

The Status of Women in Ancient Athens

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The roles of Athenian women in the fifth century B.C. were primarily those of wife and mother. The Athenians, in their patriarchal society, selected models for women based on the divine and heroic orders. The divine order subjected the female duties to their male counterparts. The heroic order depicted Penelope as the absolute role model for Greek-Athenian women. Other women of literature, like Clytemnestra and Medea, demonstrated the vices of women and what the Greek female should not be. In addition to the role models, good and bad, the Athenians even devised a certain training or regiment for the “perfect wife” of Hellas.

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The Greeks of antiquity remain an enigma, despite the efforts of scholars who have tried to investigate every facet of their civilization. Some scholars have condemned the inhabitants of Hellas because of their inability to unite while others, particularly the 19th century philhellenists, have glorified the Greeks and all things Greek because of their intelligence and because of their creativity in literature, philosophy, history, and the architecture. But, in reality, the ancient Greeks also had special problems.

Our knowledge of the civilization and people in the geographic area called Greece before the beginning of the second millennium B.C. is minimal. The indigenous people or, at least, the people in the area during the third millennium B.C., seem to have been matriarchal and worshipers of a mother goddess as the primary deity. When the Hellenes came—from

whatever direction and at whatever time—they were patriarchal and their primary deity was a sky god. The new people blended with the old and produced a society in which the language and the religion of the new predominated. The resulting language was an Indo-European language with traces of the old language, particularly in the names of places. The resulting religion was not a blend of the two, but an unbalanced combination in which the male aspects of the new religion gained dominance over the female aspects of the old. The same fate befell the Greek people—the patriarchal society of the new people predominated, while the matriarchal society struggled to maintain some identity. In the resulting civilization, the matriarchal and the patriarchal aspects remained at war, as is easily discernible in the religion. Although Zeus and Hera were brother and sister, husband and wife, and king and queen, they were neither friends nor lovers. In fact, in the mythoreligious stories, they were usually hostile opponents.

One of the first literary views of this new religion and society comes from the misogynist Hesiod in the eighth century B.C. According to Hesiod in the *Theogony*, Ge, the earth goddess, produced children who were deifications of features of the physical world. Some of her children were monsters, and others, who were sired by her son Ouranos, were hated by their father. Ge persuaded one of her sons, Cronus, to castrate his father and this particular act was repeated in the succeeding generation of Cronus and his son Zeus. It was Zeus, the establisher of law and order and justice, who prohibited women from an active role in the society of all Greece—except for the role of childbearing, and even this he qualified. It was Zeus who established the patriarchal government on Olympus. He also introduced moral order and culture. He denied power to females; he even took away their sole claim as bearers of children by producing Athena from his head and Dionysus from his thigh.

In the Olympian pantheon, the Greeks, who created their god in their own image and likeness, defeminized the most important of the goddesses. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, was a deity of war, which was a masculine endeavor. Athena was a virgin—which is the denial of her sex. Athena was born of a male and thus was subject to him. Artemis was a virgin, a huntress, and a warrior. Hestia, lacking anthropomorphic attributes and mythological stories, was envisioned only as an old maid, again a denial of her sex. Aphrodite, born of a male, also was the only goddess to commit adultery, as the male did. She was also motivated by sexual love, again like the male. Hera, who was dominated by Zeus, constantly opposed him and lived in a state of eternal watchfulness and a state of permanent war-marriage. The tenets of this godly society embraced human society, as it is against this general background that the society of Athens developed.

A comprehensive and unbiased view of the role of women in Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. is difficult to ascertain. There were no Athenian women writers in that period. There is very little literature of any kind which comes from the middle or lower classes of society. The view of women in Athens in the literature comes from the writings of males from the upper economic class.

