

# ATHENA AND THE GREAT GODDESS

by Mary Smith

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## The birth of Athene

"Athene's own priests tell the following story of her birth. Zeus lusted after Metis the Titaness, who turned into many shapes to escape him until she was caught at last and got with child. An oracle of Mother Earth then declared that this would be a girl-child and that, if Metis conceived again, she would bear a son who was fated to depose Zeus, just as Zeus had deposed Cronus, and Cronus deposed Uranus. Therefore, having coaxed Metis to a couch with honeyed words, Zeus suddenly opened his mouth and swallowed her, and that was the end of Metis... In due process of time he was seized by a raging headache... so that his skull seemed to burst, and he howled for rage until the firmament echoed. Up ran Hermes, who at once divined the cause of Zeus's discomfort. He persuaded Hephaistus to fetch his wedge and beetle, and make a breach in Zeus's skull, from which Athene sprang, fully armed, with a mighty shout."

(Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*)

Athena (or Athene) was thus a goddess well-equipped to deal with the patriarchal world she came into - although perhaps she would not have chosen such a masculine bearing if her world had not been so patriarchal. She was conceived during the rape by Zeus of the Titaness-Goddess of the old order. But Zeus was so anxious to keep his own power, and so uncaring of Metis that he murdered her. In effect, then, Athena had no mother even at birth, no girlhood, and from the beginning was armoured against tender feelings, and against vulnerability. Not very surprisingly, her activities favoured men at the expense of women - as, for instance, when she cast a decisive vote absolving Orestes of his mother's murder on the grounds that the male seed was more important than the woman's womb, and the mother therefore counted for less than the father.

## Athena as archetype

In her book *Goddesses in Everywoman* Jean Shinoda Bolen depicts seven of the goddesses from Greek mythology, offering them as psychological types which can be used even today to describe patterns of female being and experience. She puts them into three broad groups: the Virgin goddesses, Artemis, Athena and Hestia, who are women that belong to nobody but themselves; the Vulner-

able goddesses, Hera, Demeter and Persephone, who are relationship-oriented; and lastly the Alchemical goddess, Aphrodite, who more than the others possess the power of transformation.

For each goddess she provides an outline of the stories and myths about them, then describes the archetype, or pattern, as it tends to manifest in (especially American) women today. She also describes the pitfalls into which women who follow this pattern can fall, and the opportunities offered for personal growth. One of the important points she makes is about the value of balance and of flow. Getting stuck in any of these archetypes leads to stagnation and to psychological difficulties - what matters is to have a wide choice open to us, and to adapt and change to suit the needs of our changing lives and changing selves.

When I first read the description of Athena in Bolen's book I was struck by how well I knew her and her story and problems. She just WAS my best friend, someone I have been close to since childhood. She was also, I realised, rather like me. And since then I have thought a great deal about how and why we both learnt these patterns of being, and about ways of growing beyond them - because both of us have been stuck in some of the negative aspects.

For the next few pages I want to explore how useful I have found it to look at my and my friend's lives in terms of the Athena archetype.



## **Athena as an option for women living in a patriarchy**

At this point I want to leave Bolen's and Graves's versions of Athena and work with my own conception of her and her nature- which is derived from theirs, but fleshed out by my experience as a woman living in the 20th century.

The main characteristic of my Athena is that she competes with men on men's terms. Born into a world run by men, with values dictated by men, she doesn't see that there are really any other options open to her. She despises weak women (and most women seem to be weak, because they allow themselves to be vulnerable, and dependent on men); this rules out Hera's, Demeter's and Persephone's ways of being - as well as Aphrodite's. She wants to be powerful, out in the world; this rules out Hestia's. And she has so absorbed the world's admiration for men that she wants to be like them, admitted as an equal; this rules out Artemis's.

Another characteristic of my Athena is that at a deep, hidden level, she is scared of full womanhood. Women who are proud to be women, women who are freely sexual, disgust and embarrass her.

In looking at myself and my friend, the question arises where did we get these Athena-values from? Not all women adopt this pattern. In my case I can see how at an early age I took on the Athena model as a way of being valued in a family dominated by my grandmother, who worshipped and sought to control men. I wanted to be as good as my brother, so I climbed trees, learnt intellectual tricks, and tried to be well armoured against pain. If only I could be as successful as my brother I could be loved as he was, and loved by him too. My friend's case I see less clearly. She had no father or brother, just a weak mother. Perhaps she became Athena - authoritative, decisive, 'boyish' - in order never to be like her mother. But really individual causes scarcely matter. Both of us were reacting to the times we were born into - the Zeitgeist, 'what was in the air', the cultural unconscious... Athena seemed to be the best defence mechanism. We could even look as if we were attacking the world, not defending against it.

