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Patriarchy And Divinity: A Feminist Comparative Study Of Helen Of Troy And Queen Elizabeth I

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Abstract: This paper conducts a feminist comparative study of Helen of Troy and Queen Elizabeth I to examine the ways in which patriarchal discourses influence the representation of female power, guilt, and authority. By using Homer's *The Iliad*, a feminist reinterpretation of Helen by Bettany Hughes, Queen Elizabeth I's Tilbury Speech, and historical feminist scholarship by Carole Levin, this paper will examine the ways in which myth and history provide divergent narratives of female failure and success. Helen of Troy is represented as a patriarchal scapegoat whose beauty and sexuality are held responsible for the Trojan War, while Queen Elizabeth I is represented as a successful female ruler who pragmatically navigated patriarchal power relations. By using feminist theoretical approaches, this paper will contend that both women are represented as the product of patriarchal discourse, but that their narratives provide different possibilities and limitations for female agency within patriarchal systems.

Index Terms— Patriarchy, Feminism, Helen of Troy, Queen Elizabeth I, Myth, Female Agency

1. Introduction

Patriarchy has always been a factor in the representation of women in literature, mythology, and history. Women are represented as either destabilizing agents, who are responsible for creating disorder in society, or as extraordinary women who achieve success by behaving like men. Classical mythology and historical narratives of the early modern period are important paradigms for understanding how stories of female power are produced and contested. Helen of Troy, the legendary woman of Homer's epics, is often represented as the cause of the Trojan War, embodying the dangers of beauty and immorality. Conversely, Queen Elizabeth I of England is remembered as a powerful and successful ruler who functioned within a patriarchal political framework.

This paper provides a comparative feminist study of Helen of Troy and Queen Elizabeth I to examine the ways in which patriarchal storytelling shapes female identity, power, and responsibility. By examining the ways in which female agency is constructed in both myth and history, this paper aims to explore the ways in which patriarchal storytelling shapes female identity and power. Furthermore, this paper aims to examine the ways in which patriarchal storytelling is used to shape female identity and power, and to explore the ways in which feminist theory can be used to deconstruct patriarchal

storytelling.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Helen of Troy in Classical and Feminist Scholarship

Helen of Troy has long been a pivotal character in classical literature and criticism, being represented as the embodiment of beauty and the cause of the Trojan War. In Homer's *The Iliad*, Helen is presented as a character who is both loved and vilified, with her beauty being the reason for the conflict and violence among the male characters. The traditional classical interpretation of Helen has also tended to represent her in this manner, with the focus being on her as a symbol of lust and treachery.

Feminist critics have challenged these patriarchal interpretations of Helen. Bettany Hughes, in *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore*, offers a feminist reinterpretation of the myth of Helen. Hughes contends that the character of Helen has been reinvented by male writers over the ages, oscillating between being a goddess, a political entity, and a moral exemplar. According to Hughes, the myth of Helen is indicative of patriarchal fears of female agency and sexuality, rather than any historical or mythological truth. This book is important in that it points to the gendering of myth-making and the tendency for female characters to be held responsible for male-led conflicts.

2.2 Queen Elizabeth I in Historical and Feminist Studies

Queen Elizabeth I is a widely researched subject in historical and feminist studies, especially in the context of her gender and politics. Elizabeth was the queen of England from 1558 to 1603, and her reign was characterized by religious turmoil, political upheaval, and external threats. As a female ruler in a patriarchal society, Elizabeth encountered doubts and opposition, but she was able to create a strong and stable शासन.

In Carole Levin's book, *The Heart and Stomach of a King: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Sex and Power*, Elizabeth's politics of self-representation and gender politics are analyzed. Levin suggests that Elizabeth strategically created a gendered public image that combined femininity and masculinity. Elizabeth's display of herself as a maternal figure and a powerful king helped her cope with patriarchal society while retaining her power. This feminist historical study by Levin reveals that Elizabeth's success as a ruler was dependent on her ability to manipulate gender symbolism in patriarchal discourse.

3. Helen of Troy: Patriarchal Blame and Mythic Representation

In Homer's *The Iliad*, Helen of Troy is depicted as the wife of Menelaus, who elopes with the prince of Troy, Paris, thus causing the Trojan War. Helen is constantly linked with beauty, lust, and war throughout the epic. Her role is used to explain the cause of the war, and she is shown to be remorseful and self-critical, thus accepting the blame for her actions.

From a feminist point of view, the character of Helen represents patriarchal fears of female sexuality and female agency. The epic assigns the responsibility of a huge and devastating war to Helen's beauty, thus deflecting the responsibility from the male warriors and leaders to the female character. Helen is made a scapegoat for the violence of the male characters, who represent the patriarchal desire to hold women responsible for the disorder in society.

Bettany Hughes' feminist re-reading of the Helen legend contests this history by insisting that the Helen story is one that has been influenced by male authorship for centuries. Hughes asserts that the identity of Helen has been constantly re-formed to reflect the cultural view of women, which has variously represented her as goddess, princess, and whore. This fluid representation indicates that Helen is less a historical figure and more a cultural icon influenced by patriarchal ideology.

4. Queen Elizabeth I: Female Sovereignty and Patriarchal Negotiation

The reign of Queen Elizabeth I is a major historical case of female political power in a patriarchal society. When Elizabeth ascended to the throne, she was faced with the problem of her gender, as women were generally believed to be incapable of ruling. Yet Elizabeth ruled England for over four decades.

The Tilbury Speech by Elizabeth (1588) is a major example of her skillful handling of gendered power. In the speech, Elizabeth says, “I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king—and of a king of England too.” This shows that Elizabeth is very much aware of patriarchal notions of female weakness and that she is deliberately appropriating male power.

