CORONIS AFLAME: THE GENDER OF MORTALITY

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THE MYTH OF CORONIS tells of the rescue of her unborn son Asclepius from her corpse as it burns on the pyre. Similarly, the unborn Dionysus was rescued from the body of his mother Semele when she was destroyed by the lightning flame of Zeus. Beyond the correspondence of details in their narratives, these myths are comparable to one another as meditations on gender and mortality. Both suggest that the mortality of the infant is purged through the removal of his mother. Fire destroys the gender perceived as inferior in the polarity of female and male, and by implication the child becomes free of the inferior element in the polarity of mortality and immortality. A homology arises that can be expressed as Female: Male :: Mortality : Immortality, with the male child situated within these polarities in respect to his origin and potential. The homology implies a strong connection between mortality and the mother, since eligibility for immortality is a consequence of the obliteration of the female parent. Other myths contain motifs present in the myths of Coronis and Semele, such as mortality-destroying fire, divine rescue from imminent death, and monogenesis. But in the myths of Coronis and Semele we find these motifs in an arrangement that seems inevitably to lead to an association of the female with mortality.[1]

In the first part of this paper, I will explore mythological motifs present in the myths of Coronis and Semele. Reference to other myths that employ these motifs will be necessary in order to comprehend the nature of the motifs and to ascertain how they function in the story pattern that underlies the myths of Coronis and Semele. In the second part of the paper, I will seek to

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1. For the correspondence between the births of Asclepius and Dionysus, see Preller 1894, 661. That the lightning destroying Semele is akin to fire is often made clear in our sources (e.g., Eur. *Bacch.* 3, 288; Ov. *Met.* 3.309; Diod. Sic. 4.2.2). For comparison of various myths featuring fire (discussed below), see, e.g., Min. Fel. *Oct.* 22.7; Galen quoted at Frazer 1921, 1:271, n. 2; Richardson 1974, 234, 240; Mackie 1998, 333–34. "Male versus female and mortal versus divine: these fundamental oppositions held pride of place among the many binary oppositions that shape ancient Greek thought" (Lyons 1997, 3; see further her discussion of Dionysus in terms of these polarities at 107–8); cf. Doniger 1999, 7: "My argument is that myth responds to the complexities of the human condition by splitting its characters into two unequal halves, and that these sloughed and cloven selves animate myriad permutations of character and plot, centering on two primal topics: sex and death."

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explain why the female would be correlated to mortality by surveying ancient medical and literary passages in which the female body in the act of birth is devalued. The cultural attitude indicated by these texts provides a context for the apparent implications of the myths of Coronis and Semele. In the final part of the paper, I will recognize variance in the myths of Coronis and Semele but conclude that they often did function as an expression of patriarchal ideology.

MOTIFS OF GENDER AND MORTALITY

The myths of Coronis and Semele locate themselves within a complex of interrelated motifs. Perhaps the most important motif is that of mortality-destroying fire. We can best understand the relevance of this motif to the Coronis/Semele story pattern by focusing on its presence in the myths of Achilles' and Heracles' acquisition of immortality. The two semidivine heroes exist between a state of mortality and a state of immortality. Both end up acquiring immortality on the pyre. Achilles' experience was narrated in the *Aethiopis:* Proclus reports that in this poem Thetis snatched her son off the pyre and conveyed him to Leuke, or "White Island"(ἐκ τῆς πυρᾶς Θέτις ἀναρπάσασα τὸν παῖδα εἰς τὴν Λευκὴν νῆσον διακομίζει). Unfortunately the poem is lost, and we do not know the details of how this translation was effected. The only account of the translation that is specific in detail is a Thessalian hymn to Thetis quoted by Philostratus in the *Heroicus* (208.53.10):

Θέτι κυανέα, Θέτι Πηλεία,
τὸν μέγαν ἃ τέκες υἱὸν Ἀχιλλέα, τοῦ
θνατὰ μὲν ὅσον φύσις ἤνεγκε,
Τροία λάχε· σὰς δ' ὅσον ἀθανάτου
γενεᾶς πάις ἔσπασε, Πόντος ἔχει.[2]

Here it is clearly thought that Achilles is both buried and translated. According to this view, Thetis did not simply snatch up the body of Achilles so that it could be regenerated in a place of paradise. Nor did she escort the soul of Achilles off while the body was left behind to burn.[3] She took the immortal part of Achilles that had been separated by the fire of the pyre from his mortal part. The summary of the *Aethiopis* by Proclus goes on to state that the Greeks made a burial mound for Achilles. Critics have struggled to explain the apparent inconsistency between the translation and burial of Achilles, often concluding that the Greeks raised a cenotaph.[4] But

2. The hymn is said to be sung over Achilles' grave site at Troy. Philostratus is a late and often idiosyncratic source, but the hymn he quotes may be quite ancient. Hommel (1980, p. 41, n. 125) cites opinions on the date of it, which vary widely, and suggests (42) that its content, at least, is much older than Philostratus.

