

The influence of monotheism and polytheism on gender roles



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Throughout western history, enormous gender differences have been evident in both monotheistic and polytheistic cultures. Indeed, the patriarchal hierarchies in both social systems have emphasized the superiority of the male sex; however, greater stress is placed on the worthlessness of women in a monotheistic society. The fact that women in polytheistic worlds such as those found in *The Odyssey* and *Medea* are able to command more power than women in monotheistic civilizations such as those found in *The Holy Bible* and *Beowulf* suggests that the female image commanded greater respect and was more highly regarded in a polytheistic society. In many ways, this shift in mind-set can be attributed to the religious nature of the culture at that time. The emphasis placed on female inferiority in a monotheistic society can be seen even in a henotheistic culture. As henotheism is often viewed as a precursor of monotheism, it is beneficial to examine the conditions experienced by women in this type of society. “Genesis” describes a world based on a patriarchy: this is a civilization founded on the idea that the primary deity is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Women are rarely mentioned as having any power over the decisions of men, as they listen only to the word of YHWH, and YHWH speaks only to men. For example, Lot presents his daughters to the men of Sodom as mere property: his daughters have no verbal or physical power. Another instance is found in the account of the rape of Dinah by Shechem. Whether Dinah is distressed by this event or wants to take action against the offender is unknown; however, it is clear that the retaliation against Hamor’s town is the work of Dinah’s brothers, who never mention that the motive is the actual rape. Dinah and her brothers are the children of Jacob, and thus are the chosen people. It seems that the presence of a single God (YHWH) and His <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-monotheism-and-polytheism-on-gender-roles/>

focus on the advancement on the patriarchs leaves females out of the picture. The inferiority of women is only further emphasized in “Exodus”, which portrays a wholly monotheistic society. Though there are no actions described that involve women, it is evident from the sermon on Mount Sinai that YHWH views women not only as property, but more importantly, as unable to exert power. Women who are married are fed and clothed by their husbands (Exodus 21: 10), and women who act as “sorceresses” are condemned to die (Exodus 22: 18). By worshipping a single God (who is clearly male), the female gender is relegated to the class of loyal servants to their male counterparts. Even in later writings, one of the “Fathers of the Church” (Tertullian) claims that women are the “devil’s gateway” and promotes persecution of them under Christianity. Following the fundamentals of monotheistic Christianity, Beowulf’s warrior-driven society again portrays women who have no substantial actions in the story, and speak impassioned only when they are fed lines. Indeed, it appears as if Welthow is merely another Hrothgar, in that she can only reiterate every feeling that Hrothgar has just spoken. Once again, the view of women as mere objects of hospitality can be derived from the traditional Christian view: God clearly praises male values in fighting, war and strength. The one female character in Beowulf who actually has authority and control is Grendel’s mother. Predictably, she is despised for these characteristics, although they would have been deemed acceptable had she been a man. In addition, Grendel’s mother (as well as all other females) “could not come with a man’s strength, fought with the power and courage men fight with, smashing their shining swords, their bloody, hammer-forged blades onto boar headed helmets, slashing and stabbing with the sharpest of points.” It <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-monotheism-and-polytheism-on-gender-roles/>

is clear that society places women in an inferior position, believing that they are not suited for the same tasks as men. Success in battle is attributed to God – as is seen when Hrothgar thanks God for allowing Beowulf victory. God expects men, not women, to display these highly-regarded, warrior-like attributes. In contrast to the monotheistic societies, cultures that believe in multiple gods offer a more powerful, respected image of women. Although females in these ancient polytheistic cultures were still largely viewed as ill-intentioned creatures, their increased level of influence demanded recognition. For instance, the ancient Greek culture described by Homer deviates from that of a strict patriarchal society. Although prominence on the battlefield was still highly valued, the fact that women had an important role in shaping everyday life was acknowledged. One explanation for the shift in gender treatment is that the culture developed a reliance on the fact that multiple aspects of life were controlled by both male and female gods. These gods are clearly accorded gender-specific responsibilities, such as Ares, the god of war, and Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Interestingly, Athena also represents war, although not to the extent that Ares does. With this overlap in duties, it is no wonder that both gods were revered, which in turn required a re-evaluation of current gender classifications. In polytheistic societies, all gods must be worshiped, regardless of their gender. It was considered unwise to demean women, since any stranger could be a goddess in disguise. In addition, although women were still viewed as having evil intentions, it is evident that they had far more power and influence over others than ever before. From the creation of that “damnable race of women” in Hesoid’s Theogony to the wicked nature of Medea, women have always used their power for vile purposes. However, the Odyssey is filled

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with accounts of women with remarkable powers who are respected for their judgments. Penelope shares many characteristics with Odysseus - intelligence, quick thinking, and reasoning, to name a few - and yet society does not view her qualities with the level of disdain that is found in "Genesis" or Beowulf. In fact, Penelope is highly valued by both her family and Athena. Helen, although regarded as highly deceitful, has obviously been endowed with the ability to drug those who cross her, and she uses this skill to her advantage. Whether the female spirit of independence and willingness to take action is a desirable trait is not addressed, but it is certainly permissible, and a potent force in these Greek stories. It is not only mortal women who exhibit increased influence in a polytheistic society. As the most powerful goddess in the Odyssey, Athena, has the power not only to change the outcome of battles, but to influence Zeus' decisions. In the interest of saving Odysseus, Athena persuades Zeus to bring Odysseus home. Other goddesses in the story, such as Circe and Calypso, are also described as having great powers. With female goddesses present in the culture, it was no longer acceptable to view women merely as male property, especially since the goddesses rivaled the gods in terms of power and authority. In Medea, there are far fewer mentions of the gods than are found in the Odyssey. Medea, however, is a sorceress, and it is obvious that she is not the obedient, loyal woman that was considered desirable in monotheistic societies. Indeed, in a monotheistic society Medea would have been condemned to die for a variety of reasons - most prominently because of her status as an enchantress. In Medea, however, she is looked upon with regard, mostly because she wields greater powers than Jason or Creon.

When Medea takes her revenge by killing both of her children, as well as <https://assignbuster.com/the-influence-of-monotheism-and-polytheism-on-gender-roles/>

Creon and his daughter, Jason is disgusted by her actions, but never attributes her evil nature to her gender. Many parts of the Bible, on the other hand, refer to the innately evil nature of females. Although both monotheism and polytheism appear to breed a contemptuous attitude towards women, polytheism confers higher regard upon the female gender. This image of women is achieved in stories by giving them considerable power and the ability to make decisions. One of the major reasons for the difference in views is that polytheistic religions include deities of both genders. The reverence of female deities appears to alter the manner in which women are viewed. They are no longer perceived as helpless, loyal slaves to men, but rather take on an important role in society.