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Not All Were Created Equal

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Not All Were Created Equal

“The man’s role requires him to be outside – men who stay at home during the day are considered womanish – the woman’s requires her to work at home” (McAuslan 137). In the time-period between 700 and 300 BCE, this was often true for the women of the world, but there was one major exception: Spartan women. In most other parts of ancient Greece, women were expected to be seen and not heard. Spartan women, however, were allowed much more freedom than their contemporaries. They were allowed to own property, could live independently, and were not forced into marriage and motherhood at a young age. Spartan women had a more public role than their female counterparts because of the exceptional social, political, and economic status afforded to them by their society.

Since the earliest recorded peoples it has been a trend that women are portrayed as the lesser and submissive of the two genders. This was extremely true for most Greek poleis from 700-300 BCE. While men fought to protect their homeland, women were expected to raise the children, tend to basic work, serve their husbands, and remain unnoticed. It was often said that a woman’s glory was in her silence and that “the courage of a man [was] shown in commanding, the courage of a woman in obeying” (Lefkowitz 45). In places such as Rome and Greece,

women were not equal. Roman and Greek women were not allowed to control their own property or to voice opinions to men and actually have them listened to.

Where Spartan women were sometimes allowed to manage their own properties, Roman and Greek women were, themselves, property to men because of a system known as Paterfamilias, which originally came about around 589 BCE in Rome. Paterfamilias enforced the idea that the father was the absolute owner of all his family and property. Women were ruled by their fathers when they were young, then dominated in marriage by their husbands, and sometimes even in old age by their sons. “Women were viewed symbolically and literally as properties – the prizes of contests and the spoils of conquests – and domination over them increased the male’s prestige” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 25). Women, free or slave, were valued for their beauty, their chastity – “for the Greeks, chastity was a virtue only in women” (5) – and their silence. Greek and Roman women were little more than slaves in their homes, “Women and slaves were similarly distinguished...both were excluded from full participation...both occupied an ambiguous position in the patrilocal family as indispensable outsiders” (Murnaghan). Women in Greece and Rome were not so much members of society as they were tools to be used by the men around them. Greco-Roman culture held their women in certain roles and gave them certain jobs to fulfill, just as we today might use a certain tool to complete a specific job, “We have mistresses for our enjoyment, concubines to serve our person, and wives for the bearing of legitimate offspring” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 8).

The differences between Spartan women and their contemporaries can be linked all the way to the extreme difference between the basic structure of the Spartan society and most other

poleis of ancient Greece. While most Greek communities of the time began to face the same problem of “population growth, increasing disparity between rich and poor, and an expanding economy”, Sparta chose to handle it in a very different way (Kishlansky 60). The Spartan solution was to develop a very firm two-tiered social structure that laid a specific outline for who could come to power and to enforce the unifying idea of *eunomia*. In most ancient Greek communities, personal honor was placed above general concern for community, but in Sparta “Spartans of all social ranks were urged to look not to individual interest but to *eunomia*, good order and obedience to the laws, which alone could unite Spartans and bring victory” (Kishlansky 61). Upon realizing that *eunomia* was their only alternative to a certain defeat in battle, Spartans elevated it above all other ideals, instilling a sense of patriotism among its citizens, “*Eunomia* was the sole guiding principle, and service to the state came before family, social class, and every other duty or occupation” (Kishlansky 61).

Along with the concept of *eunomia*, “war was the center of Spartan life” (Kishlansky 61). War lay at the very heart of the differences between the social and political organization of Sparta and other poleis. The extreme militaristic society of Sparta began around the eighth century B.C.E. when Sparta conquered the region of Messenia and enslaved its people as helots. The reforms that came along with this battle are what finally pushed Sparta to its unique military system. With the defeat of the Messenians, each Helot was assigned to attend to individual Spartans as personal slaves. Because of the newly conquered people, a minimum source of wealth for all Spartan people was spread and Spartans were able to “devote themselves full-time to military service” (Kishlansky 61).

The most radically changing reform came when Sparta “placed everyone under the direct supervision and service of the state from birth until death” (Kishlansky 61). While parents in other parts of ancient Greece were allowed to decide whether their child should be raised or abandoned, “In Sparta, public officials examined infants and decided whether they were sufficiently strong to be allowed to live” (61). If the infants did not meet the standard and were judged too weak to live, they were typically abandoned in the wilderness and left to die. Until the young age of seven, boys in the Spartan empire would live with their mothers, but after this time they would be taken and entered in the education system of the state, known as the *agoge*. For the next thirteen years the boys would undergo “13 years of rigorous military training” which included “harsh discipline and physical deprivation...intended to teach men to endure pain and to conquer in battle” (62). At the age of twenty, the youths were expected to pass one more test to be considered a man, they were sent into the countryside “with nothing but a cloak and a knife and forbidden to return until [they] had killed a helot” (62). If a man were able to pass this final test he would then continue to live with his fellow warriors, but was now able to marry and begin a family. The traditional family life was not had, however, because the soldier was expected to continue living with his army. Instead the groom would have to act out a “ritual abduction of his bride” and “thereafter he would slip out occasionally at night to sleep with her” (Kishlinsky 62).