3. Rohde (1925, 65) supposed that the body of Achilles would have to be regenerated after his translation to a paradise. While I accept his view that something more substantial than a shade would be required to enjoy the physical pleasures of paradise in Greek myth, the interpretation offered here suggests another way by which the dead hero could achieve corporeal form in the afterlife.

4. Cf. Rohde 1925, p. 84, n. 29; Schadewaldt 1965, p. 162, n. 2; Kullmann 1960, 41; Edwards 1985, p. 224, n. 23; Davies 1989, 59–60. It is true that at Diod. Sic. 4.38.5 a mound is raised for Heracles when his bones are not discovered.

the *Aethiopis* may have narrated a burial of the mortal part of Achilles that was left behind and buried after Thetis took away his immortal part. Visits to the grave of Achilles at Troy—such as Alexander's famous one—certainly point to a belief that his bones lay there.[5] This need not mean that a "Homeric" account of the hero's death was preferred over a "Cyclic" one.[6] The separation of Achilles' body into mortal and immortal corporeality explains how the hero could be thought to enjoy his afterlife at Leuke though his bones were buried in Troy.[7]

Let us recall, at this point, the early Greek story of Thetis trying to immortalize Achilles by burning away his mortality with fire or boiling water and using ambrosia to preserve his immortal side.[8] The story is very similar to the more familiar one of Demeter trying to immortalize her nursling Demophon (*Hom. Hymn. Dem.* 231–64). The tale-type is actually more appropriate for Achilles than Demophon: Achilles, not Demophon, is semi-divine, and so could logically become immortalized if his mortality were burned away.[9] In any event, Thetis fails to burn off the mortal side of Achilles when Peleus interrupts the process. We might conclude that the fire of Achilles' pyre finally accomplished for Achilles what Thetis was not able to effect when the hero was an infant. Achilles always existed suspended between the polarity of mortality and immortality, as Thetis was keenly aware, and it is fire that can successfully destroy the inferior element in this polarity.

The apotheosis of Heracles is obviously comparable, for it also seems to contain the motif of fire dividing mortality from immortality.[10] The sources are often vague, incomplete, or inconsistent, but it seems that his immortality resulted from the destruction of his mortal form by his funeral pyre

5. Hdt. 5.94, Strab. 13.32, and Plin. *HN* 5.125 indicate that Achilles was understood to be buried in the Troad; for Alexander's visit see Diod. Sic. 17.17.3; Arr. *Anab.* 1.12.

6. In fact, Edwards (1985) has demonstrated that Achilles was routinely thought to enjoy immortality at a paradise, despite the placement of his shade in Hades in the *Odyssey*.

7. Cf. the title of two epigrams about Achilles in the pseudo-Aristotelian *Peplos* (4, 5): Ἐπὶ Ἀχιλλέως κειμένου ἐν Τροίῃ, τιμωμένου δὲ καὶ ἐν Λευκῇ τῇ νήσῳ (quoted at Hommel 1980, 42–43; see Diehl 1925, 2:171–72 for the epigrams and title). On the *Peplos*, which is dated from the fourth to second century B.C.E., see Forbes 1937, and Cameron (1993, 388–93), who thinks that the two epigrams contradict each other on the grave site of Achilles but believes that they were written by one author, perhaps compiling different sources. With my interpretation the seeming contradiction evaporates.

8. Notably at Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 4.869–79 and Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.13.6, with scholiasts reporting similar variants. See Burgess 1995, 219–24, and now Mackie 1998, where this tradition is nicely linked with Achilles' funeral pyre (though in my interpretation the pyre is more than "symbolic" of a transition). Cf. Rohde 1925, 21, on the connection between myths of immortalizing children by fire and the symbolic functions of a funeral pyre.

9. I pointed this out at Burgess 1995, p. 221, n. 13. This thematic appropriateness is more important than the similarities in language to which reference is made in the argument that Apollonius used the Homeric hymn as his "source" (Richardson 1974, ad 237ff.; see further Mackie 1998, 331, 337–38, where the value of looking beyond the textual parallels is rightly emphasized).

10. For sources, see Gantz 1993, 460–63; Frazer 1921, 1:270, n. 1; Padilla 1998, 14–16; *LIMC*, "Heracles," nos. 2847–938. This is not the place to enter into the controversy over the date of Heracles' immortality, which is irrelevant to my thesis. Cf. esp. Burkert 1985, 209–10; Boardman 1986; Stinton 1987; Crane 1988, 87–91. The common reference to *Il.* 18.117–19 as proof that the immortality of Heracles is post-Homeric is fallacious. The *Iliad* is routinely silent on stories of immortality that must have been known (cf. *Il.* 3.243–44 and *Od.* 11.299–304 on the Dioscuri). And since all accounts of the immortality of Heracles presuppose his death, the *Iliad*'s reference to his death in no way precludes his immortality.