Further analysis by Carole Levin also shows that Elizabeth was able to create a political identity that combined femininity and masculinity. Elizabeth’s image as the “Virgin Queen” was able to convert her sexuality into a political symbol, which further emphasized her moral authority and independence from male dominance. Elizabeth’s decision not to marry enabled her to retain her sovereignty without being subject to a male monarch.

5. Comparative Analysis: Mythic Failure and Historical Success

A comparative feminist analysis of Helen of Troy and Queen Elizabeth I shows how patriarchal discourses represent women in very different ways based on their association with power, sexuality, and social order. While Helen is portrayed as a disruptive woman whose beauty causes chaos, Elizabeth is portrayed as a successful female ruler who kept political stability intact. But both portrayals are also heavily influenced by patriarchal discourses.

5.1 Narrative Agency and Self-Representation

One of the most interesting points of divergence between Helen and Elizabeth is the role of narrative agency. Helen’s narrative is largely told through the agency of male poets and historians, such as Homer, whose work is centered on the male hero and the act of war. Helen’s narrative voice is only occasionally heard and is then characterized by feelings of guilt and self-reproach, implying that she has absorbed the patriarchal critique. She does not drive her narrative but instead has her identity formed through the lens of male interpretation, which objectifies and moralizes her presence in the world.

By contrast, Queen Elizabeth I was an active participant in the formation of her public persona. Through her speeches, royal proclamations, portraits, and political symbolism, Elizabeth formed a strong persona that integrated her femininity with her power. Her Tilbury Speech, for example, shows her rhetorical skill and political acumen, as she deliberately performs both of these gender roles, acknowledging her female body while also asserting her male kingship. This skill at self-fashioning sets Elizabeth apart from Helen and is a key element in her representation as a successful female figure in a patriarchal society.

5.2 Sexuality, the Female Body, and Patriarchal Anxiety

Both Helen and Elizabeth are linked to sexuality, but their representation is a function of different patriarchal concerns. Helen’s sexuality and beauty are depicted as threatening, being the cause of the Trojan War. Her body is transformed into a symbolic space of male desire, competition, and violence. In patriarchal mythology, her sexuality is constructed as problematic and immoral, thus perpetuating the notion that female sexuality is a source of disorder.

Elizabeth’s body, on the other hand, is politicized and carefully managed. Her role as the “Virgin Queen” caused her sexuality to be constructed as a political metaphor of purity, order, and independence. Elizabeth’s decision not to marry ensured that she was not subject to the rule of a male

monarch. Unlike Helen, whose sexuality is constructed as disordering, Elizabeth's managed and symbolic sexuality is deployed to construct political legitimacy.

5.3 Patriarchal Scapegoating versus Patriarchal Negotiation

Helen's story is a paradigm of patriarchal scapegoating, in which a woman is made to take the blame for conflict and violence caused by men. The Trojan War, while having its origins in the ambitions of politicians and the code of honor among men, is in mythological terms the result of Helen's beauty and behavior. This narrative move exonerates the male characters from responsibility and cements the notion that women are the cause of disorder.

Elizabeth's story, on the other hand, is an example of patriarchal negotiation. Instead of being held responsible for disorder, she is hailed as a paragon of order and success. But this acceptance comes with a condition: Elizabeth earns her acceptance by incorporating the language and symbolism of masculinity into her politics. Her famous declaration that she has "the heart and stomach of a king" shows that women's power is acceptable only when it is expressed in terms of masculine values.

5.4 Myth versus History: Constructing Female Legacies

The difference between myth and history also influences the characterization of Helen and Elizabeth. Mythology is more likely to reduce female characters to simple archetypes like the seductress, victim, or goddess. This maintains patriarchal dualisms. Helen is reduced to the archetype of the 'dangerous woman' whose beauty causes destruction.

History, while also being influenced by ideology and propaganda, can provide more complex accounts of female agency. Elizabeth's reign is attested to by historical evidence, political accomplishments, and tangible evidence of her rule. Her legacy is not just symbolic but rooted in political reality. This is what differentiates myth from history, where myth can be a patriarchal instrument of regulating female narratives, while history can provide female agency, even within the parameters of patriarchy.

6. Feminist Implications of the Comparative Study

This comparative study shows that both Helen of Troy and Queen Elizabeth I are produced through patriarchal discourses that form their identities and legacies. Helen's representation as a figure of failure is an expression of patriarchal anxieties about female sexuality and independence, whereas Elizabeth's success represents the potential for navigating patriarchal power relations through self-fashioning.

From a feminist point of view, Helen's story is open to revisioning and recovery. Feminist scholars and writers have been increasingly rewriting Helen's story to subvert patriarchal representation and emphasize her lack of agency in a world dominated by men. Elizabeth's story also problematizes feminist theories of power, as her success is predicated on appropriating male power rather than challenging patriarchal power relations.

7. Conclusion

This paper has examined Helen of Troy and Queen Elizabeth I as opposing examples of female power in patriarchal stories. Helen's mythic representation as the catalyst for the Trojan War is a patriarchal representation of fear of female sexuality, while Elizabeth's real-life success is an example of how women can use patriarchal power structures to their advantage.

By using feminist critique, it is clear that both Helen and Elizabeth are represented by gendered discourse, although their stories are very different in terms of agency and outcome. Helen's legend is an example of how patriarchy represents women who are seen as having sexual agency or who are otherwise disruptive to patriarchal society as agents of chaos and failure. Elizabeth's legend, on the other hand, is an example of how women can use patriarchal power structures to gain power by embracing symbols of masculinity.

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