

Conceptions of Women in Classical Athens

Women have always been fashionable in some quarters and even within Classics no-one could claim that their study has been a totally neglected one. Even before the present outbreak of interest in all things feminine, 'The Position of Women in Athens' had become a hackneyed, if minor, topic claiming its obligatory chapter in all general surveys of Greek civilisation, and not a few works devoted specifically to the subject. Now, of course, since it touches in its own small way on our current concern with the general issue of woman's place in society, it is fast becoming within Classics a new obsession.¹ For all that, I do not think that we have got very far; nor, to be frank, do I think that we shall ever know very much about Athenian women -- for a simple reason: we lack the right sort of evidence.

At first sight this situation might seem to have little in common with the treatment of women in anthropological writings. It could be argued, with some justification, that the minor role usually attributed to women in most ethnographies is the result of certain prejudices, or at least presuppositions, about the essentially 'masculine' nature of society on the part of the ethnographer (whether the ethnographer happened to be male or female). Now, I would certainly not argue that the classicist or historian was any the less prone to making sexist assumptions than the ethnographer; but the classicist or historian is not entirely at liberty to gather his data from wheresoever he chooses to look. He is always at the mercy of the biases of his evidence -- and of its omissions. In this sense, at least, he cannot exercise his own prejudices with quite the same ease as the ethnographer who, in a way, fashions the material he has to study. Thus it is scarcely the historian's personal responsibility that the evidence from antiquity largely neglects women. On the other hand, what the historian must continually confront, and take account of as a legitimate part of his material, is precisely the prejudices of those peoples who have chosen to record themselves for posterity, and which have endured in the written authority of their texts.

But, in the context of the study of women, this may mean that the historian's situation is not so different from the anthropologist's. Something of the ethnographer's traditional blindness to women has been explained by the simple fact that any presuppositions he might have held about the comparative social unimportance of women were likely to have been shared and reinforced by the views of the males of the society with which he was dealing and from whom he gleaned his information. If attention turned to women, both ethnographer and 'his people' were likely to have been engaged in a very similar process of 'bird-watching' (Ardener 1972; I hold no brief for the pun). Consequently, what the anthropologist ought to be accused of is not so much a failure to have recorded the social truth about women, but a failure to have seen beyond a social truth about women located in a reality constructed by men. We might feel some sympathy for him. For the ethnographer to have given women their due would probably have necessitated almost a refusal to participate in the observations of the society he was studying; it would have involved

an attempt to dispel precisely what he was trying to assimilate.

Now, whatever the correctness of the hypothesis that a society is not one, but two -- a male and a female -- and that beyond the dominant ideology of the male, which purports to account for the society in its totality, there exists another 'social reality' constructed by women, in which not only their own role but also the role of men might be significantly different, it is still manifestly the case that when we look to determine 'the Position of Women in Athens' we can claim to be determining only what Athenian men thought about women, how Athenian men represented women, and how rules and regulations constructed by men sought to define and locate the position of women within the male conception of society. It is for this reason that I have not called this essay 'the Position of Women in classical Athens', but rather 'Conceptions of Women in Classical Athens'. For all of what we do know about Athenian women comes from the representations and ordinances of men. And that, in certain areas, it is so very little, becomes in this respect a salient fact. Our evidence will not allow us to discover the whole truth about Athenian women. Nevertheless, like most ethnographers, though more honestly, and with less choice, we can still record a quite valid, but in every sense of the word 'partial' truth about them.

I have not mentioned all this simply to make nice distinctions about possible titles -- or to defend myself in advance for recording a view of women which, in our terms, might appear more than a little sexist. The difference between the naive view of social reality as a set of objective phenomena to be recorded, examined, and even judged, and social reality as a construct already replete with meanings given it by those who are both its substance and its essence, lies at the heart of any attempt to discuss what Athenian women were, and, unfortunately, of the confusions that have resulted from most attempts thus far.

Those who have written over the years about the position of women in Athens have tended to polarize into two groups which, for the sake of convenience, I shall call the 'pessimists' and the 'optimists'. The nineteenth-century orthodoxy, which still has its adherents, and which probably prevails, holds that in classical Athens women lived lives of cloistered confinement, that they were legally, politically, economically and socially restricted, subjugated, and suppressed, and that they were considered natural inferiors and generally held in contempt. The 'optimist' challenge, which started with an essay by A.W. Gomme in 1925, whose views were largely followed by Kitto (1951), Seltman (1956), and now by an increasing number of contemporary scholars, holds, to the contrary, that Athenian women were cherished and honoured members of the community. I hasten to add that the polarization is a tendency: scholars who have painted a bleak enough picture of Athenian women's lives have at times felt compelled to add that no doubt many Athenian men truly loved their wives, or something of that sort. And the 'optimists' could not deny that at least from a legal point of view women's position was a markedly inferior one. But in essence, a dichotomy of opinion remains. And it is perhaps worth noting that among recent writers, whether men or women, whose

interest in the subject has been aroused fairly obviously by a commitment to the present women's movement, this same dichotomy continues. Those who have an axe to grind are still a little uncertain as to whether it would be more profitable to their cause to show that, contrary to the general opinion, Athenian women played an important and recognised role in society, thereby, if not exactly awakening the ghost of primitive matriarchy,² at least proving a conspiracy of male scholarship: or whether, by adding an element of further indignation to the traditional view that women were suppressed, they should demonstrate yet again man's inhumanity to woman.

