

The bear mythology: an enduring archetypical tale of feminine empowerment, adulthood and motherhood

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Abstract

The relation of bear mythology with the transformation of girls into women, as well as the connection and involvement of Artemis and bears with the beginning of woman's adulthood and motherhood is considered. Particular attention is paid to the worship of Artemis Brauronia and to rituals like the Arkteia rite. Finally, the connection of bear mythology and customs and beliefs from ancient Greece and the film *Brave* (2012) is discussed.

Keywords

bear mythology; Artemis Brauronia; Arkteia ritual; Ancient Greece; Disney's film *Brave*

The Bear is a primitive mythological archetype that is still being used today in order to express two seemingly opposite qualities of the female soul: a) its indomitable nature but also b) its maternal instinct of protection. The bear myth has been a central fascination for Indo-European, Northern and Near Eastern cultures from prehistoric to recent times. The majority of such bear myths can be separated into three categories focusing on a) women's transformation into bears, b) infants being raised by female bears, or c) mortal women's abduction and impregnation by male bears or the offspring of such union; the so called 'werebears'.¹ Such myths can also be found in the Haida tribe of North America and French fairy tale of Jean De l'Ours.²

Greek myths such as Callisto and the worship of Artemis Brauronia describe the transition of girls into womanhood, which seems to be strongly associated with bear mythology. One of the most recent continuations of bear mythology is the Disney's animated fantasy film *Brave* (2012), directed by Mark Andrews, which tells the story of a young princess called Merida, who is on the brink of womanhood. In order to avoid marriage, Merida rebels and turns her mother into a bear. The story unfolds in the setting of tenth-century AD Scotland and even though the scriptwriters (Mark Andrews and Brenda Chapman) insist on having drawn inspiration from the folk-tales of their Scottish heritage, the Greek bear mythology is hard to miss.³

Moreover, girls' journeys into becoming women appear to be identified with the cult of Artemis, which makes absolutely perfect sense since she is a goddess of the young (especially maidens) and a goddess of transitions. But indeed, this female deity is responsible for the transformation of children into adults, for the outbreak of deadly diseases or for their cure,⁴ for births but also for murders. She makes girls become women, women become mothers, and slaves become free. Artemis' role in helping children make the transition to adulthood is clearer when this transitional stage fails, as in the case of the anti-hero Hippolytus. Refusing to fall in love, Hippolytus was dedicated to chastity and to Artemis. Aphrodite, insulted by his refusal to revere her, incited in his stepmother Phaedra desire for him, but when he rejected her she took her own life, putting the blame on him. Hippolytus was then killed by his horses when they were frightened by a bull sent by the god Poseidon.⁵ This tragic series of incidents was not caused by Artemis, but it should be mentioned that the goddess did not at least try to stop it from happening to her follower.

Additionally, as Budin⁶ explains, Hippolytus refused to make the transition from childhood into adulthood and as a goddess of change, Artemis was partially betrayed and thus offended, causing not her wrath but her lack of sympathy and help. Hippolytus later set an example for the younger generation, who, in order to learn from his mistake

1 Pastoureau (2011: pp. 24–28).

2 Kroeber (1998: pp. 95–109).

3 Manwell (2017).

4 Budin (2016: pp. 2–3).

5 Eur. *Hipp.*

6 Budin (2016: p. 45).

and avoid it, founded a sanctuary of Artemis in Troizina, where the girls went before their wedding and sacrificed a tuft of their hair to the goddess, preparing their smooth transition to adulthood. This ritual was maintained until the second century AD.⁷

Artemis did not always punish mortal virgins who wished to become sexually active women, as long as the rules and the necessary sacrifices were followed successfully. The rituals before leaving the virgin life consisted of dances and sacrifices that differed from place to place, but they all had one thing in common: to please the goddess and to appease her possible anger when they attempted to pass into adulthood. But when the appropriate sacrifices were neglected, Artemis made sure that the transition to adulthood was not successfully completed.⁸

