

GODDESSES, WHORES, WIVES, AND SLAVES

Women in Classical Antiquity



SARAH B. POMEROY

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as has been suggested, turn to other women in desperation, due to men's disparagement of them. Rather, it appears that they could love other women in milieux where the entire society cherished women, educated them comparably to men of their class, and allowed them to carry over into maturity the attachments they had formed in the all-female social and educational context of youth.

The women poets were not unique, for their works allude to groups of women involved in literary pursuits. Sappho mentioned other women poets in Lesbos, and Corinna addressed some of her lyrics to "white-robed Boeotian women." In Rhodes, the philosopher Cleobulus in the sixth century B.C. advocated that girls be educated, and his daughter, Cleobuline, in imitation of her father, was able to compose riddles in verse.⁶³ As far as can be determined, the educated women of Archaic Greece were all members of the upper class. Unlike some men of the Archaic period, they did not write poetry because they were lame, or angry at political or social issues. Rather, the poetry of the women is the product of leisurely contemplation. It is interesting that there are no traces of literary activity among Athenian women. The city whose men would be responsible for the most notable artistic creations in Classical Greece produced no female artists.

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WOMEN AND THE CITY OF ATHENS

IN THE sixth century B.C. the Athenian lawgiver Solon institutionalized the distinction between good women and whores. He abolished all forms of self-sale and sale of children into slavery except one: the right of the male guardian to sell an unmarried woman who had lost her virginity. As part of his extensive legislation covering many aspects of Athenian life, Solon regulated the walks, the feasts, the mourning, the trousseaux, and the food and drink of citizen women. He also established state-owned brothels staffed by slaves, and made Athens attractive to foreigners who wanted to make money, including craftsmen, merchants, and prostitutes. In the Classical period, Solon's laws continued to exert tremendous influence over the lives of Athenian women.

I would attribute this legislation neither to misogyny nor to Solon's homosexuality. These regulations, which seem at first glance antifeminist, are actually aimed at eliminating strife among men and strengthening the newly created democracy. Women are a perennial source of friction among men. Solon's solution to this problem was to keep them out of sight and to limit their influence. Furthermore, much of this legislation—including the limitation on ostentatious funerals (for which large numbers of women would be employed as paid mourners) and the regulation of feasts, trousseaux, and food and drink—was sumptuary in nature and intended to curb the power of the aristocracy in Athens of the late Archaic period.

The Dispute over Status

Whether Solon's regulations improved the status of citizen women or detracted from it is debatable. Clearly, as members of the citizen class, they advanced over those people living in Athens who were not considered citizens. Yet their advance was predicated on the status loss of lower-class women: the slaves who staffed the brothels. And the status of citizen women and men relative to each other poses still another question, which scholars tend to answer with excessive subjectivity.

While there is general agreement that politically and legally the condition of a woman in Classical Athens was one of inferiority, the question of her social status has generated a major controversy and has become the focus of most recent studies of Athenian women.¹ Opinions range from one extreme to the other. Some scholars hold that women were despised and kept in Oriental seclusion, while others contend that they were respected and enjoyed freedom comparable to that of most women throughout the centuries—we may add: "at least before the advent of the women's movement." Still others think that women were kept secluded, but in that seclusion were esteemed and ruled the house.

The first position is succinctly stated by F. A. Wright in a book published in 1923 and obviously influenced by the wave of feminism which culminated in the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. This book was reissued in 1969 and now appears quaint in its blatant polemicism:

The fact is—and it is well to state it plainly—that the Greek world perished from one main cause, a low ideal of womanhood and a degradation of women which found expression both in literature and in social life. The position of women and the position of slaves—for the two classes went together—were the canker-spots which, left unhealed, brought about the decay first of Athens and then of Greece.²

In reaction to those who considered the life of an Athenian woman little better than that of a harem slave, other scholars asserted that despite her formal handicaps the Athenian woman was neither despised nor secluded. Most modern treatments taking this position go back to the radical essay of A. W. Gomme published in

1925.³ The many advocates of Gomme's position include Moses Hadas and H. D. F. Kitto.⁴ These scholars, no less than Wright, were the victims of their own times and social backgrounds. Inspired by their admiration for the Athenians, they were reluctant to believe that the Athenians might not have treated their wives the way cultivated gentlemen in the twentieth century treat theirs. Furthermore, they had no inkling that many wives of such cultivated gentlemen were bitterly dissatisfied with their lot.

Two contemporary scholars who subscribe to neither of these extremes of opinion are Victor Ehrenberg and W. K. Lacey.⁵ For example, they call attention to a life spent mostly inside a dark, unsanitary house and to women's lack of access to the educational values of Athenian life. Ehrenberg believes that women did not attend the theater. But Lacey points out that the Athenians were extremely protective of their women, and seclusion may be viewed as the handmaiden of protection.

The wide divergence of scholarly opinion is puzzling, and cannot be attributed to sexist bias—for male partiality can be detected on both sides of the argument, and Lacey is the only one who is aware of modern concepts of women's emancipation.⁶ The principal reason for the two viewpoints lies in the genre of the evidence consulted. Gomme and his followers, relying predominantly, or exclusively, on the evidence from Classical tragedy, and believing that the heroines were modeled directly on Athenian women of the fifth century B.C., determine that women were respected and not secluded. Lacey, who explicitly rejects the testimony of tragedy as not representative of normal people in a normal family, and Ehrenberg, who accepts only Euripides, while finding Sophocles and Aeschylus less close to reality, paint a sorrier picture of the position of women.

Lacey and Ehrenberg rely heavily upon the Attic orators, while the majority of the followers of Gomme, in contrast, scarcely cite them. Hadas gives the reason that speeches are too polemical and present a one-sided, abnormal picture. The evidence from comedy is less decisive, and is cited in support of both positions.

The preceding brief survey has demonstrated that the question of the social status of women is part of a larger dispute concerning the appropriate source of evidence for women's life in Athens. The critical factor appears to be the heroines of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The scholars who consider Antigone and Electra, for example, as "real" evidence for women of the fifth century B.C. will believe

that the status of women was high. On the other hand, evidence from orators and other prose writers points usually to a low status, while comedy and Euripides give ambiguous testimony. The scholars surveyed do not give equal weight to all available evidence, but deliberately exclude or explain away the literature not supporting their positions. Moreover, archaeological evidence is not widely used; Ehrenberg even cautions against trusting isolated pieces of material evidence.

I feel that the issue of status is in itself misleading, and that the broad range of scholarly opinion results from treating women as an undifferentiated mass. It is also blurred by the unconscious tendency to view the ancient world in terms of modern values. Unless both the sphere of action and the class of women in that sphere are defined, the discussions about status will continue to fail to come to a consensus. The archaeological evidence from Athens of the Dark Age and Archaic period examined in Chapter III showed rigid distinctions between male and female roles, but that was all it showed. The Athenians of the Classical period continued to hold rigid expectations of proper behavior according to sex, but, because there is more material available, we can see that they also applied different standards to different economic and social classes of women and men, according to the categories of citizens, resident foreigners (*metics*), and slaves. Behavior appropriate to one group of women detracted from the status of another group, and this distinction was confirmed by the laws attributed to Solon.

Political roles in Classical Athens must be considered in terms of duties rather than rights. Obligations to family and state were the strongest compulsion in the lives of citizens, both male and female. The principal duty of citizen women toward the *polis* was the production of legitimate heirs to the *oikoi*, or families, whose aggregate comprised the citizenry. Every generation the members of the *oikoi* were charged with the perpetuation of the cults of their ancestors as well as the maintenance of the lines of descent. In effect, the interest of the state coincided with the interest of the family in seeing that individual families did not die out.

Epiklēroi

Women as well as men could serve the state in preserving the independence of the *oikoi*. In families in which a son was lacking, the

daughters were responsible for perpetuating the *oikos*. In such a family the daughter was regarded as "attached to the family property"; hence her name *epiklēros*. The family property went with her to her husband, and thence to their child. This arrangement shows that although males were preferred to females, succession at Athens was not strictly agnatic in the sense that only males were legally able to inherit, although the *epiklēros* never truly owned her father's property. It was the duty or privilege of the nearest male kinsman to marry the heiress. The order of succession to the hand of the heiress was the same order in which the male kinsmen would have succeeded to the father's estate if there had not been any heiress at all, i.e., brothers of the deceased, then sons of brothers of the deceased; there is some ambiguity as to whether the estate—and the hand of the heiress—then went to sons of the sisters of the deceased or to grandsons of brothers of the deceased. The disparity in the ages of the resulting married couple was not a factor, as long as they were capable of reproduction.

The bizarre ramifications of the epiklerate are too numerous to be fully investigated here.⁷ An heiress might have already been married at her father's death, and not necessarily to the nearest male kin. Whether the next-of-kin had the right to dissolve the marriage of a married heiress is debatable. The consensus of scholarly opinion is that the marriage could be dissolved only if it had not produced a son, for if the *epiklēros* had a son her property was destined for him. However, this has not been satisfactorily proven.

The amount of wealth that accompanied the heiress was the significant factor in attracting the next-of-kin. A wealthy heiress generated lively competition. We know of at least two men who divorced their wives in order to marry heiresses, both providing for the remarriage of their ex-wives.⁸ Andocides, in his speech "On the Mysteries" in 400 B.C., alleged that the serious charge of profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries was framed against him in order to divert him from claiming the hand of a rich heiress. A poorer heiress may have inherited nothing more than her father's debts. The state obliged the next-of-kin to marry her himself, or to provide her with a dowry sufficient to attract a husband.⁹

The stipulations regarding Athenian heiresses appear much harsher than those at Sparta and Gortyn (see pp. 40–41). In Sparta only unmarried girls were subject to the laws concerning heiresses,¹⁰ and in Gortyn an heiress could free herself of the obligation to marry

by relinquishing part of her inheritance. But if it is at all valid to comment on the Athenian treatment of the heiress, it is reasonable to point out that the regulation that seems cruel and mercenary in the case of the wealthy heiress is protective and charitable in the case of the poor woman, who without the attraction of a dowry would remain husbandless and pitiful. A brief statement by Aristotle implies that the regulations for resident foreigners (metics) in the matter of inheritance and heiresses were similar to those for citizens, inasmuch as he stated that legal actions concerning estates and heiresses which the archon (a chief magistrate) initiates in the case of citizens are similarly introduced by the polemarch (a magistrate with jurisdiction over actions involving persons who are not Athenian citizens) in the case of metics.¹¹

Dowry, Marriage, and Divorce

As a logical consequence of the woman's duty to Athens, marriage and motherhood were considered the primary goals of every female citizen. The death of a young girl often elicited lamentations specifically over her failure to fulfill her intended role as a wife. Epitaphs express this feeling, and some vases of the shape used to transport water for a prenuptial bath mark the graves of girls who died unwed. The dead maiden is portrayed dressed as a bride on these memorial *loutrophoroi* vases.

Citizen women were perpetually under the guardianship of a man, usually the father or, if he were dead, the male next-of-kin. Upon marriage a woman passed into the guardianship of her husband in most matters, with the important limitation that her father, or whoever else had given her in marriage, retained the right to dissolve the marriage.¹² If the husband predeceased the wife, the guardianship of her dowry and perhaps of her person passed to her sons if they were of age, or to their guardians. If a widow had no children, she would return to the power of her original guardian or his heirs. A widow was protected by the archon, who could prosecute offenders in her behalf.

Responsible fathers in Classical Athens did not raise female babies unless they foresaw a proper marriage for them at maturity. The initial consideration of the father was financial. Custom dictated that a dowry commensurate with the father's economic status be

provided for a woman's maintenance. Vase paintings representing women seated on clothing chests allude to the dowries possessed by brides.¹³ A father would not raise more girls than he could provide with dowries, and larger dowries tended to attract wealthier and more desirable suitors. In cases where the father had not shown proper foresight or had suffered reverses, dowries were contributed from other sources. The wealthy frequently dowered their poorer relatives. We are told without further explanation that the law required that dowries be provided for poor girls of even passably attractive appearance, and a few times Athens provided dowries for daughters of men who had served the state.¹⁴ Lack of a dowry gave a hostile orator a chance to assert that no legal marriage had taken place, or gave self-righteous husbands an opportunity to boast that they had been compassionate enough to marry without the promise of a dowry.¹⁵ The marriage of the dowryless Elpinice to Callias was exceptional, for he was very wealthy and could overlook the dowry in his desire for a marriage alliance with a poor branch of the noble family of Phileidae. There may have been women of citizen origin who lacked dowries or guardians to arrange marriages for them, and who were thus compelled to become concubines, but our evidence for this group of women is meager.¹⁶ In addition to her dowry, a bride had a small trousseau, limited by Solon to three dresses and some other paraphernalia of little value.¹⁷ The trousseau was usually not included in the dowry, but would customarily remain with her as her personal property at the conclusion of a marriage.¹⁸

The Athenians were protective of their women. A woman's dowry was to remain intact throughout her lifetime and to be used for her support; neither her father, nor her guardian, nor her husband, nor the woman herself could legally dispose of it. Upon marriage, the dowry passed from the guardianship of the father to that of the groom. The groom could use the principal but was required to maintain his wife from the income of her dowry, computed at 18 per cent annually. Upon divorce, the husband was required to return the dowry to his ex-wife's guardian, or pay interest at 18 per cent. Thus her support would continue to be provided for, and, with her dowry intact, she would be eligible for remarriage. A widow, especially if she had increased her property through inheritance from her late husband, would also be an attractive candidate for remarriage.¹⁹

A betrothal was contracted between the guardian of the bride

and the groom or, if the latter was still young, the guardian of the groom. Marriage arrangements were made by men on the basis of economic and political considerations, and girls were always obliged to marry the men their male relatives selected for them. The bride and groom may have never set eyes upon one another, but there were many marriages between first cousins or other relatives, who presumably would have seen each other at such family ceremonies as funerals.²⁰ Marriage to relatives was attractive especially among the wealthier families in democratic Athens, when inroads were constantly made against the fortunes of the wealthy: such marriages provided a way of consolidating the resources of the family, facilitated agreement between parties who knew and trusted each other, gave relatives preferential access to brides, and forestalled enforcement of the law of the epiklerate.