(*exusta mortalitate,* Plin. *HN* 35.139).[11] Some late sources employ the story as a metaphor for the separation of body and soul, but in early Greek myth it is improbable that a soul of a mortal would reside among the quite corporeal divinities at Olympus.[12] The pyre of Heracles likely functioned as it did in the story of Achilles, to separate the mortal part from the immortal part. Many of the sources suggest this, and at least two explicitly refer to the separation of divine and mortal "parts" (Sen. *Herc. Oet.* 1966–77; Ov. *Met.* 9.251–52). I take this to mean that after mortal flesh and bone had been burned off, a wholly immortal body remained to be translated to Olympus.

Indeed, the pyre was probably prominent in the story of the death of Heracles because it functioned to bring about this separation.[13] A few fifth-century vases seem to agree with this interpretation by depicting a corselet on the pyre as Heracles is seen rising above it on the chariot of Athena; the corselet probably symbolizes the mortal husk of Heracles.[14] As with the translation of Achilles, there must have been a lot of disagreement on how exactly the apotheosis should be conceived, and no doubt storytellers were often uninterested in providing a clear and logical account. But it is certain that the immortalization of these demigods could be understood as the division of mortal and immortal parts through the agency of fire.

What does this have to do with the myths of Coronis and Semele? In the story of Coronis the same fire motif is at play, but with a twist.[15] Pindar describes Apollo snatching Asclepius from the flames of the pyre of Coronis (*Pyth.* 3.38–44):

ἀλλ' ἐπεὶ τείχει θέσαν ἐν ξυλίνῳ
σύγγονοι κούραν, σέλας δ' ἀμφέδραμεν
λάβρον Ἀφαίστου, τότ' ἔειπεν Ἀπόλλων· "Οὐκέτι
τλάσομαι ψυχᾷ γένος ἀμὸν ὀλέσσαι
οἰκτροτάτῳ θανάτῳ ματρὸς βαρείᾳ σὺν πάθᾳ."
ὣς φάτο· βάματι δ' ἐν πρώτῳ κιχὼν παῖδ' ἐκ νεκροῦ
ἄρπασε· καιομένα δ' αὐτῷ διέφαινε πυρά·

11. The pyre of Heracles is first attested in art and literature in the fifth century B.C.E., but I see no reason to think that it did not always play a role in the immortalization of Heracles. The discussion of it and similar stories of separation by fire at Stinton 1987 is overly skeptical.

12. And the concept of a division into two corporeal parts, mortal and immortal, must have originated before the body/soul division became canonical; see Vernant 1991, 28–29 ("The fact is that in the archaic period Greek 'corporeality' still does not acknowledge a distinction between body and soul, nor does it establish a radical break between the natural and the supernatural," 29).

13. This interpretation might be relevant to the puzzling account at *Od.* 11.601–4 of two forms of Heracles, one in Hades and the other at Olympus. Nagy 1979, 208, interprets the passage to mean that the body of Heracles eventually lives in a regenerated state at Olympus; I would suggest that the Olympic Heracles is the ascended immortal part, whereas the *eidolon* of Heracles in Hades results from the burning of the hero's mortal part.

14. See *LIMC,* s.v. "Heracles," nos. 2916–18, and Boardman 1986, 128–29, for interpretation. For the human appearance of the "muscle" corselet depicted, see Laurens and Lissarague 1989, 88–89.

15. Major sources include Hes. frags. 50, 59, 60 M-W (see West 1985, 69–72); *Hymn. Hom. Asclep.*; Acusilaus 2F17; Pherec. 3F3; Pind. *Pyth.* 3; Ov. *Met.* 2.542–632; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.10.3; Paus. 2.26.6. In a variant Arsinoe was said to be the mother of Asclepius. For further sources see Gantz 1993, 90; Frazer 1921, 2:13, n. 5. Two sixth-century Etruscan images may depict death demons carrying Coronis: see *LIMC,* s.v. "Apollon/Aplun," nos. 7–8.

Here again we have a division of bodies, but in this case it is the infant male body being separated from the female body of his mother. In a sense the division is again one of mortality and immortality, for it is a separation from a mortal mother of a son who came to be regarded as practically divine.[16] Notably, the division is also one of gender, for it is a male infant who is being removed from the womb of his mother.

In the story of the death of Semele, we again see an unnatural separation of an infant body from the body of its mother.[17] In the *Bacchae,* Tiresias amidst his clever etymologizing describes how Zeus snatched Dionysus from the lightning's fire (288–90):

ἐπεί νιν ἥρπασ' ἐκ πυρὸς κεραυνίου
Ζεύς, εἰς δ' Ὄλυμπον βρέφος ἀνήγαγεν θεὸν,
Ἥρα νιν ἤθελ' ἐκβαλεῖν ἀπ' οὐρανοῦ

Here again fire, now in the form of lightning, has a function in separating an infant from his mother. This is again a division between the mortal and divine; Diodorus Siculus (5.52.2) goes so far as to suggest that Zeus planned to remove Semele so as to ensure the immortality of Dionysus (κεραυνῶσαι δὲ τὴν Σεμέλην πρὸ τοῦ τεκεῖν, ὅπως μὴ ἐκ θνητῆς, ἀλλ' ἐκ δυεῖν ἀθανάτων ὑπάρξας εὐθὺς ἐκ γενετῆς ἀθάνατος ᾖ). In addition, there is again the separation of the male from the female. It is as if the mother symbolizes mortality and her removal serves to effect the male offspring's divinity.[18]

The presence of fire in the stories of Coronis and Semele is what most obviously connects them with the apotheoses of Achilles and Heracles. In all the episodes discussed above, not only is fire present, but it is present as a force for division. The aspect of gender division in the myths of Coronis and Semele is analogous to the division of the mortal and the divine in the myths of Achilles and Heracles. Comparison of the Coronis/Semele deaths with the Achilles/Heracles apotheoses therefore reveals how the female is correlated to mortality.