Thus, for modern scholars, the women of Athens are as much of an enigma as the Greeks themselves. In Athens, for the most part, women were legal nonentities whom the Greek male excluded from any participation in the political or intellectual life of the city. Generally, the women did not attend school and did not learn to read and write. According to one scholarly view, they were uneducated except for domestic training; they were virtually imprisoned in their homes. The principal spokesmen of fifth century Athens, for example, Pericles and Thucydides, disdained Athenian women. Other scholars, like Lacey and Ehrenberg, take a less sanguine position. Yet, as A. W. Gomme pointed out, "There is, in fact, no literature, no art of any country, in which women are more prominent, more carefully studied and with more interest, than in tragedy, sculpture, and painting of fifth century Athens."¹ Actually, in classical Athens, women fulfilled various roles in society which the male Athenians viewed as either "good" or "bad." The two primary good roles played by women were those of wives and of mothers. Among the bad roles were those of lovers, rebels, and witches.

The ideal wife for the Athenian male appears first, not in real life, but in the primary literature of the Western world. In the first book of the *Odyssey*, Homer depicts Penelope as the epitome of the Greek wife. As she enters the epic, she descends the stairway not alone but accompanied by two servants. Then, weeping, she addresses Phemios the singer with an order to sing of the deeds of men and gods—a happy tune—not the sorrowful ones. She states that she is affected by an unforgettable grief, and that is because Odysseus is gone (I, 330-359). She ultimately retreats within the house and then cries herself to sleep (360-364). In Book XIX, the prudent Penelope encounters Odysseus—at this point a stranger—but again she is not alone, for Eurynome, her housekeeper, is with her. In lines 124-163, Penelope details here constancy and faithfulness to Odysseus and relates her three-year ruse and ultimate discovery. She has finished the robe—unwillingly and under duress. At the beginning of Book XXI(2), Penelope is again the prudent wife accompanied by her serving women. She wept aloud for her lost husband in line 56; again, in line 330, it is the prudent Penelope who weeps for her dear husband. Even in Book XXIII it is the prudent Penelope who is slow to accept the return of that same dear husband. In the recognition scene of that same book, she weeps for joy and is most eager to respond to the invitation of her husband, "Let us go to bed, my wife, so that now we may lie down and take pleasure beneath sweet sleep" (254-255). The ultimate model Athenian wife and husband reveal themselves in the persons of Penelope and Odysseus in lines 299-373. In the conversation between husband and wife, Penelope asserts that she has remained chaste, unviolated, and faithful to her husband. Odysseus has warred, adventured, and has enjoyed the intimate company of both Circe and Calypso. The dutiful wife accepts the absence and adultery as her husband drifts off into sleep. She, Penelope, was the model and ideal for all Athenian women and for all Greek women to emulate. She was the perfect wife.

The Athenians, once there existed a role model, trained or hoped to train their

wives. And so it was that Xenophon in the *Oeconomicus*, Books VII-X, outlined the way to train a new bride. According to Xenophon, the proper age for the Athenian bride was 15 or a little less. She was expected to be a person who knew and saw and said as little as possible. The most important virtue which she was to bring into her marriage was the ability to control her appetite. The translation of the word "appetite," which appears in the Loeb edition, is a little ambiguous (VII, 6). The word employed by Xenophon properly means stomach or belly. Moderation, then, in and control of the intake of food was most desirable. It seems that, even in antiquity, obese wives were not in favor with husbands, either because of esthetics or perhaps because of the expense.

The province of the wife—according to Xenophon—is the house, and her training must be in respect to the indoors and the care of the household. She must bear children, rear children, be discreet, practice self-control, manage the house, supervise the slaves, and be able to weave and to teach the slaves the art of weaving. She must take care of the ill in the house, keep an orderly home, show total and immediate obedience to her husband, and get her daily exercise through work in the house. Two observations made by Xenophon are especially noteworthy. He states: "The better partner you prove to me and the better guard of the house to our children, the greater will be the honor paid to you in our home" (VII, 42). He continues, "For it is not through outward comeliness that the sum of things good and beautiful is increased in the world, but the daily practice of the virtues" (VII, 43). The Athenian woman must be the perfect Penelope—a partner to the husband, a guard of the house, and one who practices the virtues defined by her husband. Physical beauty was not to be a goal, nor was it even a primary valued attribute. Total dedication to the welfare of husband, children, and household was the ultimate virtue.

