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## Dominated, Denied, and Debauched: The Lives and Roles of Women in Classical Athens

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# Dominated, Denied, and Debauched: The Lives and Roles of Women in Classical Athens

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**Marialeen Ellis**

**I**N HIS LOST PLAY *TEREUS*, Sophocles speaks through a fictional woman about the woes of female's lives and the trauma of marriage for girls. He writes, "How frequently I've thought of women's nature in this very regard, how we are nothing. When we are young, still in our fathers homes, I think we live the sweetest life there is; for ignorance, alas, breeds happiness."<sup>1</sup> Sophocles' description of a woman's life can thus be summed up in a single word: *nothing*. Indeed, a woman's very existence was deprived. Females living in classical Athens were completely subjected to the domination by and control of an overbearing, misogynistic male population. They had no legal citizenship or human rights and, despite their necessary and important roles in society, they were continually disregarded as being inadequate and sub-human.

Through the research and analysis of the personal experiences of the average citizen-class Athenian woman, focusing on her birth, the rules of guardianship, marriage, and domesticity, we will be able to gain a clear understanding of what life was like for such women living in classical Athens. We will examine the levels of her political and social roles as they pertain to the functioning of the Athenian *polis* and, finally, her multifaceted positions found within the religious realm of the state. Although we might find many contradictions and complexities, the lives of Athenian women were fundamentally impacted by her deprived treatment and denied status.

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1 Sophocles, *Tereus*, in Sarah B. Pomeroy, et al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 263.

Let us begin at the heart of the Greek civilization with the *oikos*, or family. Above all a patriarchal institution, the head of the household, *kyrios*, was a man who held his entire family under his sole guardianship. While this guardianship lapsed for boys once they came of age, Athenian daughters spent their entire lives under the legal control of a male guardian—her father, husband, son, brother, or next-of-kin.<sup>2</sup> Women gave birth at home with the assistance of a midwife and possibly a few female friends or neighbors.<sup>3</sup> As for the baby girls who survived the many fatalities associated with infancy long enough to make it to their name-giving ceremonies (typically on the tenth day), data indicates that they were likely to be given a name derived from their father's family, skipping a generation, with the first daughter being named after her paternal grandmother. Thus, girls were immediately linked with the males under whose guardianship they were to spend the first half of their lives.<sup>4</sup> Further, the birth of a child was announced to the community at large by pinning the appropriate boy or girl symbol onto the door of the home: an olive crown indicated a baby boy while girls were again immediately associated with the life expected of them via a tuft of wool or a spindle.<sup>5</sup>

Already high infant mortality rates were further heightened by the practice in ancient Greece known as exposure. Once a baby was born, it was up to the father to decide whether the child would be raised or exposed. In mak-

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2 Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 67.

3 *Ibid.*, 111.

4 Pomeroy, 260.

5 Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece*, 111; Jenifer Neils, *Women in the Ancient World* (London: British Museum Press, 2011), 77.

ing his decision, he most likely evaluated the newborn's health, the financial feasibility of raising another child, and, of course, the baby's gender.<sup>6</sup> While most sons were raised, as well as the firstborn child regardless of sex, less value was placed on girls. Girls would lack earning power, would cost the family an additional dowry, and would bear children who would belong to another family. One playwright, Posidippus, later observed, "A poor man brings up a son, but even a rich man exposes a daughter."<sup>7</sup>

The custom in Athens was to put the infant into a crockery pot and abandon it on a roadside usually not far from home.<sup>8</sup> According to Pomeroy, it has been estimated that as many as twenty percent of newborn Athenian girls were left deserted, if not in the streets, in places like the local garbage dump.<sup>9</sup> Though some were found and raised by slave dealers, the majority of these infants quickly died and exposure became infanticide, "without the stigma or pollution attaching to murder."<sup>10</sup> Another practice that was forbidden by a law attributed to Solon was that of fathers selling their daughters into slavery for fear that they would otherwise die unmarried virgins, which was ultimate failure for a woman.<sup>11</sup>