A second motif relevant to the myths of Coronis and Semele is that of infidelity on the part of a mother. This motif in fact provides another possible correspondence between the myths of Coronis and Semele. Obviously the motif is central to the story of Coronis; Apollo has her destroyed when he learns of her infidelity. The motif may have also been present in one version of the myth of Semele. Archaic sources indicate that Actaeon became

16. See Farnell 1921, 234; Graf 1996, 188. Lucian *Dial. D.* 13 and Min. Fel. *Oct.* 22.7 describe the death of Asclepius by lightning as leading directly to immortalization, as sometimes lightning was thought to do (see below).

17. Major sources are Pind. *Ol.* 2.25–27; Eur. *Bacch.* 1–3, 26–38, 83–98, 242–45, 286–90; Ov. *Met.* 3.259–315; Diod. Sic. 4.2.2, 5.52.2; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.14.3; see further Gantz 1993, 473–76; Frazer 1921, 1:318, n. 1. Images of Semele at the point of death occur on fourth-century red-figure vases and in later Roman art; see *LIMC,* s.v. "Semele," nos. 3–18; discussion at Lyons 1997, 120–22.

18. Murnaghan (1992) provides a perceptive analysis of the link between the mother and heroic mortality, to which I am much indebted. My discussion above differently stresses the divinity of Thetis over her gender; in terms of gender the death of Heracles is more parallel to the births of Dionysus and Asclepius. The parallelism of prepositional phrases at Mackie 1998, 333, supports my thesis: "Asclepius is given life from death, taken from the burning body of Coronis."

enamored of his aunt Semele before he was killed by his own hounds.[19] It has been suspected, often in connection with this information, that in an unknown variant Semele was actually unfaithful to Zeus.[20] A variant in which Semele was unfaithful to Zeus would be even more analogous to the story of Coronis. Much as Apollo causes the death of Coronis in anger over her unfaithfulness, Zeus would kill Semele in anger over her unfaithfulness. There is no clear evidence for such a variant, but it is not difficult to believe that it could have existed. If that is the case, then the myth of Semele as well as that of Coronis would involve sexual jealousy on the part of a male, leading to punishment by death.

The story of the birth of Heracles also toys with the motif of infidelity. Heracles and his brother Eurystheus are the result of Alcmene's having sexual relations with two males, Zeus and Amphitryon. Alcmene is usually said to have been deceived by Zeus, but there are frequent allusions in our sources to a variant in which Alcmene was bribed by Zeus to sleep with him.[21] On some Italian pots, which apparently follow lost plays, Alcmene is depicted as threatened by Amphitryon, who suspects the paternity of his twin children.[22] She takes refuge at an altar, around which her husband places fire logs that he proceeds to light. Fortunately for Alcmene, Zeus prevents her death by extinguishing the flames. Again sexual jealousy emerges in a story of a divine-mortal liaison. In this case it is a mortal male partner who is suspicious, and the mother is not destroyed. The polarity of mortality and immortality is manifested in this myth by the infant twins. Eurystheus is derived from the seed of his mortal father and is destined for normal mortality, whereas Heracles is derived from a divine father and is destined for a heroic career crowned by immortality.

The story of the birth of Heracles therefore shares many motifs with the Coronis/Semele story pattern. Yet though the same motifs are at play they do not lead to exactly the same kind of narrative. In this myth the mother of Heracles, Alcmene, could be suspected or threatened in ways reminiscent of the Coronis/Semele story pattern, but ultimately she does not suffer the same fate. Therefore, an analogy between mortality and the female is not underscored through the destruction of the mother. Here we see that different narratives can differently explore the possibilities that are created by the polarities of gender and mortality. The story of Alcmene possesses certain motifs found in the myths of Coronis and Semele, but it does not lead to the same implications.

A third mythological motif that is relevant to the Coronis/Semele story pattern is monogenesis. At times divinities are thought to achieve the birth of a child alone, without a mate of the other gender. Narratives that feature

19. See Schlam 1984, 83–84; the sources include Stesichorus *PMG* 236; Acusilaus cited at Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.4.4; Hes. *Cat.* frag. 217a.

20. For speculation about such a variant, cf. Keune 1923, 1344; Janko 1984, p. 301, n. 12; Lyons 1997, 120, 126; Larson 1995, 98 (where Semele is mentioned in the context of the tale type of a father killing a pregnant daughter, for which see further Larson 1995, 90, 96–98). It is notable that Semele is slandered by an accusation of illicit sexual activity by her sisters in the *Bacchae* (26–31; cf. Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.4.3).