Three additional "wives" from literature illustrate the virtues and vices of the Athenian matron. Alcestis, the one of Euripides, is the epitome of the self-sacrificing wife who possesses the virtues and the training of a good wife. Euripides depicts throughout the *Alcestis* a woman who is strong, dutiful, and pious in the eyes of her servants. She is a woman who prays for her children, honors her gods, and is almost incapable of departing from the marriage bed where her maidenhood was undressed (177). She is so dedicated to her husband that she alone offers to give up her life so that her husband may live.

Phaedra, quite another kind of wife in the *Hippolytus*, demonstrates the concerns of a proper mate. Reputation must be preserved above all, as Phaedra teaches in her "shame" speech (373-430). When Phaedra fell in love with Hippolytus, she decided that silence and concealment were the best plan. Then, discretion and good sense followed. Ultimately, the final solution was death, and she says, "It would always be my choice to have my virtues known and honored" (402-403). She continues, "I cannot bear that I should be discovered a traitor to my husband and my children. God grant them rich and glorious lives in Athens . . . and from their mother an honorable name" (420-423). Reputation is what

Euripides makes most important for the woman, and if this is lost, then the result should be like the end of Phaedra.

Clytemnestra, as characterized by Aeschylus, embodies what a wife should not be—a totally rebellious and fear-inspiring wife. Throughout the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is the wife of the king, the mother of Orestes, and exactly what she should not be—as the chorus reveals in line 351: “My lady, you speak like a man.” She describes herself in lines 606-609: “as faithful as he left, a watchdog at his door, knowing one loyalty, to enemies implacable, in all ways unchanged.” She calls herself in Greek “*domaton cyna*.” The word *cyon* has possibly been mistranslated or misunderstood as a watchdog. The primary meaning of the word is bitch, and in Homer it is a word of reproach for women—a word which denotes shamelessness and audacity. In the *Iliad* (VI, 344, 356), Helen applies this word to herself; Iris applies it to Athena in VIII, 423, and Hera applies it to Artemis in XXI, 481. This speech of Clytemnestra can be given two distinct interpretations. Not only does she depict herself as faithful, knowing one loyalty, implacable to her enemies, and watchdog of the house; she also embodies the negative aspects of each of these in her sentiments toward Agamemnon. She is masculine, rebellious, and fear inspiring, a true “*domaton cyon*.”

The second role for women in Athens was that of mother. To the Athenian, as Xenophon pointed out in the *Oeconomicus*, the primary duty of an Athenian wife was to produce Athenian children. Soranus, though he practiced medicine some centuries after the Golden Age of Athens, states in the *Gynecology* that “women are married for the sake of children and succession, and not for mere enjoyment” (34). Women are fit to conceive, according to Soranus, between the ages of 15 and 40, if they are not mannish, compact, and oversturdy, or too flabby and very moist. Thus, the primary duty of Athenian women of childbearing age was to produce little Athenians with or without pleasure.

The worst mother of all, magnificently depicted by Euripides in the *Medea*, clearly demonstrated to the Athenians what a mother should not be. Medea and Jason went to Corinth with children. At the opening of the play (112), Medea expresses her attitude toward her children: “You accursed sons of a mother who knows nothing but hate, damn you, your father, and you whole house.” Although she was a mother and at one time evidently loved her children, Jason’s rejection of her clearly changed everything into hate. She murders her children because of that rejection; she prefers herself to her husband and children and their welfare.

The negative roles of women in Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. included the adulteress, the rebel, and the witch. All three of these roles confronted the superiority of the man and endangered his dominance. The Athenian men operated under a double standard. Married men were like Odysseus, free and even expected to be sexually active outside marriage. Again, in literature, this appears in the epic poem of the blind poet of Chios(?). Homer states that his *Iliad* concerned the wrath of Achilles and the war against Troy. He could have stated that the cause was a woman or possibly the possession of a woman. Helen