The real basis of the divergence of opinion is, however, an evidential one. It depends on just what sort of evidence they are willing to give weight to.³ The pessimist view is largely based on a reading of the legal and forensic material, philosophical moralist writings, and what little can be pieced together from various sources about Athenian daily life and social organisation. The optimist view springs from a consideration of Athenian art, tragic drama, and 'myth'. I shall let Gomme speak for himself: "There is, in fact, no literature, no art of any country, in which women are more prominent, more carefully studied and with more interest, than in the tragedy, sculpture, and painting of fifth-century Athens."⁴ Adherence to one or other of the opposed views then necessitates the mutual charge that the evidence on which the oppositions claims are based is either unimportant or unrepresentative. Thus Gomme would argue that the legally defined position of Athenian women has, a priori, little or nothing to do with the 'respect' and 'honour' in which women might have been held. Lacey, (1968) in a recent book about the Athenian family writes, on the other hand, that "Among the intentional omissions of this book are large-scale references to Greek Tragedy What the characters say (in tragedy) has no independent value for telling us about society, though very often it will support what we know from other sources to be true."⁵

Now, it seems to me that in general two sorts of things have gone wrong, and I shall deal with them in turn. Firstly, questions about the position of women in Athens have usually been posed from the outset, either implicitly, more often quite explicitly, in moral or evaluative terms. We are asked to decide whether women were, on the one hand, 'despised' and suppressed', or whether, on the other hand, they were 'honoured' and 'cherished'. To put it bluntly, the question is usually: "Did the Athenians treat their women decently or not?" Now this is an impossible question to answer; moreover, it is the wrong question to ask. One cannot read through Athenian literature and substantiate, in any empirical fashion; from direct statements about the matter, whether Athenians 'liked' or 'disliked' women; whether they went round 'honouring' or 'despising' them. There is a body of very misogynistic literature; but for every explicitly misogynistic statement, one can find another to the effect that there is no greater joy than a good woman.⁶ This being so, the recourse has obviously been to evidence other than direct expressions of affection or contempt, from which classicists have deduced whether the Athenians honoured or despised women. But such deductions are, of course, based on a series of a priori judgements

about what sort of behaviour towards women, and indeed, what sort of characterisations of women, constituted an attitude of 'honour' or 'contempt'. Needless to say, the trading of opinion has been interminable. The same, of course, applies to 'suppression'. We can certainly say that in Athens, from the available evidence, a woman's life appear to have been a very much more restricted one than a man's; that she was not allowed to do, or did not do, many thing that a man did. And, by the way, I am not claiming that women were not suppressed. But, surely before we can talk of 'suppression', we must know whether the restrictions imposed on women contravened or frustrated their own desires. And this we most certainly do not know. What we have instead are the classicists' opinions as to how one ought to treat women -- and they show their differences.

"I can say all I have to say (for the women) in one short word of advice. Your great glory is not to be inferior to the way nature made you; and the greatest glory is hers, who is least talked about by men, whether in praise or in blame."⁷

Richter's comments on this famous passage (1971) exemplify the sort of confusions currently produced. Richter, an optimist, is intent on proving that this passage cannot be taken as evidence that the Athenians despised women. He argues (1) that the sentiments in this speech should be attributed to Thucydides the historian rather than to Perikles himself, and that they reflect a Thucydidean prejudice, since Thucydides regularly ignores women in the rest of his History; (2) that they can hardly be taken to carry a genuine misogynistic connotation, since clearly Perikles was no woman-hater. Richter reminds us of Perikles' notorious relationship with the courtesan Aspasia, and of the anecdote that on his death-bed Perikles sheepishly admitted to having kept all through the years an amulet some woman had given him; and (3) that Perikles' advice is just another expression of that characteristic Hellenic ideal of sophrosyne (discretion, prudence), on the grounds that any reminder to the effect that public familiarity with a respectable woman's private life might only compromise her would not be out of place in such an oration.

But while the substance of what Richter says is quite probably true, it functions only within the framework of a quite illusory argument. Exactly why a 'prejudice' on Perikles' part would be important, but, if expressed by Thucydides, can be ignored, is unclear. More to the point, the fact that Thucydides ignores women in his History seems to be quite in accord with the general Athenian exclusion of women from the public domain. But, that this should constitute a 'prejudice against women' rests on Richter's own ethnocentric assumptions. That Perikles was no 'woman-hater' seems quite reasonable, but whether he loved or hated women is not the question; the real question is what, in the male Athenian mind, was 'woman' which Perikles as an individual was at liberty either to love or to despise and what, for Perikles - or for Thucydides, or for Athenian men in general - constituted a good woman whom they could honour and respect if they so desired. Perikles' answer is clear enough; "the greatest glory is hers, who is least talked about by men, whether in praise or in blame." But there is no reason to

deduce from this that Perikles - or Thucydides, or the Athenians - hated women and there is consequently no need to waste time proving that in fact Perikles rather enjoyed them. The real question, and the only worthwhile one, is what for the Athenians constituted 'a woman'. We cannot presume that we know what 'a woman' is, and then proceed to judge whether the Athenians appreciated them or not. 'Woman' is both a cultural product, and ideological formation. What we must attempt to do is to situate the concept of 'woman' within the semantic field formed by Athenian society. Perikles' advice is another example of that most characteristic Hellenic ideal of sophrosyne -- what we must find out is how that ideal applied to women.