Not only did their societies differ entirely, but contrasting with their correspondents in Rome and Greece, Spartan women were given a classification of rights and status far above what some considered proper. The special treatment Spartan women were given started at birth when

“Spartan girls were as well nourished as the boys” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 36). In other Greek cities, baby girls were not as well accepted and were more likely to be exposed to die at birth or raised on a much less nutritious diet than boys would have been. “Sparta was the only polis where the training of girls was prescribed and supported by public authority” (Pomeroy “Spartan Women” 7). As well as being raised with the same amount of care as their siblings, Spartan girls were allowed to go to school. Although they were not educated for the same period of time as boys and eventually furthered their education in areas that the boys did not, like running the household, girls were equally encouraged intellectually and physically to be their best.

This greater status and freedom for women continued into the time that they were reaching sexual maturity and of the age to marry. As girls began to come of age, “they were not rushed – as were their sisters throughout the rest of the ancient world – into marriage” (Schrader). Because of this, they were often spared from being prematurely put into the tandem roles of mother and wife and were much more psychologically prepared to take on their new duties. While Greek and Roman women were often married off at a young age to much older grooms, Spartans advocated to only marry girls once they had finally reached an age for them to be able to “enjoy sex” which was typically around 18 (Schrader). In this, a woman’s well-being was the primary concern because she was kept from harm and given the right to enter into marriage with more leeway. Other Greek and Roman women were often rushed into marriages around the age of fifteen, with men as much as twice their age, and were given no say or opinion on their marriage.

Spartan women, however, were given the ability to voice opinions, had rights among the men and were heard because they were the mothers of future generations, “women were expected to bear and rear future warriors” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 18). From youth to marriage, the women of Sparta were brought up to be just as strong and independent as their male family members because it was believed that only a strong woman could produce strong male children. In such a militaristic society this sense of strength and endurance was pursued to the highest extent. At a very young age, children were taken from their mothers so that they could be taught, molded, and trained to be soldiers or strong mothers. “For boys there was public education, beginning at the age of seven years” (Sealey 83).

Militaristic society required men to be enrolled in the army from the young age of seven until they were about thirty. Because of the requirement for men to continue to live with their army, the women did not actually need to live with their husbands for quite some time. This meant that they were not forced to adapt to a new man’s rule suddenly and take orders like Athenian and Greek women may have had to, but were given the ability to control their estate, raise children and manage a household, for the most part, alone. In comparison to their contemporaries whose roles were well outlined, “The duties of women revolve around the household” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 29). Spartan women held an extreme freedom from male oppression and the tasks typically seen as woman’s work, “Housework and the fabrication of clothing were left to women of inferior classes, while citizen women were occupied with gymnastics, music, household management, and childrearing” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 36).

Spartan women were allowed to branch outside of the menial tasks that were often seen as women's work and participate far more in their society and life outside of their home.

Because of the structured form of their society, and the fact that each step of a man and woman's life was planned out, Spartan women were not placed in marriages where their partners were much older, or unknown to them, like their fellow Greek women often were. "The Athenian bride, however...was not quite fifteen: she married a stranger twice her age, moved to a new house, and rarely saw her friends and relatives again" (Pomeroy "Spartan Women" 44). In comparison, "The Spartan...married a young man close in age. [They] had seen each other nude at festivals...since childhood" (44). Because of these circumstances, Spartan women were not forced into a strange and lonesome situation that they were not prepared to handle and, since their husbands remained with the army, their main companions continued to be other women. Also, because the men were away, the marriage was kept a secret until the woman got pregnant and she was allowed to live at home with her family until this time, meaning there was no cause for a drastic lifestyle change at a young age. "Since Spartan youths were wed at eighteen, married couples did not live together for the first twelve years of their marriage" (Pomeroy "Goddesses" 38). This meant that Spartan women were able to continue to live freely in public and lead a relatively similar life to the one they had led before their marriage.

With the idea of keeping the marriage a secret until conception, Spartan marriage was in essence a trial marriage to determine if a woman could conceive or not. If the bride could not conceive a child, the secret marriage could "be inconspicuously nullified without public

dishonor” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 38). This idea of secret nullification and no dishonor placed upon the bride, gave the ability for women to marry again in hopes to be able to conceive a child with a new husband. A marriage kept under wraps was also encouraged by the thought that, since a man would not see his wife very often and could only visit her in stealth, “when they were together they were never satiated, and their offspring [would] be as vigorous as their desire” (38). Even if a woman did conceive, however, she was allowed to raise her children in the way she saw fit and with the help of the women around her while her husband was away with the army.

