present. Cf. the conflation of *sophrosyne* and Athena’s being ‘unmarried’ or ‘having no part in marriage’ in Nonnus, *Dion.* 2.106, where reference is made to ἀνυμφεύτοιο σαόφρονα χαλκὸν Ἀθήνης, ‘the *saophron* bronze of *anymphēutos* Athena’.

<sup>21</sup> On Athena’s passionate maintenance of her *partheneia*, cf. Diod. Sic. 3.71.4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. her violent, though more excessive, reaction to the rape attempt by Pallas (n. 5).

<sup>23</sup> Nolan amphora by the Providence painter: Bologna 158 = ARV2 636.19; *Att. Mitt.* 89 (1974) pl. 44.1; line drawing by Cook 1940, 221 (fig. 141).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Cook 1940, 221. According to Paus. 3.18.13, one of the depictions of the throne of Apollo at Amyklai was Ἀθηνᾶ δῶκοντα ἀποφεύγουσά ἐστιν Ἥφαιστον, ‘Athena is fleeing and Hephaistos pursuing’. On other possible depictions of this scene, see Brulé 1987, 18–19.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Eur. *fr.* 925 Radt = Eratosth. [*Cat.*] 13 discussed above in which, when Hephaistos catches up with her, she wounds him.

<sup>26</sup> In his classification of types of Athena with helmet, Kunisch takes the fact that Athena is carrying her helmet as the transfer of an artistic motif used elsewhere (Kunisch 1974).

<sup>27</sup> For discussion and references concerning boys' susceptibility to male sexual attention, see Dover 1978, 81–91.

<sup>28</sup> A variety of motives are ascribed to Zeus for this action, with the underlying principle that it is in reward for services rendered: for making weapons for the gods (Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 1.17); for making a specific weapon, namely Zeus' thunderbolt (Fulg. *Myth.* 2.4); for freeing Hera from the magic chair he fashioned as a punishment for throwing him from heaven (Hyg. *Fab.* 166); or for cleaving Zeus' head and thereby permitting the birth of Athena to take place (*Elym. Mag.* s.v. *Erechtheus*).

<sup>29</sup> *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 21 ff.; Schol. Ar. *Vesp.* 842; see further Zajko 1993, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the wool may have cultic significance. According to Walter Burkert, baskets carried by the Arrhephoroi, young female priestesses of Athena, may have contained wool. Moreover, the rite may draw upon tensions between virginity and sexuality, being carried out at night and involving a journey from the sanctuary of Athena to one of Aphrodite (1983, 150–4; 1985, 228–9; cf Loraux 1993, 168).

<sup>31</sup> Cf Parker 1987, 209; Loraux 1993, 37–71; 123–43.

<sup>32</sup> On punishments for *parthenoi* who had lost their virginity, see Sissa 1990, 88–93.

<sup>33</sup> In addition, where Erichthonios is concerned, the serpent is also associated with autochthony.

<sup>34</sup> On representations of this scene in Athenian art, see Carpenter 1991, 71–2; Cook 1940, 662–726; Loraux 1993, 61–3.

<sup>35</sup> Loraux has explored comparable parallels and differences between Athena and Kreousa, a *parthenos* deflowered by Apollo (1993, 224–8).

<sup>36</sup> The defloration of Aithra and Troizenian *parthenoi* provides a further conflation of rape and marriage. Conflations between marriage, defloration and deceit may also be posited for the Apatouria festival at Athens, over which Athena Apatouria co-presided. See Schmitt 1977.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. other ways in which Athena assumes a mediatory role in order to bring femininity under male control: e.g. she disciplines the terrifying alterity of the Gorgon, killing and flaying it, and thereafter harnessing and controlling its power (e.g. Eur. *Ion* 991–5) and designates space within civilisation for the Erinyes, channelling their power for the good of male-dominated society (Aesch. *Eum.* 794–806; see Sommerstein 1989, 229–31). These aspects of Athena as intermediary are beyond the scope of this paper and will be reserved for future discussion.

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