

WOMEN IN ANCIENT ATHENS:
A PRIMARY SOURCE INVESTIGATION OF THEIR ROLES

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The ancient city of Athens was the birthplace of democracy and the origin of many aspects of Western Civilization. However, not every resident of Athens had an equal opportunity to participate fully in government, commerce, and religious ceremonies due to barriers created by gender inequality, citizenship status, age discrimination, and the bonds of slavery. Women, metics, children, and slaves were underrepresented in Athenian government. Furthermore, their roles in Athenian society are often difficult for historians today to discern. While entire books have been written on the marginalization of these underrepresented members of Athenian society, the current paper will focus primarily on the role of women. Examining numerous ancient sources, one can conclude that women had a great impact on life in Athens in many ways, taking both active and passive roles.

Four very telling historical examples of the views of women in ancient Athens come from Thucydides, Socrates, and Quintus Curtius Rufus. In Pericles' funeral oration during the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides writes, "Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad."¹ In other words, the "natural character" of women was for them to remain in the background and out of the way. In contrast, Plato, in *The Republic*, relates a conversation in which Glaucon tells Socrates, "Many women, it is true, are better than many men in many things."² Socrates and Glaucon continue the conversation by reaching the conclusion that men and women should be educated in common and should serve as guardians together.³ Such a view

¹ Thuc. 2.45.2; all translations of Thucydides are taken from *The Peloponnesian War* (London: J. M. Dent; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1910), as published online in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0003.tlg001.perseus-eng3:1> (accessed November 1, 2013).

² Plat. Rep. 5.455; all translations of Plato are taken from *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes, vols. 5 & 6* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1969), as published online in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg030.perseus-eng1:1> (accessed November 1, 2013).

³ Plat. Rep. 5.466.

stands in stark contrast to the view of Pericles. Socrates' apparent laud of a woman's worthiness to be educated with and rule alongside men is somewhat tarnished, however, by his flippant remark while describing proper care for the dead. Regarding dead soldiers, Socrates states, "don't you think it illiberal and greedy to plunder a corpse, and is it not the mark of a womanish and petty spirit...Do you see any difference between such conduct and that of the dogs who snarl at the stones that hit them but don't touch the thrower?"⁴ Socrates' use of the phrases "womanish and petty spirit" and "dogs who snarl" presents a comparison that may shine a light on Socrates' (and perhaps Plato's) true opinion of women. Perhaps what Socrates advocated for his utopian society was not what he personally believed, and his flippancy showed his true colors. Lastly, Quintus Curtius Rufus blames a drunken courtesan for giving Alexander the Great the idea to burn the great Persian capital of Persepolis. According to Curtius, "this [harlot], Thais...maintains that the palace of the Persians be set on fire...Following the views of a drunk harlot with such an important matter...the king [Alexander], too, [said,] 'Why not, then, avenge Greece and apply torches to the city?' They all grew with wine; and so they arose when drunk to burn down the city."⁵ Curtius' tone indicates his disdain for Alexander's actions, yet in Adam and Eve fashion, the original idea for the destructive act comes from the courtesan, the woman. It is as if Alexander were a victim of excessive drink and the courtesan's malice. While this last example does not concern women in Athens per se, Alexander's tutelage by the Athenian-educated philosopher Aristotle, and the influence of Athenian culture on Macedon⁶ make

⁴ Plat. Rep. 5.469.

⁵ Curt. 5.7.3-6; all translations of Quintus Curtius Rufus are taken from *Historiarum Alexandri Magni Macedonis, libri qui supersunt*, trans. Edmund Hedicke (Lipsiae: Aedibus B.G. Teubneri, 1908), as published online in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0860.phi001.perseus-lat1:5.7> (accessed November 1, 2013). Translation of Latin text provided by Google Translate, <http://translate.google.com> (accessed November 1, 2013).

⁶ Sarah B. Pomeroy et al., *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 414.

Alexander an extension of Athenian culture. Furthermore, it is likely that courtesans could have exercised similar sway over powerful Athenian men. A possible example of this is Pericles' lover, Aspasia. Plutarch writes of her, "this may be a fitting place to raise the query what great art or power this woman had, that she managed as she pleased the foremost men of the state, and afforded the philosophers occasion to discuss her in exalted terms and at great length."⁷ Pericles' relationship with the well-known courtesan Aspasia completely contradicts his statement about a woman "who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad."⁸ Aspasia was clearly the topic of conversation among men, and she likely exerted some degree of influence over Pericles.