While modern readers might find these practices horrifying, all classes in classical Attica practiced these customs. Thus, from the moment of birth, girls in Athens were immediately vulnerable and subjected to a life of control by and fear of men. Scholars have calculated that the average Athenian woman would give birth to 4.3 children; however, only 2.7 of these would survive infancy. It is unsurprising then, given the hazardous factors surrounding childbirth and infancy, that the death ratio for Athenian

babies was 500 per 1,000 adults or half of those born.<sup>12</sup>

Even those children who were not subjected to exposure were still not completely relieved from the psychological impact that the custom so often presented for both themselves and their mothers. We can only guess as to the ramifications felt by siblings when their mothers' pregnancies ended with the disappearance of newborn babies. Those children born to wealthy families may have been raised by and may have spent a great amount of time under the supervision of slave nurses and nannies while those from poorer backgrounds were likely to begin helping with the family work at a very young age.<sup>13</sup>

Though we do not know everyday details surrounding a child's life in classic Athens, it is understood that they participated in the religious activities of the family and that they passed the time playing with various types of toys, in addition to games similar to those still played by young children.<sup>14</sup> Babies' rattles and bells have been discovered, vases have been found showing boys and girls accompanied by various pets, and it is known that girls played with dolls per the customary ritual in which she dedicated these things to Artemis prior to her marriage, leaving her childish ways behind and marking her transition into adulthood.<sup>15</sup> These girls were trained at a young age to perform domestic tasks, but it seems that before the Hellenistic period, women were seldom taught to read or write, and there existed no formal schools or methods of education for girls.<sup>16</sup>

In regards to their physical health, the philosopher and natural scientist Aristotle was on par with his understanding of the functions of the female body. While some writers had bizarre interpretations of puberty and menstruation, Aristotle wrote in his *History of Animals* that girl's

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6 Pomeroy, 259.

7 Posidippus, in Eva Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 44.

8 Ibid.

9 Pomeroy, 259.

10 Ibid.

11 Cantarella, 44.

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12 Pomeroy, 260.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 262-263.

16 Neils, 93.

breasts began to swell, and they began to menstruate after they turned thirteen years old.<sup>17</sup> It should be understood that Athenians had somewhat of an obsession with these health-related issues as they pertained to females because, as Sue Blundell points out, “in the Classical age, a woman’s chief value was seen as her ability to bear children,” thus making all things related matters of much importance.<sup>18</sup>

One condition of peculiarity, known as the “wandering womb,” was believed to be a malady in which the womb was not anchored in place due to the lack of sex or pregnancy and traveled to different areas of the body causing problems as it went. Naturally, it was believed that this was only curable through intercourse, providing us with the most obvious example of an ideological misinterpretation of such female-specific illnesses. Blundell’s argument that “the restlessness of the womb is suggestive of a basic psychological instability to which a woman inevitably falls victim [to] unless a man intervenes in her life,” shows us again the susceptibility of girls to the mercy of men.<sup>19</sup>

Greek girls were commonly married off quite young and often to men who were at least double their age. Typically, brides were about fifteen and the grooms were about thirty. One reason behind this custom could originate from the advice of the author of a treatise titled *On Virgins*. The author writes that prior to sexual intercourse the womb was not yet fully opened, which caused blood to rush up to the heart and lungs and led girls to become feverish and “suicidally insane.” His prescription for this states “when virgins have this trouble, they should marry as soon as possible. If they become pregnant, they will be cured.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, his advice is in sound accord with the social norms for the appropriate marital age of girls.

Occasionally, physical attraction might have also

been an incentive for marriage, as is described in Herodotus’ *Histories* about Periander of Corinth, a seventh-century tyrant. He is said to have fallen for his future wife, Melissa, upon seeing her in a field wearing a simple tunic and pouring wine for some workmen. However, Melissa’s own feelings do not appear to be taken into account. Their relationship was ill-fated as the crazed man later murdered her and proceeded to sleep with her dead corpse.<sup>21</sup> While this example represents a slightly different time and place, it nonetheless still gives us some insight into the possibilities related to marital relationships in ancient Greece.