The second mistake is more troublesome. As we have already remarked, the real cause for the divergence of opinion about the position of women in Athens does stem from the contradictory nature of our evidence. How is one to reconcile the sheer prominence of women in art, imaginative literature, and 'myth' with the picture usually derived from the 'social' and legal evidence of their restricted role in other areas of Athenian public life? The Lacey approach is to say that tragedy, for example, has 'no independent value for telling us about society', and to simply rule it out of court. But surely Athenian art, the public performance of a dramatic festival, is just as much a part of Athenian social reality as a haggle about an inheritance before a court of law, or someone's wife sitting spinning in the women's quarters. The other approach is to say that since the representations of women in Athenian art do not accord with what we know of social practice, then obviously our knowledge of social practice is incomplete, biased, or unrepresentative. What follows from this is a continual attempt to explain away almost all the evidence we do have. Thus, according to Richter again, Ischomachos' painful instruction to his newly-wed wife⁸ on the ways of the world as he sees them, since she knows nothing having been kept in careful ignorance by her family, has nothing to do with the Athenian attitude towards women, but stems from the fact that she is only a twelve year old girl and he is probably thirty. Yes -- but surely it is significant that, at least among the upper classes, girls were trained to know nothing and given in marriage to men twice their age. And surely it is significant -- not just an irrelevant legalism -- that throughout her whole life a woman was a perpetual minor to be represented in her every undertaking by a male guardian, her kurios, -- her father, her brother, her husband, perhaps finally her son, or their appointee. Independence of any sort was a legal impossibility -- not quite our conception of Klytemnestra, or Medea, surely.

Now, it seems to me that both the 'optimists' and the 'pessimists' are really making the same sort of implicit assumption: viz. that ideally all the evidence concerning women ought to be integrated on exactly the same level. That one ought to be able to arrive at an aggregate picture of women from all references to them. Manifestly this is not the case, and so they dismiss one or other half of the evidence as being either 'fictional' and hence irrelevant, or unrepresentative and incomplete. What I would argue -- and very simply -- is (1) that all the evidence must be taken into account;

(2) that we should expect, or at least hypothesize, that evidence about women which comes from the same society ought in some way to form a relatively coherent whole; but (3) that we should not expect that the evidence concerning women can be correlated by analysing it as if it all related to exactly the same level of social reality; as if we could place the evidence from 'myth' and Tragedy and art side by side with what we know about women from other sources. What we must attempt to do is to trace through various systems of thought, and behaviour, and representations and institutions in which women had a place, and to see how these systems relate to each other, and if there is any particular underlying concept of 'woman' which is articulated throughout. We do not have to fret because such figures as Klytemnestra or Medea or even Antigone do not seem to conform in their status and actions to the women of fifth and fourth-century Athens as we know them from other evidence, for there is no necessity to presume that what Athenian art is doing, or what Athenian drama is doing, or what the myths upon which both were based are doing is to describe the social conditions of fifth and fourth century Athens -- not, that is, unless we work on the naive assumption that the only purpose of all artistic expression is to realistically recreate the conditions of the society which created it. There is, however, a very real necessity to take account of the 'artistic' evidence: for, as an expression of the ideas, beliefs and values of Athenian society, it is itself most certainly a part of the social reality which we are attempting to understand and describe. Indeed, an exploration of visual art, drama, 'myth' may be our only way of gaining access to the semantic field within which the behaviour of Athenian men towards their women starts to make sense. It may lead us to comprehend what, for Athenian men, a woman was. It may indeed be invaluable for 'telling us about society', as Lacey puts it.

Very roughly, then, I intend to look at 'the Position of Women in Athens' from three different points of view; to analyse it on three different levels. Although each point of view will tend to concentrate on a certain type of evidence, it should be stressed that no particular piece of evidence is by definition ear-marked for allocation to any particular 'level'. We shall look at (1) 'social organisation' -- woman's incorporation or lack of incorporation into the official divisions and bodies of the state, the polis, and her role within the family structure. Under this heading we shall also have to include not only the legal rules which defined her capabilities and incapacities, but also her economic status and the degree of her participation in the less formally defined areas of social life; (2) what we might loosely call 'popular morality' -- the sort of explicit characterisations made in the writings of fifth and fourth century Athens about the nature, or 'personality' of women. Here we shall have to include some attempt to present certain of the characteristics, 'psychological' and behavioural, thought ideally to be the prerogative of, or fitting to, men; for it will be necessary to see in what way women were thought to be different from men in order to appreciate the meaning of those characteristics which men attributed to women; (3) finally, we shall look at what, with grave misgivings, I am calling 'myth'. This last heading requires a few immediate explanatory comments.

'Myth' is becoming a dubious word in Anthropology, so great are the confusions its mention immediately generates; and within Classics Kirk's two recent books (1970, 1974) have done their best to undermine the utility of the term. But I am not particularly interested in trying to 'decode' or 'interpret' or 'decipher' myths in the sense of trying to find out 'what they really mean'. Nor am I interested in trying to set apart a form of communication which is qualitatively different to other forms of expression -- to make distinctions between 'myth' and folk-tale or legend, or even history. Within the Greek context such distinctions are particularly unhelpful. The working definition of myth which I am using, and which is satisfactory for my purposes, is that myths are stories which, in the Durkheimian sense, are 'collective representations' -- stories which exist independently of, and prior to, their any particular telling by any particular individual; or, perhaps more importantly, that whatever their origins, they have passed into the collective possession of a whole society. This latter qualification allows me, I hope, to include Homer and even Hesiod; for if their works were individual creations, they became public possessions. What I am interested in is looking at the presentation of a series of standardised or fixed situations and events which, if not reflections of reality, were reflections on reality -- a series of imaginative orderings and shapings of experience which might expressed in concrete situational form attitudes and values operative in the mundane world of Athenian society. Such are not, of course, the prerogative of any special category of expressions which we might call 'myth'. The same can be found in certain fixed expressions of every-day speech, in a body of culturally standardised metaphors, or on the other hand in what we might want to pigeon-hole off as 'ritual'. In other words, what I am interested in is the symbolic expression of a series of cultural assumptions.