An indicative example of a failed marriage was Admetus, who had forgotten to make the appropriate sacrifices to Artemis before his marriage, as was the custom, so the goddess sent poisonous snakes to kill him. However, Apollo intervened, convincing the Fates to spare Admetus' life and take his wife instead, the noble Alcestis, who, for her good fortune, was saved at the last moment by Hercules.⁹

Artemis was the protector of the young of both animals and humans of both sexes. For this reason, like many other Greek female deities such as Gaia,¹⁰ Aphrodite,¹¹ Hecate,¹² and even the god Apollo,¹³ she had the surname "Kourotrophos".

In fact, as Diodorus Siculus stated in his *Bibliotheca Historica* "Ἄρτεμιν δέ φασι εὐρεῖν τὴν τῶν νηπίων παιδίων θεραπείαν καὶ τροφάς τινας ἀρμοζούσας τῇ φύσει τῶν βρεφῶν", which means that Artemis discovered the proper care and nutrition for the young ones and this is why she is called "Kourotrophos".¹⁴

However, it should not be taken for granted that Hecate,¹⁵ one of the goddesses with whom Artemis was identified, was in fact the first deity to be named Kourotrophic around the eighth-seventh century BC, thus passing her kourotrophic characteristic to the Artemis archetype. All the sources of the ancient literature that considered Artemis a Kourotrophic deity date back to the Roman period. For instance, the *Orphic Hymn to Artemis*,¹⁶ and Pausanias¹⁷ address the goddess as a "pedotrophos" which means child-nurturer (2nd century AD) and on the island of Cnidus there was *Artemis the Hyacinthotrophos*, a cult referring to the goddess as responsible for the upbringing of her brother Apollo, surnamed *Hyacinth*, of the first century AD.

7 Paus. *Description of Greece* 2.32.1.

8 Budin (2016: pp. 92–102).

9 Eur. *Alc.* 1–25.

10 Paus. 1.22.3.

11 *Anth. Gr.*, 1, VI, 318.

12 Hes. *Theog.* 450–452.

13 Kallim. *Hymn.* 4, 4.276.

14 Diod. 5.73.5–6.

15 Hes. *Theog.* 450–452.

16 36.8.

17 Paus. 4.34.6.

Apart from the literature of antiquity, there are also many iconographic depictions of Kourotrophos Artemis. As Budin¹⁸ explained, there are three types of kourotrophic artistic depictions of the goddess found mainly in her sanctuaries: a) terracotta figurines depicting Artemis herself with children, b) reliefs dedicated to goddess, showing families with children, asking for her protection, and c) figurines of small children. Regarding the nature of children (and especially of girls), Aristotle in *Politics*¹⁹ states that it is indomitable and is not yet mature nor civilized.

But why was Artemis specifically associated with the bear mythology and not with another animal? As a logical answer would be that childhood was considered as wild as the personality of the goddess of hunting and wildlife, who was also the protector of young people and had the bear as one of her most sacred symbols.

However, according to Budin,²⁰ Artemis is considered “kourotrophic” in modern science more often than she should be, since the goddess of antiquity and classical ancient sources is less kourotrophic and even more dangerous and deadly for mortal children, even demanding their sacrifice (example of Iphigenia). Budin²¹ supports her theory by explaining that the terracotta statues were offered as “thanks to Artemis for successful births”.

Artemis was mainly the goddess of girls, but she was not absent from the adult life of women either. Around the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the cult of Artemis was somehow associated with the goddess of birth Eileithyia who involves even more thoroughly in the lives of adult women. But, it is rather important to keep in mind that Artemis was an eternally sworn virgin who persecuted other virgins because they became sexually active women (whether intentionally or unintentionally).