The purpose of marriage was procreation, within the limits of the economic resources of the family. Before the groom joined her on their wedding day, the bride ate a fruit with many seeds, symbolizing fertility.²¹ The birth of a child, especially a son, was considered a fulfillment of the goal of the marriage.²²

A girl was ideally first married at fourteen to a man of about thirty.²³ The necessity that the bride be a virgin, coupled with the ancient belief that young girls were lustful, made an early marriage desirable.²⁴ The husband who married at thirty could well be dead at forty-five, having begotten two or three children within the marriage and leaving his wife a candidate for remarriage. Late marriage of men in Athens can be attributed to their duty to serve as soldiers for ten years, but it appears also to have been an adaptation to the low proportion of females in the population. A young widow could serve as wife in a number of serial marriages. Since marriage was the preferable condition for women, and men were protective of their women, a dying husband, like a divorcing husband, might arrange a future marriage for his wife.²⁵

Divorce was easily attainable, either by mutual consent or through action on behalf of either one of the spouses, and there was no stigma attached.²⁶ When the divorce was initiated by the husband, he was required merely to send the wife from his house. When the wife wished a divorce, she needed the intercession of her father or some other male citizen to bring the case before the archon. There are only three cases known from the Classical period where an Athenian divorce proceeded from the wife's side. Two are from the

fourth century, and were negotiated exclusively among men. The third case was remarkable in that a woman attempted to obtain a divorce on her own initiative. During the stress of the Peloponnesian War, Hipparete attempted to divorce Alcibiades. She left her husband's house and moved in with her brother Callias. She then set off to register her divorce with the archon, evidently unaccompanied by her brother, for at the tribunal she was seized by Alcibiades and forcibly carried back to his house.²⁷

Since children were produced to perpetuate the father's house, they were the property of their father, and remained in his house when marriages were dissolved through death and probably also in cases of divorce. The divorcée or widow was thus entirely free to remarry and to bear children to a new husband.²⁸

The Propagation of Citizens

The parentage determined the eligibility of children for citizenship—not an unusual criterion, save for the ambiguity of Athenian attitudes toward the value of the maternal contribution to the foetus. For instance, Apollo, in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, presented in 458 B.C., states that the mother contributes to conception in a passive way as a receptacle for the father's seed:

I shall explain this—and speak quite bluntly, so note.
She who is called the mother is not her offspring's
Parent, but nurse to the newly sown embryo.
The male—who mounts—begets. The female, a stranger,
Guards a stranger's child if no god bring it harm.
I shall present you evidence that proves my point.
There may be a father, and no mother. Nearby
Stands my witness, the child of Olympian Zeus
Who was not nourished in the dark depths of a womb,
Yet such a child as no goddess could ever bear.²⁹

These statements are understandable in view of the fact that the mammalian ovum was unknown; hence a woman's contribution to a baby was not fully understood. This is why an agricultural society would use a metaphor such as "sowing" for sexual intercourse: the (visible) male semen was held to be the seed, sown in what appeared to them to be a fertile field—but merely a field. However, this view is

contradicted by the contemporary Athenian law which forbade marriage between siblings who had come from a single mother, while children of the same father but different mothers were permitted to marry. A further inconsistency is found in the regulations we have already discussed concerning the *epiklēros*, which encouraged a close degree of inbreeding within the paternal line.

We have instances from the late Archaic and early Classical periods of some of the leading citizens—among them Megacles and Miltiades—being married to foreign women while their children by them were considered to be citizens. The influence of powerful fathers-in-law was desirable from the standpoint of the ruling classes, but not so in terms of Athenian notions of democracy. Yet not until the legislation of Pericles in 451–50 B.C. was it necessary that the mother of citizens be a citizen herself. This law was prompted by the realization that the number of citizens was too greatly increased.³⁰ This same law was later relaxed, at a point in Athenian history when the population had dwindled and it was necessary to increase the number of citizens.

Pericles, in the funeral oration he delivered after only one year of the Peloponnesian War, exhorted married women to bear more children.³¹ The shortage of males became more critical as the war continued. The proportion of women in the city was increased by the departure of a large expeditionary force, consisting of 4,000 hoplites, 300 cavalry, and 100 triremes to Sicily in 415 B.C. Moreover, the occupation of Decelea in 411 B.C. forced the Athenians to fight throughout the year, rather than, as previously, only in the summer. Evidence of the continuing shortage of men can be found in the arming of slaves and in the abnormal deployment of knights for the naval battle of Arginusae.³²

One effect on women was that fewer potential husbands were available. This concern is voiced in 411 B.C. in *Lysistrata*.³³ The corollary to the dearth of husbands naturally would have been a decrease in the number of legitimate sons born. The diminution would have been intolerable, in a state engaged in a lengthy war. Therefore, owing to the lack of husbands, and the need to increase the population, the Athenians stretched the concept of legitimacy. As Diogenes Laertius 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." This practice, then, explains the stories that Cal-

lias, son of Hipponicus (see p. 81), and 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.³⁴ Though bigamy was not normally tolerated in Athens, temporary bigamy was a necessary and expedient response to the high wartime mortality rate of males, the excess number of women, and the need to replenish the population.³⁵

In these three known cases of bigamy, all the wives were Athenian citizens. However, since the chief requirement of the citizenship law had been Athenian parentage on both sides, and citizenship had not been predicated on actual marriage, the relaxation of this law may imply that foreign women were now permitted to be mothers of Athenian citizens. In other words, what was new in this period was not so much the fact of legal bigamy—although it is important that such legalization entitled the children of the second wife to inherit from their father—but rather that the situation of Athens before 451 B.C. was restored, and Athenian men could marry foreign women and have children who would enjoy the privileges of citizenship.

Some Athenian men may well have preferred foreign women to Athenians. One of the more abominable crimes of the Thirty Tyrants (404–403 B.C.) was that they were responsible for the spinsterhood of Athenian daughters.³⁶ They accomplished this, no doubt, by executing many eligible men who were their political adversaries; and, by continuing to countenance the relaxation of the citizenship law, they were not forcing the surviving men to marry Athenian brides. When the democrats deposed the Thirty in 403 B.C., the citizenship law was reimposed, making Athenian women desirable marriage partners if only because they were once again the sole means of producing children who could be legitimate heirs. (The children produced by the mixed unions preceding the reimposition of the law continued to be considered citizens.)³⁷

Many a play of New Comedy ends happily with the recognition that a young woman of unknown parentage who is about to become a concubine is truly an Athenian citizen and can marry her lover. Foreign women residing in Athens were tempted to pretend they were citizens in order to obtain the security and advantages of marriage to male citizens. The celebrated speech *Against Neaira*, attributed to Demosthenes, is the prosecution, probably in 340 B.C., of a woman who had practiced prostitution as a foreign slave in Corinth, with several notable and wealthy men among her clients.

When freed, she lived in Athens, with the children who had been born to her in slavery, as the legitimate wife of an Athenian citizen. It is indicative of the invisibility acquired by the ex-slave prostitute upon becoming a respectable Athenian wife that her husband in turn was able to pass off her daughter (born in slavery) as a citizen, giving her twice in marriage to citizens, one of whom was no less a personage than the King Archon, a high religious magistrate.

Biology of Motherhood and Demographic Speculations

The average age of menarche, as well as the age of a woman's first marriage, was fourteen.³⁸ J. Lawrence Angel's studies of skeletal remains indicate that the average adult longevity in Classical Greece was 45.0 years for males and 36.2 for females.³⁹ Other sorts of studies give lower figures for both sexes, but all agree that females predeceased males by an average of five to ten years.⁴⁰ Without the intervention of war—which would selectively affect the mortality of males—the sex difference in longevity alone would be responsible for a large ratio of men to women in the population. According to Angel, the interval between childbirths was approximately four years. Allowing for two years of adolescent sterility after menarche, if the typical female died at 36.2, she would have borne five or six children. Angel's examination of female skeletal remains shows an average of 4.3 births per woman, with 1.6 juvenile deaths, resulting in 2.7 survivors per female. According to these calculations, the Athenian population would have increased each generation, and indeed Aristotle stated that Pericles' citizenship law was enacted because of the large number of citizens.

What mechanisms did Pericles use to contain the growth of the population? What proportion of the citizenry was male, what proportion female? How many young men died on the battlefields and were buried en masse or cremated, thus depriving us of the opportunity to analyze their skeletons or read their tombstones? Since there is no way of definitely ascertaining the demography of Classical Athens, what follows is an attempt to reconstruct a puzzle with many of the pieces missing.

Homosexuality, anal intercourse, recourse to prostitutes and slaves or dislike of women, and the preference for a sexually inactive wife continued to be adaptations for population control. There is

little specific information for the Classical period on female contraceptive techniques, but it may be assumed that certain time-honored methods were employed.⁴¹ Abortion was practiced, although those who took the Hippocratic Oath promised never to administer abortifacients. Aristotle distinguished between abortion before and after the foetus felt sensation and had life, by stating that the former was sanctionable but the latter was not.⁴²

Cemeteries bear witness to the high rate of infant mortality. The natural mortality of infants in Classical Athens was so high as to preclude the wholesale practice of infanticide.⁴³ Nevertheless, I think that it was practiced to some extent, for it was necessary in order to limit the population in peacetime, and that more female infants were disposed of than male. We also hear little of twins in Classical Greece and can deduce that usually only one of a pair was raised. Since a baby was not a member of the family until the father made a ceremonial declaration to that effect, the distinction between exposure of the newborn and late abortion was blurred. Theoretically, in order to perpetuate each *oikos* it was necessary that each family contribute at most one daughter to the supply of eligible brides. Through remarriage—which occurred not infrequently during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., and is well documented for the upper classes—a woman could produce heirs for more than one family, and an unmarried man who lacked a son could adopt one to perpetuate his *oikos*. Girls were rarely adopted. The adoption of a niece by the wealthy Hagnias in 396 B.C. may have been a result of the dearth of young men and the surfeit of unmarried women following the disastrous events of the second half of the Peloponnesian War.⁴⁴

It was necessary to have only one male heir. However, for insurance, a family probably would raise more than one son. There was less compulsion for a family to raise more than a single daughter, although some did raise a number of daughters. Extra males did not threaten to increase the population permanently, for many men were killed in war or could migrate to colonies.

After Pericles' citizenship law discouraged marriage to foreigners, if my demographic speculations are correct, there was not a sufficient number of citizen brides for those who survived through whom additional families could be engendered. The citizenship law may have been reimposed because, even in the brief time when it was not in force, a sufficient number of citizen children had been

produced and the war was subsiding. The quotation from Diogenes Laertius (above, p. 66) and Aristotle's statement that the imposition of the citizenship law by Pericles was motivated by the growth in the citizen population show that the Athenians understood that the simplest means of controlling the growth of the population was by increasing or decreasing the number of females who could produce citizen children.⁴⁵ The increase was effected by the relaxation of the citizenship law, the decrease by female infanticide and the reimposition of the citizenship law. In normal times, when citizen men outnumbered citizen women, there were not enough brides for each man to be able to marry.⁴⁶ In unusual periods—for example, during the last quarter of the fifth century B.C., when the male population had been depleted by the many years of war and by the loss of a huge contingent of soldiers in Sicily—some men had legitimate relationships with more than one woman.⁴⁷

It must be recognized that ancient literary sources may merely take note of the children who mattered most: that is, the boys. But a casual survey definitely gives the impression of a preponderance of male children among well-known Athenians. Socrates had three sons, Pericles two legitimate sons and another by Aspasia. Plato had two brothers, one sister, and one half-brother. A study of the propertied and influential families listed in Johannes Kirchner's classical work, *Prosopographica Attica*, shows that, of 346 families, 271 had more sons than daughters and that the ratio of boys to girls is roughly five to one.⁴⁸ These statistics have some significance but cannot be taken at immediate face value, since Herodotus reported that Cleomenes died childless, leaving only a daughter,⁴⁹ and in modern Greece, when a peasant with three sons and two daughters is asked how many children he has, he is likely to answer, "three." We may also observe an oversight in Herodotus' report that before the battle of Salamis, the Athenians asked the rest of the Greek fleet for protection so that they might evacuate their children and women from Attica; but upon arriving in their city the Athenians overlooked the women and actually made a proclamation that each man should save his children and slaves.⁵⁰

Women at Work

By the late fifth century B.C., owing to the need for the safety afforded by city walls, urban living replaced farming for many Athenians. Thus, when one compares Sparta to Athens, it is necessary to remember that the former never comprised more than a settlement of villages, while Athens was one of the largest Greek cities.⁵¹ The effect of urbanization upon women was to have their activities moved indoors, and to make their labor less visible and hence less valued.

Urban living created a strong demarcation between the activities of men of the upper and lower classes, as well as between those of men and women. Men were free to engage in politics, intellectual and military training, athletics, and the sort of business approved for gentlemen. Some tasks were regarded as banausic and demeaning, befitting slaves rather than citizens. Naturally, a male citizen who needed income was unable to maintain the ideal and was forced to labor in banausic employment. Women of the upper class, excluded from the activities of the males, supervised and—when they wished—pursued many of the same tasks deemed appropriate to slaves.⁵² Since the work was despised, so was the worker. Women's work was productive, but because it was the same as slaves' work, it was not highly valued in the ideology of Classical Athens. The intimacy of the discussions between heroines and choruses of female slaves in tragedy and the depictions of mistress and slave on tombstones imply a bond between slave and free, for they spent much time together and their lives were not dissimilar.⁵³

Yet the hostility engendered by women of the leisured class who did not work, but sat at home as idle parasites, is apparent in Xenophon's report of a conversation between Socrates and Aristarchus.⁵⁴ Aristarchus complains that, due to political turmoil following the establishment of oligarchy, fourteen of his female relatives have moved into his house for protection and he cannot afford to maintain them. Socrates suggests that they be put to work; Aristarchus counters that they are freeborn ladies, not accustomed to working. Socrates convinces Aristarchus that labor is not demeaning and that the women themselves would be happier if employed productively. The women are put to spinning and weaving—skills

they had learned as part of a gentlewoman's education, in order to be able to supervise slaves, but which they had never expected to be compelled to use for monetary gain. The result is an improvement in the dispositions of the women, as well as in the attitude of the man of the house toward them. We are led to understand that he kept them at these jobs permanently, and made a profit too. We should keep in mind that Socrates' suggestions for the amelioration of Athenian life were acceptable only to his own small circle, and that his disciple Xenophon was a theoretician, wealthy, and an exile. However, the problems with which Socrates concerned himself were widespread, and had been noted even in the Archaic period in the poetry of Hesiod and Semonides.