These stories from Thucydides, Socrates, and Quintus Curtius Rufus highlight the dramatic inconsistency in how women in Athens were viewed, what role they played, and how they lived their daily lives. Certainly part of this inconsistency can be blamed on the difference between slaves, free women, noble women, and cult priestesses. Notwithstanding such inconsistencies, numerous references to women in Greek literature indicate that substantial importance was given to a woman's role as child bearer, and this represents a commonality among women at nearly all levels of status. Slaves produced their own children, who would grow up to be used as slaves in the same household or be sold. Slaves who bore their own children could also serve as wet-nurses. Free women produced children that helped run the household and work the farmland. Noble women, particularly the wives of powerful leaders, produced daughters who could be used through marriage to build alliances with other powerful

⁷ Plut. Per. 24; all translations of Plutarch are taken from "Pericles," *Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), as published online in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0007.tlg012.perseus-eng1:24> (accessed November 1, 2013).

⁸ Thuc. 2.45.2.

leaders. Thucydides alludes to such an alliance by referencing the story from Homer's *Iliad* in which suitors took an oath to protect Helen when her father Tyndareus gave her to Menelaus in marriage.⁹ Noble women, particularly the wives of powerful leaders, produced sons who would serve as heirs to the family fortune and power. This childbearing role for royal wives was so important that Herodotus relates the example of the Spartan king Anaxandrides. As in pre-democratic Athens, powerful families who bequeathed power through dynastic succession ruled Sparta. According to Herodotus, "although [Anaxandrides] was content with [his wife], no children were born to him. Since this was the case, the Ephors called him to them and said, 'Even if you have no interest in caring for yourself, we cannot allow the house of Eurysthenes to perish. Therefore send away the wife that you have, seeing that she bears you no children, and wed another.'"¹⁰ Although Anaxandrides rejects the advice of the Ephors, this example shows the enormous pressure placed on royal wives to produce male heirs to perpetuate the patriarchal society.

Child bearing is just one example of active roles Athenian women took in the polis. Child raising was another active role. According to the orator Aeschines, women and children had great value to the polis and must therefore be protected under the law. Aeschines states, "Consider, fellow citizens, how much attention that ancient lawgiver, Solon, gave to morality, as did Draco and the other lawgivers of those days. First, you recall, they laid down laws to protect the morals of our children."¹¹ Later in his oration, Aeschines states, "the lawgiver imposes the

⁹ Thuc. 1.9.1.

¹⁰ Hdt. 5.39; all translations of Herodotus are taken from *The Histories*, trans. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), as published online in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0016.tlg001.perseus-eng1:1> (accessed November 1, 2013).

¹¹ Aeschines, "Against Timarchus" 6-7; all translations of Aeschines are taken from "Against Timarchus," trans. Charles Darwin Adams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1919), as published online in the Ancient History Internet Sourcebook, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/aeschines.asp> (accessed January 29, 2013).

heaviest penalties if any person act as pander in the case of a free-born child or a free-born woman.”¹² Clearly, the polis had a great interest in properly raising children and protecting free women. Athenian women took the responsibility of child rearing very seriously. One example of this is Herodotus’ story of the Lemnian men who abducted Attic women to serve as their concubines.¹³ The Lemnian men had children with the Attic women, but the women refused to raise the children according to Lemnian values and customs. Instead, the women raised the children according to Attic values and customs. Upset by this, the Lemnian men killed both the women and the children. This event, while highlighting Athenian women’s dedication to moral child rearing, should not be misinterpreted as an indication that Athenian children were coddled and spoiled. On the contrary, Herodotus also tells a story about a mother who was so upset that her son had survived the failed Athenian raid on Aegina that she killed her own son with her broach.¹⁴ The incident led to a change in women’s dress so that broaches could no longer be worn.¹⁵ Notwithstanding, violent women were rare in Greek literature. While Thucydides offers the example of the women who hurled missiles from rooftops at the Battle of Plataea,¹⁶ typical Athenian women and their children were at the receiving end of the violence, and not the other way around.

Although Athenian women were sometimes identified in Greek literature with active roles such as child bearing and child rearing, many of the writings about Athenian women show them in a passive role. Thomas E. J. Wiedemann, discussing the role of women in Thucydides’

¹² Aeschines, “Against Timarchus” 14.

¹³ Hdt. 6.138.

¹⁴ Hdt. 5.875.

¹⁵ Carolyn Dewald, “Women and Culture in Herodotus’ Histories,” *Women’s Studies* 8 (1981): 100, <http://humanidades.uprrp.edu/smjeg/reserva/Historia/hist6051/Prof%20Maria%20Fatima/HIST%206051%20-%20Women%20and%20culture%20-%20Dewald.pdf> (accessed October 30, 2013).

¹⁶ Thuc. 2.4.2.