It is conceivable that genuine affection between husbands and wives may have existed, as indicated within the works of Homer in which he acknowledges that a man’s feelings for his wife might have formed a significant part of his motivations. This can be seen in *The Iliad* when Hector tells his wife, Andromache, that when he contemplates the capture of Troy, he is distressed not so much by the pain that will come to the Trojans, or by the suffering of his parents and brothers, but rather by the thought of his wife being dragged into captivity.<sup>22</sup> Blundell writes that Hector describes “an ascending scale of loyalties—city, kin, and wife—in which his wife stands at the pinnacle.”<sup>23</sup>

While this romantic ideal is pleasant to consider, the reality remains that this fondness was not felt out of unadulterated love, but was likely closer to feelings one developed over time for a friend (although even then it would not compare, as a friend was likely one’s equal while a wife was far from it), and so it surely would be tremendously rare for a couple to be in love prior to marriage. Additionally, though Homer does give us insight into the lives and relationships of spouses, we must also remember that his works were indeed romanticized fictions. Finally,

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17 Aristotle, *Historia Animalium* vol. 11 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 135.

18 Blundell, 100.

19 Ibid., 101.

20 From *On Virgins* in Ibid., 99.

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21 Herodotus, *The Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5.92.

22 Homer, Jovanovich, trans., *The Iliad in Western Literature 1: The Ancient World* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 6.603-615.

23 Blundell, 71.

in the case of Periander of Corinth, his stimulus was derived out of lust rather than pure love, allowing for his wife to serve only as a means by which he can fulfill this desire and subjecting her to his ultimate control.

Upon a match being arranged, the father of the bride and the groom made a promise of marriage, or *eggue*, which was the legal step required to constitute a valid wedding and in which the terms of the marriage were settled.<sup>24</sup> The actual celebrations lasted a total of three days, included multiple events, and typically took place at night. As previously mentioned, among the first of these involved a ritual in which the bride would dedicate her dolls and childhood things to Artemis as she was making the transition into womanhood. The main occasion occurred on the second day of festivities and included a procession in which the bridegroom drove his wife in a chariot to her new home, followed by relatives and friends on foot bearing gifts.<sup>25</sup> Finally, the bride could be visited at her new home on the next day—a custom which may have helped to ease the dramatic change and brought her a sense of familiarity as she embarked on the tumultuous journey of married life and encountered new expectations suddenly placed upon her. Taking this into account, we find one lone case which considers the emotions and mental health of women, but that ultimately is a fleeting reflection.

Once married, women would be primarily concerned with conception and giving birth. While men naturally were meant to enjoy their sexual pursuits and society encouraged these endeavors, they did not approve of female sexual desire, at least as far as wives were concerned. Blundell explains, “According to Xenophon...sexual enjoyment was not the object of marriage; men acquired

wives in order to raise a family, not to satisfy their lusts, which were amply catered for in the streets and brothels.”<sup>26</sup> Although it was normal and acceptable for men to have affairs, a great contradiction remained in the case of women. If an Athenian woman was said to have committed adultery, something she could have been charged with

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regardless of its validity, she would have been banned by law from temples and religious festivals (two of the few places or events she was even allowed to venture to),

and her husband would be obligated to divorce her.<sup>27</sup>

Additionally, it was considered in Athens “justifiable homicide for a man to kill not only the lover of his wife, but also any man who seduced or raped his mother, daughter, sister, or concubine.”<sup>28</sup> This is perfectly evidenced in the speech written by the logographer Lysias, titled *On the Murder of Eratosthenes: Defense*, which he intended for Euphiletus, an Athenian who was charged with the murder of the known scholar and geographer Eratosthenes. In the oration, Euphiletus pleads his case claiming that his only motivation was to fulfill sanction of the law after catching Eratosthenes in bed with his wife. He accuses him of having seduced her and carrying on an affair in his own home while he was there, telling the criminal, “It is not I whom am going to kill you, but our city’s law, which you have transgressed and regarded as of less account than your pleasures, choosing rather to commit this foul offence against my wife and my children than to obey the laws like a decent person.”<sup>29</sup> This prime example shows us that even in the case of such affairs, men felt personally affronted more than they felt concern for the well-being and behav-

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24 Cantarella, 45.