Women of all social classes worked mainly indoors or near the house in order to guard it. They concerned themselves with the care of young children, the nursing of sick slaves, the fabrication of clothing, and the preparation of food. The preparation of ordinary food was considered exclusively women's work. During the siege of Plataea, when the city was evacuated, one hundred and ten women were left behind to cook for the four hundred men remaining to defend the city.⁵⁵

The tasks enumerated by Homer for mortal women and goddesses are the same tasks pursued by women in Athens four hundred years later. The only technological advance facilitating women's work that can be detected in urban Athens was the improvement of the water supply in the late sixth century B.C. Transporting water in a pitcher balanced on the head was a female occupation. Because fetching water involved social mingling, gossip at the fountain, and possible flirtations, slave girls were usually sent on this errand.⁵⁶

Women did not go to market for food, and even now they do not do so in rural villages in Greece.⁵⁷ The feeling that purchase or exchange was a financial transaction too complex for women, as well as the wish to protect women from the eyes of strangers and from intimate dealings with shopkeepers, contributed to classifying marketing as a man's occupation.

Wealthier women were distinguished by exercising a managerial role, rather than performing all the domestic work themselves. Xenophon wrote a treatise elevating household management to the status of a science. According to the *Oeconomicus*, the wise husband will teach this science to his young bride. The husband and wife are to have a partnership, he performing the outdoor work, including

bringing food and wool and other commodities, she supervising the transformation of the raw materials into a finished product. The good wife, according to Xenophon, has a favorable relationship with her slaves, but even more onerous duties than they, since she bears the responsibility of caring for the household's possessions. The Socratic principle that knowledge is virtue is given practical application. The wife who masters the science of economics has so greatly improved herself that Socrates pays her the ultimate compliment: he says that she displays "a masculine mind."⁵⁸

Poorer women, even citizens, went out to work, most of them pursuing occupations that were an extension of women's work in the home. Women were employed as washerwomen, as woolworkers, and in other clothing industries. They also worked as vendors, selling food or what they had spun or woven at home. Some women sold garlands they had braided. Women were also employed as nurses of children and midwives. One woman is depicted on a vase as a vase painter, but it is impossible to determine from such a portrayal whether she was a citizen.⁵⁹

An important source for our knowledge of the occupations pursued by women is the dedications that freedwomen made to Athena when they were released from obligations to their former owners.⁶⁰ It was customary to offer a silver cup valued at one hundred drachmas, and lists of the dedicators, with their origins and occupations, survive. The respectable occupations available to these freedwomen are not noticeably more numerous or diverse than those open to citizens.

Although some prostitutes acquired a transitory wealth, few women became rich by working.⁶¹ A few metic women did engage in large-scale financial transactions, but it was very unusual for a citizen woman to do so. Women could not buy or sell land. Athenian law restricted women and minors to contracts valued at less than a *medimnus* of barley (a *medimnus* could sustain a normal family for six days).

In the fifth and fourth centuries, Athenian women could acquire property through their dowries, or by gift, or by inheritance as sisters, cousins, nieces, and aunts, though probably not as mothers. Some women were acutely aware of financial matters, but their property was nevertheless managed by male guardians.⁶² The Athenian provisions are in stark contrast to those of Sparta and Gortyn, which gave women real control over their property.

Education

Direct participation in the affairs of government—including holding public office, voting, and serving as jurors and as soldiers—was possible only for male citizens. The advanced education of a boy concentrated on the art of rhetoric, with the aim of delivering persuasive speeches at public meetings and winning a fine reputation among men. Physical education was also stressed in order to provide the state with strong soldiers. The qualities admired in girls were the opposite from those desired in boys: silence, submissiveness, and abstinence from men's pleasures.⁶³ The statesman Pericles, in his funeral oration delivered in 430 B.C., advised the widows of fallen soldiers that the greatest glory would accrue to the woman who was least talked about by men, whether in complimentary or scandalous terms.⁶⁴ Since citizen girls were not to look forward to the public careers that brought status to men, it was sufficient for them to be instructed in domestic arts by their mothers. While her male contemporary was living in his parents' house and developing mental and physical skills, the adolescent girl was already married and had young children. Thus the discrepancy in the educational levels of men and women, added to the huge age differential between bride and groom, resulted in feelings of condescension and paternalism on the part of the husband, and a marriage characterized by a lack of friendship in the modern sense between husband and wife.

Athenian law of all periods tended to regard the wife as a veritable child, having the legal status of a minor in comparison to her husband. Although males came of age at eighteen, females never did; the childbearing wife was really a child herself. That the husband would rule over the wife and children was considered natural by Aristotle. He deduced that the friendship between husband and wife was "unequal" and that the connubial relationship was based on utility, in contrast to the equitable relationships between men which are the basis of social and political organization. Man and wife need each other, Aristotle admitted, but their relationship was as a benefactor to beneficiary.⁶⁵ Aristotle was describing the patriarchal family of Classical Athens, but his influence was widespread and enduring.

Religion

Religion was the major sphere of public life in which women participated, although it is necessary to remember that at Athens cult was subordinate to and an integral part of the state, and the state, as we have seen, was in the hands of men. Since it would be impossible to survey here all the Athenian cults in which women played a role, we shall examine only three, and these in a limited way: the cult of the Olympian goddess Athena, the Mysteries of Demeter and Korē at Eleusis, and the exclusively female celebration of the Thesmophoria.⁶⁶

Athena Polias was the patron goddess of Athens, and the priestess of Athena Polias was a person of great importance and some influence. The priestesshood was hereditary in the noble family of the Eteoboutadae. Herodotus gives two early indications of the political use of the prestige of the priestess on behalf of democratic factions.⁶⁷ In 508 B.C., when the Spartan King Cleomenes attempted to meddle in Athenian politics by opposing the popular reformer Cleisthenes and approached the shrine of Athena, the priestess reminded him that it was not lawful for Dorians (*sc.* foreigners) to enter. Again, the priestess supported the decision to evacuate Athens before the battle of Salamis in 480 B.C. by reporting that the sacred snake of Athena had already departed from the Acropolis. Inscriptions and dedications honoring the priestesses of Athena are common, especially from the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and some of their names are inscribed on seats in the theater of Dionysus.⁶⁸ Women and men participated in the Panathenaea, a festival celebrated annually on the birthday of Athena, and quadrennially with greater magnificence. From the religious viewpoint, the essential feature of the festival was the sacrificial offering of animals. Preceding the sacrifice was a procession that conducted the sacrificial victims to the altar. The Parthenon frieze depicts women in this procession mingling with men. Of particular note are the young girls, called *kanēphoroi*, who carried sacred baskets in the procession. The *kanēphoroi* were virgins selected from noble families. Their virginity was a potent factor in securing the propitious use of the sacred offerings and sacrificial instruments carried in their baskets. To prevent a candidate from participating in this event

was to cast aspersions on her reputation. High on the list of women around whom—as passive and unwitting objects of insults to be avenged—the course of history has turned is the sister of Harmodius. The sons of the tyrant Pisistratus first invited her to be a basket-bearer and then rejected her, claiming she was unsuitable. This insult to his sister provoked Harmodius and his friend Aristogiton to the act of assassination in 514 B.C., an act that earned them reputations as the liberators of Athens.⁶⁹

Every fourth year at the Greater Panathenaea a new *peplos* (robe) was manufactured to be worn by an ancient image of Athena.⁷⁰ The weaving of the cloth was begun by two of the *arrēphoroi*, who were girls between the ages of seven and eleven, chosen from noble families by the King Archon to perform a variety of religious functions for a year. Other women continued the weaving and embroidering of the *peplos*. For the Panathenaic procession the *peplos* was spread like a sail above a ship on wheels. The Parthenon frieze depicts the presentation of the *peplos* to Athena.

Lesser and Greater Mysteries were celebrated annually at Eleusis in honor of Demeter and her daughter Korē (Persephone).⁷¹ [Plate 8] The rituals in earliest times were connected with the death and rebirth of grain and developed into an allegory of human immortality. The Eleusinian Mysteries survived as the most revered Greek cult until the end of paganism. Yet little is known for certain about the Mysteries, and there is scarcely any indication of the reason for their popularity.

Originally a private family cult of the noble Eumolpidae, the Mysteries came under the control of the Athenian state before 600 B.C. The chief priest, the *hierophantēs*, most exalted of all Athenian priests, was a Eumolpid and held office for life. There were additional male officials, among whom the *dadouchos*, or torchbearer, was next in importance after the *hierophantēs*. He was assisted by a priestess called the *dadouchousa*. Other female celebrants included two priestesses known as *hierophantides*, also Eumolpidae, who held office for life and who could be married. One *hierophantis* served Demeter, the other Korē, and both were the main assistants of the *hierophantēs*. A group of priestesses *panageis* (sacrosanct), also known as *melissae* (bees), lived together in segregated dwellings and had no contact with men. The name “bees” probably alludes to the asexuality associated with these insects (p. 49). The function of these priestesses is unknown.

Rivaling the *hierophantēs* in prestige was the chief priestess of Demeter. She came from the family of either the Phileidae or the Eumolpidae. The priestess of Demeter, like the *hierophantēs*, was paid an obol (a small coin) daily by everyone being initiated into the Lesser or Greater Mysteries. The priestess was eponymous—that is, at Eleusis events were dated by the name of the priestess and her successive years in office.⁷²

All women, men, children, and slaves of Greek speech, untainted by homicide, were eligible for initiation into the Mysteries. The preliminary rites included a bath of purification, fasting, sacrifices, and the drinking of the *kykeōn*, a barley potion. Only female initiates participated in the *kernophoria*, the bearing of the sacred vessels, which was one of the preliminary ceremonies. The initiates also watched women perform sacred dances, in commemoration of the time when the women of Eleusis danced in honor of Demeter. Included in the ritual were recitation, the revelation of sacred objects, and a dramatic performance probably showing the sorrow of Demeter at the abduction of Korē and her subsequent joy at her daughter's return. The priestess of Demeter played the roles of both Demeter and Korē.⁷³ In view of the multiple manifestations of the mother goddess and son-consort dyad throughout antiquity, especially in the Middle East, one may well be astounded at the appeal that a unique religion centering on a mother and daughter held for Athenians.

Another festival honoring Demeter, but strictly reserved for women, was the Thesmophoria.⁷⁴ Unlike the Eleusinian Mysteries, the Thesmophoria never developed into more than an agrarian festival, but it was noted for preserving its ancient rituals without alteration. At Athens the celebration took place at the autumn sowing in order to ensure the growth of the seed grain by means of fertility magic. The precise nature of the rites and the days on which they were enacted are much disputed, but the following interpretation seems plausible.

The Thesmophoria was celebrated for three days. The first day was titled *kathodos* (going down) and *anodos* (rising up). Pigs, which were animals sacred to Demeter, had been thrown into subterranean caves early in the summer, probably at the festival of Demeter and Korē known as the Scirophoria. On the first day of the Thesmophoria, women went down into the caves and recovered the remains of the pigs, which they mixed with seed grain and placed on altars.

The second day was titled *nēsteia* (fasting). The women fasted sitting on the ground, mimicking Demeter's behavior at the loss of her daughter. On the third day, *kalligeneia* (fair birth), the remains of the pigs and seed grain were scattered in the fields.

Only free women of unblemished reputation were permitted to participate in the Thesmophoria.⁷⁵ They were chaste for three days in preparation for the festival and continued to abstain during the course of it. Yet they indulged in the foul language and obscenities characteristic of fertility rituals. The women chose their own officials from among themselves.⁷⁶ Men were involved only to the extent that, if they were wealthy, they were compelled to bear the expense of the festival as a liturgy or tax in behalf of their wives.⁷⁷

The existence of exclusively women's festivals has been variously explained. One hypothesis is that women's cults were survivals from a matriarchal period when all religion was in the hands of women. Another explanation notes that women in early societies were in charge of gardening, and hence involved in fertility cults. Regardless of the social structure, women's connection with birth and fertility is obvious, and it is not difficult to understand the urge to apply women's influence to the crops.

A comparison between Archaic and Classical Athens gives the impression that women were forced into obscurity in the latter period. Certainly there are no stories of respectable women in the fifth century B.C. to compare with those surrounding the members of Pisistratus' court. It may be suggested, on the basis of comparisons between Archaic and Classical Athens and between Athenian and Spartan or Roman society, that some women—at least those of the upper class—flourished in an aristocratic society, while none fared as well under the democracy. The curbing of the aristocrats by the democracy of the fifth century B.C. entailed the repression of all women, but leaned especially heavily on the aristocrats who had the time and the means to make and enjoy displays of wealth. It may also be suggested that after the class stratification that separated individual men according to such criteria as noble descent and wealth was eliminated, the ensuing ideal of equality among male citizens was intolerable. The will to dominate was such that they then had to separate themselves as a group and claim to be superior to all nonmembers: foreigners, slaves, and women.

V

PRIVATE LIFE IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

SOCRATES' BLUNT dismissal of his wife Xanthippe from his deathbed and his desire to die among his male companions is a dramatic, if exaggerated, indication of the emotional gulf between husband and wife.¹ The distance between husbands and wives extended to other spheres. Athenian men and women lived separate lives, and most of our information is about men's lives. It is almost easier to describe the activities of men and then simply say women did not do most of these things.

The Seclusion of Women

The separation of the sexes was spatially emphasized. While men spent most of their day in public areas such as the marketplace and the gymnasium, respectable women remained at home. In contrast to the admired public buildings, mostly frequented by men, the residential quarters of Classical Athens were dark, squalid, and unsanitary.²

Women stayed home not only because their work did not allow them much chance to get out but because of the influence of public opinion. Many families were likely to own at least one female slave,³ but even a woman with slaves was tied down by the demands of her household, husband, and infants.⁴ [Plate 9] Wealthier women were most likely to stay home and send their slaves on errands. But poor

women, lacking slaves, could not be kept in seclusion,⁵ and in fact women found pleasure in the company of other women, for they gossiped while fetching water, washing clothes, and borrowing utensils.

Women of all economic classes went out for festivals and funerals. The close association of women and mourning noted for earlier periods (see p. 43) continued in Classical Athens. In an effort to promote democratization, Solonian legislation had curtailed the participation of women in funerals, for mourning by large numbers of women had been a means for ostentatious families to parade their wealth. The *prothesis* (lying-in-state) formerly held in the courtyard was to take place indoors. Only women over sixty years of age or within the degree of children of cousins were permitted to enter the room of the deceased and to accompany the dead when the corpse was carried to the tomb, following the men in the funeral procession.⁶ Xanthippe's visit to Socrates on the day he was to die was not warmly received, but Socrates' behavior was unusual. When some men were condemned to death by the notorious Thirty, they summoned their sisters, mothers, wives, or other female relatives to see them in prison.⁷

Whether women attended dramatic performances has been much disputed. It seems likely that they did, but the contrary can be maintained with plausibility.⁸ Dramatic festivals evolved from the worship of Dionysus, and all the roles were acted by male actors; but, as Euripides' *Bacchae* demonstrates, women were highly enthusiastic participants in the cult of this god. On the other hand, women who did not have slaves to tend their babies were probably not able to attend a full day's performance, or even to see one play. What is interesting about this controversy is that, numerous though they probably were over the years, the women, absent or present, were not noticed by our ancient authorities.