A typical example is Callisto, a virgin follower of Artemis who caught the attention of Zeus. Some of the stories claim that Callisto was raped or seduced by Zeus disguised as either the god Apollo or Artemis.²² The girl became pregnant and for this reason she was transformed from the goddess into a bear, who was then killed by the goddess's arrows as a punishment for the vows of the virginity she violated.²³

Zeus is said to have taken pity on the girl and after her death transformed her into the constellation of Ursa Major, while her son, Arcas, whose name literally means bear in ancient Greek, managed to be born and survive.²⁴ It is also said that Arcadia took its name from Callisto's son, Arcas, who also became the constellation of Ursa Minor.²⁵ Callisto's example demonstrates the outbreak of Artemis' violence when she was betrayed

18 Budin (2016: p. 70).

19 Arist. *Pol.* 1.1260a.

20 Budin (2016: p. 69).

21 Budin (2016: p. 75).

22 Paus. 8.3.6–7; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.8.2.

23 Ov. *Met.* 2, 405–531.

24 Hes. *Astr.* Frg. 3.

25 Paus. 8.3.6; Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.8.2.

or when her followers became sexually active without her permission, but it also sheds more light on the goddess's love for beasts, and especially for bears.

There is a variety of myths about the worship of the goddess of hunt and the association of mortal heroes with female bears. When her father, king Agamemnon, wanted to sacrifice Iphigenia to the goddess Artemis in order to persuade her to release the winds to sail to Troy, she is said to have been replaced on the altar by an animal, either a deer or a bear. What is amazing is that Agamemnon tempts his daughter to come not by telling her that he is going to sacrifice her but by pretending to have organized a wedding ceremony for Iphigenia with the famous hero, Achilles.

What is also worth noting here is the behavior of Artemis, who seems ruthless, without mercy or compassion for the young women, who were considered sexual objects, unwittingly unleashing the wrath of the goddess on them and not on their rapists.

Another famous hero involved in the myth of Artemis and bear symbolism is the Trojan Prince Paris, who is said to have been abandoned by his family to die when he was still an infant, but a female bear nurtured him before the shepherds, who raised him, found him.²⁶ As Pastoureau²⁷ also argues, the revolutionary nature of Trojan Paris is due to the animal character given to him by the bear and this can be seen from the abduction of Helen herself.

Similarly, Princess Atalanta from Arcadia was also raised by a bear. But when she reached a marriageable age, Atalanta asked her suitors to do a road race, claiming that she would only marry the one who managed to beat her. A marriage contest also appears in the movie *Brave*, as Princess Merida only agrees to marry the lord who beat her in archery. Like her predecessor Atalanta, Merida strategically chooses a marriage contest that favors her own talent, giving her a sense of control and dominance over her potential partner. However, unlike the Greek heroine Atalanta, who eventually married the hero Hippomenes, who managed to slow her down by throwing her three golden apples, Disney princess Merida remains unmarried and faithful to the archetype of Artemis, although she remains open to the possibility of a wedding, when the heroine feels psychologically prepared for such a big change.

In addition, it is worth noting that analyzing the myth of Atalanta, Bolen²⁸ claims that the heroine was defeated not by fraud, but because she realized that she was on a new phase of her life and thus deliberately lost the games. The golden Hesperian apples given by the goddess Aphrodite are a metaphor of the three phases that Atalanta's life went through. As characteristically mentioned in Bolen's book "Goddesses in everywoman",²⁹ the first apple is identified with Atalanta's awareness of the time spent from childhood to adulthood, the second apple is associated with her awareness of the importance of romance and love, while the third is related to her desire to start a family by changing

26 Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.12.5.

27 Pastoureau (2011: pp. 31–32).

28 Bolen (2014: pp. 93–100).

29 Bolen (1984/2014: pp. 72–74).

her character to achieve a broader goal: motherhood and the continuation of her family's name.