21. See Gantz 1993, 374–78; Frazer 1921, 1:174, n. 1 for the sources.

22. See *LIMC,* s.v. "Alkmene," nos. 3–7.

a male parent giving birth to a child by himself are easily seen as patriarchal annexation of what naturally is a female ability.[23] In myth Dionysus was often explicitly said to have been born from the thigh of Zeus after he was taken from the womb of Semele.[24] Similarly Zeus is able to give birth to Athena by himself; in this case the female parent, Metis, has been incorporated into Zeus.[25] There are also accounts of Hera's giving birth to Hephaestus or Typhoeus by herself, usually in explicit retaliation for monogenesis by Zeus.[26] These stories underscore the element of gender rivalry about birth in myth. I would suggest there is a similar element in the stories of Coronis and Semele, wherein a pregnant mother is removed before the act of birth. To a degree the mother is portrayed as unnecessary.

A fourth mythological motif relevant to the Coronis/Semele story pattern is divine rescue, especially at a significant place like an altar or pyre. In a sense this motif is illustrated by the apotheoses of Achilles and Heracles when their immortal parts are suddenly translated from the pyre. The "rescue" of their immortal part can be compared to the rescue of the unborn Asclepius and Dionysus. Support for this comparison exists on the lexical level. A compound of the verb ἁρπάζειν is used in the description by Proclus of Achilles' translation (quoted above).[27] This verb and its compounds are often used in descriptions of the rescue of the unborn infants Asclepius and Dionysus (as in the passages quoted above, at Pind. *Pyth.* 3.44 and Eur. *Bacch.* 288). In addition, the word is also commonly used to describe the divine rescue of heroes on the battlefield, or the seizure of someone by winds, divinities, or supernatural creatures (like a Harpy). Such occurrences of divine rescue or seizure have well been described as analogous to immortalization.[28] Lexical correspondence, therefore, confirms my contention that the births of Asclepius and Dionysus and the immortalization of Achilles and Heracles are comparable manifestations of the motif of divine rescue. More generally it links the births of Asclepius and Dionysus to immortalization.

Other examples of the motif of divine rescue at a significant place are worth noting. A form of it is present in the variant of the Alcmene myth discussed above. Alcmene is almost roasted on a jerry-rigged pyre by her suspicious husband Amphitryon, yet she is rescued when Zeus sends a thundercloud to quench the flames. Comparable is the supernatural rescue

23. See Keuls 1985, 40–42; DuBois 1988, 57–58; Dean-Jones 1994, 148–49; Lyons 1997, 111.

24. At Keuls 1985, 41, it is described as "that classic tale of uterus envy . . . in which the father of gods and men develops a pseudo-womb."

25. Early sources are Hes. *Theog.* 886–900; 924–29, *Cat.* frag. 343 M-W; *Hymn. Hom. Ath.*; for images see *LIMC*, s.v. "Athena," nos. 334–80.

26. Hes. *Theog.* 929–32, *Cat.* frag. 343 M–W; *Hymn. Hom. Ap.* 331–52; Stesichorus *PMG* 239.

27. Mackie 1998, 333, notes this as a correspondence between Asclepius and Achilles, as well as that both were healers trained by Chiron. In addition, the summary of the *Cypria* by Proclus uses a compound of ἁρπάζειν to describe the snatching of Iphigenia by Artemis before her sacrifice, an episode discussed below in examination of the motif of divine rescue at a significant place.

28. See Rohde 1925, 56–58; Nagy 1990, 242–57; Edwards 1985, 222–23; Muellner 1990, 78–79; Slatkin 1991, 42; Vernant 1991, 102–3. The immortalization has various motives (e.g., erotic), and the consequences are not always seen as beneficial on the narrative level. For example, a mortal may turn out to be inappropriate for immortalization, or his/her disappearance can be perceived as tragic from the perspective of loved ones.

of Croesus, who attempted to commit suicide on a pyre.[29] In his case the flames are extinguished by divine intervention, as they are for Alcmene. For both Alcmene and Croesus the interruption of fire is of course necessary, since both are mortal and fire cannot serve to separate a mortal from an immortal part. But there is a significant difference between Croesus and Alcmene. Alcmene is merely saved from death, whereas Apollo translates the living body of Croesus to the paradise location of the Hyperboreans.[30] It is interesting that in this variant Alcmene fails to achieve immortalization, despite being led to the brink of it by the sequence of motifs in the story. Perhaps as a hero's mother tainted by mortality she was not seen as a proper candidate for immortalization (but see below on the possible immortalization of Coronis and Semele).

Another noteworthy example of divine rescue at a significant place occurs in a strong variant of the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Iphigenia is saved by Artemis just before her sacrifice at the altar (e.g., in Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* [frag. 23a M-W] and in the *Cypria* [Proclus]). Here the rescued mortal is immortalized, the natural consequence of the motif of divine rescue. Iphigenia is not semidivine, so the agency of fire to divide mortality from immortality is inappropriate for her (as well as irrelevant to the surface details of the narrative). She is not male, but then again she is not a hero's mortal mother, to be linked with mortality. And as the heroine of the episode, she has the central role, not a supporting role, as is the case with Coronis and Semele.