The separation of the sexes was expressed in private architecture by the provision of separate quarters for men and women.⁹ Women usually inhabited the more remote rooms, away from the street and from the public areas of the house. If the house had two stories, the wife along with female slaves lived upstairs. The sexes were separated to restrain the household slaves from breeding without the master's permission.¹⁰

There are, however, some hints that the usual standards of decorum were breached during the second half of the Peloponne-

sian War. Andocides describes an infamous *ménage à trois* consisting of Callias and two citizen women, one who was his legitimate wife, and the second his wife's mother who became his concubine and eventually bore a son to him.¹¹ The second example is that of Hipparete, the wife of Alcibiades, who does appear to have acted with extraordinary independence when she left his house in order to obtain a divorce.

Another well-born woman whose behavior was unusual was Agariste, the wife of Alcmaeonides. She was one of three witnesses who gave evidence that Alcibiades celebrated the Mysteries in the house of Charmides.¹² That she witnessed this celebration at night and publicly identified several participants is remarkable in view of the constraints on women in times of peace.

Free women were usually secluded so that they could not be seen by men who were not close relatives. An orator could maintain that some women were even too modest to be seen by men who were relatives, and for a strange man to intrude upon free women in the house of another man was tantamount to a criminal act.¹³ In the first quarter of the fourth century B.C., a husband who murdered his wife's seducer gave a vivid picture of his living arrangements:

Athenians, when I decided to marry, and brought a wife to my house, for a while I was inclined not to bother her, but neither was she to be too free to do as she wished. I wanted her as much as was possible, and took my duty as a husband seriously. But when my son was born, I began to trust her, and put all my possessions in her hands, presuming that this was the greatest proof of intimacy.

In the beginning, Athenians, she was the best of all wives. She was clever, economical, and kept everything neat in the house. But then my mother died; and her death was the cause of all my troubles. For when my wife attended her funeral, she was seen by this man, and, as time passed, he seduced her. He looked out for our slave who goes to market and, making propositions, he corrupted her.

Now first, gentlemen, I must tell you that I have a small two-story house, with the women's quarters upstairs, the men's downstairs, each having equal space.

When our son was born, his mother nursed him; but in order that she might avoid the risk of climbing downstairs each time she had to clean the baby, I used to live upstairs and the women below. And so it became quite customary for my wife to go downstairs often and sleep with the child, so that she could give him the breast and keep him from crying.

This was the situation for a long time, and I never became suspicious, but I was so simple-minded that I believed my own was the chastest wife in the city.

Time passed, gentlemen; I came home unexpectedly from the country, and after dinner my son began crying and fretting. Actually, the slave was annoying him on purpose to make him do this, for the man was in the house—as I found out later.

I told my wife to go and give the baby the breast, to stop his crying. At first she refused, as though glad to see me home again after my long absence. Then I became angry and told her to go.

"Oh, yes," she said, "so that you can have a try at the little slave girl here. You dragged her about before, when you were drunk!"

I laughed. She got up, went out of the room, closed the door, pretending it was a joke, and turned the key in the lock. I, thinking nothing about it, nor having the slightest suspicion, was glad to go to sleep after my journey from the country.

Toward dawn she returned and unlocked the door. I asked her why the doors had been creaking during the night. She said that the lamp beside the baby had gone out and she had gone to get a light at the neighbor's.

I was silent, and thought it really was so. But it did seem to me, gentlemen, that she had put makeup on her face, despite her brother's death less than thirty days before. Even so, I said nothing about what she did. I just left, without a word.¹⁴

The speaker, Euphiletus, is defending himself against a charge of premeditated homicide, because he and his friends slew Eratosthenes when he caught his wife in bed with him.

The speech raises a number of suspicions about the motives of Euphiletus. After his wife had given birth to a son, the purpose of their marriage was fulfilled. Euphiletus very carefully points out that his wife's indiscretion began after the child was born, and therefore there can be no doubt about the legitimacy of his son. He moved upstairs and probably was cavorting with the slave girl. He says that his wife accused him of this, and we may consider the charge to be true, or wonder why the mother rather than the slave was cleaning the baby in the middle of the night. Euphiletus may have been able to retain his wife's dowry for his son as a penalty for her adultery, although this is not certain. It would seem, however, that if a cuckolded husband had to surrender the dowry, then he would be penalized for a crime not committed by him; if an adulterous wife was sent back to her relatives without her dowry, they would be pe-

nalized for not having brought her up properly. Euphiletus was a person of moderate wealth. He admits that his house is small; he has only one female slave and does not employ a wetnurse. Even so, he maintains separate living quarters for husband and wife, although the wife sometimes sleeps in her husband's room. (His claim that he did not bother his wife much at first probably is a euphemism for not making sexual demands on her.)

The clothing of respectable women also served to conceal them from the eyes of strange men. Women's clothing was, by modern standards, simple.¹⁵ The material used in Classical times by respectable women was usually wool or linen, but prostitutes wore saffron-dyed material of gauzelike transparency. The style of dress was either Ionian or Dorian. A *himation*, or shawl, was worn with either style and could be drawn over the head as a hood. Since the Ionic *chiton* was confining, it tended to be the garment worn in public, and a shorter tunic was worn around the house and as a nightdress and petticoat. There was a large variety of sandals and slippers. Sandals with thongs between the toes were worn, as well as sandals with straps bound around the lower leg as far as the knee. Some women wore shoes with platform soles to increase their height.¹⁶

Vase paintings show women bathing themselves and attending to various parts of their toilette. They removed their pubic hair by singeing and plucking.¹⁷ Cosmetics were used by housewives as well as by prostitutes. A white complexion was considered attractive, since it proved that a woman was wealthy enough not to go out in the sun. Powder of white lead was commonly used for this, and when women went outdoors they protected themselves from the sun with a parasol. Rouge was used on the cheeks.

Although dress was simple, jewelry and hairdos could be complicated. Women wore their hair loose, surmounted by a coronet or headband, or up in a chignon or net. False curls seem to have been used sometimes. Slaves' hair, however, was usually cropped. Some of the exquisite jewelry can still be admired, since it was preserved along with the bronze mirrors and containers for cosmetics in the graves of the women with whom they were buried.

Some women are portrayed on their tombstones choosing jewelry from a chest proffered by a slave, or adorning themselves with the aid of a mirror. [Plates 10 and 11] In Chapter III we noted the lack of Archaic tombstones commemorating women in Attica.

and ventured to guess that their absence was stimulated by sumptuary laws in force in the sixth century B.C. Since the dress and activities of women are frequently an index to the wealth of their husbands, we are not surprised to find in the burials of women an indication of the family's status and the paraphernalia appropriate to a leisured class.

The Physical Condition of Women

The study of Geometric cemeteries suggested that female deaths increased during the childbearing years (see p. 45). Childbirth was difficult. Medea announced that she would prefer to stand in the front line of battle three times than to give birth to one child.¹⁸ Many women made offerings in gratitude to Eileithyia, goddess of childbirth. The robes of women who died in childbirth were dedicated to Artemis at Brauron,¹⁹ since she was patroness of the life cycle of women—and there are several Classical relief sculptures apparently of women who died in childbirth.²⁰ Beginning in Classical times and continuing through the Roman period, women outnumber men as donors to Asclepius, the god of health.²¹

Mothers and midwives normally assisted women in childbirth.²² There were male physicians, but some examples drawn from Hippocrates' *Aphorisms* do not indicate that their ministry was notably beneficial:

30. Acute illnesses are fatal to pregnant women.

31. Miscarriage follows blood-letting in pregnant women, especially if the foetus is large.

32. If a woman vomits blood, this stops with the onset of menstruation.

41. To determine whether a woman is pregnant, give her a drink of hydromel on retiring when she has not had supper. If she suffers from colic in the stomach she is pregnant; if not, she is not pregnant.

42. A pregnant woman has a good complexion if the child is male; a poor complexion if the child is female.

43. If a pregnant woman has erysipelas of the womb, she will die.

48. A male foetus leans to the right, a female to the left.

49. When a drug that produces sneezing is used to expel the afterbirth, stop up the mouth and nose.

Motherhood at an early age, combined with a life spent indoors, was disadvantageous to the health of the Athenian woman. More children were born in the first half of the twenty-year reproductive period than in the second half, making the period from approximately sixteen to twenty-six years old the most hazardous. It is interesting to recall here Plutarch's approbation of the Spartan custom of having girls marry at eighteen, since they are then in a better physical condition to bear children, although he preferred earlier marriages for other reasons. Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle all believed that Spartan customs concerning women were more wholesome. Xenophon praised the Spartans for nourishing their girls as well as their boys, for it was unusual among the Greeks to do so.²³ This differentiation in nourishment could exist even for suckling newborns. The "mothers' rations" awarded to Ionian women in 489 B.C. in Persepolis were exactly twice as much wine, beer, and grain for women who had given birth to boys as for those who had borne girls.²⁴

Xenophon also approved of the Spartan custom of encouraging women to exercise so that they could maintain a good physical condition for motherhood. The well-developed physiques of Spartan women caused comment among the Athenian housewives in the comedy *Lysistrata*,²⁵ although it may be suggested that performing household chores, especially moving back and forth before the loom, offered an Athenian woman ample opportunity for strenuous exercise.

In the *Republic*, Plato prescribed physical exercise for women and stated that females should become parents for the first time at twenty and males at thirty. Later, in the *Laws*, he reduced the age minimum for females to any time between sixteen and twenty.²⁶

Aristotle suggested that pregnant women be forced to exercise by passing a law that they must take a daily walk to worship the divinities presiding over childbirth. He also noted that it was undesirable for the very young to produce offspring, since more of the babies were likely to be female, and the mothers endured a more difficult labor and were more likely to die in childbirth. He suggested that the optimum age for marriage was eighteen for women, thirty-seven for men.²⁷

Many women did survive the childbearing years, though the fact that there is less information about menopause than about menarche implies that fewer women underwent this experience. The age

of menopause was typically from forty to fifty.²⁸ Solon's Funeral Law, permitting women over sixty who were not close relatives to visit corpses, demonstrates that some women attained old age.²⁹ There were some old men as well, although as a group the elderly formed but a small percentage of the total population.

Sexuality

The sexual behavior of citizen women was regulated by laws—mostly those attributed to Solon, who was himself a homosexual.³⁰ The guardian of an unmarried woman caught *in flagrante delicto* had the right to sell her into slavery. I do not know of any case where this sale actually occurred, whether because the severity of the penalty was a deterrent, or because the father was reluctant to make the scandal in his family public. Since the aim of marriage between citizens was the production of legitimate children, adultery was a public offense because it could result in the introduction of a child unrelated to the husband—and possibly the offspring of a non-Athenian—into the husband's house and kinship-group cults and onto the rolls of Athenian citizens. Both parties were severely punished, but, despite the penalties, cases of adultery are recorded.

Whether adultery came about through rape or seduction, the male was considered the legally guilty or active party, the woman passive. The husband of a raped or adulterous woman was legally compelled to divorce her. The accused woman had no opportunity to proclaim her innocence, though, with difficulty, her guardian might do so in her behalf. A woman thus condemned was not allowed to participate in public ceremonies, nor to wear jewelry, and the most severe deprivation was probably that she would be a social outcast and never find another husband.

The penalties for the male caught in adultery with a citizen woman are indicative of the Athenian attitude toward their households and their women. The penalty for rape was less than for seduction. Seduction was considered a more heinous crime than rape, for it implies a relationship over a period of time during which the seducer wins the affection of the woman and access to the possessions of her husband's household. In a city where only men and male children belonged to families in any permanent sense, but

where women were easily transferred from their fathers' families to those of successive husbands, men were readily suspicious of the loyalty of women to the families in which they found themselves. Therefore, the aggrieved husband had the right but not the obligation to kill the seducer. The rapist gained the enmity of the woman, and thus posed less of a threat to the husband. The penalty for rape was a monetary fine.

Interestingly, Athenian law governing sexual behavior was not limited to what one must not do, but also concerned itself with what one should do. Thus the husband of an heiress was to consort with her three times a month. While this suggests that the main purpose of their union was to produce an heir, Plutarch adds another dimension to the relationship when he says that any husband ought to show affection to a good wife three times a month because the result will be a reduction in marital tensions.³¹

Intercourse thrice monthly was deemed sufficient sexual attention for "good" citizen wives; many wives surely had fewer opportunities. As we have seen, the social segregation of the sexes in Classical Athens and the legal stipulations regarding connubial relations could make sex between husband and wife an obligatory act—fulfilled by procreation—rather than an intimate emotional encounter. In *Lysistrata*, it is true that husbands are brought to their knees by sheer sexual starvation, but this does not contradict the assertion that connubial intercourse was devoid of any concept of spiritual union. If the husband was not away on a military campaign, or enjoying the company of his fellows in homosexual relations, or consorting with prostitutes, he was likely, if he had fathered the requisite number of children, to sleep in separate quarters or with his female slaves, rather than risk his wife's abortion or infanticide. Thus, we may assume that the sexual experience of the majority of Athenian citizen women was not satisfying.

In view of the severe penalties, adultery was not a comfortable or wise alternative for either men or women, and, taking all factors into consideration, the Athenian atmosphere was not conducive to homoerotic relationships between women. Therefore, masturbation seems to have been viewed as an acceptable outlet for women's sexual appetites. [Plate 12] Some vase paintings depict phallic instruments being used by women for self-stimulation, and references are made to such devices by the respectable wives in *Lysistrata*:

LYSISTRATA: This is something I've been tossing about many sleepless nights.

CALONICE: It must be getting thin if you've been wearing it down.³²

In this sex-starved climate, resort to onanism among women would be almost expected. Though Plato invented a fable—attributing the story to Aristophanes—in which he purported to explain the natural origin of female homosexuality,³³ we have no solid evidence of lesbian relationships actually occurring among citizen women. However, we should not take arguments *ex silentio* in matters of ancient history as valid; our sources may simply have not been interested in describing sexual activities other than those of men.

We may, however, weigh the likelihood of lesbianism among the respectable women of Athens against the absence of two important factors present in the societies of Sparta and Mytilene in Lesbos, where we know with some certainty that female homosexuality existed. In Athens, unlike the other cities, women did not generally find high esteem in the eyes of other women; and adolescent Athenian women were not educated in the kind of all-female setting common to Sparta and Lesbos. As we have seen, Athenian women were not only cut off at a very early age from contacts with males, including their husbands, but were most often secluded in the home—away from relations with any women other than their mother and sisters, or their female slaves.

