WOMEN IN CLASSICAL GREECE

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In the Classical period of Greek history, Athens had reached the zenith of its power and prestige. Having defeated the Persians, Athens ruled the seas and had formed an Empire that dominated the Aegean. Commodities from all over the Eastern Mediterranean flowed through the port of Piraeus, making Athens the dominant trading nation. Culture flourished and democracy reached its fullest extent. Athenian men lived public lives in the *polis*, taking part in the military, politics and the arts. However, at the same time, Athenian women lived private lives. They remained within the *oikos*, considered little more than children and could only participate in the life of the city in very limited, constrained roles. Most other *poleis*, taking their lead from Athens, treated their women similarly. Only in Sparta, with its unique societal structure, did women find the freedom lacking in the other states.

The study of the position of women in classical Greece is made difficult by the silence of the women themselves. Tradition and lack of education muted the voices of women. Instead, scholars must glean what they can from male authors brought up to underestimate the value of the women in their society. Some authors show sympathy to the other sex, such as Euripides. Others play upon the stereotypes long accepted in Athenian society. All are views looking in upon the female condition, not personal responses to it. Nevertheless, taken within context, scholars can learn a great deal about the assumptions about women, the lifestyles they led and the problems facing them.

To Greek philosophers and thinkers, women were by nature both dangerous and weak and utterly unlike men. The Pythagorean philosophers believed the world existed in linked contrasting pairs: one such pair of opposites was male and female. As discussed by Aristotle, to retain harmony in their world, these opposites had to be kept in balance.[1] Aristotle clearly stated his opinion of the relationship between men and women. Man is made to rule and women to be ruled, man is the courageous defender of the family, while women are fearful and in need of protection.[2] Hippocrates agreed, writing, "The nature of women is less courageous and is weaker."[3] As in other cultures, women were the mythical source of all sorrow. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Pandora unleashes all of the evils in the world and, as if to remind themselves of the curse of women, the Athenians incorporated the myth onto the base of the statue of Athena in the Parthenon.[4] The "race" of women had caused the pain of men, but remained necessary to society. If men wished for an ordered society, they had to control women and the dangers they brought.

Despite their danger to men, women were still necessary to Greek life, for only they could bear male heirs. Although in Euripides' *Medea*, Jason laments he cannot "procreate children otherwise" it was not to be.[5] Women were fecund creatures, imitating the earth in their fertility.[6] Indeed, in *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes plays with the concept of women as highly sexualized beings. These two ideas – fertility and sexuality – meant that men had to control women and their reproductive potential. Should they fail to do so, they could not prevent their women from straying from the marital bed nor guarantee the paternity of any children. The latter was particularly important in a political system in which membership of the *deme* and thus of political society was based upon patrilineage. Thus, men never allowed women full freedom. All women were

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[1] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.v.6 986 a 23–27.
[2] Aristotle, *Politics* I.ii.12 and *Ethics* .x.5
[3] Hippocrates, "On Virgins". Reproduced in Ann Ellis Hanson, *Signs 1* (1975), 575–6.
[4] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, line 82. trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, 9.
[5] Euripides, *Medea*, lines 573–574. in Paul MacKendrick and Herbert M. Howe, eds, *Classics in Translation Volume 1: Greek Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1952)
[6] Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. R.G. Bury, *Loeb Classical Library Plato IX*, p 343.

subject to *kyrieia* ("guardianship") under which their father then their husband acted upon their behalf and were responsible for their life. This made women akin to children – who were also subject to guardianship – throughout their entire lives. Women could not hold property or land, nor could they inherit. If a woman failed to bear a male heir but bore a daughter, the daughter would be married to a male from the same family line as her father. Her sons would then inherit from their maternal grandfather.[7] Under the laws of Solon, the nearest male relative of a dead man whose widow had not borne sons had to marry a daughter in order to keep the property in the family.[8]

To prevent not only adultery but also the appearance of adultery, society expected women to remain in the home. Men or slaves would conduct all business that required contact with the outside world, such as purchasing food, while the women would manage the household. However, in Greek drama, this ideal does not always seem to have been enforced. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the passive, obedient Ismene does not comment nor appear to feel uncomfortable when she and Antigone are out in the streets.[9] Neither Lysistrata nor Lampito have problems meeting in *Lysistrata*.[10] Indeed, A.W. Gomme notes, "In Attic tragedy, women come and go from their houses at will."[11] How much this reflected actual practice, however, is still a source of speculation for scholars. Certainly some women would have been visible in the city, as most men accepted the need for poor women to leave the house, but for women of means, it was still a sign of immodesty.

Within the home, a husband would expect his wife to busy herself with household tasks. As well as managing the household supplies, wives spun and wove the cloth for clothing, prepared food, managed any servants or slaves and brought up the children. Xenophon, in his "On Household Management" wrote, "Stand before the loom and be ready to instruct those who know less than you and to learn from those who know more; look after the baking-maid; stand by the housekeeper when she is serving our stores; go round and see whether everything is in its place."[12] The wife would often have slaves or servants to aid her in her duties and it was only a poor woman who would have been alone in the women's quarters of the Greek household. However, Katz notes that husbands rarely trusted their wives to fully manage their households until they had born at least one child. Only then did men consider their wives bonded fully to his family and with an interest in the joint success of the household.[13]