One further point must unfortunately be dealt with. Classicists never tire of reminding us that we do not possess a mythological corpus as such. Within the Greek context, myth, as we have it, is always a literary phenomenon -- for the most part the tragedies of fifth-century Athens. If this is the material we must work on, will it fit even our working definition? Are we not dealing with the products of individual, not to say individualistic, minds? In a sense this is true. Obviously the individual playwrights had their individual concerns -- political, moral, theological, not least aesthetic -- which they expressed through their works. They may even, like the modern writer, have been setting their ideas in opposition to public opinion, rather than celebrating it. Such is the concern of the literary critic. Nevertheless, with very few exceptions, the same body of stories is the constant recourse of all the dramatists to supply their basic situation, their common plots. And it is these recurrent situations which interest us -- at least under the heading of 'myth'.

I made the point earlier that no particular piece of evidence or category of evidence was by definition ear-marked for allocation to one or other level of our analysis. This is particularly true of tragedy. Here we must attempt a multiple reading of the texts. On the one hand we have the basic situation, the plot, the 'myth'

and it is here that we encounter those massive female figures whose prominence we must account for, and which must have some bearing on the Greek, or Athenian, conception of women, but which does not accord with what else we know of women in Athenian society. On the other hand, although no-one would claim that, as a genre, Greek tragedy was 'realist', nevertheless the tragedies do to some extent attempt to situate themselves within the actual social mores of contemporary Athens. The myths, transformed on stage into drama, into a context which demands a certain recreation of the mundane world, do make their gestures towards 'realism'. And here we do have some conformity 'with the evidence we know from other sources to be true' (Lacey) -- not in terms of the basic characters, or the major actions, but in terms of the humbler detail. Thus Elektra, whose actions certainly do not seem to conform to the habits of Athenian girls, who is about to avenge her father, Agamemnon, and help murder her mother, Klytemnestra, can still be upbraided by her peasant husband for talking to strange males outside the houses. As Gould pointed out, in this sense it is just not true to say, as Gomme did, that in tragedy women are free to come and go as they like. A description of reality intrudes and glosses the 'myth' where this is possible -- though sometimes it is not so easily done. Aeschylus' Agamemnon is an interesting case. Klytemnestra cannot, by virtue of the role she must play in the structure of the plot, conform to the realistic representation of an Athenian wife. But what Aeschylus does, is to translate this necessary non-conformity into a peculiar and individualistic character-trait of his heroine. Thus the chorus and characters keep remarking that Klytemnestra 'has the mind of a man', that she 'acts like a man'. And the chorus informs us, and thereby explains to the audience as if by way of an historical note that 'when the man is absent and the male throne empty, it is right to honour the woman'.⁹ In drama, the myths do make their accommodations with the description of social reality; but both that which is 'mythic' and that which is 'descriptive' do, in their different ways, allow us to see something of the male conception of the position of women in Athens.

If we look at the available social, legal and economic evidence, and at what we can reconstruct of women's daily lives from the writings of fifth and fourth century Athens, then I think we can largely support the traditional view that women did live quite extraordinarily restricted lives. We shall leave well alone, however, any attempt to determine whether this meant that men 'despised' women.

To all intents and purposes, women were excluded from public life, -- with the major exception of their ritual and religious role, which deserves special attention. And one should bear in mind the emphasis that the Athenians put on participation in public life. Athens's economy was slave-based; a substantial liberation from the necessities of toil allowed the ideal that a citizen's first duty, and indeed his fulfilment as a human being, lay in his involvement with the life of the city. The word for private in Greek is idios; for what it is worth one might note the direction of its shift in meaning. But women, whatever their status in other terms, were not citizens, politai. They were not members of the citizen body; they had no right to vote, to speak, or even to be present in its

congregation, the ekklesia, the sovereign legislative and executive body of the state. Obviously exclusion of women from the political sphere is scarcely unique to Athenian society, and it is not the fact of their exclusion itself which is interesting. But given the degree of importance placed on political membership of the state within this radical and participatory democracy, then we might at least suggest that the exclusion of women qua women had a correspondingly more important place in their social definition. For the most part, they are not given even nominal membership. The feminine form politis is occasionally found, but in all official contexts where it was necessary to distinguish the mother, wife, sister or daughter of a citizen from other women resident in Athens (as it frequently was), then the term aste, 'city-woman', is employed. If man could be ideally defined as a 'political animal', woman definitely could not.

The anonymity of women is maintained even in law court speeches directly concerned with their claims to inheritance, or male claims through them. They are referred to as so-and-so's mother, so-and-so's wife, so-and-so's sister -- their definition as individuals is formed only by their situation within the network of their male relationships. Very rarely indeed are we told their actual names -- and then the context is usually derogatory. In fact, in a number of cases, it was quite possible for one party to flatly deny the existence of a certain woman who had lived only two or three generations back.