We do know, on the other hand, that prostitutes in Athens enjoyed not only a full range of heterosexual diversions, but homosexual relations as well—again, on the basis of vase paintings showing phallic devices designed for simultaneous use by two women. But the gap between respectable women and prostitutes was so wide that we cannot begin to infer from one group to the other; rather, we must consider the latter a case unto themselves.

Prostitutes

Prostitution flourished in Greece as early as the Archaic period. Large cities, especially those on the coast visited by sailors, supported vast numbers of prostitutes. As we mentioned earlier, one of the means for making Athens an attractive city on the mainland was

the establishment of state-owned brothels to be staffed by slave women.³⁴

Not only slaves were prostitutes. Like any slave, a prostitute could be granted her freedom by her owner, or could arrange to buy her own freedom by contracting a loan from a benefit club sometimes composed of past clients. She would repay the loan from her earnings as a free prostitute.³⁵ In this way many freedwomen and free noncitizen women permanently domiciled in Athens practiced the profession. They had to be registered and were subject to a special tax. Those at the top of this social scale were called *hetairai*, or “companions to men.” Many of these, in addition to physical beauty, had had intellectual training and possessed artistic talents, attributes that made them more entertaining companions to Athenian men at parties than their legitimate wives. It is no accident that the most famous woman in fifth-century Athens was the foreign-born Aspasia, who started as a *hetaira* and ended as a madam, and in the course of her life lived with Pericles, the political leader of Athens. Aristophanes jokingly claimed that due to her influence Pericles started the Peloponnesian War.³⁶ Plutarch was much kinder, and added:

Sources claim that Aspasia was highly valued by Pericles because she was clever and politically astute. After all, Socrates sometimes visited her, bringing along his pupils, and his close friends took their wives to listen to her—although she ran an establishment which was neither orderly nor respectable, seeing that she educated a group of young female companions to become courtesans. Aeschines says that Lysicles the sheep-dealer, a man lowly born and humble of nature, became the most important man of Athens by living with Aspasia after the death of Pericles. Consequently there is a good deal of truth contained in the *Menexenus* of Plato (even if the first part is written with tongue in cheek) when it states that she had the reputation of associating with many Athenians as a teacher of rhetoric. Nevertheless, it appears as if Pericles' affection toward Aspasia was chiefly erotic in its nature. For his legal wife was a close relative of his who had previously been wed to Hipponicus and bore to him Callias, “the Wealthy”; while married to Pericles she bore him Xanthippus and Paralus. Later, as they found living together to be unsatisfactory, with her consent he married her to another man, and he himself took Aspasia and cherished her deeply. The story goes that he would kiss her warmly both when he left for the marketplace and when he returned home each day.

In comedies she is referred to as the new Omphale, and Deianira, and Hera. Cratinus openly called her a whore in the following passage:

"As his Hera, Sodomy bore Aspasia,
A shameless whore."

Moreover, it appears likely that she bore him a bastard son, because Eupolis, in the *Demes*, depicts him as inquiring:

"Does my bastard son live?"

To which Myranides replies:

"Yes, and he would have been a man long ago,
Had he not been afraid of the harlot's evil."³⁷

Modern scholarship contradicts some of Plutarch's assertions. It seems likely that the liaison of Pericles and Aspasia began at least five years after he divorced his wife. She bore one son to Pericles and one to Pericles' successor Lysicles.³⁸

In Plato's *Menexenus*, to be sure not a serious work, we learn that Aspasia composed the funeral oration referred to above (p. 74). The oration includes recommendations for the strict conduct of citizen women, and in the *Menexenus* Aspasia is shown to make much of women's ability to bear and nurse babies.³⁹ These opinions seem unsuitable in the mouth of an educated and liberated woman such as Aspasia, but it is necessary to remember that she made the recommendations for the wives of citizens, not for women like herself.

Married Athenian men were allowed to copulate with prostitutes. Of course, female slaves were also available to their masters or their masters' friends for sexual purposes.⁴⁰ We hear little about the objections of their wives, although Euphiletus' wife bantered her husband about his intimacy with their slave. However, when Alcibiades flaunted his freedom to consort with prostitutes by bringing them into his house, his wife walked out and attempted to get a divorce. She had a very large dowry (ten talents at marriage and ten at the birth of a son) which Alcibiades would have been forced to return if the divorce had been granted. Therefore, when Hipparete attempted to register her divorce with the archon, Alcibiades picked her up bodily and brought her home through the marketplace, with no one daring to oppose him. She continued to live with him until her death not long after.⁴¹ When Alcibiades himself died in exile and dishonor, a faithful courtesan, Timandra, took care of his funeral.

Men were unlikely to marry before the age of thirty, and unmarried men had no opportunities for heterosexual activity except with prostitutes and slaves. Since there seem to have been fewer women than men in the general population at this time, shared women, or prostitutes, were a solution. Some men lived with concubines in a more or less permanent union. When a man lived with a concubine, she was considered his sexual property in much the same way as a legitimate wife. The rape or seduction of a concubine drew the same penalties as offenses committed against a legitimate wife. The important difference between legitimate marriage and less formal unions was that, after the citizenship law of 451-450 B.C., the children of concubines could not be considered citizens and there were also problems about their ability to inherit.

Prostitutes were notoriously mercenary. They were the only women in Athens who exercised independent control over considerable amounts of money. From the time of Rhodopis, the Egyptian courtesan freed by Sappho's brother, prostitutes were credited with using their money in extraordinary ways. Rhodopis was reputed to have supplied the funds to build a pyramid. Herodotus discounts this story, but describes the expensive dedication that he believed she made at Delphi.⁴² This was the first of many Greek stories of lavish prostitutes.

Rhodopis and Aspasia were unusually successful. In the absence of male protectors, the careers of prostitutes were hazardous. Neaira, it is true, managed to raise three children, but it seems likely that prostitutes practiced infanticide to a greater extent than citizen wives. Prostitutes may have preferred daughters to sons so that they might succeed them in the profession. They also bought young slave girls or collected the female newborns exposed by others.⁴³ They trained the girls in their trade, and kept them in brothels to ensure an income for themselves when they were past their prime.

Though the life of the Athenian woman looks bleak from a modern vantage point, especially in contrast to the opportunities available to the Athenian man, we are in no position to judge whether most women were discontented and unhappy. Citizen women were cared for and protected by law, and they had the satisfaction of knowing that their children would be citizens. Through the institution of the dowry, most women enjoyed economic security throughout their lives, and widows and old women were specifically protected by law.⁴⁴ Comedy, although full of

misogyny, also reveals mutual affection in marriage. Women's opinions had some influence, for the prosecutor of Neaira reminds the jury that they will be compelled to answer to their wives, daughters, and mothers if they acquit her.⁴⁵ Although there were slaves in the household, when a wife was away from the house she was sorely missed because children and household needed her attention.⁴⁶ Funerary reliefs show the sorrow of the entire household—husband, children, and slaves—at the death of a wife. The following is an epitaph of the fourth or third century B.C., from Piraeus, the port of Athens:

Chaerestrates lies in this tomb. When she was alive
her husband loved her. When she died he lamented.⁴⁷

Although to a modern woman, the role of neither *hetaira* nor secluded housewife appears attractive, it is tempting for us to idealize the former and to pity the latter.⁴⁸ The *hetaira* had access to the intellectual life of Athens, which we nowadays treasure, and a popular courtesan who was not a slave had the freedom to be with whoever pleased her.⁴⁹ Admittedly our sources are biased, but the fact that we know of some courtesans who attempted to live as respectable wives, while we know of no citizen wives who wished to be courtesans, should make us reconsider the question of which was the preferable role in Classical Athens—companion or wife.

VI

IMAGES OF WOMEN IN THE LITERATURE OF CLASSICAL ATHENS

Women in Tragedy versus Real Women

IF RESPECTABLE Athenian women were secluded and silent, how are we to account for the forceful heroines of tragedy and comedy? And why does the theme of strife between woman and man pervade Classical drama? Before proceeding to complex explanations which are directly concerned with women, it is necessary to repeat the truism that the dramatists examined multiple aspects of man's relationship to the universe and to society; accordingly, their examination of another basic relationship—that between man and woman—is not extraordinary. It is rather the apparent discrepancy between women in the actual society and the heroines on the stage that demands investigation. Several hypotheses have been formulated in an attempt to explain the conflict between fact and fiction.

Many plots of tragedy are derived from myths of the Bronze Age preserved by epic poets. As we have observed, the royal women of epic were powerful, not merely within their own homes but in an external political sense. To the Athenian audience familiar with the works of Homer, not even an iconoclast like Euripides could have presented a silent and repressed Helen or Clytemnestra. Likewise, the Theban epic cycle showed the mutual fratricide of the sons of Oedipus. The surviving members of the family were known to be Antigone and Ismene. Sophocles could not have presented these sisters as boys. In short, some myths that provided the plots of

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Classical tragedies described the deeds of strong women, and the Classical dramatist could not totally change these facts.

Those who believe in the historical existence of Bronze Age matriarchy also propose an answer to our questions: the male-female polarity discernible in Bronze Age myths can be explained by referring to an actual conflict between a native pre-Hellenic matriarchal society and the patriarchy introduced by conquering invaders.

The Bronze Age origin of these myths does not explain why Athenian tragic poets, living at least seven hundred years later in a patriarchal society, not only found these stories congenial but accentuated the power of their heroines. For example, in the *Odyssey* Aegisthus is the chief villain in the murder of Agamemnon, but in the tragedies of Aeschylus a shift was made to highlight Clytemnestra as the prime mover in the conspiracy. Electra, the daughter of Clytemnestra, is a colorless figure in mythology, and in the *Odyssey* Orestes alone avenges his father; but the dramatist elevated Electra and created whole plays around her and her dilemma. Similarly, Sophocles is thought to have been responsible for the story of the conflict between Creon and Antigone. Homer, it is true, showed how Calypso and Circe could unman even the hero Odysseus, who more easily survived other ordeals, but these two were immortal females. The mortal women in epic, however vital, are not equivalent in impact to tragic heroines, nor is their power such as to produce the male-female conflicts that tragedy poses in a pervasive and demanding way.

A number of scholars find a direct relationship between real women living in Classical Athens and the heroines of tragedy.¹ They reason that the tragic poets found their models not in the Bronze Age but among the real women known to them. From this theory they deduce that real women were neither secluded nor repressed in Classical times. They use as evidence, for example, the fact that tragic heroines spent much time conversing out-of-doors without worrying about being seen. This argument lacks cogency, since the scenes of tragedy are primarily out-of-doors and female characters could scarcely be portrayed if they had to be kept indoors. The proponents of this argument question how dramatists could have become so familiar with feminine psychology if they never had a chance to be with women. They ignore the fact that playwrights were familiar with their female relatives, as well as with the numerous

resident aliens and poor citizen women who did move freely about the city. At least one group of women—the wives of citizens with adequate means—probably was secluded.

It is not legitimate for scholars to make judgments about the lives of real women solely on the basis of information gleaned from tragedy. When an idea expressed in tragedy is supported by other genres of ancient sources, then only is it clearly applicable to real life. Ismene's statement that the proper role of women is not to fight with men² can be said to reflect real life, since it agrees with information derived from Classical oratory and from comedy. But when Clytemnestra murders her husband, or Medea her sons, or when Antigone takes credit for an act of civil disobedience, we cannot say that these actions have much to do with the lives of real women in Classical Athens, although isolated precedents in Herodotus could be cited for passionate, aggressive women (including a barbarian queen who contrived the murder of her husband with his successor; another who opposed men in battle; and a third who cut off the breasts, nose, ears, lips, and tongue of her rival's mother).³ However, as images of women in Classical literature written by men, heroines such as Clytemnestra, Medea, and Antigone are valid subjects for contemplation.

Retrospective psychoanalysis has been used to analyze the experience of young boys in Classical Athens, and thus to explain the mature dramatist's depiction of strong heroines. According to the sociologist Philip Slater, the Athenian boy spent his early formative years primarily in the company of his mother and female slaves.⁴ The father passed the day away from home, leaving the son with no one to defend him from the mother. The relationship between mother and son was marked by ambiguity and contradiction. The secluded woman nursed a repressed hostility against her elderly, inconsiderate, and mobile husband. In the absence of her husband, the mother substituted the son, alternately pouring forth her venom and doting on him. She demanded that he be successful and lived vicariously through him. The emotionally powerful mother impressed herself upon the imagination of the young boy, becoming the seed, as it were, which developed into the dominant female characters of the mature playwright's mind. The Classical dramatist tended to choose those myths of the Bronze Age that were most fascinating to him, since they explored certain conflicts that existed within his own personality. The "repressed mother" explanation works in inverse

ratio to the power of the heroines produced by the son: the more repressed his mother was and the more ambivalent her behavior, the more dreadful were the heroines portrayed by the dramatist-son.

Slater's theory is an interesting attempt to answer a difficult question. Some readers may abhor the interpretation of classical antiquity by means of psychoanalytic approaches. But since the myths of the past illuminate the present, it appears valid to examine them with the critical tools of the present. Still, there are problems with Slater's analysis, just as there were with the more traditional ones. First, although adult Athenians lived sex-segregated lives, it is far from certain that fathers were distant from children. Inferences from the modern "commuting father" have too much influenced Slater's view of antiquity. In fact, comedy shows a closeness between fathers and children: children could accompany fathers when they were invited out, and a father claimed to have nursed a baby and bought toys for him.⁵ Second, the reader would have to accept Slater's premise that women constrained in a patriarchal society would harbor rage, whether or not they themselves were aware of it. As noted in the preceding chapter, the epitaphs of women assumed that their lives were satisfactory, although this evidence may be somewhat discounted since the inscriptions were selected by the surviving members of the family, most probably male. But even today many believe that women can find happiness in the role of homemaker, particularly when traditional expectations are being fulfilled. Thus Athenian women may well have lacked the internal conflict of, say, Roman women, who were plagued with the frustrations arising from relative freedom which confronted them with the realm of men, but tantalizingly kept its trophies just beyond their grasp. Is it more reasonable to suggest from a modern viewpoint that the boredom of tasks like constant weaving must have driven Athenian women to insanity, or, in contrast, to call attention to the satisfaction women may have felt at jobs well done?

