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The Enigma of the Spartan Woman

Legend has it, when a woman from Attica asked the Spartan queen Gorgo, “Why is it that only Spartan women can rule men?” Gorgo replied, “Because we are the only women who give birth to men.” The enigmatic position Spartan women held has perplexed historians for centuries. Unlike the women of Athens, Spartan women had some autonomy and involvement in social arenas. Though not much writing exists from the Spartans themselves, we can get a sense of their unique social calibration through the writing of outsiders. Unquestionably, the very core of Spartan society was war. Sparta was a civilization whose entire existence depended upon the strength and bravery of its soldiers. The militaristic climate in Ancient Sparta led to women having a higher social value than their Athenian counterparts.

The characterization of Spartan society covered in this paper represents the period of Greek history known as the “classical” period, which spanned from 490-323 B.C.E. Two states of this period are better represented in media and academia than most of the others: Athens and Sparta. When evaluating and reconciling the differences between ancient Greek states it is important to consider the physical geography of Greece. The mountainous terrain of the region leads to particular areas being isolated from others. Sparta was a prime example of this isolation. According to McGraw Hill’s *Western Experience* textbook, “the isolation of Sparta from other Greeks was both geographic and psychological,” (54). On the other hand, Athens was a city adjacent to the sea, which led to exposure to other Mediterranean cultures by way of international trade: “Athens’ port of Piraeus became the most important trading centre in the Mediterranean and gained a reputation as the place to find any type of goods on the market...” (Cartwright 1). So while Sparta’s existence depended upon detachment and distrust of other

peoples, Athens' depended upon interaction with other peoples. Thus, the differences between Sparta and Athens can be almost entirely ascribed to literal and figurative isolation.

What is most iconic about the Spartan people is their absolute focus on military might. While Athens' prosperity came from trade and the arts, Sparta's legacy lies in their conquests. Modern ideas about Sparta come, "most conspicuously and effectively [from] the battlefield..." (Cartledge 171). Even still, Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word "Spartan" as "1: a native or inhabitant of ancient Sparta or 2: a person of great courage and self-discipline." Men were expected to serve in the army until the age of sixty, leaving women at home for long periods of time to run the household. Because of the authority they possessed over their households, Spartan women appeared often in public. Their lives were starkly opposed to the "housebound life of the Athenian matron..." (Katz 74). Though both are Greek, there are massive disparities between Athens and Sparta. The fundamental differences between the two states can be best traced through Athens' and Sparta's policies and social attitudes about education, marriage and child rearing, and land ownership.

Sparta's take on education was different than any of its contemporaries', particularly Athens. Sarah B. Pomeroy's book, *Spartan Women*, comprehensively details this. Sparta was the only ancient Greek state to have a standardized system of education offered to girls as well as boys. In fact, girls had even more potential to explore academics, because boys lived and learned in a community of the other boys, where they were constantly inundated with physical pursuits. Girls, on the other hand, lived at home with their mothers and therefore had more leisure time to pursue music, poetry, and other disciplines. The fundamental idea behind extending this system to females was to "create mothers who would produce the best hoplites and mothers of hoplites..." (Pomeroy 4). Even though Sparta's allowances of education for all children were not

rooted purely in equality, the fact remains that Spartan girls were granted an education, which is more than can be said of the opportunities presented to Athenian girls.

Athenian philosophers were especially perplexed by Sparta's educational structure. In Plato's *Laws*, Plato explains the educational program for young girls included gymnastics as well as mousike, the discipline that included music, dance, and poetry. Choruses of Spartan maidens, "learned from the poets..." (Pomeroy 5). Mousike was particularly important to the lives of Spartan maidens "for it was a pleasant relief from the self control and austerity of everyday life..." (Pomeroy 12). Music and poetry was used by Greeks to worship the gods, and such a sacred act was often performed by young girls in Sparta. Appeasing the gods was a massively important part of Ancient Greek life as it led to fair weather, prosperity, and, particularly vital to Sparta, military victories. The prominence of female participation in mousike and other artistic endeavours demonstrates that girls had social importance.

Economic participation is also indicative of social importance. Land ownership in Ancient Greece was a predominantly male responsibility. However, Sparta is once again the exception to the rule. Aristotle, as referenced by Paul Cartledge in his essay, *Spartan Wives: Liberation or License*, was shocked at the distribution of land in Sparta. Aristotle said: "two fifths of the whole country...was in the hands of women..." (97). The allowance of land to Spartan women was not for egalitarian reasons, though. The absence of men for long periods of time meant someone else had to tend the land and perform agricultural tasks. Men assumed women could not manage these tasks of their own volition, so rather than monitoring them, law gave women an incentive to take care of land- being the owner of the land. This allowed the female landowners to control and bequeath their own property. Owning their own land provided

women a strong foothold in their autonomy. A legal, concrete allowance of land could not be unjustly seized from them. Conversely in Athens, women were not permitted to own any land.