Their exclusion from the rights (and duties) of citizenship extends, of course, to more than 'politics' in our rather narrow sense of the word. Their legal status was that of perpetual minors. From birth to death they were under the constant guardianship of a male -- whether father, brother, husband, son or appointee -- whose presence was necessary for their every undertaking. By law, they could not personally engage in any contract whose value exceeded one medimnos of barley -- that is, they were limited to buying and selling only the smallest of personal items. Nor, I think, as in the case of male minors, did the presence of the guardian merely legalize contracts and sales which women made; whatever property a female had was under the jurisdiction of her guardian. Her consent was not necessary for any arrangements he might make. In a court of law a woman again could not give evidence -- or least, not directly. It was given by her kurios in her name. Needless to say, no woman could hold any administrative position in the secular organisation of the state.

In marriage also, a woman was totally subject to her guardian. Her father, or her brother, or even her deceased husband by will, i.e. the head of the household which she was resident, married her to the head of another household. The contract was made between the two men. The woman is transferred from the authority of the one to the other. No doubt a girl was able on purely personal grounds to influence the choice of a husband for her -- but certainly there is no legal provision for her to exercise any choice. And the expressions one continually encounters are that so-and-so married his sister with a dowry of so much to so-and-so. Of particular interest is the epikleros, the girl who is her father's heir in the

absence of male descendants. She is with-the-property, and claimable by her father's next of kin with the property. Although this is disputed, it seems that this was the case even if the girl was already married. Her marriage would simply be dissolved, and she would pass with the property to her father's closest collateral. This has upset some scholars, but in fact the position of the epikleros is no worse than any other girl's. In the one case she is married by her guardian to whomsoever he pleases; in the other, as an epikleros, she is adjudged by a court of law to her father's closest kin.

As far as property ownership goes, we have no certain case of any Athenian woman in the classical period owning land; and any such personal property as she did have would always be under the jurisdiction of her kurios. This applies even to the dowry. In fact it does not become her husband's property, and is not merged with his property; but while she is living with him it is completely under his control. In the event of divorce, or the death of her husband, the dowry must return with her to her natal household, and she will be remarried with it. Alternatively, it would pass into the control of her sons who must support her. Such seemingly wealthy and independant women as we do encounter are courtesans, in most cases non-Athenians. Even here the exact title of their property is dubious -- it might well have been exercised through the nominal ownership of their lovers.

The state, the polis, of Athens was not conceived of as an autonomous body -- that is, it was but the highest order of collectivity of what still might best be considered as 'descent groups'. Membership of the state was not determined at the level of the state, but at the level of these descent groups. Citizenship was an hereditary privilege. And it was patrilineal. One belonged to the same deme, and the same phratry as one's father. Now, the matter is slightly controversial, but I think that the evidence points towards the fact that women were not members of the phratries or demes; that just as they were not 'citizens', so neither did they belong to those descent groups whose membership defined membership of the state. A little caution is due here, however, because, apart from acting as basic organizational units of the state in a number of contexts, the main functions of the phratries, at least, appear to have been 'religious'. Cult worship organized at the level of the phratries would then in many cases involve women, affiliated to a phratry via their kurios, their guardian, whether father or brother, or alternatively husband in the case of married women. Nevertheless, I do not believe that women were ever considered in their own right to be members of phratries or demes.

In short, we could say that as far as the state is concerned, women are non-participating members. They are virtually non-persons, in this context. They are protected by the law, but they have no positive rights which they can exercise independently and on their own behalf.

If we try to look at the private life of Athenians -- and this is difficult to do -- then at least we can say that the bulk of the evidence does point towards the seclusion of women. Due allowance

has to be made for differences of economic status. There were ribbon-sellers and bread-sellers trading in the market. One would presume that peasant-farmers could not afford to keep their women out of sight. But as an ideal, and an ideal which could be put in practice by the upper economic groups, women were not to be seen in public unless accompanied by their kin, or by a slave. Religious festivals, funerals etc. seem to have been their major escape from confinement within the house. It is a very vexed point as to whether they actually attended the dramatic festivals. Within the house itself there were separate women's quarters; it appears that in some cases the husband and wife would sleep separately if she had a young child. At all events, men had plenty of other sexual outlets. Certainly no woman who was not a hired entertainer would ever be present at the dinner-parties and symposia which formed a vital part of male entertainment. Eating and drinking together with males who were not close kind could be used in court as partial proof that a woman was not a legitimate wife (who could beget legitimate children), but a prostitute or a courtesan. In Demosthenes 47., a delightfully sordid tale, the speaker can contrast two incidents, one designed to provoke the outrage of the (male) court -- that his opponent had at one stage burst into his houses in his absence and there confronted face to face his wife, children and old Nurse, but a neighbour, Hagnophilos, hearing the commotion will not enter because he has not the right in the absence of the kurios; the other to show his own decency -- for on a previous occasion, in the heat of argument, he had burst into his opponent's house, but, he adds, he knew that his opponent was a bachelor.¹⁰ Finally, I will take an example from Kenephon's Oikonomikos. Ischomachos is explaining to Sokrates what a happy marriage and a wonderful wife he has. Indeed, he trained her himself, and he relates his instructions to his newly-wed wife in which he explains the relative roles of husband and wife, and the separate areas of their activities. It is for him to be always outside, organising the running of his estate, shopping in the city, conducting his affairs in the agora, both private and public, indeed, talking to Sokrates to improve his mind. It is for her to remain always indoors, supervising the household, receiving and caring for the bounty he will bring into it from his exertions in the outside world. If she needs anything, she is to tell him, or to send out a slave. Ischomachos doesn't exactly tell her about the birds, but he does go into great detail about bees -- the perfect model for his wife, the queen in the hive. And here we might note an interesting point: within the traditions of Greek mythology, bees are sexless, reproduced by spontaneous generation.

