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Epictetus' Enchiridion and the Influence on Women

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Introduction

The *Enchiridion*, written by the ancient Stoic philosopher Epictetus, is a text that has influenced human thought for centuries. Written nearly two-thousand years ago, the *Enchiridion* has been subject to various translations, interpretations, and adaptations by scholars. Although intended for a male audience, Epictetus' teachings have been used by some to address social questions beyond those that concerned Epictetus, such as the issue of the power differential between men and women. For this reason a reader who wishes to understand the modern day influence of the *Enchiridion* must research beyond the document itself. An examination of the connections that have been made over time between Epictetus' *Enchiridion* and the status of women at different points in time provides valuable insight into gender-based societal structures through time. While early interpretations of the *Enchiridion* were used to suggest that women should be content with their secondary status, women who were exposed to Epictetus' teachings over time found in the work ideas that supported women's liberation. Thus, although not intended for a female audience, Epictetus' *Enchiridion* has been used to justify the oppression and liberation of women in both 18th century England and the modern day United States.

History of the *Enchiridion*

Although scholars are still in the dark about many of the details regarding the life of Stoic philosopher Epictetus, his teachings are still relevant to readers today. Scholars do know Epictetus was born around 50 C.E. in Hierapolis, Phrygia (present day Turkey). At a young age Epictetus was enslaved by Epiphroditus, a former slave himself.¹ Epiphroditus allowed his slave to take classes from the Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus. After later being freed by his master, Epictetus continued to involve himself deeply in Stoicism. Epictetus was forced to leave Rome for Greece when the emperor Domitian banished all philosophers from Rome during his rule from 81 C.E. until 96 C.E. In Nicopolis, Greece, Epictetus continued his study of Stoicism and began teaching and lecturing about Stoic philosophy. He continued to do so until his death around 135 C.E.²

There is no evidence that any direct writings by Epictetus ever existed, or if they did, that any have survived to the modern day, however, his student Arrian recorded his lectures in great

detail³. The two major works that were written by Arrian and which scholars attribute to Epictetus are the *Enchiridion* and the *Discourses*. Arrian wrote the *Enchiridion* (or Handbook) in the form of 52 short passages, each containing instructions for the reader about how to employ Stoic philosophy to live a happy life. As written by John Sellars in his book *Stoicism*, Stoic philosophy is best defined as the belief that, “virtue alone is sufficient for happiness and that external goods and circumstances are irrelevant.”⁴ The short passages of the *Enchiridion* are specific in their instructions, but the major theme of surrendering to what you cannot control is present throughout the text.

Epictetus was greatly influenced by ancient philosophers who came before him. A.A. Long describes the core of Epictetus' teachings as being rooted in the teachings of, “Zeno, Cleanthus, and Chryssipus, the founding fathers of Stoicism in the third century B.C. at Athens.”⁵ In 300 B.C.E. Zeno founded Stoicism. He taught philosophy informally at the Painted Stoa. After Zeno died, Cleanthus succeeded him, followed by Chryssipus. The three founders of Stoicism focused on action-based instructions about how to live a fulfilling life, much like Epictetus did many years later. Additionally, Socrates had a great impact on Epictetus. In the *Enchiridion* this is evident, as Epictetus mentions Socrates by name far more often than any other philosopher. The Stoics admired Socrates for the self control and immunity to emotional stress that he practiced and taught.⁶ Epictetus included all of these ideas in his *Enchiridion* which has been widely read throughout the world since its creation.

The Intended Audience

Although women would eventually become a large part of the audience for the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus was not originally addressing women in his teachings. It is understood by scholars that the students at Epictetus' school in Greece were all male and therefore his intended audience exclusively male.⁷ The wording of the *Enchiridion* makes this abundantly clear. While some precaution must be taken by the reader due to the translation from Latin and the possibility that Arrian may have contributed edits to the teachings, Epictetus' teachings are directed specifically towards men. In the *Enchiridion*, Epictetus repeatedly refers to the reader's wife. In one passage he instructs, “If you would have your children and your wife and your friends to live

forever, you are silly.”⁸ If the reader ignores the moral message of this passage, it is understood that Epictetus is assuming the gender of his students’ spouses. Given the patriarchy of Classical Rome the reader can conclude that the reference to his students’ wives reflects Epictetus’ expectation that his students will be male.