The issue of inheritance in classical Greece is complicated. Due to the higher literacy rate of Athenians, historians know more about Athenian inheritance laws than they do about Sparta's. In the Athenian model, "each father passed down his [estate] intact to a single son..." (Hodkinson). On the other hand, from what we know, Spartan daughters, "automatically inherited a portion of the family estate alongside their brothers..." (Cartledge 98). To a modern audience, this may sound like fairness between siblings, but in comparison to the Athenian system, Sparta was downright radical. In reality, the reason for this allocation was most likely again due to the fact that men were at war for years or decades at a time, and if not for the women owning land, there would be no landholder present for extended periods of time, not because of a fundamental belief in equality. Even so, the social involvement of the Spartan women completely contrasted "the Athenian woman, whose legal position placed her in a position of greater subservience to the male than her counterpart..." (Ste. Croix 273). Inheritance and property laws demonstrate again the elevated level of rights (especially economic rights) granted to Spartan females.

Marriage and child rearing was hugely different between the states as well. Physical strength was a massive factor in Spartan marriages and childbearing. Spartans typically married several years older than Athenians, who were married off at the first sign of menstruation, since at that point they could bear children. Spartan men were to be married at age thirty, and women typically in their late teens or early twenties. According to Plutarch, women married, "not when the women were small or immature, but when they were in their prime and fully ripe for it...". These additional years during the pivotal development period of puberty gave way to more time

for education and physical training. Due to the absolute demand for strong warriors, Spartan women were expected to be strong and therefore produce strong children. The strength of the Spartan women was radically different than the Athenian women. Women from Athens were ideally weak and delicate, as the men were responsible for physically defending and providing for their families. In Sparta, the female sex was ordered to “exercise no less than the male...healthier children will be born if both parents are strong...” (Xenophon). Comparable to a rudimentary form of eugenics, Spartans understood the concept of traits being passed from parent to child. Naturally, a society built upon strength and military prowess put high value on intelligence and physical strength. Young girls competed in gymnastics, running races, wrestling, and other displays of physicality alongside the boys of the community.

Gymnopaedia, the festival of naked youths, is a particularly fascinating part of Spartan culture. Not only youths, but “young women as well may have participated in the *Gymnopaedia*...” (Pomeroy 34). The celebration of *Gymnopaedia* occurred each year and lasted approximately ten days, drawing attendance from Spartans and visitors alike. During this festival, young males and females stripped and performed rhythmic dances, showing off their physical fitness. In addition to the physical displays, choruses of both boys and girls performed songs and poetry. Spartans who had died the previous year were also honored. Intended to honor Apollo, the god of both music and the sun, *Gymnopaedia* was an integral part of Spartan worship. The equal participation of male and female youth in such a massively important event is important to note, as it shows the extent to which girls were regarded as equally capable of appeasing the gods.

Queen Gorgo of Sparta is fascinating and gives us a sense of the Spartan attitude toward women. Several anecdotes suggest she was both clever and literate. At age nine, Gorgo advised

her father to refuse a bribe from a foreign diplomat to support a revolt. Her father heeded her advice. This precocious understanding of the Spartan's political policy shows that the young princess was educated and respected enough to advise her father, the king. Gorgo's role in Spartan politics is not entirely clear, but there is much evidence to suggest female nobles, "wield[ed] a great deal of authority because of their influence on the kings..." (Pomeroy 76). Radically different than that authority is the exclusion from public life imposed on Athenian girls. Later, when Gorgo was an adult, Sparta received a tablet covered in wax. Gorgo told the recipients to scrape the wax off, revealing a secret warning carved into the tablet. The very knowledge that there might be writing on such a tablet, "indicated that she probably could read..." (Pomeroy 8). Women in Athens had no role in the arena of public life, and therefore had no reason to learn to read. When evaluating the culture of ancient societies, literacy is typically an effective indication of a particular group's social status, and it appears at least some Spartan women were literate.

The sole goal imposed upon Spartan mothers by the state was to create soldiers, not nurture or coddle their children. Anecdotally, the typical parting words of a Spartan mother to her son leaving for battle were, "come back either with your shield or on it..."(Plutarch). In other words, she wants the boy to return either victorious or dead. Coming back without a shield was the sign of a deserter. In Sparta, deserting your army was considered unforgivable, and worse than death. Mothers often sent letters to their children, chastising them if they were craven: "A bad rumor about you is circulating. Either absolve yourself at once, or cease to exist..." (Pomeroy 59). If a mother's son were to abandon his fellow soldiers, the family would be disgraced for generations. In the same respect, the mother of a courageous and victorious soldier would have been highly respected. In fact, the only Spartans who received marked graves upon their deaths

were soldiers who died in battle and women who died giving birth: “with both genders giving their lives to the state...” (Dillon 154). Burial practices were extremely sacred to the ancient Greeks, and placing fallen mothers on the same level as fallen soldiers is indicative of the honor Spartan culture placed on the females who birthed future warriors.

Time Magazine’s website recently posted a poll asking readers which word should be banned from being used in 2015. While the thought of banning a word is egregious in and of itself, the winning word voters thought ought to be banned was “feminism”. Time has since issued an apology for including “feminism” in the poll, but the influential nature of such a huge news outlet means a huge amount of people saw and were affected by this disrespectful article. The still constant struggle of gender equality is exhausting for many of its proponents and the setback of mockery from a major publication makes an already difficult battle even harder. Moreover, some women are reluctant or even embarrassed to call themselves feminists. Now more than ever, women -and men- need examples of strong, autonomous females. Hopefully an ancient example of women afforded respect will make women now feel less radical in their demand for equity in society. Surely we do not want to regress on over 2,000 years of progress. The disproportionate representation of women in history means, though their stories may be more difficult to find, it is socially and academically valuable to seek out information on the women of history.

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