The distinction between slave and free in Athens obviously represents a major social division. But I rather suspect that the distinction involved more than simply a contrast between those who were legally slaves, douloi, and those who were legally free, eleutheroi. The opposition between slave and free was seen to apply not only to social categories of people, but to psychological or behavioural characteristics. A free man was someone who in every sense of the word was autonomous, in control of himself; a slave was anybody who had lost his self-control. The very strong aversion to any form of hired labour can be understood in these terms. A hired man had lost his integrity. It was not the work itself which was resented, but the external compulsion. And to call a

hired man a slave, a doulos, was I think, rather more than a metaphorical association with a class of people who by law were 'slaves'. A man not under his own command was a slave.

Now, when the Athenians talked of emotions, or passions, or physical indulgences in any pleasures, and when they talked of them in a disparaging fashion as they usually did, then the phrases they used were continually variations on the following: 'he has become a slave to his desires', 'he has been mastered and overcome by pleasures', 'he is enslaved by passion' etc. The frequency of these is quite remarkable.¹¹ The hostility to emotion, passion, pleasure, physical indulgence, is never on the grounds that such things are per se wrong -- but that they threaten integrity and self-control. They allowed the possibility that one might end up no longer master of oneself. We arrive at what, by some contemporary standards, might even appear paradoxical. For the man whose actions were unrestrained, was unfree - since obviously he had been enslaved by desires. The man who was truly free, was so by the command he rationally exercised over himself. It would seem that when the Athenians spoke of emotions, passions, etc., they conceived of them as something outside of and separate from their true selves, and which represented a potential threat to their true selves.¹² It would seem further, that they conceived of their true selves in terms of their 'rationality', and that it was their rationality, their logismos which guaranteed them freedom and self-control. Enkratia, self-control, was seen as a primary virtue upon which all other virtues necessarily depended. And enkratia was based on rationality, for passions and emotions are exterior forces which will enslave the self and deprive one of self-control.

It is of course possible that this was all only a 'façon de parler'. But I am inclined to think that a 'façon de parler' is always in some degree a 'façon de penser'. At all events, if we go back to the Homeric epics, then, as Dodds showed ~~some~~ years ago (1951), emotions and passions were clearly portrayed as external agencies inflicted on men by the gods. If we look at the drama of fifth century Athens, emotional forces are still conventionally portrayed in concrete form as external agents which attack the self. Again, to some extent we are obviously looking at elaborate poetic representations, which were even queried by the characters themselves when the moral implications of 'responsibility' or its lack were discussed. Nevertheless, the conventions were operative, And even in Plato and Aristotle, whose models of the psyche are comprehensive and include the emotions and passions, a very clear distinction is still maintained between the 'rational' and the 'irrational' faculties of the psyche.¹³

Now if we were to draw up a list of the characteristics conventionally attributed to women in Athenian literature of all types, then that list would pretty well appear as a list of the antitheses of the male virtues. There is nothing particularly note-worthy in this fact itself. But, what is interesting is that these female characteristics all cluster around incontinence -- a total subjection to emotion passion or desire; a complete inability to rationally contain these, ---or, perhaps more correctly, to ward them off. Woman, in short, was psychologically

incapable of self-control. She could not, by nature, be free. Such a characterisation was not necessarily derogatory it was simply a fact of life. A woman was irrationally jealous, vindictive, unforgiving -- but she was also irrationally loyal and loving. In Aristophanes she is regularly a drunkard and a glutton, incapable of resisting any physical pleasures. Almost everywhere she is sexually avid - and much more so than man, who could, if needs be, always resist. In fact, she was considered to derive by far the greater pleasure from intercourse. Woman was uncontrolled by herself, for she was irrational. And Aristotle bluntly states that the rational faculty of the psyche is, in woman, akurion, 'not capable'.¹⁴ In other words, she lacked not only those masculine virtues compatible with civilised life, but rationality itself from which, for the Athenians, both those virtues and civilisation derived. Permanently under the sway of the irrational, she could even pose a danger to the society of men. And here we might note an interesting law around which the whole of *Isaia* 2 revolves. No man's will was valid if it could be proved that he was not of sound mind. And he was not of sound mind if he was attacked by madness, if he was senile, if he was under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and if he was under the undue influence of a woman.

Now, if all this was so, then I would argue that two options were open: Either woman could remain outside the bounds of civilisations and society to wander in the wilderness of her passions; or, she could be incorporated into society by being put under the control of those more rational than herself. Both options, I think, were taken. The latter is precisely the situation that Athenian law envisaged and that Athenian social organisation portrayed. Woman, whose rational faculty was a-kurion, 'in-capable', was placed under the permanent supervision of someone who was capable for her - her kurios. But, it is the former situation which, I think, we see displayed in myth, and in certain of the rituals of Athens.

Let us start with the most extreme cases: the Amazons and the Maenads. The Amazons are amongst the oldest and most well established of Greek mythical figures. Although there is no specific fifth-century drama which deals exclusively with an Amazonian story, there are frequent references to them, and they appear in Homer and are one of the most popular subjects of Greek vase-painting. Their appearance in other poetry is plentiful. Their general characteristics are well enough known: they are a totally independent female society, either keeping a subject and crippled male population for breeding, or having a working arrangement with neighbouring tribes; they are indomitable warriors, and they are exclusively horse-riders. Now, the actual geographical location of the Amazons varies considerably according to the version of the myth we are following, and according to the period when it was set down, and the familiarity of the Greeks with their geographical surroundings. But one thing remains constant: wherever the Amazons come from, it is from somewhere beyond the bounds of the civilised world -- from the extreme north, from the north-east around the Caucasians, from Asia, or from the south in Libya or near the Atlas mountains. Conceptual space is translated into geographical space. Women, whose nature places them outside of civilisation are, as an independent society, placed geographically outside the borders of the civilised world.