Like Callisto and Atalanta, their most modern version, Princess Merida, is also adept at riding, running and archery, not wanting to marry, and thus be tamed by a man. Unmarried women were considered by civilized patriarchal societies to be indomitable, savage, and so they were associated with the also savage and indomitable nature of the bear. But the bear archetype also marks the ability of the female body to give birth to children, to raise them and to protect them at all costs.

The tales of the bear archetype are significantly connected with the festival of *Artemis Brauronia*.³⁰ There were two festivals of the goddess in Brauron: *Arkteia* and *Brauronia*, in which it is very possible that pre-adolescent and teenage girls played the bear for Artemis as part of a significant ritual. Moreover, the girls were called "bears" and had to take part in various races, wrestling, parades and dances. Most of these competitions were depicted on vases found in the sanctuary of Artemis in Brauron. In fact, the majority of scholars believe that the girls were between five and fourteen years of age³¹ and a high priestess of the goddess who bore the title of "Iphigenia" was called to organize and lead the ceremonies.³² Details about the rituals of the festivals about who could attend, what happened during them and what they symbolized remain a mystery and can be interpreted in various ways.

One of the most indicative examples of Artemis' association with children is the famous *Arkteia* rite that was performed exclusively by the young girls of the Attica region, mainly by the Athenians. In addition, it still seems that the origin of the *Arkteia* ritual has not been ascertained, neither with regard to the semantics nor the etiology as to why the girls had to "play the bear". Scientific opinion seems to be divided as there are two versions explaining where this ritual came from. More specifically, it is claimed that *Arkteia* was a kind of initiation into adulthood helping girls to transform into women, since the girls of Attica could not marry before playing bear for the goddess.³³ But the process and analysis of what exactly this "bear imitation" meant is unfortunately still a mystery, as there is no surviving information describing the ritual.

In fact, there seem to be two separate traditions that require different age restrictions for the participating girls who played the bear for Artemis. According to Budin,³⁴ ancient sources state that girls no less than five and not more than ten years old should play the bear, but there is some evidence that teenage girls between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, who were of marriageable age may also have played the bear for Artemis.

According to Dillon,³⁵ virgins played an important role in the ancient Greek religion, especially in Artemis' and Athena's cults, as they could have roles that were forbidden

30 Suda; Goff (2004: p. 105); Golden (1990: p. 78).

31 Manwell (2017: p. 261).

32 Dillon (2002: p. 93).

33 Aristoph. *Lys.* 645–646.

34 Budin (2016: p. 78).

35 Dillon (2002: p. 37).

to married women. Most of the girls served as carriers of trays or baskets, while others rubbed the corn they would use in the sacrifices.³⁶ Dillon stated that “the importance of unmarried women in religion can be demonstrated by the virgin women represented in the frieze of the Parthenon and the Caryatids of the Erechtheion holding the roof of the sanctuary”.³⁷

Furthermore, as for the origin of the ritual, there are also two mythical versions. In the first story, a domesticated bear accidentally slightly injured a girl and her brothers killed the animal for revenge. Then Artemis sent a plague in Athens for the unjust murder and the Oracle of Delphi advised people to bring their innocent young girls to play the bear for Artemis in order to ease her anger, otherwise no girl would be allowed to marry and become a mother.³⁸

In the second story, a wild bear appeared in the port of Athens and an Athenian killed it. A terrible disease then broke out and the Oracle advised the people to sacrifice the daughter of the murderer to Artemis, but the bear killer hid his daughter in the sanctuary of the goddess and instead killed a goat. Artemis was moved by this gesture and cured the disease, while the Athenians continued to honor Artemis in memory of this incident by offering their daughters to “play bears”. Therefore, for a girl playing the bear or simply serving as a priestess in the temples of Artemis was an attempt to appease the goddess’s anger as she would soon lose her virginity, which could provoke violent reactions from the virgin goddess.