25 Pomeroy, 263.

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26 Blundell, 102.

27 Neils, 64.

28 Ibid.

29 Lysias, *On the Murder of Eratosthenes: Defense* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 1.26.

ior of their wives. Further, men regarded women as having been naively seduced, proving that they did not believe them capable of such desires and ploys.

By the beginning of the classical period, the giving of bride wealth (gifts from the groom to the bride's father to win his daughter's hand) had been replaced by the near-opposite. Fathers now paid a dowry—property allocated to the daughter upon her marriage and outlined within the *eggue*—to the husband, who managed it for his wife.<sup>30</sup> The dowry usually took the form of money or valuables, allowing the father to provide for his daughter even after she was married, while also giving him a greater stake in her marriage because if a divorce were to take place, the husband was obligated then to return the wealth.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the dowry might act as a reinforcement of reasonable behavior on the behalf of the husband. He would be less likely to seek a divorce for frivolous reasons and would live under the threat of divorce by his father-in-law, which might aid in preventing the maltreatment of his wife.

While the dowry relates primarily to the upper classes, we know much less about marriages within the lower classes. It is safe to assume that they were far less complex affairs, and a man's primary reason for marrying was in order to produce offspring to take care of him in his old age and to inherit his property so that it did not pass to distant relatives.<sup>32</sup> Hesiod is probably the best source for representing the preoccupations of the peasant class, advising men to marry when they are thirty and to choose a virgin in her fifth year of puberty who lives nearby.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, for those women who were directly affected by the custom of the dowry, this payment acted as somewhat of an agent of protection and, thus, the system could therefore be linked to the increasing stress being placed on

the protection of women within marriage. However, this perceived need for protection also implies the continued lowering of the status of women. Additionally, through this institution of marriage and the laws surrounding the giving of the dowry, a woman essentially became nothing more than a vessel for the transfer of property between men of equal wealth. Marriage can therefore be viewed as a business deal. Consequently, women are so closely associated with property that it is a wonder that the Athenians did not simply refer to them as such. While some might argue that the dowry helped give women somewhat of a higher status (because they were so closely associated with capital), the understanding that this union was nothing more than a means by which men could personally benefit and prosper shows us that, once again, women's status was further decreased and their lives manipulated.

A woman's work revolved around the home; social norms confined them to it for the majority of their lives. In Xenophon's Socratic dialogue, the *Oeconomicus*, the division of labor is described: "I think the god, from the very beginning, designed the nature of man for the outdoor work. . . . For the woman it is more honorable to remain indoors than to be outside."<sup>34</sup> Lysias writes, "The most excellent of wives" was a "clever, frugal housekeeper" who "kept everything in the nicest order."<sup>35</sup> Mostly, women worked steadily producing textiles, as is depicted in Homer's *The Odyssey*, one of the first documents to illustrate in detail the conditions of the lives of women. In one scene, Telemachus tells his mother, Penelope, to go back inside where she should "tend to [her] own work, the loom and the distaff, and keep the women working hard as well." Telemachus indicates that it was the wife who was in charge of overseeing the activities of any slaves or

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30 Blundell, 68.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 69.

33 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), 695-700.

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34 Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 7.22-30.