The stories examined above usually do not contain all the motifs present in the myths of Coronis and Semele, and they arrange the motifs that they do share in various ways. As a result, they are often quite different from the myths of Coronis and Semele. Similar issues are explored through use of the same system of motifs, but different meanings are generated. For example, the variant in which Alcmene is threatened by death on a pyre is very reminiscent of the Coronis/Semele story pattern, yet does not feature the death of the female mother of the hero. The absence of immortalization allows one to view the episode as a shadowy version of the myths of Coronis and Semele, as I suggested above, but certainly no strong equation between the female gender and mortality is made. And employment elsewhere of motifs present in the Coronis/Semele story pattern does not lead to negative portrayals of the female gender. For example, Hera is able to produce divine offspring all by herself, Thetis provides Achilles with the immortal side of his being, and Iphigenia is immortalized in a narrative vaguely reminiscent of the apotheoses of male heroes. Explanations are readily available. Iphigenia is not a mother of a hero. Thetis is, but divinity exists on a higher value level than the male gender in Greek mythological thought, and so immortality trumps gender. The ability of Hera to produce offspring by

29. As told at Bacchyl. 3 and Hdt. 1.87.

30. For this type of translation, cf. the fate of Elysium without death foretold to Menelaus at *Od.* 4.561–69.

monogenesis underscores this, though as it turns out, her acts of monogenesis are ultimately failed attempts to counteract male abrogation of the birth process. Nonetheless, the motifs can certainly be employed in radically different ways. Yet the different applications of the motifs examined above do not suggest that they are simply free-floating narrative devices. They tend to coalesce around issues of gender and mortality. The Coronis/Semele story pattern, it is now apparent, employs the system of these motifs in order to explore the polarities of gender and mortality, with the implied homology Female : Male :: Mortality : Immortality resulting.

Among the multitude of different myths existing within this constellation of related motifs, the myths of Coronis and Semele seem most similar. Their stories in turn are very comparable to the apotheoses of Achilles and Heracles, which also contain the motifs of mortality-destroying fire and divine rescue. These examples of heroic immortalization assist us in discerning the intertwining of gender and mortality in the Coronis/Semele pattern. Other myths are not as readily comparable, but they do share motifs found in the Coronis/Semele story pattern (besides mortality-destroying fire and divine rescue, monogenesis, and infidelity of a mother). The shared motifs are used to explore similar concerns involving gender and mortality, but the narratives that result vary greatly. As it happens, the use of these motifs in the myths of Coronis and Semele leads to a narrative that serves patriarchal ideology by equating the female with mortality.

THE FEMALE AND BIRTH IN GREEK CULTURE

To understand why the myths of Coronis and Semele would seem to make such an insidious connection between the female and mortality, we should try to place these stories in the context of Greek culture. Several passages in Greek literature suggest that there existed a cultural attitude that devalued the role of the female body in the act of birth. In a famous passage of the *Eumenides* Apollo argues that the female is not a true parent but merely the vessel for the male seed (658–66). Other literary passages display a similar bias. Jason in the *Medea* states that mortals should produce children other than by women (573–74), and Hippolytus wishes that it were possible (Eur. *Hipp.* 616–24). In addition, one strand of ancient scientific thought, which includes Aristotle, denied that the female provided a "seed" as the male did.[31] It is true that belief in a female seed did exist, notably in the Hippocratic corpus.[32] But the Hippocratic corpus also stresses the essential passivity of the female in childbirth. The female body is viewed as a convenient vessel for action that the fetus initiates and carries through.[33] Ironically, the story of Coronis is especially relevant to historical medical circumstances, since there were connections between Hippocratic practice and

31. See Lloyd 1983, 94–105; Keuls 1985, 144–46; DuBois 1988, 125–26, 184; Dean-Jones 1994, 148–49, 176–99; Demand 1994, 135; King 1998, 10–11.

32. See Lloyd 1983, 86–94, 105–11; Dean-Jones 1994, 149, 153–76, 178; King 1998, 8–11. For overviews of the gynecological treatises in the corpus, see Dean-Jones 1994, 5–13; King 1998, 21–39.