I am not convinced that we can learn much about the Athenian mother from Slater, but his work is useful for the analysis of the male playwright's creative imagination. For explanations of the powerful women in tragedy, we must look to the poets, and to other men who judged the plays and selected what they thought best. The mythology about women is created by men and, in a culture dominated by men, it may have little to do with flesh-and-blood women. This is not to deny that the creative imagination

of the playwright was surely shaped by some women he knew. But it was also molded by the entire milieu of fifth-century Athens, where separation of the sexes as adults bred fear of the unfamiliar; and finally by the heritage of his literary past, including not only epic but Archaic poetry, with its misogynistic element.

Misogyny was born of fear of women. It spawned the ideology of male superiority. But this was ideology, not statement of fact; as such, it could not be confirmed, but was open to constant doubt. Male status was not immutable. Myths of matriarchies and Amazon societies showed female dominance. Three of the eleven extant comedies of Aristophanes show women in successful opposition to men. A secluded wife like Phaedra may yearn for adultery; a wife like Creusa may have borne an illegitimate son before her current marriage; a good wife like Deianira can murder her husband. These were the nightmares of the victors: that some day the vanquished would arise and treat their ex-masters as they themselves had been treated.

Most important, in the period between Homer and the tragedians, the city-state, with established codes of behavior, had evolved, and the place of women as well as of other disenfranchised groups in the newly organized society was an uncomfortable one. Many tragedies show women in rebellion against the established norms of society. As the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus makes clear, a city-state such as Athens flourished only through the breaking of familial or blood bonds and the subordination of the patriarchal family within the patriarchal state. But women were in conflict with this political principle, for their interests were private and family-related. Thus, drama often shows them acting out of the women's quarters, and concerned with children, husbands, fathers, brothers, and religions deemed more primitive and family-oriented than the Olympian, which was the support of the state. This is the point at which the image of the heroine on the stage coincides with the reality of Athenian women.

Masculine and Feminine Roles in Tragedy

The proper behavior of women and men is explored in many tragedies. This is not to say that it is the primary theme of any tragedy. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is about the workings of justice, but

the discussion of this tragedy in these pages will set aside the principal idea and focus on the secondary theme of sex roles and antagonisms.

Womanly behavior was characterized then, as now, by submissiveness and modesty. Ismene in *Antigone*, Chrysothemis in the plays dealing with the family of Agamemnon, Tecmessa in *Ajax*, Deianira in *Trachinian Women*, and the female choruses in tragedy act the role of "normal" women. Because of the limitations of "normal" female behavior, heroines who act outside the stereotype are sometimes said to be "masculine." Again, it is not a compliment to a woman to be classified as masculine. Aristotle judged it inappropriate for a female character to be portrayed as manly or clever.⁶

Heroines, like heroes, are not normal people. While in a repressively patriarchal culture, most women—like Ismene—submit docilely, some heroines—like Clytemnestra, Antigone, and Hecuba—adopt the characteristics of the dominant sex to achieve their goals. The psychoanalyst A. Adler termed the phenomenon "masculine protest."⁷ In *Agamemnon*, the first play of the *Oresteia* trilogy, Aeschylus shows Clytemnestra with political power, planning complex strategies involving the relaying of signal beacons from Troy, outwitting her husband in persuading him to tread upon a purple carpet, and finally planning and perpetrating his murder. Unrepentant, she flaunts her sexual freedom by announcing that the death of Cassandra has brought an added relish of pleasure to her, and that her situation will be secure as long as her lover Aegisthus lights the fire on her hearth (1435–36, 1446–47). The double entendre is especially shocking because a woman traditionally lit the fire on her father's or husband's hearth.

Thus the chorus of old men of Argos considers that her ways are masculine and reminds her that she is a woman, addressing her as "my lady" (351). When it quizzes her as though she were a silly child, she answers with a brilliant, complex speech displaying her knowledge of geography (268–316; cf. 483–87). To a chorus slow to digest the fact that she has murdered Agamemnon, Clytemnestra impatiently retorts, "You are examining me as if I were a foolish woman" (1401). The chorus continues to meditate upon the fact that their king has been killed by a woman (1453–54). Had Aegisthus himself performed the murder, as he was reputed to have done in the *Odyssey*, the chorus would better have accepted it. The old men find

the reversal of sex roles in Clytemnestra and Aegisthus monstrous (1633–35; 1643–45).

In the *Eumenides*, which was the final play of the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus restores masculine and feminine to their proper spheres. Orestes, who chose to murder his mother in vengeance for her murder of his father, is defended by Apollo and Athena. The power of the uncanny, monstrous female spirits of vengeance (formerly called "Erinyes" or "Furies") is tempered and subordinated to the rule of the patriarchal Olympians. Henceforth, as *Eumenides*, or fair-minded spirits, they will have a proper place in the affections of civilized people.

The portrayal of the masculine woman as heroine was fully developed in Sophocles' *Antigone*. The play opens with the daughters of Oedipus lamenting the laws established by the tyrant Creon. Their brother Polyneices lies dead, but Creon has forbidden that the corpse be buried, as punishment for the dead man's treachery against his native land. While Antigone urges that they perform the burial rites, her sister Ismene seizes upon the excuse that they are not men: "We were born women, showing that we were not meant to fight with men" (61–62). She uses the frequently significant verb *phyō*, implying that it is by nature (*physis*) rather than by man-made convention that women do not attempt to rival men.

Creon, a domineering ruler, reveals particular hostility in his relations with the opposite sex. His prejudices are patriarchal. He cannot understand his son Haemon's love for Antigone, but refers to a wife as a "field to plow" (569). The sentiments of Apollo in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* (657–61; see p. 65) must be recalled here: since the male seed is all-important, any female will suffice. Apollo's idea is restated by Orestes in Euripides' *Orestes*.⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, traced the phallus/plow-woman/furrow as a common symbol of patriarchal authority and subjugation of woman.⁹ Moreover, as modern feminists have pointed out, the repressive male cannot conceive of an equal division of power between the sexes, but fears that women, if permitted, would be repressive in turn. So Creon, the domineering male, is constantly anxious about being bested by a woman and warns his son against such a humiliation (484, 525, 740, 746, 756).

On the other hand, Ismene—perhaps because she stayed at

Thebes while Antigone shared the exile of her father—has been indoctrinated into the beliefs of patriarchal society: men are born to rule, and women to obey. Antigone bitterly rejects her sister's notion of the natural behavior of women. Polynices is buried secretly, and Creon, the guard, and the chorus all suppose that only a man could have been responsible (248, 319, 375). Thereupon forced to confess to Creon that she has in fact buried her brother, Antigone refers to herself with an adjective in the masculine gender (464). Creon, in turn, perceives her masculinity and refers to Antigone by a masculine pronoun and participle (479, 496). He resolves to punish her, declaring, "I am not a man, she is the man if she shall have this success without penalty" (484–85). (Similarly, Herodotus notes that Queen Artemisia, who participated in Xerxes' expedition against Greece, was considered masculine, and that the Athenians were so indignant that a woman should be in arms against them that for her capture alone they offered a financial reward.)¹⁰

Feeling, then, that in daring to flout his commands Antigone has acted as a man—for a true woman would be incapable of opposition—Creon, when he declares sentence upon the sisters, asserts that "they must now be women." However, he continues to refer to them in the masculine gender (579–80). The repeated use of a masculine adjective to modify a feminine noun is noteworthy, because in classical Greek, adjectives regularly agree with the gender of the modified noun (the masculine gender may be used in reference to a woman when a general statement is made).¹¹

We may note the male orientation of the Greek language, in which general human truths, though conceived as referring specifically to women, can be cast in the masculine gender. Perhaps this grammatical explanation will suffice when the change in gender is sporadic. However, the masculine gender used to refer to a female in specific rather than general statements—a rare occurrence in Greek—occurs with significant frequency in *Antigone*. It is, I believe, a device used by the playwright in characterizing the heroine who has become a masculine sort of woman. In her penultimate speech, Antigone explains her willingness to die for the sake of a brother, though not for a husband or child.

For had I been a mother, or if my husband had died, I would never have taken on this task against the city's will. In view of what law do I say this? If my husband were dead I might find another, and another

child from him if I lost a son. But with my mother and father hidden in the grave, no other brother could ever bloom for me. (905–12)

Herodotus also relates a story about a woman who, when offered the life of a husband, a son, or a brother, chooses a brother for the same reason as Antigone.¹²

A number of Sophoclean scholars have judged the speech spurious, or pronounced the sentiments unworthy of the heroine.¹³ They consider the choice of a brother over a child bizarre. And yet, in the context of Classical Athens, Antigone's choice is reasonable. Mothers could not have been as attached to children as the ideal mother is nowadays. The natural mortality of young children would seem to discourage the formation of strong mother-child bonds. In addition, patriarchal authority asserted that the child belonged to the father, not the mother. He decided whether a child should be reared, and he kept the child upon dissolution of a marriage, while the woman returned to the guardianship of her father or, if he were dead, her brother. Thus the brother-sister bond was very precious.

The preference for the brother is also characteristic of the masculine woman, who may reject the traditional role of wife and mother as a result of being inhibited by external forces from displaying cherishing or nurturing qualities.¹⁴ The masculine woman often allies herself with the male members of her family. In this context we may note Antigone's firm and repeated denunciations of her sister (538–39, 543, 546–47, 549). She also judges her mother harshly, blaming her for the "reckless guilt of the marriage bed," while the chorus, seeing only her father's disposition in her, calls her "cruel child of a cruel father" (862, 471–72). Her disregard of her sister is so complete that she actually refers to herself as the sole survivor of the house of Oedipus (941).¹⁵

In the end, Antigone reverts to a traditional female role. She laments that she dies a virgin, unwed and childless (917–18), and commits suicide after being entombed alive by Creon. In classical mythology, suicide is a feminine and somewhat cowardly mode of death. Ajax, like Deianira, Jocasta, and Creon's wife Eurydice, had killed himself because he could not live with unbearable knowledge. Haemon, like Phaedra, Alcestis, Laodamia, Dido, Evadne, and Hero, kills himself for love, justifying Creon's earlier concern over his "womanish" tendencies. Of all tragic heroines, Antigone was the most capable of learning through suffering and achieving a tragic

vision comparable to that of Oedipus. Her death erased that possibility.

The fate of Haemon illustrates the destructive quality of love. The chorus gives voice to this idea:

Love, invincible love, who keeps vigil on the soft cheek of a young girl, you roam over the sea and among homes in wild places, no one can escape you, neither man nor god, and the one who has you is possessed by madness. You bend the minds of the just to wrong, so here you have stirred up this quarrel of son and father. The love-kindling light in the eyes of the fair bride conquers. (781-96)¹⁶

Antigone is a complex and puzzling play. According to Athenian law, Creon was Antigone's guardian, since he was her nearest male relative.¹⁷ As such, he was responsible for her crime in the eyes of the state, and his punishing her was both a private and public act. He was also the nearest male relative of his dead nephews, and he, not Antigone, was responsible for their burial. Creon put what he deemed to be the interests of the state before his personal obligations.

The differences between Creon and Antigone are traditional distinctions between the sexes. According to Freud, "Women spread around them their conservative influence. . . . Women represent the interests of the family and sexual life; the work of civilization has become more and more men's business."¹⁸ The civilizing inventions of men are listed by the chorus of *Antigone*: sailing, navigation, plowing, hunting, fishing, domesticating animals, verbal communication, building houses, and the creation of laws and government (332-64). These were mainly masculine activities.

The Greeks assumed that men were bearers of culture. For example, according to myth, Cadmus brought the alphabet to Greece; Triptolemus—albeit prompted by the goddess Demeter—brought the use of the plow; while Daedalus was credited with the scissors, the saw, and other inventions. The specific achievements of women—which were probably in the realm of clothing manufacture, food preparation, gardening, and basketmaking, and the introduction of olive culture by Athena—do not appear in Sophocles' list, nor in a similar list in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.¹⁹

Creon's lack of insight into the necessity of the duality of male and female led to the death of Antigone and to his own annihilation

as well. Creon's wife died cursing him. Moreover, in a society where sons were expected to display filial obedience, Haemon chose Antigone over his father and his choice was not held against him. His death was not a punishment for disobedience. *Antigone* and many other tragedies show the effect of overvaluation of the so-called masculine qualities (control, subjugation, culture, excessive cerebration) at the expense of the so-called feminine aspects of life (instinct, love, family ties) which destroys men like Creon. The ideal, we can only assume—since Sophocles formulates no solution—was a harmonization of masculine and feminine values, with the former controlling the latter.²⁰

Euripides' Women: A New Song

Streams of holy rivers run backward, and universal custom is overturned. Men have deceitful thoughts; no longer are their oaths steadfast. My reputation shall change, my manner of life have good report. Esteem shall come to the female sex. No longer will malicious rumor fasten upon women. The Muses of ancient poets will cease to sing of my unfaithfulness. Apollo, god of song, did not grant us the divine power of the lyre. Otherwise I would have sung an answer to the male sex.²¹

Thus sang the female chorus of Euripides' *Medea* in 431 B.C. Were they directly reflecting the attitude of the poet? Noting the absence of female tragedians, did Euripides turn his gift of poetry to compositions in behalf of women? Of all the images of women in classical literature, those created by Euripides pose the greatest dilemma to the modern commentator.