And the places which they are said to inhabit are not only distanced from civilisation, but are also infamous for their inhospitality and wildness.

I am fairly unashamedly employing Levi-Strauss' nature/culture dichotomy. Man is the rational 'political' being; woman is from the beyond, the inhabitant and representative of what lies outside civilisation. Here it is perhaps worth taking note of the fact that the Amazons are always horse-riders. So indeed were some Greeks. But cavalry by the classical period was an aristocratic anachronism. At all events, the Amazonian association with horses is almost symbiotic. And in at least one reference, they are characterised as eaters-of-raw-flesh.¹⁵ We could, if we had time, trace through a whole complex of associations between horses, the eating of raw flesh, and uncivilised savagery. But to stay close to the Amazons themselves, it is interesting to note how frequently they appear in conjunction with those other creatures situated somewhere in between humanity and bestiality, the centaurs -- half horse, half man, perhaps semi-divine, and, with the notable exception of Achilles' mentor Khiron, the models of the savage and the wild.

The Greeks' most popular culture hero, Herakles, has dealings with the Amazons. His ninth labour is to steal and bring back Queen Hippolyte's girdle -- virtually, of course, sexual assault and subordination. But the Athenians' own culture hero, Theseus, is also involved in this expedition. The variations of the myth are complex, but at all events Hippolyte's sister, Oreithyia invaded Attica in revenge. In other words, the very first threat posed to Attica, newly federated and given political form by its founder Theseus, comes from the invasion of its territory by a horde of wild and vengeful horse-riding women, allied, we might note, with those traditional barbarians of the north, the Skythians. Athens won.

The Maenads, or Bacchantes, are of course the historicist mythographer's favourite. Again, their representations are manifold, but Euripides' magnificent Bacchae has secured their place in everyone's memory. Maenad, of course, is a reflex of mainesthai, to be frenzied, to rave, and, given the traditional Greek view of the matter, to be possessed or 'en-thused'. They are the worshippers of Dionysos, or Bacchos -- the god of wine, certainly; but more correctly the god of inebriation, of 'liberation' in general. His origins are mythically in the East. Euripides' Bacchae relates his establishment in Greece, his subjugation of Thebes. And the historicists would take this to have been in fact the case -- the importation onto Greek soil of a foreign Asiatic cult. But let us remember the place of the irrational in Athenian society. We do not have to go to Asia to find that it is outside civilization.

The Maenads, or Bacchantes, themselves revelled, according to myth, with Dionysos on the wild and rocky slopes of Mount Kithaeron. It is the women who, to King Pentheos' disgust, become enthused. Naked or dressed in skins, drunk with wine and with the god, the women tear wild animals from limb to limb and devour their raw flesh. Both the threat that this offers to civilisation and the accommodation that civilisation must make with the irrational is the theme of Euripides' version of the myth. Pentheos resists

Dionysos and suppresses his worship. Dionysos transmogrifies to a bull before Pentheos' eyes, drives him insane, dresses him in womens' clothes to spy on the Maenads, and leads him out of the city where, mistaken for a lion by the Maenads in their frenzy, he is ripped limb from limb, with his own mother, Agave, tossing and exhibiting in triumph the bloody remains of his wrenched off head.

Let us now look very briefly at some of the tragic and mythic heroines. Medea is one of the most awesomely evil figure of Greek mythology -- despite her relatively sympathetic treatment in Euripides' play. What is perhaps briefly worth noting is that this sorceress again comes from beyond the civilised Greek world. She is brought back by Jason on the Argo from far-off Kolchis by the Black Sea. She is introduced into the Greek world, married to Jason, integrated into society as the mother of his children -- except that it doesn't work. Mad with jealousy she murders her rival for Jason's love, Glauke, with a poisoned robe before killing her own children and fleeing on her chariot drawn by winged serpents. The story is interesting because it touches on certain themes presented elsewhere in a less exotic context.

The introduction of a woman who is from outside, who is a foreigner and who introduces uncontrolled and uncontrollable emotions and passions into the city where they rip apart the fabric of ordered male society is present even in so basic a set of Greek stories as those concerning the Trojan war. Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, comes to Sparta, and then to Troy, -- Menelaus and Paris, both infatuated, destroy both their cities as a result. Helen, as the cause of the Trojan war, a creature of wondrous beauty introduced into both the House of Atreus and the House of Priam to their mutual destruction, is magnificently dwelt on by the chorus of Aeschylus Agamemnon. And there, she is also the lion-cub whose savage nature cannot be suppressed, and the bird whom the luckless boy, Paris, cannot hold.¹⁶ Aeschylus' is a sophisticated rendition of the tale, but the imagery with which he supplements the myth tells the same story -- the fusion of the wild, the beautiful, the destructive, the passionate, and the female.

And if we turn to Sophokles' Trachiniae, where we meet Deianeira, perhaps the closest we come to a portrait of the self-effacing, loyal, and dutiful little Athenian wife, the same element that we find in the Medea story is still present. For Deianeira, pining at home for her promiscuous husband Herakles, sends him a cloak she has woven impregnated with what she believes, in all innocence, to be a love potion. But it is a poison which devours Herakles and eats his flesh away. And it is a poison concocted from the blood of the dying centaur who once tried to rape her. The myth re-asserts itself even through Sophokles' humanist and realist rendition of the tale. Deianeira, 'man-destroyer' as the name implies, kills Herakles through her passion with a centaur's poison blood. She gives the same 'don-fatal' as Medea -- and significantly a piece of woman's work, a woven cloak, like the cloak with which Klytemnestra ensnared Agamemnon, and the garment by whose weaving Penelope destroyed her luckless suitors. We might suspect that even the product of woman in her domestic role had

its dangers. And the domestication of women finds its symbolic representations also.

