

9 Hera, Hephaestus, and Ares

INTRODUCTION

Like Athena, Hera was a local Great Goddess who was incorporated into the religion of Zeus. She was worshipped in pre-Mycenaean Argos by the local people who grazed herds of cattle and flocks of sheep upon their fertile plains. Given the extensive power Hera originally wielded as the Great Goddess, her reluctance to marry Zeus and to become merely one more of his conquests was understandable. Yet, his power was too strong for her, and she had to submit to his authority. Her rebellious nature indicated her strength and independence. Her attitude toward the Titan Leto indicated a rivalry between two great Mother Goddesses.

Hera's claim that she conceived Hephaestus without Zeus's aid may have had its origins in the matriarchal religion that preceded Zeus. At that early time, the role of the male in conception was not understood. To them, all creation centered completely within the female. In addition, the idea that Hera would throw Hephaestus out of her home took its meaning from the matriarchal society where inheritance occurred from mother to daughter. Children were reared by their mother's brother while their father was irrelevant to their lives. (Father was helping rear his sister's children.) When a male married, he usually went to live in the home of his wife. The matriarchal society permitted its goddesses and women to love as many males as they chose.

Ironically, upon her marriage to Zeus, Hera became the protector of marriages. Among the Mycenaean Greeks, the marriage bond was sacred. Hera, however, continued her previous role as the helper of women. Like her daughter Eileithyia, she helped women with childbirth. Although her supremacy had been usurped by her husband, Hera's power was evident in the fear she inspired among mortals when she caused the lovely Titan Leto to search the earth and heavens for a place to give birth to her children.

There was a famous sacred statue of golden-throned Hera in Argos which depicted her seated upon a throne of gold and ivory. It was the custom in ancient Greece for the townspeople to chain the statues of their earth goddesses to the thrones they sat upon in order to prevent the divine spirit within the statue from escaping. The people feared that if the spirit left its stone body, the community would lose the protection of its patron goddess.

Hephaestus originally was worshipped as a god of fire in Lycia, in Asia Minor. Then this worship spread to the islands of the Aegean, particularly the volcanic island of Lemnos. Finally it reached the Greek mainland. According to the version of the myth in which Hera conceived and bore Hephaestus without Zeus's help, the worship of Zeus was probably established on the Greek mainland before the worship of Hephaestus arrived there. Yet, Hephaestus became one of the twelve major Olympians. The metalsmith was an artist, and the people of the time respected his unusual ability and rewarded it. Men of the Bronze Age believed that tools and weapons contained magical attributes, which they enriched by such practices as dipping their weapons into a brave enemy's blood in order to incorporate his strength and courage into their weapons. Therefore, it is not surprising that Hephaestus shared a sacred shrine with Athena, his sister craftsman, in Athens. On Mount Olympus, the gods were equally appreciative of their fellow immortal. Their fascination with his metalwork and other artistic achievements reflects this attitude of ancient Greeks toward the skilled craftsman.

Although Ares, the acknowledged son of Zeus and Hera, was one of the twelve ruling Olympians, he was unpopular both among the immortals and among the Greeks because he represented what the Greeks believed to be the worst aspects of war: rashness, brutality, and barbarism. Although the Greeks often engaged in warfare and therefore appreciated the need for courage and excellence upon the battlefield, they disliked Ares's rash spirit of destruction. As a warrior, Ares was the opposite of Athena: undisciplined, irrational, complaining, and cowardly. Ares was worshipped in Thebes, but his other famous shrines were not located in Greece. He was also worshipped in areas near the Black Sea, such as Colchis. Thrace may have been his original homeland.

ANTICIPATIONS

1. Is there a relationship between creativity and physical disability?
2. When you choose a friend, on what basis do you make that choice:
 - a. personality?
 - b. appearance?

THE MYTH

Hera married Zeus unwillingly because she was aware of his fascination with other beautiful women. He had already had six other loves when he tricked Hera into seeking him by transforming himself into a cuckoo. She caught the bird as a pet, but Zeus then resumed his real form and forced her to marry him.

Gaea attended her grandchildren's wedding and brought Hera a spectacular gift, a tree on which apples of gold were growing. Hera was delighted and had it planted in her gardens far in the West, near Mount Atlas. When Atlas's daughters, the Hesperides, kept picking the apples, Hera placed the huge dragon, Ladon, in the garden to guard the tree. He had one hundred heads and as many different voices, and he was a diligent watchman.

Hera bore Zeus four children: Hebe, the cupbearer of the gods; golden-helmeted Ares, the god of war; Eileithyia, goddess of pregnancy and childbirth; and lame Hephaestus of the strong arms, the renowned metalsmith. Hera claimed that she had conceived Hephaestus without any act of love, to show that she was as independent of Zeus as he had been of her when he gave birth to Athena. Hera angrily complained:

"Notice how cloud-gathering Zeus shames me. Apart from me, he has given birth to grey-eyed Athena, a daughter who excels among all the deathless gods."

Hera felt even more embarrassed when Hephaestus, the child she had hoped would compete with Athena's excellence, turned out to be lame. The distraught mother could not bear his deformities, so she cast him out. "With my own hands," she admitted, "I took him and threw him into the deep sea."

Thus, the newborn infant, screaming hysterically with fear, fell from the summit of Mount Olympus to the dark waters below. However, just as the waves were about to engulf his body, silver-footed Thetis, daughter of the ancient sea god, Nereus, raised her arms out of the sea and caught him. She took the trembling infant beneath the dark sea to the hidden cave which she shared with Eurynome, and there the two goddesses secretly reared the little, lame god. For nine years, Hephaestus lived and played in the underwater cave. With these substitute mothers, he experienced only gentleness and love, and he became a reflection of the treatment he received. Thus Hephaestus developed into a kind, loving god, who was as beautiful within as he was misshapen without.