33. See Demand 1994, 19, 33–70, 135. Interpretation of the origins, perspective, and ideology of gynecological treatises in the corpus remains controversial; see Lloyd 1983, 63–86; Hanson 1990, 311–12;

the cult of Asclepius.[34] The story of the death of Coronis, therefore, probably served as a narrative that informed conceptions of childbirth in real life. Its valuation of a male fetus over the mother may well have affected the self-image of pregnant women or the attitude of doctors toward pregnant patients. Of course, death in childbirth would have been common in the ancient world, and it is probable that this encouraged the view of the female body as expendable.[35]

It is apparent that the poetic passages and the corresponding scientific theories represent one strain of thought prevalent in the ancient Greek world, certainly in classical Athens. The role that the female plays in the process of birth is denigrated or devalued. And male desire for legitimate male heirs could even lead to suspicion of the mother in the context of childbirth. Not only were Attic males eager to have male, but not female, children, they could be nervous about surreptitious abortion or the fraudulent introduction of an illegitimate heir. This concern would have only been heightened in the period after the Periclean law that made parentage by Athenian citizens on both sides necessary for citizenship.[36]

Several of the myths examined above reflect a general anxiety about the act of birth in Greek patriarchal society. How could a cherished male child who promised to continue a father's lineage come from both a female and male? How could the father maintain his sense of superior parentage when the female possessed the power of birth? Even assuming that his seed was more important, how could a father know that it was his seed that was responsible for the child?[37] There were no easy answers for these perceived problems, and myths featuring mixed divine/mortal parentage were available to explore such concerns in especially powerful ways. Just as the production of a legitimate male heir was a common goal in Greek society, so was the production of a semidivine hero the essential "goal" of many myths. It may not seem that way at the narrative level, where the characters are caught in a bewildering series of twists and turns and the birth of a hero appears almost accidental. But for the ancient possessors of these myths, the circumstances leading up to the birth of a hero, including all the mishaps, treachery, violence, and tragedy, would serve to address and explore a basic anxiety over birth. It is certainly not hard to see the connections between patriarchal ideology and the myths of Coronis and Semele. The

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Demand 1994, 63–64; Dean-Jones 1994, 26–31; King 1998, 21–23. Demand (1994, 122–28) interprets ancient representations of birth as depicting the female as passive. See DuBois 1988 for the various conceptions of the female as a container, amply illustrated and repeatedly stressed in Reeder 1995, though Holmberg (1997) cautions that the essays in this collection do not uniformly reflect this thesis.

34. See Demand 1994, 91–95; King 1998, 99–113.

35. See Keuls 1995, 138–44; Dean-Jones 1994, 211–12 on death in childbirth. Pliny claimed that a Caesarian section resulting in the death of the mother is better than an inauspicious feet-first birth of a male child (*HN* 7.47, cited by Keuls 1985, 144). I take this to be a notable manifestation of the concept of the mother as disposable.

36. See Demand 1994, xviii, 57–62; Keuls 1985, 100–103, 272.

37. Cf. the questions generated by the notion of autochthony, as formulated at Lévi-Strauss 1963, 212 ("born from one or born from two?" "born from different or born from same?"). Autochthony itself can serve male fantasy of a female-free world (cf. Vernant 1980, 138; Loraux 1992, 93–94). On anxieties toward birth in Greek thought, see further Vernant 1980, 136–40; Loraux 1992, 93.

myths similarly portray the female body as just the vessel for the birth of a desired male child, to the extent that the female body is eliminated even before it can effect a natural birth. The myths also demonstrate an anxiety about achieving the purest product, in this case demi-gods endowed more with the divine nature of their fathers than with the mortality of their mothers.

CONCLUSION

Of course, the "meaning" which I have teased out of the stories of Coronis and Semele is not necessarily the only meaning or the original meaning. Variance exists for most of the myths discussed above, and some versions do not suggest the interpretations that I have pursued. Certainly there existed positive accounts of Coronis and Semele. Dionysus was sometimes said to have rescued Semele from Hades and immortalized her; modern scholars have even suspected that she was a goddess in origin.[38] Death by lightning could be associated with immortality, and one might thereby interpret the death of Semele as her immortalization.[39] Coronis herself received some honor in cult, at least.[40] The attitude toward these mothers in myth and cult was thus not always negative. But though some conceptions of Coronis and Semele do not suggest a link between the female and mortality, it remains probable that the Coronis/Semele story pattern often functioned to make this correlation.

Myths are complex and ever-changing stories, and they easily serve the different needs of different places, times, and narrators. They are often

38. Her immortality is often apparent in the early sources for her death cited above; major sources for the story of her rescue by Dionysus are Diod. Sic. 4.25.4; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.5.3; Plut. *Mor.* 565f-566a; Paus. 2.31.2; see Gantz 1993, 476–77; Frazer 1921, 1:332, n. 2; Lyons 1997, 111, 120–22. Rohde (1925, 581) cites late sources for Semele's immediate apotheosis and believes this version could be implicit in Pindar, which is not a necessary conclusion. For her cult worship see Larson 1995, 8–9, 11, 93–96, 159; Lyons 1997, 48, 118, 121, 131–32. For the argument that women associated with Dionysus (Semele, Ino, Ariadne) are made to reflect themes associated with him, including immortality, see Lyons 1997, 57, 103–33. See Kossatz-Deissmann 1994, 719, for a survey of scholars since antiquity who have seen Semele as a faded goddess. This thesis is readily accepted by Larson (1995), but see Otto 1965, 69–73, for a strong denial of it. Origins aside, Otto is correct to state, "The mortality of the mother, therefore, must have been one of the essentials of the myth of Dionysus" (1965, 70).