35 Lysias, 1.7.

servants.<sup>36</sup>

Women performed these tasks mainly in their own rooms, which were spaces confined from the rest of the house, often on separate floors. Euphiletus describes his home as a “dwelling...on two floors, the upper being equal in space to the lower, with the women’s quarters above and the men’s below.”<sup>37</sup> All socializing took place in the main area of the home, the men’s space, and it was quite normal for visitors to never see nor speak of the women that lived there.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, though they were in charge of either preparing meals themselves, or ensuring that slaves did, women rarely dined together with men except during informal family dinners.<sup>39</sup> These citizen women seldom ventured far from home except to attend festivals and funerals,<sup>40</sup> special occasions that could even cause trouble as pointed out in regards to Euphiletus’ wife, who was first seen by her seducer at the funeral of her mother-in-law.<sup>41</sup>

Two professions available to citizen-class women naturally revolved around a woman’s most important role to society—midwives and wet-nurses. As described by the gynecologist and physician, Soranus, both of these occupations had high standards expected of them. He wrote that wet nurses should be between the ages of twenty and forty years old and should have had two to three babies themselves, whereas midwives were always in their post-menopausal years and possessed a great deal of knowledge about the birthing process, having previously apprenticed under an older expert.<sup>42</sup>

We have again come full circle in this analysis of certain key dominant aspects of the lives of women in clas-

sical Athens. We have learned so far that she was subjected to living her entire life under the guardianship of men, that the mere fact of being born female was detrimental to her survival, that her entire life course was out of her control, that she was often treated as a piece of property that could be bought and sold, and that even within the comfort of her own home, she was forced into seclusion and stripped of almost all social opportunities. Through all of this, it was ingrained within society that women should always return to what was seen as their single, primary purpose of existing: to mother the future citizens of the state, which as we shall soon discover, brings about another great contradiction.

Roger Just suggests the idea that women’s positions were worse during the democracy than in earlier periods, and worse in Athens than in any other *polis*. This argument holds at least some truth.<sup>43</sup> The laws and constitutions of the democracy in Athens reveal that women within this state possessed no active political rights. They could neither speak nor vote in the *ekklesia*, a citizen assembly, nor could they attend its meetings. Further, they were unable to hold any administrative or executive positions within the secular organization of the state. Just says it best, writing, “In the Greek sense of the word, they were not citizens.”<sup>44</sup>

Being a citizen in Athens meant that one was a free adult male of recognized Athenian parentage, a group that actually could have only accounted for a small proportion of the total population.<sup>45</sup> As Aristotle wrote in *Politics*, “It must be admitted that we cannot consider all those to be citizens who are necessary to the existence of the state.”<sup>46</sup> Those whose presence was necessary for the existence of the state, or *polis*, but who were excluded from its gov-

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36 Homer, Jovanovich, trans., *The Odyssey in Western Literature I: The Ancient World* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 21.350-53.

37 Lysias, 1.9.

38 Pomeroy, 267.

39 Neils, 97.

40 Pomeroy, 267-268.

41 Lysias, 1.8.

42 Neils, 100.

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43 Roger Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 22.

44 *Ibid.*, 13.

45 *Ibid.*, 15.

46 Aristotle, *Politics* (New York: Random House, 1943), 3.2.

ernance and who were not considered citizens (*politai*), included all women and children in addition to resident aliens (*metics*), freedmen, and, of course, slaves.<sup>47</sup>

The primary reason it was so crucial for one to be considered a citizen was because only then did a person have the right to own land and houses in Attica (the equivalent of wealth). It is possible that the laws on citizenship were meant to minimize the population of those who were considered citizens, thereby centralizing the wealth of the *polis* into a smaller, more easily controlled upper class. While it was essentially a democracy, it was far from the ideal republic of equality and justice for all. Another law proposed by Pericles in 451 or 450 BCE placed even more limitations on citizenship by ordaining that a citizen had to be of Athenian parentage on both his father's and his mother's sides.<sup>48</sup> Further, in the fourth century BCE, it became illegal for a non-Athenian to marry an Athenian, and the penalties for transgression were severe. Indeed, the fact that the very definition of being a citizen in democratic Athens involved being born to pure Athenian parents.