The lame god learned that he could receive great satisfaction and joy from expressing the love he felt and the beauty he observed in his underwater home. First, using shells, pebbles, coral, and other jewels of the

sea, and later working with the gold and silver the sea-goddesses brought him, he began to create magnificent jewelry. While the ocean roared outside his cave, in the secure peace of his sheltered home, he fashioned necklaces, bracelets, and brooches, and each was a unique work of art. No one else, whether god or man, could create such beauty.

When Thetis and Eurynome realized Hephaestus's brilliant talent as a goldsmith, they encouraged him to make golden sandals for all the Olympians. He agreed to their request and, when they next attended an assembly of the deathless gods, Thetis and Eurynome arrived bearing Hephaestus's gifts. They brought golden sandals for Zeus and all the other Olympian gods, all, that is, except for Hera. For his mother, Hera, the lame god had designed a golden throne. The immortals were captivated by the beauty of their sandals, and especially by the incomparable beauty of Hera's throne. They pleaded with Thetis and Eurynome to bring the young artist up to Mount Olympus so that he could join his family and live in splendor.

Hera was proud that Hephaestus had remembered his mother. She was especially pleased that the other gods were envious of her gift. Why, what were golden sandals, compared to a magnificent throne! Without making an excessive display, Hera sat down upon her golden throne. She conversed in royal comfort until the assembly began to disperse. Then, when she tried to rise, she found that she could not move. Although she could not see them, she could feel that she was bound to her chair with invisible cords. She tried gentle pressure; she tried sudden force; she wriggled in one direction; she strained in the opposite direction. However, she could not break loose. She was inextricably bound to her golden throne. None of the immortals could free her, because no one could see her fetters.

There golden-throned Hera sat, while Eurynome and Thetis returned to their cave beneath the sea and to the brilliant craftsman. Would he free Hera? Most certainly not! After all, she had thrown him away! In fact, he said that he did not have a mother. So there Hera sat, while the gods did their best to persuade Hephaestus to come to Mount Olympus and to forgive and free his mother. But Hephaestus remained adamant.

Finally, loud-roaring Dionysus, whom the lame god trusted as his friend, made Hephaestus drunk and persuaded him to join the gods on Mount Olympus. There Hephaestus confronted his mother, Hera, at long last. The queen of Olympus swore an oath on the River Styx that he, indeed, was her child. Because she had publicly acknowledged him as her son, the lame smith forgave her and freed her.

Olympian Zeus then gave his royal son Hephaestus his choice of what he wanted. The renowned smith chose the grey-eyed goddess, Athena, as his gift, but she refused to take any husband. Therefore, he selected

golden Aphrodite, and they were married.

Gold-wreathed Aphrodite, however, preferred handsome men, especially Hephaestus's brother, golden-helmeted Ares. When shining Helius saw Ares dishonoring Hephaestus's marriage, he told the lame god. Hephaestus knew that he was no match physically for the golden-helmeted god of war. However, Hephaestus's weapons were his imagination and his clever hands. Going to his forge, the lame craftsman made an invisible chain which could not be bent or broken. He wove it into a fine net, which he carried to his bedroom. There he hung it from the roof beams and fastened it around the bedposts. When he was satisfied with the arrangement of his trap, he pretended to travel to the island of Lemnos.

Golden-helmeted Ares secretly watched with delight as the lame smith left. Then he and Aphrodite hastened to a reunion in that specially prepared bed. As they lay down, a cobweb of chains descended upon them, confining them as if they were in a cage, naked and embarrassed.

When shining Helius informed the metalsmith of his success, Hephaestus felt partially avenged. He then summoned his father, loud-thundering Zeus, to witness the shameful scene. Poseidon, the Earth-shaker, far-shooting Apollo, and Hermes, the Wayfinder, could not resist the unusual entertainment, but the goddesses kept a modest distance.

Hephaestus remained on Mount Olympus until he sided with his mother, Hera, in a dispute with loud-thundering Zeus. This so angered the Lord of Olympus that, in his fury, he grabbed his son's foot and threw him off Mount Olympus, the second time Hephaestus had been thrown from there. The lame god soared through the sky for an entire day and then fell upon the island of Lemnos, becoming more lame than ever.

Later, Hephaestus returned to Mount Olympus, where he was forgiven by Zeus. Thereafter he designed magnificent armor for Thetis's great mortal son, Achilles, in the war against Troy. He also made golden arrows for Artemis, the archer-goddess, and silver ones for her far-shooting brother, Apollo. He created Pandora for his father, far-seeing Zeus, and he built grand palaces for all the Olympian gods. Thus, although he was in many ways the least fortunate of all the immortals, lame Hephaestus was the most talented.

His mother, golden-throned Hera, on the other hand, spent most of her time exacting cruel vengeance upon the many loves and children of her unfaithful Olympian husband. She never could be very proud of her other son, golden-helmeted Ares. Although he was the first to create armor and to arm mortal soldiers, he lacked courage and self-discipline. The immortals despised him for his emotional outbursts and his destructive nature.

REFLECTIONS

1. Compare and contrast Hephaestus and Ares with regard to
 - a. physical appearance.
 - b. personality.
 - c. contribution to society.
2. What do you most admire in Hephaestus? What do you admire in Ares?
3. Create a dialogue between Hephaestus and Ares in which they discuss the war between the Titans and the gods.
4. The gods favored Hephaestus over Ares, yet Hephaestus was thrown off Mount Olympus twice. As the goddess Athena, explain to Hera and Zeus why Hephaestus should live on Mount Olympus.