

What Greek mythology teaches us about women's resistance and rebellion

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A close up of the sculpture 'Medusa with the head of Perseus,' by Luciano Garbati. Image courtesy of the artist. Luciano Garbati

After some hard-fought victories, women's rights are threatened again in many parts of the world. In the United States, the Supreme Court overturned women's right to abortion in June 2022; women have also been leaving the workforce since the COVID-19 pandemic, in many cases to care for children and elderly relatives. In other parts of the world, especially in developing countries, women are disproportionately affected by climate change.

As a scholar of ancient mythology, I'm aware of many female characters in Greek mythology who offer us models for today's challenges. This may be a little surprising, because ancient Greece was under strict patriarchal rules: Women were considered minors under the guardianship of their fathers or husbands for their whole lives and not allowed to vote. Yet women in these myths spoke truth to power and fiercely resisted injustice and oppression.

Rebel goddesses




The god Saturn devouring his child. A painting by Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

Female rebellion is at the heart of the Greek story about the creation of the world. Gaia, the Earth goddess, rebels against her husband Ouranos, the Sky, who smothers her and refuses to let her children be free. She orders her son Kronos to castrate his father and take his throne. Once Kronos comes to power, however, he becomes afraid of being dethroned by his children, so he swallows all the babies his wife Rhea gives birth to.

Rhea rebels against this horrific act. She gives Kronos a stone wrapped in a blanket to trick him into thinking that he is going to devour this baby as well. Rhea then hides her child, the god Zeus, who grows up and throws his father down into the depths of the Underworld. But history repeats itself, and the new leader of the gods again fears that his wife may plot to overthrow him. As the king of the gods, Zeus is forever afraid of his wife Hera, who exacts vengeance for all his transgressions, especially his innumerable affairs.

Similarly, the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone shows a powerful goddess holding her ground in the face of male deities. When Persephone is abducted by Hades, the king of the Underworld, Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, refuses to let the crops grow until Persephone is returned. Despite Zeus' pleading, Demeter does not relent. The entire world is barren of fruit, and humans starve.

Eventually Zeus is forced to negotiate, and Persephone rises from the Underworld to be with her mother for a part of each year. During the months when Persephone is with Hades, Demeter holds back vegetation and it is winter on the Earth.

 A painting showing a man carrying a woman away in a chariot being driven by a white horse

Mural with Hades abducting Persephone in a chariot. From Le Musée absolu, Phaidon, via Wikimedia Commons


Mortal women

Greek culture, however, was suspicious of strong-willed women and portrayed them as villains.

Classical scholar Mary Beard explains that women are characterized in this way by male writers to justify women's exclusion from power. She argues that the Western definition of power applies intrinsically to males. Therefore, Beard explains, "[Women] are, for the most part, portrayed as abusers rather than users of power. They take it illegitimately, in a way that leads to the fracture of the state, to death and destruction. ... In fact, it is the unquestionable mess that women make of power that justifies their exclusion from it in real life."

Beard uses the stories of Clytemnestra and Medea, among others, to illustrate her point. Clytemnestra punishes her husband, Agamemnon, for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia at the beginning of the Trojan War. She seizes power in his kingdom of Mycenae while Agamemnon is still at war, and when he returns, she murders him in cold blood.

Medea makes her husband, Jason, pay the ultimate price for deserting her – she kills their children.

 A black bowl from 400 B.C.E. with several figures painted on it.

Painting on a bowl of Medea fleeing in a chariot pulled by dragons. Cleveland Museum of Art

Medea, as a foreign princess in the Greek city of Corinth, a powerful sorceress, and a Black individual, is marginalized in multiple ways. Yet she refuses to back down. Classical scholar and Black feminist intellectual Shelley Haley stresses that Medea is proud, a characteristic that is viewed as typically masculine in Greek culture.

Haley sees Medea's actions as a way to assert her individuality in the face of Greek societal expectations. Medea is not willing to give Jason the freedom to start a relationship with another woman, and she negotiates asylum on her own terms with the king of Athens. According to Haley, Medea "resists the cultural norms that inscribe child-bearing as the only *raison d'être* of female existence. Medea loves her children, but like a man, her pride comes first."

Comedy and tragedy

In a more humorous way, in "Lysistrata," the playwright Aristophanes imagines the women of Athens protesting the destructive Peloponnesian War by going on a sex strike. Under such dire pressure, their husbands quickly give in and peace is negotiated with Sparta.

Lysistrata, the leader of the striking women, explains that women suffer doubly in war, even though they have no say in the decision to enter warfare. They suffer first by bearing children and then by seeing them sent out as soldiers. They can be widowed and enslaved as well as a consequence of war.

Finally, in a famous tragedy by Sophocles, Antigone fights for human decency in the face of autocracy. When Antigone's brothers Eteocles and Polyneices fight for the throne of Thebes and ultimately kill one another, the new king, Creon, orders that only Eteocles, whom he considers to have been the rightful king, be buried with honor. Antigone revolts and says that she must uphold divine law rather than Creon's tyrannical human law. She sprinkles Polyneices' body with a little dust, a symbolic gesture that allows the dead man to move on to the afterlife.

Antigone takes action knowing full well that Creon will kill her to enforce his edict. Yet she is prepared to offer the ultimate sacrifice for her beliefs.

Women and moral justice

Throughout these stories, female figures stand for moral justice and as an embodiment of the resistance of disempowered people. Perhaps for this reason the figure of Medusa, traditionally viewed as a terrifying female monster defeated by the male hero Perseus, has recently been reinterpreted as a symbol of strength and resilience.

Acknowledging that the mythological Medusa was turned into a monster as a result of her rape by Poseidon, many survivors of sexual assault have adopted the image of Medusa as an image of resilience.

Sculptor Luciano Garbati turned the myth on its head. In a new take on the traditional image of the victorious Perseus with the head of Medusa, Garbati gave Medusa a powerful new stance with his statue “Medusa with the Head of Perseus.” Medusa’s thoughtful and determined demeanor became a symbol for the #MeToo movement when the statue was set up outside the courtroom where Harvey Weinstein and many others accused of sexual assault stood trial.

What does this mean in today’s world?

Echoes of all these stories resonate strongly today in the words of fearless young female activists.

Malala Yousafzai spoke up for girls’ education in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan although she knew the potential repercussions could be dire. In an interview for a podcast, she said: “We knew that nothing would change if we remained quiet. Change comes when somebody is willing to step up and speak out.”

Greta Thunberg, addressing world leaders at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in 2019, did not miss a beat: “You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line.”

For the women who continue to fight against oppression, it can be both a comfort and a catalyst for action to know that they have been doing so for millennia.