All of this considered, a person's parentage and kinship clearly defined his or her political, social, and religious status. Being a citizen not only had a political connotation, as in the modern sense of the word, but also meant being a member of a *polis*, which was just as much a social and religious entity. A person's social existence derived from his situation within a network of kinship connections that supplied him with his personal identity in life.<sup>49</sup> But even though this realm was only opened to the perceived

dominant gender, it was equally, if not entirely, dependent on the other.

While there is nothing to suggest any sort of inclusion of women into the political life of the *polis*, it is ironic that a feminine form of the word "citizen" does occur (*politis*), but it was generally only used to distinguish

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the mother, wife, or daughter of an Athenian citizen from another woman.<sup>50</sup> Although these Athenian women were distinguished from

non-Athenian females living in Athens, and the difference in being free and being a slave was just as radical for women as it was for men, it remained that these females were placed in a group of outsiders (like *metics*) who were always subject to being ruled rather than ever being capable of becoming rulers themselves (like slaves).

This clearly affected the male idea of women in a number of contexts since "the Athenian *polis* was both a 'citizen's club' and a 'men's club,'" which women fell outside of by definition.<sup>51</sup> Here, we are again presented with a contradiction in the position of women in classical Athens: on the one hand, we have the *polis*, which excluded women, yet on the other, we have a closed community bound together by the above-mentioned ties of kinship and religion, which most certainly included women as channels through which all rights were passed down and transferred between men.

However, there is always an exception to the general rule, and even this strict political system was not entirely exempt from a little female influence. Just is quite right in his statement that, "In narrowly oligarchic, aristocratic, or monarchic states, women who belonged to the elite have

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47 Just, 14.

48 Ibid., 17.

49 Ibid., 20.

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50 Ibid., 21.

51 Ibid., 23.



often wielded considerable power, even if illegitimately. . . . But in the Athenian democracy there were no thrones behind which women could rule.”<sup>52</sup> While Just is correct, he does not mean that all women were completely ignorant of the happenings of the state. Some at least were aware of public issues thanks to the probable fact that men, in the privacy of their homes, might have discussed what had taken place in the courts or assembly or other general political news with their wives and daughters. It is also conceivable that some women may have even influenced their husbands’ political decisions and actions. For example, Aspasia of Miletus, who was the mistress of the fifth-century Athenian politician and general, Pericles, was portrayed in Plutarch’s later written biography of the public figure as an influential, though immoral, intellectual.<sup>53</sup> However, this instance of a courtesan having such political influence caused quite the scandal amongst classical Athenian socialites and politicians, proving that women who pushed the boundaries to become involved in public life were both rare and highly frowned upon.

Although there was this exception, the average Athenian woman, as previously stated, held little to no political influence, and she was not granted legal rights as a citizen nor was she capable of exercising her free will within the realm of the *polis*. However, there still remained one major aspect of Grecian life in which she was granted just as many, if not more, freedoms and liberties as her male counterparts—in the realm of religion. The participation of females was vital to the religious life of the city. They took part in the rites and cults within individual households (*oikoi*) and within the various divisions of the state or *polis* itself.<sup>54</sup> For example, while it was a citizen selected each year to act as *Archon Basileus* (King Ar-

chon) to preside over all ancestral festivals, his wife, titled *Basilissa*, presided with him over these ceremonies, and even represented the wife of the god in the annual ritual celebrating the marriage of Dionysus.<sup>55</sup> Also important to note, in the religious sphere, the wives of Athenian citizens formed just as exclusive a group as their husbands; they alone were able to participate in certain festivals and ceremonies from which female slaves and the wives of *metics*, foreigners, concubines, and courtesans were excluded.