39. See Rohde 1925, 581–82; Dodds 1960, ad 6–12; Burkert 1985, 126, 198; Nagy 1979, 190. For apparently Orphic texts linking lightning with the afterlife, see Zuntz 1971, 300–305 (A1–3); Graf 1993 (I also found Cohen 1996 helpful on this issue). Philostr. *Imag.* 1.14 described an image of Semele ascending to the heavens immediately after death. But preserved representations of her death (fourth century B.C.E. and later Roman) depict her only at the point of death. A few sixth-century images depict an apparently immortalized Semele with Dionysus (see *LIMC*, s.v. "Semele," nos. 19, 20–22, 27). It should also be noted that Asclepius was killed by lightning for raising the dead (major sources are Hes. *Cat.* frag. 51 M–W; Stesichorus *PMG* 194; Acusilaus 2F18; Pherec. 3F35; Pind. *Pyth.* 3.55–58; Diod. Sic. 4.71; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.10.3–4; Paus. 2.26.5; see Gantz 1993, 90–91; Frazer 1921, 2:28, n. 3). This neatly connects his story in a thematic way: born in fire he dies by fire, killed for raising the dead by a phenomenon associated with immortality (see Burkert 1985, 214; Mackie 1998, 333).

40. See Larson 1995, 63–64, 155–56. Nevertheless, the positive portrayal of mothers of heroes is dependent on their heroic sons and often equivocal. Lyons (1997, 59) states that "many heroines *are* heroines by virtue of being mothers of heroes," and goes on to stress the limited, "purely metonomic function" of Coronis and Semele as wombs for their heroic sons (59–60); later she speaks of the heroine as "simultaneously identified with and opposed to the child" (119). Larson 1995, 60, 63–64, 80, 89–91, notes that cultic attention for heroines like Coronis is often bound directly with worship of their heroic sons, not with the divine father.

expanded by narrators who do not comprehend the essence of their central meaning, and sometimes one motif leads to the exploration of a theme entirely unrelated to their central structure. In the case of Coronis and Semele, variants that are dissonant with the interpretation that I have followed can usually be explained as resulting from the needs of cult and ritual, which often focus intensely on certain details of a mythological narrative.[41] The mothers who in mythological narrative must be removed for the benefit of their heroic sons would have received positive attention in cult and ritual precisely because of their close relation to the heroes. And the stories of the extraordinary deaths of Semele and Coronis, in cultic terms, do seem to evoke certain typological themes that motivate ritual activity. In particular, the mothers could easily have been thought of as threatening figures in need of appeasement. Coronis and Semele might have been understood as scapegoat figures, or as ambiguous (and therefore ominous) associates/antagonists of a powerful male deity, or as shades who were potentially wrathful because of their violent deaths. Much of the evidence that is dissonant with my interpretation of the implications of the mythological narratives of Coronis and Semele surely reflects such cultic conceptions.

Above it was demonstrated that the myths of Semele and Coronis most readily suggest the homology of Female : Male :: Mortality : Immortality. This seems to be confirmed by the use of motifs present in the Coronis/Semele story pattern in other myths. A constellation of loosely associated mythological motifs seems to crystallize into narratives centering around the highly charged polarities of gender and mortality. The myths of Coronis and Semele are founded upon one particular arrangement of the motifs, among a number of potential arrangements. The nature of the deaths of Coronis and Semele, when seen within a system of interrelated motifs, suggests an equation of the female body with mortality. If we need to imagine a historical time that would provide a context for myth with this message, we need look no further than classical Athens, where there existed much anxiety over the cultural implications of birth. Such a cultural setting would provide the motivation for using the myths of these two mothers to serve patriarchal ideology. It would not be surprising if for some males in this period the myths were susceptible to a telling in which these mothers were linked with mortality. Their stories would thus function to express male resentment of the female power of birth and male anxiety about the legitimacy of their offspring.

It is most probable, therefore, that the myths of Coronis and Semele were employed to express an association of the female body with mortality and were understood as expressing such an analogy. The semidivine hero in Greek myth was usually a mediating figure existing somewhere between mortality and immortality. The hero normally did not succeed in reaching the extreme of this polarity (immortality), but it could happen and it did happen. A transformative agent sometimes used in this process was fire.

41. On the interconnections between the media of myth and ritual, and their varying functions, Nagy 1979 is fundamental; for heroines in particular, see Larson 1995.

Since immortalization was unusual, this transformative device sometimes failed (e.g., with the infants Demophon and Achilles) but occasionally succeeded (as with the apotheoses of Heracles and Achilles). In the cases of Dionysus and Asclepius, the motif is also at play, but this time the polarity of mortality and immortality is paralleled by a polarity of gender. The result is that the Coronis/Semele story pattern associates the female with mortality (and by extension, illegitimacy). By implication the future success of the male children is assured by the successful removal of the female, both her physical body and her status as parent. The stories of Coronis and Semele are about birth, but more than that they are stories of separation, a separation of mortal from divine that is at the same time a separation of gender. Narrated so as to serve a patriarchal ideology, the myths of Coronis and Semele portray the unfortunate mothers as disposable flesh, analogous to mortality.

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