In our teenage years we both continued the Athena model, my friend more thoroughly than me, as I was weak about boys, and she wasn't. (Athena may have affairs, sometimes, but she doesn't talk about them with girlfriends, and she isn't vulnerable around men.) I continued to compete with men intellectually - doing Science A levels, and a degree in Philosophy. I also, Athena-like, tried to protect my father from discomfort and embarrassment. That mostly meant protecting him from noticing his failure to fulfil his role as my sole parent, which I did by looking after myself.

My friend eschewed the academic world but played football and the trumpet and had fantasies of being a farmer, though in fact ended up as a carpenter and joiner - something 'only men do'. Both of us also deeply admired clever, able, strong men.



In our twenties and early thirties my friend admitted some of Hera into her life, marrying a soon-to-be-famous actor and, as his consort, sharing his glory. I, on the other hand, grew more towards Artemis: I stayed single, became a teacher and a feminist (Artemis is a defender of the young and a befriender of women). However Athena was still firmly in place too, and began to be a problem for both of us.

Athena manifested in my friend particularly through her support for patriarchal values: she supported the status quo, yet tried to deny that her status was that of woman subservient to man. She armoured herself against pain and awareness - but pain kept under comes back in other forms.

As for my story, the feminist (Artemis) in me destroyed most of the patriarchal values which were Athena's legacy, but I still had a too-great respect, awe even, for authority and power, much as I might have denied this. Athena also still had a firm grip of my inner life - I had to stay invulnerable, I had to be in control, and I had to be clever and 'right'.

As well as bad, there were good aspects of being Athena. Both of us were extremely logical, we were good at organising things, we were both creative, domestic - all Athena's qualities.

### **I Learn To Recognise Athena**

Any pattern of behaviour, call it 'archetype' or what you will, has its strongest grip when it goes unrecognised, is not available to consciousness. When I started therapy, I did not see many of the ways in which Athena had hold of me. For instance, I saw myself as too emotional, if anything, rather than as too controlling of my emotions. And I didn't see that often the 'problems' I had with authority figures stemmed from too great respect, too little awareness of the ways in which these figures manipulated me.

When I had been in therapy about six months I read Bolen's book and, as I have said, recognised some of the Athena patterns as characteristics of both myself and my friend. It was also about this time that my friend started appearing regularly in my dreams. However, it was a long time before I really began to grasp how the 'Athena' in me was working to harm me; and that happened when I began to see that the friend in my dreams was standing in for the Athena part of myself.

(At this point I want to make a silent apology to my friend for the way my unconscious has stereotyped her. I am sure she will never read this, but I do still feel some unease at the way I have 'used' her, both in my dreams, and in this essay.)

In my first recorded dreams about her my friend

\*fails to look after her little boy, who has had an accident

\*throws a kitten into water to drown

\*neglects to look after my luggage for me

\*is asleep when I need help

\*won't give me a lift home

I didn't understand at all why I was casting her in such an uncaring role, because I didn't see that for me she more or less equalled Athena, and that the Athena in me was actually damaging me. The part of me that still tried to maintain (superfluous) control, that wanted to deny uncomfortable emotions, was not helping me, was neglecting the tender parts.

The first dream I had where my friend didn't hinder occurred, significantly, the night after I had taken a major step towards blowing the whistle on my boss, who had been fiddling the books. (Athena supported her boss-figure, Zeus, even when he was patently in the wrong.) In this dream my friend was sitting by the sea while I scrambled about above. I fell into the sea, bringing a load of pebbles down on her head, and then enjoyed being in the water. This was quite a long, involved dream, full of symbols of female sexuality, and towards the end there seemed to be some recognition that women (and therefore being a woman) were not necessarily so frightening after all. That is, for me, another important element in undoing Athena's grip on me, as my Athena figure fears full womanhood. In later dreams my friend and I continued to play out some kind of jockeying for power. In one dream I understand about magic and using the will, and assure her that she can get back her dog, who had flown off, by willing him back. In other dreams she takes me on dangerous car journeys, and lets her dog damage my room. But we were working towards some kind of harmony, and in one dream, where I didn't trust her driving, we managed to go where we wanted by driving together.