One such celebration honoring Demeter, the festival of the Thesmophia, was even more exclusive in that only married women married to Athenian citizens attended it. These wives were allowed to leave their homes and the guardianship of their husbands for the duration of the feast.<sup>56</sup> Another cult in which married women played a central role was that of Dionysus. Every other year, women from Athens, known as *Thyiades*, traveled to Delphi to join the women there in celebration of the rites of Dionysus on the slopes of Mount Parnassus, performing dances at fixed points along their routes.<sup>57</sup>

Even though women were granted much more freedom through this major cultural facet, the beliefs of the ancient Greeks were fostered by one of the most contradictory and misogynistic religions. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, which describes the creation myth for the Greek gods and subsequently that of man and woman, the human race is punished for the acquisition of fire when the craftsman god Hephaestus, acting under instructions from Zeus, molds from the earth the image of a virgin.<sup>58</sup> In another of his poems, *Works and Days*, the author adds to the myth that a number of deities contributed to the ornamentation of the woman and her accomplishments: Athena teaches

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52 Ibid., 22.

53 Plutarch, *Pericles* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916), 24.2-7.

54 Just, 23.

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55 Ibid., 24.

56 Joan Breton Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 42.

57 Ibid.

58 Hesiod, *Theogony* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), 565-570.

her to weave and outfits her in splendid clothes, Aphrodite provides charm and “painful, strong desire,” and Hermes gives her “sly manners, and the morals of a bitch.”<sup>59</sup> Then, the “beauteous evil” is handed over to an assembly of mortals, for whom she becomes a “hopeless trap, deadly to men.”<sup>60</sup>

This first woman is named Pandora, meaning “all gifts,” because she is presented as a gift by the gods to man (though she was intended to be their downfall).<sup>61</sup> Here we can gain insight into Hesiod’s view. He believed that, while women help to sustain life, they are also potentially damaging.<sup>62</sup> He further describes Pandora as being a very ambiguous creature. Though she is “evil,” she can bring “delight,” and though she is the “ruin,” she can be loved by men.<sup>63</sup> As Blundell points out, Hesiod believes her beauty “conceals a worthless interior...her belly is always taking,” but men must be subject to this “if they want what her belly can also give, the children whom they need in order to survive.”<sup>64</sup>

Further, regarding the Greek deities, the Olympian goddesses present a major contradiction as it relates to their being role models for their worshippers. Of the six goddesses, three are dedicated virgins; one could be considered a semi-virgin since she is able to renew her virginity annually; and two are mothers who are known for showing a lack of devotion to their children.<sup>65</sup> Although Athenian girls could be inspired by the virginal divinities because it was of the utmost importance that they too be virgins until marriage, the similarity ends there. It was even more important that they should marry and give birth. Moreover, the goddesses continued to be poor paragons as

four of them— Athena, Artemis, Hera, and Aphrodite— were very active outside of the home.<sup>66</sup> This in and of itself is a severe contradiction of the Greek ideal of the modest, submissive woman and the domestic lifestyle expected of her. Furthermore, while it can be argued that these deities were not bound by such expectations, it still remains that their worshippers looked to them for inspiration only to find poor examples, which was probably very confusing and difficult for the average woman to understand.

Because the worship of these Olympic deities, and religion as a whole, was very much a major aspect in all Athenians’ lives, the teaching and learning of ritual practices cannot be separated from the female sphere. All girls of the “right” status—that is, of pedigree, wealth, health, and wholeness—were prepared for these cult responsibilities as a part of their informal educations for life in general.<sup>67</sup> These factors, pertaining to status, set the qualifications for priesthood among ancient Greek women.

The religious positions that girls and women held mirrored the various life stages and changes, thus rendering their jobs as “short term posts for maidens, both lifelong and temporary posts for married women, and offices requiring perpetual celibacy only for the oldest of women.”<sup>68</sup> While some positions could be attained through allotment, election, appointment, or even via purchase, the most prestigious and time-honored priesthoods were passed down as an inheritance within some of the oldest and noblest family clans.<sup>69</sup> In Athens, the most privileged and honored priesthood was that of *Athena Polias*, which was claimed by the Eteoboutad clan, which was related to the king of Athens, and the position continued to be held by the family for some seven hundred years.