Even with common speech, women, or rather young girls, are wild horses to be yoked, saddled, mounted and broken in by marriage. Those are the clichés of Athenian talk -- they may also be clichés of Athenian thought. Girls are given in marriage for ploughing, and the sowing of legitimate seed. And if such goddesses as Demeter and Hera are clearly on the side of culture, then it is because they represent the appropriation, exploitation and domestication of nature for the purposes of civilisation. The Thesmophoria is exclusively a woman's festival in honour of Demeter; and it is an official and state-sanctioned celebration. But it is also the exclusive preserve, sanctioned by heavy penalties, of women who were legitimate married wives and matrons, of women whose purpose had been defined by the state and whose role was celebrated by it. In contrast we have the Adonia -- whose participants are in the main prostitutes, concubines, courtesans; which is open to all, whether slave or free, legitimate or illegitimate, and which was marked by the indulgence of sexual and sensual licence. Not sanctioned by the state, it also involved the temporary dissolution of civic roles and divisions and the return to promiscuity which was thought to be woman's natural inclination.

Finally, it may seem odd that if something like the nature/culture dichotomy is an integral part of the Athenians' conceptualization of women, that Athen's own patron goddess, and the patroness of civilisation itself, should have been a female, Athena. But let us note her peculiarities that, like the bees, she is sexless. She is Athena Parthenos, Athena the Virgin. And unlike that other virgin, Artemis, her virginity does not spring from an opposition to marriage, to domestication, and from a compensatory over-indulgence in the wild untamed world of the animals and nature; but from a genuinely androgynous and asexual and purely rational existence. She is transvestite. She is virgin. But she also sprang fully armed and fully formed, a parthenogenetic creation, from the head of Zeus -- to the intense annoyance, we might add, of his wife, Hera.

From 'myth' to social organisation, from the dramas of Athens to its laws, the male conception of woman is coherent. Its manifestations differ, as do its contexts - and this is what must be recognized - but if we have the patience to trace them through, then I think we can finally arrive at what, for the Athenians, a woman was.

I shall conclude with Kreon's words from Sophokles' Antigone, which draw together and identify more concisely than I could woman's position in myth and society.

"Anarchy, it ruins states, it dissipates the host, while discipline preserves the ordered ranks: therefore we must maintain authority, and yield no title to a woman's will."

(672-8)

Not Sophokles' own sentiments perhaps -- but the expression of a widely held conviction.

Roger Just.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge my debt to Prof. John Gould, whose Hellenic Society Lecture, Law, Custom and Myth: Some Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens, June 1974, has greatly influenced this paper throughout, and whose opening remarks I follow here.
2. It still lurks in remoter regions, however. See C.G. Thomas' article 'Matriarchy in Early Greece, the Bronze Age'. Arethusa Vol. 6 (1973) 2.
3. Cf. Pomeroy 1973 p.141.
4. Gomme A.W. 1925, p.4.
5. Lacey W.K. 1968, p.10.
6. Gomme made this point well, but used it to discount the evidence of misogyny in order to argue that women were 'honoured' and 'respected'.
7. Thucydides II 45.
8. Xen. Oec. 7-11.
9. Aesch. Ag. 259-60.
10. These passages were admirably discussed by Prof. Gould of Lysias III. 6. where a man's sister and nieces are so nicely brought up that they were embarrassed even to be seen by their male kin. This passage, too, comes from an account of a house breaking.
11. Dover 1974, p.208.
12. Ibid. p.125.
13. See Fortenburgh 1975.
14. Arist. Pol. 1260^a.
15. Aesch.. Supp. 287.
16. Aesch. Ag. 399-455 and 681-749.

References

- Ardener, E. 1972. "Belief and The Problem of Women." In J.S. La Fontaine (ed.) The Interpretation of Ritual. Tavistock.
- Dodds, E.R. 1951. The Greeks & the Irrational U.C.P.
- Dover, K.J. 1974. Greek Popular Monarchy in the Time of Plato & Aristotle. Basil Blackwell.
- Fortenbaugh, W.W. 1975. Aristotle on Emotion. Duckworth.
- Gomme, A.W. 1925. "The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries." Classical Philology Vol. XX, pp. 1-25.
- Kirk, G.S. 1970. Myth: Its Meaning & Functions in Ancient & Other Cultures. C.U.P. and U.C.P.
- " " 1974. The Nature of Greek Myths. Penguin 1974.
- Kitto, H.D.F. 1951. The Greeks. Penguin
- Lacey, W.K. 1968. The Family in Classical Athens. Thames and Hudson.
- Pomeroy, S.B. 1973. "Selected Bibliography on Women in Antiquity." Arethusa Vol. 6 (1973) 1.
- Richler, D. 1971. "The Position of Women in Classical Athens." Classical Journal Vol. 67 no. 1. pp. 1-8.
- Seltman, C. 1956. Women in Antiquity. Thames and Hudson.
- Thomas, C.G. 1973. "Matriarchy in Early Greece: The Bronze Age". Arethusa Vol. 6 (1973) 2.