

MEAT, MEN, AND A MYTHOLOGICAL MURDERESS

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Since the dawn of mythological time, meat, murder and the male have been locked in a disturbingly intimate dance around the barbecue. In the beginning, as the ancient poet Hesiod tells it, there was no need for the Y chromosome. The first offspring in his myth of cosmic history are born without a father. Among them, however, was the sky god Ouranos, born parthenogenetically to Gaia, the earth mother. Thenceforth Gaia gave birth after mating with him and other males. Once sexual dimorphism was established, goddesses lost their reproductive independence and the upstart male went from strength to strength, culminating in the rise to power of Zeus, the prolific “father of gods and men”. It looked like the Y-chromosome was here to stay.

On the human level the story plays out slightly differently. Among mortals, it was men who got here first and thrived for a time without the other gender. Unlike the primal divine powers, however, they were never able to procreate asexually. For that they needed women, who came later in the person of Pandora, the first human female, bestowed on them by the gods as a “gift”. Pandora is best known for ending men’s happy homosocial existence by opening a jar full of evils that immediately spread throughout the world. On the plus side, she also supplied them with the ability to reproduce. This gave mortal men a kind of surrogate immortality by allowing them to perpetuate their name and line. Despite the trouble caused by Pandora, then, sexual dimorphism served the interests of the male from the start, leaving the Y-chromosome secure in its primacy--or so it would seem.

If we backtrack a bit, Pandora’s arrival turns out to have resulted from a barbecue gone awry. Back in the good old days, when gods and men still mingled freely and women had yet to be created, the crafty Prometheus tried to trick Zeus by offering him his choice of two portions of an ox to eat at a feast. One comprised tasty meat and rich fat, concealed under the unappetising stomach, the other was nothing but bones, covered with a tempting layer of succulent, shining fat. Angered by this deception, Zeus hid fire from mortals, but Prometheus, out of pity, stole it back for them. This is where Pandora enters the picture. Zeus had her made as a punishment for Prometheus’ theft, and gave her to men, says Hesiod, “in exchange” for fire. This story is a founding myth not only for sexual reproduction but for the

institution of ritual sacrifice. In ancient Greek sacrifice an animal--an ox being the most prestigious victim--was felled with an axe and roasted over an open fire. The bones were then offered to the gods--who also enjoyed the savory smoke from the burning fat--and the meat shared among their mortal worshipers. The feast was a convivial event, more like a 4th of July barbecue than the average church service. As such it brought the community together. But sacrifice also codified and enacted the proper distinctions among gods (who should receive sacrificial honor), non-human animals (who are sacrificial victims) and humans (who are situated in between).

Like sexual dimorphism, then, animal sacrifice unites members of a social group while also generating and affirming biological and cultural divisions. This may help to explain why it is so closely intertwined with the creation of woman. Pandora is not just a payment for fire but its equivalent. Like fire, women are an ambiguous presence in the world of men. Fire is a destructive force, but also makes possible cooking, metalwork, and other aspects of human culture--including sacrifice itself; women brought all the world's evils, but also allow men to reproduce.

Greek men were not very grateful for the female reproductive contribution. The fact that they needed women at all was, rather, a source of some resentment. One misogynistic male wishes, for example, that men could simply purchase children cash down, dispensing altogether with the involvement of the female. At the same time, men could never quite shake off the fear that women--unlike themselves--could exist independently of the other gender. Human females do not, to be sure, enjoy Gaia's literal power of parthenogenesis, yet women are often described as a separate "race". Hesiod calls Pandora, for example, the progenitor of the "race" of females, as if she were somehow exclusively responsible for all the women to follow. A fear of female independence underwrites many myths, notably that of the Amazons, an independent society of females who use men as mere sperm donors, retaining only their daughters and banishing their sons. In other stories, mothers who care too much about their daughters, especially at the expense of the male line, are viewed with deep suspicion.

This brings us to our mythological murderess. In order to obtain the winds he needed to launch the Trojan War, king Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to the gods. Here the themes of meat and murder become a bit too close for comfort. Even if we overlook the kinship between father and daughter, human sacrifice is a monstrous perversion of the proper hierarchical relationships between

humans, animals and gods. Granted, Agamemnon does not actually barbecue the girl--let alone eat her--but he does put her in the position properly occupied only by a food animal. Sacrificing one's daughter is not quite the same as throwing her on a hamburger grill on a national holiday--but nor is it entirely different. Clytemnestra, the girl's mother, shows her solidarity with the female line by retaliating in kind. She slaughters her husband with an axe in his turn, as if he were a sacrificial ox.

Like her husband's crime, this murder violates not only kinship bonds but the proper boundary between humans and other animals. This time, however, other distinctions are also at stake, notably the gender hierarchy that entered the human world along with sacrifice. The war between the sexes is played out as a shocking perversion of sacrificial ritual by both spouses. Clytemnestra--especially as portrayed by the tragic dramatist Aeschylus--threatens not only the authority of the male but the fundamental distinction between the genders on which it is based. She evinces a "masculine" personality and behavior, culminating in an appropriation of the male prerogative of bloody slaughter.

Modern Americans eat vastly more meat than ancient Greeks, who had no fast-food hamburgers, only the periodic ritual slaughter of slow food. There have been other changes too. Glistening fat, for example, no longer holds out the same irresistible allure. Yet we still ritualize the cooking and consumption of barbecued meat, and it still plays a role in articulating the distinction between the sexes. Meat cooked over a naked flame beneath the open sky remains the culinary province of manly men, and steak their official foodstuff (as opposed to chicken, salad, or chocolate). The modern male may no longer wield the axe, but he still affirms his masculinity by taking his place beside the barbecue. Yet the values embodied in this affirmation of manhood are under constant attack. The veggie-burger is on the march, along with increasing rumors of the Y-chromosome's imminent demise. Ever since Dolly the sheep, moreover, the possibility of strictly feminine reproductive strategies has been back in the cards. Dolly is no Gaia--or Clytemnestra--but she would doubtless be only too happy to see a ban on barbecued meat. The Y-chromosome has been put on notice. It must remain ever vigilant lest, like Agamemnon, it end up out of a job.