Not only did Epictetus not anticipate his audience being largely women, he was also not especially concerned with societal gender dynamics in his teachings. In the entire *Enchiridion*, which is comprised of 52 sections, only one section is devoted to specifics of gender dynamics. In the single passage about acceptable conduct for women Epictetus professes:

“Women forthwith from the age of fourteen are called by the men mistresses. Therefore they see that there is nothing else that they can obtain but only the power of lying with men, they begin to decorate themselves, and to place all their hopes in this. It is worth our while then to take care that they know that they are valued (by men) for nothing else than appearing decent and modest and discreet.”⁹

In this passage Epictetus teaches that males should praise women for modesty to reinforce that they are valued for more than their relationships with men. This passage supports the conclusion that the teachings in the *Enchiridion* were not created with the intention to support either the oppression or liberation of women. Epictetus is more concerned with women viewing themselves as an entity separate from their relationships with men than he is about making a grand statement about gender-based power structures. He does not challenge the power structures but rather suggests that the power structures can be used to reinforce behavior in women which he thought would be beneficial to them.

Oppression and Liberation of Women

Epictetus’ *Enchiridion*, while not addressed towards women, was used by those who studied him to justify both the oppression and liberation of women. In 1567 the *Enchiridion* was translated into English for the first time by James Sandford.¹⁰ Several more English translators published copies of the *Enchiridion* before the interest in Epictetus’ text intensified in 1690, especially for female readers. Some scholars credit the original female readership to the succinct, easily read style of the *Enchiridion*.¹¹ The accessible style, however, was not the only thing that

made this text appealing for females. Epictetus' teachings were interpreted in two drastically different ways. In the late 17th century, women in England were expected to be homemakers, subordinate to their husbands.¹² One interpretation of the *Enchiridion* provided confirmation that women should remain unphased by their lower societal status, while the other interpretation espoused reading the *Enchiridion* as a way for women to cultivate, "a confident and positive way of thinking about themselves."¹³

These two starkly different interpretations of the same text are not difficult for a reader of the *Enchiridion* to understand. Epictetus explains to his students that, to better themselves they must accept the circumstances that they cannot control. The first line in the *Enchiridion* is, "Of things, some are in our power, and others are not."¹⁴ He goes on, detailing which things are and which are not in our power. Epictetus claims that the things that are not within a humans' power are, "the body, property, reputation, offices (magisterial power)."¹⁵ With this statement Epictetus introduces both the freedom of relinquishing any urge to control the things that one cannot physically control, but also complacency within power structures.

Epictetus' *Enchiridion* influenced the liberation of women through Mary Chudleigh's feminist writing during the late 17th century. Upon hearing the sermon of Reverend John Sprint, who preached that women are the lesser sex and must submit to their husbands, Chudleigh was infuriated.¹⁶ Her response was a poem entitled *The Ladies Defense*, published in 1701. Mary Chudleigh wrote her poem in the form of a dialogue. In the poem the female character, Melissa, responds to the male character by questioning, "Must men command, and we alone obey?"¹⁷ This is one of multiple examples of Mary Chudleigh using her writing as a way to question male authority. Mary Chudleigh found that the *Enchiridion* supported her ideals of the liberation of women from the authority of men. Evidence of Chudleigh's interest in the *Enchiridion* is identifiable to readers in her essay *On Anger*, in which she directly quotes Epictetus' *Enchiridion*. Additionally, in her poem about the sermon of Reverend Sprint, Mary Chudleigh encourages her readers to study ancient writers to understand how to better themselves.¹⁸ Her focus on reading the *Enchiridion* was about women finding fulfillment within their lives as they were. She taught that fulfillment was not based on circumstances but instead on mindset. Mary