Marriage and divorce was the province of the family, not of the two individuals involved. The father of the bride arranged the marriage of his daughter when the child was in her early teens. Marriage would be to a man some fifteen years her elder and marked the girl's transition from childhood into adulthood, from innocence to fertility. The betrothal itself included reference to the woman's fertility. The legally binding moment came when the father gave his daughter to "sow", for the procreation of legitimate children.[14] The parents would then agree a dowry that, together with resources from the groom, would form the basis of the household. The emphasis upon fertility only increased when in 451 BCE, Pericles persuaded the Athenian *polis* to change the law regarding citizenship. Under the new law, only male children born of both an Athenian father and Athenian mother could become a citizen.[15] Among other effects, this led to a limited choice of potential wives and thus to increased domestic distress. Husbands could conduct adulterous affairs with single women, especially aliens – known as

[7] Marilyn A. Katz, "Daughters of Demeter: Women in Ancient Greece," in Renate Bridenthal, Susan Mosher Stuard and Merry E. Weisner, eds, *Becoming Visible, Women in European History, 3rd edition*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 50.
[8] Sarah Pomeroy, Stanley M. Burstein, Walter Donlan and Jennifer Tolbert Robert, *A Brief History of Ancient Greece: Politics, Society and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 116.
[9] Sophocles, *Antigone*, in MacKendrick 156–7.
[10] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* in *Four Plays*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: Meridian, 1994) 356
[11] A.W. Gomme, "The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries," *Classical Philology* 20.1 (1925) 10
[12] Xenophon, "On Household Management", reproduced in Lisa Di Caprio and Merry E. Weisner, eds, *Lives and Voices: Sources in European Women's History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001) 52.
[13] Katz 65.
[14] Pomeroy 159
[15] Pomeroy 146

metics – and courtesans – *hetaerae*.[16] Pericles himself had a metic consort, Aspasia.[17] That this relationship was accepted, albeit grudgingly, by the other men of the Athenian *polis* suggests that it was a common occurrence. Women had no such release. A woman who was adulterous threatened the structure of society by putting the paternity of her children into dispute. Her husband would divorce her, sending her back to her birth family in disgrace, and she would be banned from taking part in the religious ceremonies of the state. In effect, she would become a non-person, denied even the limited role in society of other women.[18] A woman whom a husband abandoned or divorced, for whatever reason, had little recourse. Although it is undoubtedly an extreme case, the wrath of Medea in Euripides' play, suggests the deep despair many women must have felt at such abandonment.[19]

While Athenian women had no official role in politics, they did maintain a limited role in the public sphere. They took part in religious ceremonies and were responsible for the ceremonies surrounding death and mourning. *Lysistrata* also suggests that they could influence their husbands through their feminine wiles to make political decisions of which they approved. It was in religious ceremonies that women were most active. They took part in the Panathenaic festival to Athena every four years and in the Eleusian Mysteries. Some festivals and religious ceremonies were even dominated or restricted to women, especially those relating to Demeter, Goddess of fertility.[20] Dionysian cults in particular attracted women, often to the unease of men. Euripides reflects upon this in *The Bacchae*.[21] Dionysus visits Thebes and lures the womenfolk to abandon their looms and take part in his ecstatic rites. King Pentheus objects to these bacchic rites and the loss of control. The women find him attempting to infiltrate the rites and, in a haze of madness, rip him to shreds. How chilling it must have been to the male audience in the theater of Athens to contemplate their women running wild, insane under the control not of their husbands but of a capricious deity.

The rites associated with death and mourning were also the province of women. Sophocles illustrated this in his *Antigone*, in which the sisters of Polynices discuss breaking the laws of King Creon in order to give their brother proper funeral rites. Obedient Ismene does not dare to break the laws of man, stating, "Women […] should not strive with men […] and so must yield to men in this." Antigone, however, recognizes the importance of her role in obeying the laws of the Gods, and commits to performing "righteous deeds" to "please the dead" despite the threat to her own life.[22] To women, shut out of so much of communal life, the rites in which men allowed them to take part must have been deeply significant. In mundane life, they were deemed automatically inferior, but in the realm of the spiritual, of the ritual, they could come into their own. It is easy to imagine that, like Antigone, they guarded these few concessions carefully.

The position of women in many Greek cities mirrored the situation in Athens. Only in Sparta was there a significant difference. Women outnumbered men and as the men spent all their time in the *Agoge* or in the barracks, women dominated the day-to-day life of the city. Unlike their Athenian counterparts, Spartan women learned to sing, dance and take part in athletics. To produce the best and most healthy sons, society encouraged them to be competitive and fit. The "strapping" figure of the Spartan Lampito in *Lysistrata* – although undoubtedly an exaggerated stereotype – contrasts sharply with the more 'normal' Athenians.[23] Lampito, like other Spartan women, could also move about easily. In the ultra-competitive world of Sparta, women did not live in seclusion. While they could not vote, they took an active role in politics, could decide whom (or even whether) to marry and could retain their own property. As an intrinsic part of the Spartan system, they helped to uphold the ideals of the

[16] Katz 66.
[17] Pomeroy 163
[18] Katz 67.
[19] Euripides, *Medea* in MacKendrick, 191.
[20] Katz, 48.
[21] Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. Philip Vellacott, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 2nd edition (London: Penguin, 1973)
[22] Sophocles, *Antigone*, in MacKendrick 157.
[23] Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* in *Four Plays*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: Meridian, 1994) 356.

society, pushing the men, especially their sons, to maintain these ideals.

Women in Classical Greece, especially in Athens at the height of her power, lived under a system of patriarchal control established to diminish the threat of their female natures and to maintain the harmony of a system constructed by and for men. Women existed to provide sons to their husbands, heirs about whom there would be no question of illegitimacy. Men allowed them a role neither in politics nor in the world of commerce; they could not own property and the only means for their expression of communal spirit was in religion. The majority of their life was in the private sphere. Nevertheless, Greek drama suggests that society could not always maintain the ideal and that despite the apparent stability of the system, Athenian philosophers and dramatists such as Euripides were beginning to acknowledge the problems facing women.

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