## **Athena, other archetypes and the great Goddess**

Of course discussing real people in terms of behaviour patterns leads to generalisation: 'this is how she behaves...' 'this is what I tend to do...'. And the danger with generalisations is that if taken too far they become untrue. After all, nobody behaves exactly the same all the time. In discussing how the Athena archetype has manifested in myself and my friend I have generalised about how we are as people, but BEING people we are not that simple. As I said earlier, we neither of us are or were just Athena; my friend is also Hera-like; I am Artemis-like; both of us have strong elements of Hestia; I would like to develop my Aphrodite qualities.

Interestingly, psychological problems can tend to occur when we behave too much like generalisations about ourselves. Getting stuck in Athena's way of being was bad for me, is still bad for my friend, who has not really shifted away from it. What we needed to do was to adapt ourselves, to keep some of Athena's qualities, while also developing some from the other goddesses. My friend, as a mother, could perhaps have developed more of Demeter's vulnerability and openness (it is always easy to see what other people need to do!) I could perhaps have looked to Aphrodite earlier in life.

This, however, brings me to another point I want to make about the archetypes described in Bolen's book, archetypes based on the Greek pantheon. As she agrees, the goddesses and gods worshipped in this pantheon all exist within a patriarchy where Zeus is the Father of all (and Raper of many). The stories of most of the goddesses are shaped by this, and depict ways for women to behave under patriarchy. As a result, modern women who try to enrich their lives by opening up to a wider range of the archetypes run the risk of simply adding to their repertoire of patriarchally-induced behaviour.

There is much evidence (and much-disputed evidence) to suggest that, before the development of the patriarchal societies such as those of ancient Greece and Rome, woman was worshipped in the form of the Great Goddess. She was the birth-giver and destroyer, greater than Athena, Hera, or any of the other Greek goddesses, greater than Zeus or any of the gods. She was worshipped in many forms, in many societies - her power, the power of Nature, was such that nobody could ignore her. And yet nowadays people dare to ignore her, which is putting the world in danger. Like the natural phenomena of which she is mistress, she is never so dangerous as when she is ignored.

The people who worshipped Zeus and his kin tried to remove the power of the Great Goddess. She was female, and they didn't like that. Slowly her qualities were tamed and her characteristics were divided up between the Olympian goddesses. Man's (and I mean man's) awe and respect for Nature, for woman and her (pro)creative powers diminished, to be replaced by a liking for warfare and technology. And look where it has got us - two world wars( at the time of writing) in one century, and an ecological crisis that threatens to destroy us if war doesn't.

The Great Goddess's worst enemy in Olympus was arguably Athena, because it was she who supported Zeus in his rape of women, and who upheld the very patriarchy which had so diminished the Great Goddess. And yet, as I pointed out earlier, Athena is an obvious archetype for strong women to follow; by accepting male power, there is a good chance of sharing it, goes the logic. But women who follow Athena are helping to destroy the world. Instead, we need to look backwards, past Athena and the other goddesses and gods who reigned with Zeus, to the Great Goddess. We need to study her and respect her, which means among other things to study and respect Nature. We need to re-mythologise her, invent stories about her, draw and paint her, dance and sing her. Only then will there be strong and clear alternative archetypes to Zeus's crowd, so that women can choose freely how to be.

Long live the Goddess.

## FRANÇOISE'S FIRST STEP TO A THERAPEUTIC ENCOUNTER

by John Stathers

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After several attempts to dial the number Wendy had given me, I steeled myself to pick up the phone one more time and dial again.

It started ringing. Already, I wanted to put it down. Two rings, three rings - surely they would have answered by now? I was about to hang up on the fourth ring when the phone was answered from the other end. Why the delay in speaking? It was with some relief that I listened to the recorded message....

"Hello, this is David Phelps. I'm not able to ..... bla, bla, bla....."

The tone came and I decided to put the phone down. For one thing I always felt so silly talking to a tape recorder but more importantly I really felt fine after all, didn't I? Didn't I? I was coping with my life. But that was it!

I was only coping and coping wasn't very fulfilling at all, in fact it was really quite miserable at times. So I didn't hang up, but took the first and probably most significant step towards a therapeutic encounter and left a message for David to phone me taking care to sound really quite casual, in control and fairly disinterested.

As I put the phone down I felt an immediate sense of relief.