Chudleigh was a highly-published poet and her continuous encouragement of women to read ancient philosophers such as Epictetus influenced many women to do so.¹⁹

Before the time of Mary Chudleigh there is evidence that the *Enchiridion* was used for the purpose of stereotyping women as a form of oppression, rather than Chudleigh's intention of instilling confidence in them. In the late 1600s both John Dryden and John Evelyn, two English writers produced work that introduced Epictetus as a teacher who was able to convey the value of young girls obeying male authority figures.²⁰ Readers will understand that Epictetus' teachings instruct the acceptance of power differentials, which was used by Dryden and Evelyn to justify the perpetuation of female subordination to men. Their focus was on teaching this acceptance of gender-based power dynamics to encourage complacency with the status quo, as opposed to teaching acceptance as a route to finding fulfillment. After the death of Mary Chudleigh, the use of the *Enchiridion* to support the ideals of female submission reemerged. A dynamic is illustrated in the 1754 poem by Samuel Bowden and Elizabeth Singer Rowe, in which the impassioned female character is calmed by reading Epictetus.²¹ Their storyline suggests that the female protagonist had too much emotion and Epictetus was able to return her to a quiet state, perpetuating the 18th century English ideal of quiet and submissive women.

The Lasting Influence

By the mid-18th century, readers were not as interested in reading Epictetus' work as they had been only decades before. Scholars believe that this is due to readers reacting, "against the extreme popularity."²² Although the *Enchiridion* was no longer heavily read by the time the 20th century arrived, the influence of Epictetus' lectures have lived on in several ways. The story of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy suggests that Epictetus' teachings are still relevant today, including to women.

Albert Ellis, who designed Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT), studied Epictetus' teachings extensively. Ellis was born in 1913 in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. His mother suffered from bipolar disorder and his father was gone much of time, leaving Ellis responsible for his two siblings.²³ During his difficult childhood Ellis took an interest in the teachings of several ancient philosophers, including Epictetus. After attending college and graduate school

Ellis became a practicing psychologist and professor. It was in 1957 that Ellis first suggested REBT as a type of therapy.²⁴ The basis of the therapy is closely tied to the teachings of Epictetus that Ellis had taken interest in earlier in his life. Ellis was especially fascinated with Epictetus' idea that the experiences you have are not what cause pain or emotional upset but instead, it is the opinions you have about those experiences that makes them painful and disturbing.²⁵ Ellis instructed his patients to understand the irrationality of their fears with the intent of helping them to understand that those fears are harmful rather than helpful or rational.

It was the wife of Albert Ellis, Debbie Joffe Ellis, who drew a connection between REBT and female social status in an online symposium hosted by the company Modern Stoicism on their website in 2019. Debbie Joffe Ellis, like her late husband, is a licensed psychologist, mental health counselor, and professor. She also assisted him in writing the book on REBT. In response to the symposium question, which was "Is Stoicism something that is equally useful for men and women?," she proposed that the approach of REBT, which was grounded in Epictetus' teachings, could enable women to cope with the challenges of gender inequity.²⁶ She acknowledges that all genders have the capacity to enhance their lives with self awareness and rational thinking. Her main point, however, is about how women should confront unfair treatment in any setting, and especially the workplace, with the core teachings of REBT. She writes that in the face of unfair treatment, "REBT certainly would encourage her to seek out and take any actions that she could take in order to receive equal conditions and payments. However REBT would encourage her to do so from a place of healthy emotion."²⁷ Debbie Ellis continues by offering several lines of rational wisdom that could benefit women in the face of adversity. Two of the lines that are key to REBT and find roots in the teachings of Epictetus are, "I can stand what I don't like, I just don't like it," and, "life is often unfair and is often unjust, however I can make effort to create change while focusing on what still is good in my life."²⁸

Debbie Ellis' claim that women can employ the strategies of REBT when faced with oppression directly links Epictetus' *Enchiridion* to feminism in the modern day. Debbie Ellis' statement supports ideas similar to those of Mary Chudleigh. The advice that Ellis gives to women facing gender inequity is that they should not be complacent in the face of gender-based power dynamics, however, they should not let their personal mental health decline as a result.