and her adultery were the causes of the Trojan War, but the role of Paris and his responsibility are not stated so strongly. As the *Iliad* continues, it is again the possession of a woman that caused the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles. It is the right of Agamemnon and of all the Greek heroes to have company in their tents even if technically the act is an adulterous one. Agamemnon pushes the right to the limit, for he returns home to Greece with his traveling companion Cassandra, who was selected not necessarily because of her jovial personality and grasp of the present. In contrast, Clytemnestra received condemnation from the outset of the *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus for her association with Aegisthus. But Agamemnon acts in the tradition of the Greek world, following in the footsteps of Zeus and Odysseus. This practice was established in the divine world and it carried over into the heroic world from where it finally made its way into real life and received legal sanction. Diogenes Laertius (II, 26) reports an Athenian law which permitted Athenian men to marry one Athenian woman and have children by another. He states: "For they say the Athenians, because of the scarcity of men, wished to increase the population, and passed a vote that a man might marry one Athenian woman and have children by another." Sarah Pomeroy points out that Callias, Socrates, and Euripides each had two wives, and that Myrto was the mother of the two sons of Socrates, who were still children in 399 B.C.² The law stated nothing about Athenian women having two husbands or the legitimacy of an Athenian woman being married to one Athenian male and having children by another. Implicit in this is the mistaken conception that lack of children must be the fault of the female. The double standard permitted the male to do whatever he desired, while the female had to remain forever faithful. Although there were as many reasons for the Athenian woman to commit adultery as existed for the male, the wife could legally be punished, whereas the husband did not get the attention of the law.

Aristophanes, Aeschylus, and Euripides created women who rebelled against their powerless position. In the *Lysistrata*, the women are faced with a war that drags on eternally. They have neither political power nor influence. There is but one weapon in their control and that is their own sexuality. Lysistrata, an Athenian, and her friends from other city-states are rebels and, although this is a comedy, it is a caricature of real life. Otherwise, there would be no humor. Aeschylus created the archenemy of the husband, Clytemnestra, who was in open rebellion. Euripides created his Medea, and she took her rebellion to the furthest extent—the murder of her children. Lysistrata and her friends withdrew from the marriage act, and, although this was a serious transgression to the minds of their husbands, it did not injure anyone. Clytemnestra contemplated and accomplished the death of her husband. Without consideration of motivation, the act was murder, but, like everything else, there were degrees of murder. The murder of a husband was not the murder of a blood relative. To the Greeks of antiquity, the taking of a blood relative's life exceeded the murder of anyone else. The most horrendous crimes were those committed by Medea. She murdered her brother

and her children. She must have represented the most rebellious and the most criminal of women. These three Athenians wrote for their time and for their audiences. They dealt with the problems of their day. These problems of the Athenians, as depicted in the *Lysistrata*, the *Oresteia*, and the *Medea*, all concerned women and women in rebellion.

Athens was the enlightened city of classical times. In this democracy, the city of almost 500,000 souls at its height had fewer than 15 percent of its people as citizens with equal and full rights. The slaves were powerless and not part of the citizen body. The *metics*, though in Athens for generations, had only limited rights. Children were in the power of their parents. Even among children there was a serious distinction; a boy child was considered of much more value than a girl. And women—the wives and mothers of the Athenians—were necessary but only as tools and instruments.

Hipponax of Ephesus (sixth century B.C.) wrote, “The two best days in a woman’s life are when someone marries her and when he carries her dead body to the grave” (Fragment 68, West). Sophocles, an Athenian male of the fifth century B.C., more succinctly states the condition of women in his city. In a fragment of the *Tereus* (583), he wrote: “But now outside my father’s house, I am nothing, yet often have I looked on women’s nature in this regard, that we are nothing. Young women, in my opinion, have the sweetest existence known to mortals in their fathers’ homes, for their innocence always keeps children safe and happy. But when we reach puberty and can understand, we are thrust out and sold away from our ancestral gods and from our parents. Some go to strange men’s homes, others to foreigners, some to joyless homes, some to hostile. And all this once the first night has yoked us to our husbands, we are forced to praise and say that all is well.”

NOTES

1. A. Gomme, “The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries,” *Classical Philology*, January-October 1925, p. 4.
2. Sarah Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, New York: Schocken, 1975, p. 67.