*Athena Polias* was one of the most distinguished

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59 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 66-68.

60 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 585, 589.

61 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 81-82.

62 Blundell, p. 23.

63 Hesiod, *Works and Days*. 57-58.

64 Blundell, 24.

65 Ibid., 25.

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66 Ibid.

67 Connelly, 29.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid., 47.

offices in the ancient Greek world. These priestesses held the position for life, possibly making them the most powerful women in Attica.<sup>70</sup> One Athenian priestess, Chrysis, was granted rights by Delphi that surpassed being mere honorary privileges and included “freedom from taxes, the right to own property, priority of access to the Delphic oracle, guaranteed personal safety, and a front-row seat in all competitions.”<sup>71</sup> This placed her not only in a position superior to that of the average woman, but, more importantly, superior to that of the average man. Moreover, many priestesses held such authoritative and influential offices that they were able to sign and affix their seals to documents, argue cases of sanctuary law before the Council and Assembly, appoint sacred officials, give advice, and enforce the laws of the sanctuaries in which they served.<sup>72</sup> In this way, such priestesses exercised power. Although it originated from the religious sphere, it stemmed into the political realm more and more with the passing of time. It is safe to say that some of these women held just as much, if not greater, power than their political male counterparts. Connelly writes, women “function[ed] as legitimate politicians within the *polis* bureaucracy.”<sup>73</sup> In addition, history has sometimes portrayed them as “valued colleagues and confidants of male philosophers.”<sup>74</sup>

Their sacred authority was so embedded in political authority that Plato writes in *Laws*, “No sensible person will try to change whatever Delphi or Dodona or Ammon or some ancient tradition has authorized in any manner... on the strength of which people have established sacrifices and rituals.”<sup>75</sup> The female agents who oversaw these rituals were indeed endowed with an authority that “no sensible person” would question. With this in mind, it is interesting

to consider that, while all of the positions held by women within the religious sect were very important and vital to the well-being of the *polis*, and while these women were praised as being the most worthy of the honor in all of Athens, it remains that they were still women. They were still second-class beings, scorned forever as being unworthy of citizenship.

In classical Athens, as in all of Greece, religion, though not entirely connected, was still also not completely separated from the functions of the political state. It formed the most central part of Athenians’ lives; it held within it the roots of their social morals, values, and norms; it was interwoven into their daily activities. We must therefore consider this question: if men were the only ones entitled to individual freedoms and citizenship, why were women found at the center of all things religious? Further, why was it seen as acceptable (in the eyes of men) for women to be held in such esteemed and powerful positions if they were the weaker and lesser sex? While there is no definite answer to these questions, we might find insight by considering that, although this somewhat seemingly redeeming quality afforded to women was of high regard, power only pertained to an extreme minority of the female population. Priestesses were already members of the most elite groups of society and, therefore, the connection with the average woman is limited.

As we have seen, the average woman living in classical Athens lived in a world in which her very existence was regarded as being next to nothing. From the moment of her birth, she was immediately vulnerable to the will of the misogynistic males under whose guardianship and control she would live out her days. They deemed her as a means by which they might financially, politically, or socially prosper. The very existence of the Athenian *polis* was dependent on her, yet men granted her no legal or human rights of her own. Finally, while she was a present component in the religious sector of their lives, her mere mythical creation came as a punishment to man; the female

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70 Ibid., 59.

71 Ibid., 197.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 220.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid., 221; Plato, *Laws*, 5.73 8B.

goddesses that were idolized presented a major contradiction in comparison with the expectations of their worshippers, and the sole redeeming facet associated with her life, the roles played within the spiritual realm, only pertained to a small percentage of the overall female population. It is undeniable that these ancient women suffered tremendously at the hands of their male counterparts. However, we might be left to wonder whether these women were conscious of their depraved treatment and desolate status or, rather, were content to carry on unaware of any fundamental deprivations, for as Sophocles wrote, “ignorance... breeds happiness.”

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