Among ancient critics, Euripides was the only tragedian to acquire a reputation for misogyny. In the comedy *Thesmophoriazusae*, by his contemporary Aristophanes, an assembly of women accuse Euripides of slandering the sex by characterizing women as whores and adulteresses:

By the gods, it's not out of any self-seeking
That I rise to address you, O women. It's that
I've been disturbed and annoyed for quite some time now
When I see our reputations getting dirtied
By Euripides, son of a produce-salesgirl,

And our ears filled with all sorts of disgusting things!
 With what disgusting charges has he *not* smeared us?
 Where hasn't he defamed us? Any place you find
 Audiences, or tragedies, or choruses
 We're called sex fiends, pushovers for a handsome male,
 Heavy drinkers, betrayers, babbling-mouthed gossips,
 Rotten to the core, the bane of men's existence.
 And so they come straight home from these performances
 Eyeing us suspiciously, and go search at once
 For lovers we might hide about the premises.
 We can't do anything we used to do before.
 This guy's put terrible ideas in the heads of
 Our menfolk. If any woman should start weaving
 A wreath—this proves she's got a lover. If she drops
 Anything while meandering about the house,
 It's *Cherchez l'homme!* "For whom did the pitcher crack up?
 It must have been for that Corinthian stranger!"
 If a girl's tired out, then her brother remarks:
 "I don't like the color of that girl's complexion."
 If a woman just wants to procure a baby
 Since she lacks one of her own, no deals in secret!
 For now the men hover at the edge of our beds.
 And to all the old men who used to wed young girls
 He's told slanderous tales, so that no old man wants
 To try matrimony. You remember that line:
 "An old bridegroom marries a tyrant, not a wife." (383–413)

If he cuts up Phaedra,
 Why should *we* worry? He's neglected to tell how
 A woman flung her stole in front of her husband
 For scrutiny under the light, while dispatching
 The lover she's hidden—not a word about that!
 And a woman I know claimed that her delivery
 Lasted ten whole days—till she'd purchased a baby!
 While her husband raced to buy labor-speeding drugs
 An old crone brought her an infant, stuffed in a pot,
 Its mouth stuffed with honeycomb so it wouldn't cry.
 When this baby-carrier gave the signal, she yelled,
 "Out, husband, out I say! I think the little one's
 Coming" (the baby was kicking the *pot's* belly)!
 So he runs out, delighted; she in turn pulls out
 What had plugged up the infant's mouth—and he hollers!
 The dirty old woman who'd brought in the baby

Dashes out to the husband, all smiles, and announces,
 "You've fathered a lion—he's your spitting image
 In all of his features including his small prick
 Which looks just like yours, puckered as a honeycomb."
 Why, don't we do such naughty things? By Artemis
 We do. Then why get angry at Euripides?
 We're accused of far less than what we've really done! (497–519) ²²

Since the borderline between levity and seriousness in Aristophanes' comedies is ambiguous, and the world is often topsy-turvy, in antiquity, as now, it has been difficult to decide whether he truly thought Euripides was a misogynist or the opposite. Influenced by Aristophanes, many biographical sketches written about Euripides after his death presented him as a misogynist and repeated the insulting charge that his mother was a vegetable-monger. According to Aulus Gellius, writing in the mid-second century A.D.:

Euripides is said to have had a strong antipathy toward nearly all women, either shunning their society due to his natural inclination, or because he had two wives simultaneously—since that was legal according to an Athenian decree—and they had made marriage abominable to him.²³

The ancient biographies of Euripides are unreliable, since they do not hesitate to cull material from the author's creations and apply it indiscriminately to his life. Therefore inconsistent with Gellius is the anecdote reported by Athenaeus at the end of the second century A.D.:

The poet Euripides was fond of women. Hieronymus, at any rate, in *Historical Commentaries*, says, "When someone said to Sophocles that Euripides was a woman-hater in his tragedies, Sophocles said, 'When he is in bed, certainly he is a woman-lover.'" ²⁴

In addition to the pronouncements of ancient critics, the plays themselves provide evidence of misogyny, although one ought not attribute to a playwright the remarks of his characters. Apparently obvious sources are the anti-female pronouncements scattered through the tragedies. In Euripidean tragedy, misogynists like Hippolytus and Orestes (in *Orestes*), masochists like Andromache, aggressive women like Medea and Phaedra, and sympathetic female

choruses are equally capable of misogynistic remarks. In these statements women are usually lumped together as a nameless group, defined simply as the "female sex," in a manner rarely applied to males. These statements are platitudes, familiar to women even today, but are so arresting by their stark hostility that it is easy to overlook how few they are in the context of Euripides' extant work.

Some of the abbreviated platitudes are: "Women are the best devisers of evil."²⁵ "Women are a source of sorrow."²⁶ Others point out that if their sex life is satisfactory, women are completely happy;²⁷ clever women are dangerous;²⁸ stepmothers are always malicious;²⁹ upper-class women were the first to practice adultery;³⁰ and women use magical charms and potions with evil intentions.³¹ The longest and best-known tirade against women was delivered by Hippolytus:

O Zeus, why, as a fraudulent evil for men,
Have you brought women into the light of the sun?
For if you wished to engender the mortal race,
There was no need for women as source of supply,
But in your shrines mortal men could have offered up
Either gold or iron or heavy weight of bronze
To purchase their breed of offspring, each paid in sons
According to his own gift's worth, and in their homes
They could live without women, entirely free.
Yet now to our homes we bring this primal evil,
And—without a choice—drain the wealth from our households.
Woman is a great evil, and this makes it clear:
The father who sires her and rears her must give her
A dowry, to ship off and discard this evil.
Then he who takes in his home this baneful creature
Revels in heaping upon his most vile delight
Lovely adornment, and struggles to buy her clothes,
Poor, poor fellow, siphoning wealth from his household.
He cannot escape his fate: gaining good in-laws
Brings joy to him—and preserves a bitter marriage;
But an excellent wife with worthless male kinfolk
Weights him down with good luck *and* misfortune alike.
A nobody's simplest to marry, though worthless,
A woman of guilelessness set up in the house.
I hate clever women. May my home never house
A woman more discerning than one ought to be.
For Cypris more often produces wrongdoing

In clever females. An untalented woman
Through lack of intelligence stays clear of folly.
No servant should have to come close to a woman.
Instead they should live among dumb, savage creatures,
So they would have no humans whom they could talk to
And no one who'd respond to the things that they say.
But now evil women sit at home and plan evils—
Plots their servants execute when they go outside.
And so, evil woman, you've come, to propose that
I sleep with her whom my father alone may touch.
I'll wipe out your words with streams of running water,
Drenching my ears. How, tell me, might I be evil
When I feel impure from even hearing such things?
Be certain my piety protects me, woman.
If my oaths to the gods hadn't caught me off guard,
I would not have refrained from telling my father.
But now, while Theseus is out of the country,
I'll depart from this house—and keep my mouth silent.
Returning when my father does, I shall witness
How you and your mistress manage to confront him.
I'll have firsthand knowledge of your effrontery.
Go to hell, I'll never have my fill of hating
Women, not if I'm said to talk without ceasing.
For women are also unceasingly wicked.
Either someone should teach them to be sensible,
Or let me trample them underfoot forever.³²

I can scarcely believe that so subtle a dramatist as Euripides, who called into question traditional Athenian beliefs and prejudices surrounding foreigners, war, and the Olympian gods, would have intended his audience simply to accept the misogynistic maxims. Rather, he uses the extreme vantage point of misogyny as a means of examining popular beliefs about women. On the other hand, Euripides does not present a brief for women's rights. Not only is Greek tragedy not a convenient vehicle for propaganda, but the playwright saw too many contradictions in life to be able to espouse a single cause. Euripides is questioning rather than dogmatic. Judgments about his presentation of heroines vary, some critics believing he is sympathetic, some antipathetic.

My subjective estimate of Euripides is favorable. I do not think it misogynistic to present women as strong, assertive, successful, and

sexually demanding even if they are also selfish or villainous. Other feminists share my opinion, and British suffragists used to recite speeches from Euripides at their meetings. Yet, it is fair to add that conventional critics—who far outnumber feminists—judge that Medea and Phaedra disgrace the entire female sex, and label Euripides a misogynist for drawing our attention to these murderesses. The controversy that the doctrines of women's liberation invariably arouse among women is analogous to the dilemma posed by subjective judgments of Euripides. For every feminist who insists that women have the same capabilities (whether for good or for evil) as men, but that they have been socialized into their present passivity, there have been countless conservatives denying that women are what the feminists claim they are.

Many women perpetrate villainous deeds in Euripidean tragedy. However, old myths are paraded not to illustrate that the female sex is evil, but rather to induce the audience to question the traditional judgment on these women. Euripides counters the ideas expressed in the misogynistic platitudes by portraying individual women and their reasons for their actions. The crime of Clytemnestra had tainted the entire female sex ever since Agamemnon's judgment of her in the *Odyssey*.³³ Euripides reiterates the accusations but adds a strong defense for Clytemnestra in her speech to her daughter Electra:

Tyndareus placed me in your father's care,
So that neither I nor my offspring would perish.
Yet he promised my child marriage to Achilles
And left our household, taking her off to Aulis,
Where the ships anchored, stretched her out above the flames,
Then slit the white throat of my Iphigenia.
Had it been to save our state from being captured,
Preserve our homes, or protect our other children,
One death averting many, I'd be forgiving.
But because Helen proved lustful, and her husband
Didn't know how to punish his wife's seducer,
For the sake of these people he destroyed my child.
In this I was wronged, but for this I would never
Have behaved like a savage, nor slain my husband,
But he returned to me with a crazed, god-filled girl,
And took her into our bed—so the two of us,
Both of us brides, were lodged in the very same house.³⁴

Elsewhere, Phaedra ponders the moral impotence of humanity, not specifically of the "weaker sex," noting that people may know what virtue is, but not achieve it.³⁵

Helen was reviled in every classical tragedy where her name was mentioned, including those by Euripides.³⁶ Yet Euripides also wrote an entire play, *Helen*, using the myth that she was not at Troy at all but imprisoned in Egypt, remaining chaste throughout the Trojan War.

Self-sacrifice or martyrdom is the standard way for a woman to achieve renown among men; self-assertion earns a woman an evil reputation. But in Euripides this formula is not so simple. Medea and Hecuba are lavishly provoked. They refuse to be passive, and take a terrible revenge on their tormentors. Medea murders her own children and destroys her husband's new bride and father-in-law with a magic potion. Hecuba kills the two children of her son's murderer and blinds their father. The desire for revenge is unfeminine,³⁷ as had been noted for Sophocles' Antigone; Hecuba is often referred to with masculine adjectives.³⁸ Her vengeance is considered so ghastly that she ends up metamorphosed into a barking bitch. Medea escapes, but since she clearly had loved her children, one can imagine her perpetual anguish. When I compare Euripidean to Sophoclean heroines, I prefer Euripides' Medea and Hecuba, for they are successful. Deianira, in Sophocles' *Trachinian Women*, naively mixes a potion intended to restore her husband's affection for her; instead, the potion tortures and kills him. Antigone courageously and singlemindedly defends her ideals, and is willing to die for them, but her last words dwell not upon her achievements but lament that she dies unwed. Medea and Hecuba are too strong to regret their decisions.

Euripides shows us a number of self-sacrificing heroines who win praise from the traditionally minded. But it seems to me that the playwright does not totally approve of them. Among self-denying young women, Iphigenia is willing to submit to the sacrificial knife, arguing that in wartime "it is better that one man live to see the light of day than ten thousand women."³⁹ Similarly, Polyxena wins the praise of soldiers for the noble way she endures being sacrificed to the ghost of Achilles.⁴⁰ Evadne kills herself because she cannot live without her husband,⁴¹ and Helen is expected to do the same if she learned of her husband's death.⁴² Alcestis died to prove her love for her husband, and thereby won honor for all women, but her

father-in-law suggests that she is foolish.⁴³ Euripides structures these plays so as to leave us doubtful whether the men for whom the women sacrificed themselves were worth it.

The double standard in sexual morality is implicit in many of the myths Euripides chose as the basis of his plots. He is the first author we know of to look at this topic from both the woman's and the man's point of view. Many husbands are adulterous. Enslaved after the fall of Troy, Andromache laments:

Dearest Hector, I, for your sake, even joined with you in loving, if Aphrodite made you stumble. I often offered my breast to your bastards so as not to exhibit any bitterness to you.⁴⁴

Some wives, notably Medea and Clytemnestra, reacted with overt hostility to their rivals and husbands. Hermione, on the other hand, reasoned that the legitimate wife was in a better position regarding money, the household, and the status of her children and that it was better to have an unfaithful husband than to be unwed.⁴⁵ Euripides appears to question the patriarchal axiom that husbands may be polygamous, while wives must remain monogamous, when he shows us Phaedra committing suicide because she merely thought about adultery and points out that women suspected of sexual irregularities are gossiped about, while men are not.⁴⁶ Euripides does not advocate that women should have the same sexual freedom as men, but rather suggests that it is better for all concerned if the husband is as monogamous as the wife.

Even when they are not essential to the plot, the horrors of patriarchy compose a background of unrelenting female misery. Grotesque marriages or illicit liaisons humiliating or unbearable to women abound in Euripides. Andromache is forced to share the bed of her husband's murderer. Cassandra becomes the concubine of Agamemnon, destroyer of her family and city. Hermione marries Orestes, who had threatened to kill her. Clytemnestra marries Agamemnon, the murderer of her son and first husband. Phaedra is married to the hero who seduced her sister and conquered her country. Alcestis returns from the dead to "remarry" the husband who let her die in his stead.⁴⁷

Euripides shows us women victimized by patriarchy in almost every possible way. A girl needs both her virginity and a dowry to

attract a husband.⁴⁸ Women are raped and bear illegitimate children whom they must discard. The women are blamed, while the men who raped them are not.⁴⁹ When marriages prove unfruitful, wives are inevitably guilty.⁵⁰ Despite the grimness of marriage, spinsterhood is worse.⁵¹

Women as mothers always arouse sympathy in Euripides. All his women love their children and fight fiercely in their behalf.⁵² Even Medea never stopped loving her children, although she murdered them to spite Jason. Women glory especially in being the mothers of sons, and the lamentation of mothers over sons killed in war is a standard feature in Euripides' antiwar plays.⁵³ Yet in patriarchal society the father is the more precious parent. The suffering of the children of Heracles in the absence of a father is the basic plot of the *Heracleidae*. Mothers whose husbands are dead refer to their children as "orphans."⁵⁴ Alcestis, when she chooses death, includes in her calculations that her children need a father more than a mother, but expresses some doubt whether he loves them as much as she does.⁵⁵

In subtle ways Euripides reveals an intimacy with women's daily lives remarkable among classical Greek authors. He knows that upon returning from a party a husband quickly falls asleep, but a wife needs time to prepare for bed. The chorus of Trojan women relates that, on the night Troy was taken, "My husband lay asleep. . . . But I was arranging my hair in a net looking into the bottomless gleam of the golden mirror, preparing for bed."⁵⁶ Euripides recognizes that childbirth is a painful ordeal, that daughters are best helped by their mothers on these occasions, and that after giving birth women are disheveled and haggard.⁵⁷

Although the dramatic date is the Bronze Age, the comments of various characters on questions of female etiquette in Euripidean tragedy anachronistically agree with the conventions of Classical Athens: women, especially unmarried ones, should remain indoors;⁵⁸ they should not adorn themselves nor go outdoors while their husbands are away, nor should they converse with men in public;⁵⁹ out of doors a woman should wear a veil;⁶⁰ she should not look at a man in the face, not even her husband.⁶¹

In the post-Classical period Euripides enjoyed greater popularity than the other tragic poets. His influence can perhaps be detected even among the early Christians who idealized the dying virgin as the most valuable of martyrs, and among whom—in a manner not

dissimilar to Euripides' Bacchantes—women spread the worship of a revolutionary cult which challenged established religion.

The women of Sophocles and Aeschylus have a heroic dimension which says little about women in Classical Athens. The women of Euripides are scaled down closer to real life, and in this respect the tragic poetry of Euripides approaches comedy.