Recent data based on literary sources and ancient imagery demonstrated that none of the women participating in the Arkteia ritual were yet menstruating, so they were between five and ten years old.³⁹ Sourvinou-Inwood further explained that Brauronia and Arkteia were two separate festivals, as Arkteia was a mysterious almost occult worship while Brauronia, despite being celebrated every five years in honor of Brauronia Artemis on the 17th of the month of Mounichion, was the most important festival of Artemis in Attica’s region and was held at public expense.

More specifically, craters found in Brauron and other sanctuaries of Artemis depict girls of various ages running from five years old to young virgin women, so it is not unlikely that pre-adolescents, teenagers or even young adult women (in some cases) could participate in such rituals.⁴⁰ It is also possible that these girls eagerly awaited the moment when they would be called upon to play bear – that is, to impersonate motherhood, thus preparing the ground for their impending future.⁴¹

36 Dillon (2002: p. 60).

37 Dillon (2002: p. 43).

38 Theokr. *Suda* 2.66 cited in Budin (2016: pp. 78–80).

39 Beaumont (2013: p. 175); Sourvinou-Inwood (1988: p. 25); Aristoph. *Lys.* 645.

40 Manwell (2017: p. 263).

41 Dillon (2002: p. 175); Beaumont (2013: pp. 182–183); Goff (2004: p. 108).

In addition, as mentioned above, the bear archetype symbolized motherhood.⁴² For this reason, Beaumont⁴³ considers the depictions on the craters not as photographic representations of reality, but as metaphorical depictions of the passage from childhood to adulthood elevating a woman's ability to conceive and give birth to life. The Arkteia ritual strengthened the female soul, as Artemis' bears were transformed from unmarried girls into wives and mothers, while adult women had the opportunity to remember that they too were and remained Artemis' bears, as their transition to the world of motherhood meant their identification and worship of the goddess's kourotrophic qualities.⁴⁴

The modern cinematic Merida, although a female heroine, is deliberately a character who distorts the meaning of gender and breaks every stereotype. Although she looks like a woman, she behaves like a boy doing activities such as archery, horseback riding, climbing, exploring forests and fighting magic, things one would expect from a male hero. Merida as a character is on the verge of adulthood and especially close to the age of marriage, as she is shorter than her parents but her breasts are visible. However, although Merida behaves like a boy, she is heterosexual, that is to say her gender and sexual identity are female since the reason she refuses marriage is not her sexual preferences, but the fact that she does not yet feel ready and has not found the right partner. Also characteristic of the female nature is her hobby that she shares with her mother: the embroidery of a tapestry which is considered a typical female act.⁴⁵

All Disney princesses are subjected to change and usually this change is from unmarried girls to married women. Merida, however, remains unmarried at the end of the film, as her transformation comes from within and not from social conventions. What is remarkable about *Brave* is that the external transformation does not affect Merida, who is in fact the protagonist role of the film, but her mother instead as she turns into a bear because of her daughter. Merida has complete control over both Elinor's initial transformation (as she is the one who asked for the change to happen in order to be free of her mother's control) and the transformation back (as she is also the one who solves the riddle and restores her mother to humanity).

Eleanor as a human being is overprotective and oppressive to her daughter by overloading her with lessons in proper manners, music, embroidery, poetry and many other skills that will prepare her to become a proper queen and a worthy lady. However, Eleanor in the form of a bear is ashamed of her nakedness; she tries to put on her crown and sets the table clinging to her civilized human side, which of course is not in line with the nature of the beast. Then, the roles are reversed and the teacher becomes a student. Merida's mother when transformed into a bear struggles to maintain her humanity and her daughter becomes a teacher showing her how to catch fish and behave like a proper bear. Mother and daughter are the two sides of the same coin, since Elinor in her human form serves as an image of Merida that reflects what she will become in the future, that

42 Bevan (1987: p. 19).

43 Beaumont (2013: p. 184).

44 Goff (2004: pp. 107–108); Cole (1984: p. 142).

45 Manwell (2017: p. 252).

is, a worthy queen, and a loving mother, while as a bear she represents Merida's inner wild nature of the present.⁴⁶

Both mother and daughter share quality time together and learn from each other by restoring their relationship, as Queen Elinor remembers what it is like to be a rebellious teenager and Merida learns how to be responsible by correcting her mistakes and saving her mother from the guards and her father, who all want to kill the bear. Also, towards the end, Queen Elinor battles the evil Mor'du bear as he tries to harm Merida, showing how women can be transformed from civilized-domesticated creatures into wild beasts when their children are in danger.