History states, “There are few...instances...of women actively intervening in the male world of politics.”¹⁷ However, the role of priestess was different. Most priestesses quietly facilitated cult practices in the various temples, which is certainly a passive role. The Pythia of Delphi and similar oracular mouthpieces, on the contrary, took a more active role by making pronouncements that altered the course of political and military actions. The Pythia was usually a young maiden, an innocent virgin, raised by poor peasants, without prior religious training, and with no political self-interests.¹⁸ The Pythia was also to be a local girl, with a lifetime appointment to the oracle. Thus, the Pythia was a blank slate for Apollo to use as a mouthpiece, an unconscious instrument used to deliver his pronouncements. As there were very few oracles, this active role was available to few women.

The passive role, in contrast, was the predominant role of Athenian women. Numerous examples in Herodotus and Thucydides describe either Athenian war victories or defeats in which men were executed and the women and children sold into slavery. The women are typically nameless, as are their unfortunate children. Another example of the passive role of women is evident in Greek drama. While larger-than-life women such as Medea and Clytemnestra were identified by name in the tragedies written about them, common women in Greek comedies often remained nameless. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, a comedy by Aristophanes, the character list contains the male characters Euripides, Mnesilochus, Agathon, and Clisthenes. The other characters include the servant of Agathon, a herald, a magistrate, a Scythian, and women. What is noticeable is that the “women” parts are listed as a group and unnamed, despite

¹⁷ Thomas E. J. Wiedemann, “ἐλάχιστον... ἐν τοῖς ἄρσενι κλέος: Thucydides, Women, and the Limits of Rational Analysis,” *Greece & Rome* 30, no. 2 (October 1983): 169. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642567> (accessed October 31, 2013).

¹⁸ Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Oracular Process: Delphi and the Near East,” *Vetus Testamentum* 57, no. 4 (2007): 452, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20504276> (accessed September 30, 2013).

having three individual speaking parts. The “first woman” openly complains about being ill-treated by Euripides. She also engages in an argument with Mnesilochus, in which she curses at him and slaps him.¹⁹ In *Thesmophoriazusae*, women are ridiculed, impersonated by a man, and objectified. At one point, the character Euripides tells a flute-girl, “Come, my dear, off with your robe and seat yourself on the Scythian's knee; stretch forth your feet to me, that I may take off your slippers.”²⁰ The Scythian fondles the maiden, who in this case has a name, Artemesia. The Scythian takes her away to have a romantic encounter. The flute-girl's role is that of a submissive, passive woman.

Examining the drama of Aristophanes as well as political documents such as Aristotle's *Athenian Constitution*, the passive role of Athenian women seems to have been the norm. The constitution states that the archon “supervises orphans and heiresses and women professing to be with child after the husband's death, and he has absolute power to fine offenders against them or to bring them before the Jury-court. He grants leases of houses belonging to orphans and heiresses.”²¹ The *Athenian Constitution* corroborates the statements made by the orator Aeschines. Women and children needed protection. The lower political standing of women and the lack of a voice in government gave women little choice but to accept whatever protection was offered to them. Women were subordinate to men, as Aristophanes' flute-girl exemplified, in just about every way. Even with regard to sex, women were seen to be subordinating

¹⁹ Aristoph. *Thes.* 565-570; all translations of Aristophanes are taken from *Thesmophoriazusae*, trans. Eugene O'Neill, Jr., in *Aristophanes: Women at the Thesmophoria: The Complete Greek Drama*, vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1938), as published online in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0019.tlg008.perseus-eng1:1> (accessed November 1, 2013).

²⁰ Aristoph. *Thes.* 1180-1210.

²¹ Aristot. *Const. Ath.* 56.6-7; all translations of Aristotle are taken from *The Athenian Constitution*, trans. H. Rackham, in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 20 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1952), as published online in *Perseus Digital Library*, ed. Gregory R. Crane, <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg003.perseus-eng1:56> (accessed November 1, 2013).

themselves by virtue of the receptive position they took.²² Although this submissive role kept Athenian women out of the political and economic realm, at least directly, they did have an opportunity to influence Athenian government through indirect means. Just as the courtesan influenced Alexander the Great through casual conversation, Athenian women in the agora, in the home, and in the streets were able to influence their husbands, sons, and other men through casual conversation. According to Kostas Vlassopoulos, “the political space of the agora was not restricted to Athenian citizens; it was also open to women, metics, slaves, and foreigners. They were all present in the agora, working, crafting, selling and buying, talking.”²³ Whether they were bearing children, raising them, serving as priestesses, providing entertainment, or visiting the marketplace, women played a vital role in Athenian society.

²² David M. Halperin, “Is There a History of Sexuality?” *History and Theory* 28, no. 3 (October 1989): 260, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505179> (accessed January 27, 2013).

²³ Kostas Vlassopoulos, “Free Spaces: Identity, Experience and Democracy in Classical Athens,” *The Classical Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (May 2007): 42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4493470> (accessed March 13, 2013).

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