Due to the general absence of men, women were also expected run the affairs of the home and business if necessary. The women of Sparta ran the estates of their husbands while they were gone, meaning that “the women were involved in managing the home and property” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 39). This ability for women to handle finances of the family came in acute contrast to other societies of the time, such as Greece and Rome, where it was considered illegal for women to carry more money than was necessary for them to buy grain at a market. As well as controlling the money, Spartan women were given control over their slaves – whereas sometimes Greek and Roman women were placed on the same level – who were called Helots. “Spartan women could weave and supervise their slaves’ work, but they were not encouraged to weave endlessly” (Pomeroy “Spartan Women” 30). Because of the continued absence of men, Spartan women began to hold very high positions among their society. It was not uncommon for Spartan women to own, trade, and breed fine race horses in their time and as an example of their

independent wealth. This ability to ride horses and drive carts would have reinforced their independence and allowed them continued control over their estates. Without Spartan women, Sparta could have collapsed.

Perhaps because of this essential role that Spartan women played in running Sparta, they were also very influential upon the decisions of their men. As often depicted in ancient literature, like the Iliad, women were able to turn men's minds and even stir them to war. "The personage of Helen stands apart...the most beautiful woman in the world, for whom a war was fought" (Pomeroy "Goddesses" 17). Although this influence from beauty occurred all around, Spartan women held even more power, besides just having the ability to sway their men with beauty, they were also listened to. Not only were Spartan women allowed to have opinions and voice them, but they were listened to by the men of their society and "and with good reason, for [they were] the only women who [brought] for real men" (Kishlansky 62). This idea of a woman's opinion being taken into consideration was completely unheard of in other poleis of the time and added to the advantage that Spartan women had over their female counterparts elsewhere.

Not only were Spartan women allowed a say in what happened in their homes, finances, and families, they were also often allowed to participate in society customs right alongside Spartan men. In contrast to Spartan women, however, "Athenian women exercised only by doing housework, mostly indoors or in the courtyard of their house" (Pomeroy "Spartan Women" 32). While Athenian women were kept inside, Spartan women were able to participate in many different outdoor activities, including Gymnopaedia. Gymnopaedia was when youths

would compete naked to display their athletic and martial skills. It is reported that women frequently would strip down and perform next to male citizens, “we all run the same racecourse and rub ourselves with oil like men along the bathing places of the Eurotas” (14). Throughout their lives, women of Sparta were encouraged to compete with and be educated alongside men, “Sparta women were given an upbringing and allowed a sphere of activity unknown elsewhere in Greece” (Kishlansky 62). This equal learning environment caused Spartan women to be lifted up to a much higher status than most other women because they were able to learn the same as men were and enjoy more freedoms.

This freedom flowed over into many aspects of Spartan life, including marriage. Although it is hard to tell whether or not it was something women themselves favored, the sharing of sexual partners was considered acceptable. For jealousy to occur in this sharing was something unacceptable, therefore, “bride sharing is also believed to have taken place – the best child rearers could be mothers to the children of several different men” (Malcolm). It is not said that women passively let themselves be lent by their husbands to other men, but wife sharing among men was not seen so much as adultery, but more as a man “lending his wife to another man when that man needed an heir to his estate” (Pomeroy “Goddesses” 37). Production of heirs was the first reason for the practice of wife sharing. If a man were too old, he could bring in a younger man to help his wife conceive children as heirs to the older man’s estate.

Wives were also sometimes shared with “a man who desired children but not marriage” (Sealey 87). It is thought by some that women were happy to be able to lend themselves to hold two households together and producing more sons that could strengthen their family. While it

was not entirely a statement of power for women that they were sometimes shared among men, it does show that women had a little more freedom inside of marriage because they were not expected to be completely monogamous to their partnership. The most important idea to come from this spousal sharing, was the idea that divorces were okay because women were considered equals in the society. They could divorce from their husbands without the fear of losing personal wealth, and since they were equal citizens they were neither required to or discouraged from remarrying. Women were even allowed to keep their children in a sense because boys would often already be taken away to the *agoge* and girls would feel a stronger connection to their mother. Spartan women were allowed their children and property after divorces, but it was a rarely practiced exercise.

Even though some of their rights were rarely put into effect, Spartan women undoubtedly had many more rights and freedoms than their female counterparts in cities elsewhere. However, viewed from a 21st century lens, even the excellent position held by Spartan women seems oppressive and limiting. No matter how many more rights they had than Roman and Greek women, Spartan women were still living in a male dominated world. Compared to the role of women in the 21st century what Spartan women were able to gain was nothing, but this is the danger of looking at history through only one point of view. If looked at through the view-point of someone in 700 BCE, Spartan women were well above their fellow women and continually progressing, but from the view of a reader in this 21st century, Spartan women were oppressed. When choosing to examine history it must be examined with a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary

approach. Not only is it necessary to view the topic as a historian from this time period, but also as a person from the time period being studied.

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