Merida manages to save her mother in time, restoring her to her human form; however, she solves the riddle in a rather unorthodox and surprising way as she manages to repair her torn tapestry while riding in the forest. Merida's controversial embroidery, despite being a rather feminine act, is done in a very masculine and risky way that suits Merida's character and temperament. And although Elinor returns to her human form, she remains naked, signaling her rebirth and reconciliation with her wild inner side.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the evolution of the bear mythology of the past until the present can be seen through the ritual of dressing and undressing. Moreover, Beaumont argues that only the participating girls and their adult companions could enter the sanctuary of Artemis in Brauron during such rituals.⁴⁸ Aristophanes reveals that part of the ritual wanted the girls to wear and then take off a kind of clothing called "krokotos" (κροκωτός) in saffron color. The ritual of dressing and undressing was a metaphor for the end of childhood and the beginning of a new phase in their lives. Artemis' bears and Elinor's nakedness at the end of the film serve as a reminder that girls are not helpless, but wild women capable of overcoming any obstacle they will most likely face in their new life as wives and mothers.⁴⁹

The analysis of the myth of the bear from antiquity to the present day seemed to be rather fruitful as it gave us a further understanding of the female transformation from adolescence to adulthood and its importance for the continuation of society. At the beginning of the film, Elinor tells her daughter a tale that typically states that "legends are lessons. They ring with truths", and although Princess Merida seems skeptical, later in the film she understands and repeats her mother's phrase. She matures and takes a step towards adulthood not in a superficial and hasty way like marriage, but in a deep inner way – by understanding the teachings of the elders, that is, when Merida puts into practice her mother's advice and demonstrates her ability to treat with the elders of her tribe by speaking to them as equal among equals.

Merida also says "We should be free to write our own story", and although the ancient Greek women did not actually have the right to choose when and whom they would marry, it is important to remember that we do have this divine gift. Disney's *Brave* movie

46 Manwell (2017: pp. 253–254).

47 Manwell (2017: pp. 255–256).

48 Beaumont (2013: p. 175); Sourvinou-Inwood (1988: pp. 21–31); Aristoph. *Lys.* 644–645.

49 Beaumont (2013: p. 178).

appreciates and exalts the indomitable nature of Merida and all the girls who follow the Artemis' archetype without trying to change or eliminate it, but instead make sure to pass the Artemis' archetype on to their mothers, that is, to older women who have forgotten it. Through their transformations into bears, their reunion with their wild and youthful side and the return of older women to the call of nature are achieved.

To conclude, Beaumont emphasizes the duality of bear mythology, as the nature of this animal is wild and yet it is used to symbolize something as innocent as girls and women's nature. The same binary behavior is depicted in the Disney movie in the person of the evil Mor'du and the good Queen Elinor. Many times, bears symbolized the punishment of people cursed by a god like Artemis, but festivals such as Arkteia and Brauronia were held to praise the uniqueness of this animal as a blessing for children who would develop into worthy mothers with the legendary ursine abilities to protect and nurture their young. Despite the myths that emphasize the monstrous side of the bear and Artemis' vengeful ability, the Arkteia and the animated film *Brave* have helped restore the balance to both the mother-daughter relationship and the perception of women's indomitable nature and association with the haughty and proud bear.⁵⁰

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50 Manwell (2017: pp. 265–267).

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