Women in Aristophanes

Aristophanes is an appropriate bridge between Euripides and Plato, for he criticizes the radical views of both on women. The three authors touch on a number of the same topics, including women's sexual desires and the marriage relationship. Before proceeding, let the reader be duly cautioned that women were by no means the only victims of Aristophanic invective and ridicule—the comic poet was a critic and teacher of the entire society. It is also necessary to remember Aristotle's axiom that comedy presents people as worse than they really are, and that the literary genre itself demands obscenity, which is sometimes distinctly unfunny to a modern reader.

The three comedies in which women play the largest part are *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae*, both produced in 411 B.C., and *Ecclesiazusae*, produced in 391 B.C.⁶² These three plays reveal a range of attitudes toward women from misogyny to sympathy, and probably reflect, with the distortion to be expected in comedy, the feelings of the Athenian audience.

All the conceptions about women which are scattered through Aristophanes' other comedies are concentrated in *Lysistrata*. The play was performed in the twentieth year of the bloody Peloponnesian War. Many rational solutions to the political problems of Greece had been tried, without success. Aristophanes, in *The Birds*, produced in 414 B.C., had even proposed a peaceful commonwealth in the sky. In *Lysistrata*, he turned to another fantastically absurd solution: a sex strike on the part of the women of Greece. The women, led by the Athenian Lysistrata and aided by the Spartan Lampito, withdraw to the fortified Athenian Acropolis. A few ribald scenes with panting, sex-starved men show that the tactic works. The women achieve their objective. Peace is declared between the warring Greek states, and husbands go home with their wives. The

superficial elements of the plot thus appear complimentary to women: they have succeeded where men had failed.

Feminists may disagree over the granting or withholding of sex as a weapon against men, and classicists familiar with the bisexuality of the Athenians ponder the effectiveness of a sex strike.⁶³ More fundamentally, we can consider whether Aristophanes presents an attractive picture of women in his comedies. My impression is that Aristophanes was no more favorably disposed toward women than the ordinary Athenian.

The heroine, Lysistrata, is intelligent and successful, but she admits that her knowledge is derived from listening to her father and other older men talking. She is the vehicle of some of the most misogynistic jibes in the play, informing the audience that women are never on time and prefer drinking wine and sexual intercourse to all other forms of activity. She also feels the body of Lampito and contributes to the lewd appraisals of the physical attractions of the women who join the strike. Lysistrata exhibits hatred of the femininity in herself, but since she's a woman, we are ready to assume that her opinions about women must be correct.

Elements of *Lysistrata* reappear in other plays. Praxagora, the heroine of *Ecclesiazusae*, resembles Lysistrata, although her personality is less clearly defined. Praxagora admits that she acquired her skill in public speaking from listening to men. She is also highly critical of other women whose intelligence is not capable of carrying out the strategies she formulates for them.⁶⁴ In contrast to the sympathy between women which can be detected in Euripides, women in Aristophanes exhibit little loyalty to other women. Younger women are spiteful to older women when competing for a young man. Wives despise and envy prostitutes.⁶⁵

The bibulousness and lust of women are common occasions for laughter in Aristophanes. It is illuminating to compare Euripides' treatment of the same themes. In the *Bacchae*, the tragic poet shows why women, confined to the loom and spindle, welcome the orgiastic release promised by the wine god. Likewise, in Euripides' depiction of Phaedra it is evident that he understands a woman's struggle against ungovernable erotic impulses. Aristophanes merely points to these vices as inherent weaknesses of women.

In *Lysistrata*, men are also lustful, but their urges are better governed than those of the women. The men in Aristophanes prefer heterosexual relationships. They enjoy looking at the unclothed

female body of Peace at the end of *Lysistrata*, and sexual desire for their wives ultimately compels husbands to abandon warfare. Yet, during the strike by wives, Aristophanes offers alternatives to men: homosexuals and female prostitutes, who were not invited by the wives to participate in the strike. In contrast to the men, the women are deprived of sexual relationships and break their oaths by sneaking off the Acropolis to return to their homes. The sex strike causes greater deprivation to women than to men, and can even be viewed as a strike against women. Sex-starved though they are, the women do not consider turning to other women for homoerotic gratification, nor does it occur to them to employ any of the famous male prostitutes of Athens, the youthful slaves reserved for the pleasures of men.

Women as well as men are viewed as gluttons. One reason for their objection to war is that their favorite gourmet treats, including a particular variety of eel, are difficult to obtain (336). On the other hand, the alimentary system particularly of men is referred to in numerous scatological jokes.

Aristophanes is probably most unkind in his depictions of older women. The vices detected in all women are particularly grotesque in old hags. They are nymphomaniacs, but their objects of desire are younger men.⁶⁶ They are drunken and lewd.

In Aristophanes, women's clothing can function as a symbol of degradation. Although it is fair to note that the exchange of clothing between husbands and wives in *Ecclesiazusae* merely disgruntles the men, *Lysistrata* suggests that a magistrate be dressed in women's attire to humiliate him. We are reminded of Euripides' portrayal of Pentheus in the *Bacchae*. Pentheus also felt discomforted by masquerading as a woman, but Euripides shows him as an unsympathetic character.

Expressions of compassion are rare in Aristophanes. Yet he records the anguish war can cause to women because of their family relationships. Mothers lose sons, and girls must abandon the prospect of marriage. Aristophanes was a firm believer in the nuclear family. He disliked Euripides' heroines for sabotaging their families by adultery and the introduction of surreptitious children into the house, and he criticized utopian schemes that abolished the family.⁶⁷

Utopian Literature

The introduction of monogamous marriage was considered a civilizing step in the progress of humanity. According to a myth known only through post-Classical sources, the Athenians attributed this institution to their legendary first king, Cecrops. During his reign, when Athena and Poseidon contested the patronage of Athens, the women, who were more numerous, voted for Athena while the men voted for Poseidon. In revenge, the men took away the vote from women and declared that no longer would children be known by their mother's name. Formerly, sexual intercourse had been promiscuous, and children did not know their fathers. Hence, marriage was instituted by men as a punishment for women, simultaneous with the loss of women's political equality and sexual freedom.⁶⁸

The utopian literature of the Classical period recommended a return to what were thought to be some of the primitive features of Athenian society. In terms of women's lives, these would include the elimination of monogamous marriage and known paternity of children, and the opportunity to play a role in public affairs and enjoy sexual freedom. In utopian literature, women approached closer to equality than they did in any other genre of ancient literature or in real life. In the utopian community of Phaeacia described in the *Odyssey* (6-8), the status of the sexes was more equal than anywhere else in the Homeric epic. The major extant utopian works of the Classical period containing explicit provisions for women are the *Republic* and the *Laws* of Plato.⁶⁹ Aristotle also mentions some features of the utopias envisioned by other ancient authors.

Greek utopias, rather than being thoroughly equalitarian, are invariably stratified by classes. In the *Republic*, Plato included women among the ruling elite. His provisions for the highest class of women, the guardians, provide an index for the philosopher's beliefs about the potentialities of women. Within the guardian class there was additional stratification, with the males as a whole forming a higher class than the females. There was no equality between the sexes in Utopia, but Plato admitted that the greater physical strength of the male was the only important distinction for social capacity. The female guardians, of course, ruled over both males and females

of the lower classes. Thus some women, at least, were superior to many men.

The higher status of women in Utopia was suggested neither for the particular benefit of real women nor out of sympathy with their plight. Rather, certain proposals which happened to affect women were made for the purpose of eliminating civil strife. Private property was a major source of contention. The philosopher Phaleas of Chalcedon foresaw marriages between wealthy and poor and suggested that wealth be equalized by having the rich give dowries but not receive them, and the poor receive dowries but not give them.⁷⁰ Plato went further in his *Republic* and totally abolished the possession of private property for his highest stratum of citizens.

The elimination of private property meant that no man needed a legitimate heir of known parentage. Thus, Utopia could eliminate sexual monopoly over women, which was recognized as a major source of friction among men. Herodotus had reported that the Agathyrsi practiced promiscuous intercourse so that they could all act like brothers and kinfolk and not treat each other with envy and hatred.⁷¹ In the *Republic* the necessity for monogamous marriage among the guardians was eradicated. Plato proposed that women and children in the guardian class be the common property of the males, and went to great lengths to elaborate the means whereby parents were not to recognize their biological offspring. He proposed that the female guardians of marriageable age be held as a community of wives, never mentioning the community of husbands that would have inevitably existed simultaneously in the absence of monogamous marriage. Thus it is clear that the sharing of wives must be viewed as another aspect of the elimination of all private property. The wives are, in fact, referred to by the legal term for jointly held property: *koina*.⁷²

Like other irrational appetites which could not be totally eliminated from Utopia, sexual desire was subject to strict regulation and matings were controlled. Criticizing ideas similar to those expressed in the *Republic*, Aristophanes showed women demanding sexual satisfaction, especially old women demanding that young men first have intercourse with them before proceeding to the younger, more attractive women.⁷³ Nevertheless, in the *Republic*, the inclinations of the female guardians are not taken into consideration, but the males' are: Plato established as a work incentive more frequent intercourse with the women.

The notions that rivalry for wives could foster ill feeling among men and that heterosexual intercourse could be a reward give still another dimension to the question of the sexual desirability of respectable women in the Athens that Plato knew. Sharing of wives and children—in other words, the abolition of the private family and the *oikos* system—would promote good feeling among men. The community of wives became a standard feature of utopian philosophy and was found in the ideal societies envisioned in the Hellenistic period by the Stoics Zeno and Chrysippus, by Diogenes the Cynic, and by Iambulus.⁷⁴

Prostitution was eliminated from Utopia, either explicitly or implicitly. In the *Ecclesiastusae*, the women banned prostitutes.⁷⁵ Plato specifically outlaws Corinthian *hetairai*—for these women connoted a luxurious, degenerate community. He does not mention other prostitutes, but it is difficult to imagine where they might be useful in the top stratum of his *Republic*. In the paradise proposed by Crates the Cynic of the late third or second century B.C., there was a community of women and children similar to Plato's, and prostitutes were specifically eliminated.⁷⁶

In the *Republic* Plato stated that males and females were similar in nature, and that the only significant distinction between the sexes was that the male begets and the female bears children. Since the sexes were similar in all respects except physical strength, they were assigned similar duties. Because Plato had great faith in education, he prescribed the same curriculum for guardians of both sexes to prepare them for their duties. He also relieved guardian women from the biological burdens accompanying motherhood, by providing for the assistance of nurses.

Many of Plato's ideas derived from an idealized view of Spartan women. Like Spartans, the female guardians pursued a program of physical fitness, waited until adulthood to bear children, could bear legitimate children to more than one man with the proviso that he be a member of the approved social class, and moved freely in public. Plato went even further than the Spartans in prescribing that women strip for exercise and in delaying the age of childbearing to twenty, rather than the Spartan norm of eighteen.

In view of the limited lives of Athenian women and the misogyny of classical literature, the provisions for the female guardians in the *Republic* are remarkable. Plato's critique of marriage and the nuclear family, coupled with his provisions for an androgynous life

style accessible through equal education and state-supported child care, foreshadows the ideas of modern radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone and Simone de Beauvoir. And the elimination of private property in the *Republic* brings to mind the Marxist doctrine that the accumulation of wealth and the monogamous marriage led to the subjection of women.⁷⁷ Yet Plato's philosophy was not undiluted feminism.⁷⁸ He did not believe that women were, on the whole, equal to men, although some women were potentially superior to some men. He also repeatedly classified women with children, perhaps because, in his own city of Athens, the wives often were only fourteen years old.

In his later work, the *Laws*, Plato described a less utopian but more feasible community than he had in the *Republic*. The result was a compromise between the idealism of the *Republic* and the reality of Athenian life. The differences in the provisions for women begin with the notion in the *Laws* that there are important distinctions between the sexes beyond their reproductive roles. In the *Laws*, Plato reinforced traditional sex roles, making females obedient, modest, temperate, and gentle, and males competitive and aggressive. The education of girls was similar to that of boys, but the emphasis was different. For example, a program of physical fitness was prescribed for both sexes, but girls were not required to participate in the more martial and competitive activities (8. 834D). Married women were to exercise clothed (8. 833D), rather than nude as in the *Republic*. While in the *Republic* women who showed an inclination could be employed as warriors, in the *Laws* women served only after their childbearing years and then only in emergencies (7. 814). The sexes were distinct even in music: modest songs were appropriate to women, noble and manly music to men (7. 802E).

In the *Laws* women were more limited by their biological functions. Monogamous marriage was mandatory. The age of marriage for girls was between sixteen and twenty, for men between thirty and thirty-five (6. 785B-C). A ten-year period of procreation followed (6. 784B). Only after childbearing were women free to serve the community in other capacities. Older women were employed in prestigious ways, but ones that reinforced traditional sex roles. They supervised the administration of marriage laws, the family, human reproduction, and the rearing of young children. They were free to have intercourse with whoever pleased them, but were not to

produce children nor draw attention to these post-marital affairs (6. 784E-785A).

The interest in the role of women which we have detected in Euripides, Aristophanes, and Plato can be analyzed in relation to a relaxation of traditional patterns of living during the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.). Profound civic disturbances as well as simple warfare are described by Thucydides.

Due to the conditions of ancient warfare, more men than women were killed and the female-male population ratio rose accordingly. In Athens, this increase was aggravated by the departure of a large expedition for Sicily in 415 B.C., plus the Spartan occupation of Deceleia in 411 B.C., which forced the Athenians to fight throughout the year rather than, as previously, only in the summer. We assume that many Athenian women were forced to abandon their seclusion and perform tasks formerly reserved for men.

Some may have abandoned their decorum as well. However, Thucydides, the dominant historical source for the period, has little to say specifically about women, but the comedies of Aristophanes dating from the second half of the war show that the profound disturbances in traditional morality throughout the cities of Greece had their disruptive effect upon women and family life. The unusual behavior of Hipparete, of the second wife of Callias, and of Agariste (see p. 81) was surely the result of the turmoil of war.

We are reminded of the freedom enjoyed by Spartan women while their husbands were away at war for long periods of time, and see here an anticipation of the liberty to be gained by Roman women in similar circumstances. However, in Athens the period of men's absence was relatively brief, and we cannot detect any permanent change in the political, legal, or economic status of women of the Classical Age after the Peloponnesian War.⁷⁹ Yet a revaluation of women's position in society was under way in some intellectual circles,⁸⁰ and there was a perceptible change in the depiction of the female figure in the visual arts which can best be discussed in the context of the Hellenistic Age.