The foundation of her message favors the liberation of women from systemic oppression. Due to the foundation of REBT being in the teaching of Epictetus' *Enchiridion* the suggestion that REBT be used to liberate women is therefore connecting the liberation of women and the *Enchiridion*. Some readers may also see the connections that her suggestion draws between Epictetus' teachings and the complacency of women. Ellis suggests that women only seek better treatment in the presence of "healthy emotion." Much like Samuel Bowden, her suggestion implies that if a woman possesses emotions that are impassioned in any way she should take on the responsibility of changing them.

Shirley Chisholm stretched Epictetus' influence even further in an article she wrote in 1971 called "Race, Revolution, and Women" about the struggles of African-American women. Chisholm was the first African-American woman to secure a seat in Congress, which she accomplished in 1968.²⁹ Her political priorities were womens' rights and racial equality. Her political leadership coincided with the black feminist movement which focused on the intersectionality of racial and gender discrimination issues. In 1972, after the publication of her article, Chisholm announced her campaign for United States President. Although it was unsuccessful, she was the first African-American, and first woman to attempt a presidential campaign for a major political party.³⁰ The great obstacles that Chisholm overcame for both females and African-Americans, both through her presence as an icon for political progress and through her involvement in shaping national policies, represents the influence she had on American citizens. Therefore, it is notable that the key ideals of Epictetus' teachings were directly cited by her in her article.

In her article, Shirley Chisholm discusses both racial and gender inequity. She explains that, "Because I am both black and a woman, I will make some comments and observations about both."³¹ One of the arguments she makes is that referring to the political movement undertaken by African-Americans in the 1960's as the "Black Revolution" is marginalizing because it fails to credit African-Americans for the role they play in the social fabric as a whole. She argues that conceiving of the movement to expand freedom for African-Americans as the "Black Revolution" does not promote equality for the African-American community because the term indicates a movement that is separated from other liberation movements also going on in

the 1960's, such as the feminist revolution. To support her claim, Chisholm quotes Malcolm X's description of finding common ground with white Muslims because he understood the common oppression that they faced.³² Chisholm describes the impact of the quote by relating it to the teachings of Epictetus. Her reference is brief but she refers to Epictetus by name and mentions that he was a slave for some portion of his life. The quote that she cites is, "No man is free until he is master of his own mind."³³ She does not include any direct citation to a specific book of his teachings, however the quote relates to the core ideas that Epictetus expressed and his student transcribed.

Although it is not directly out of the *Enchiridion*, Chisholm connects the passage directly to Epictetus by name. As she interprets it, Epictetus is saying that people must fully understand the situation that they are in in order for progress to be made. Chisholm continues by connecting directly to women the quote that she attributes to Epictetus. She writes, "White women must realize that black people in America are not yet free and know that they are not yet free."³⁴ She connects the idea that women and African-Americans must understand their common oppression in order to make progress. Chisholm's interpretation of Epictetus' teachings was used to support her idea that women and African-Americans are both oppressed, and that people need to understand not only their own oppression but also the oppression of others with the intention of understanding the common goal of political progress. Whether Epictetus intended for his teachings to be interpreted in this way or not, the simple reality that such an influential modern figure connected his name to her ideas about women's liberation proves that he is still influential for women today.

Conclusion

In the *Enchiridion*, the ancient Stoic philosopher Epictetus explains why and how people can find happiness by not worrying about the things that are not within their control. This text has been highly influential and many interpretations, translations, and adaptations exist of the *Enchiridion*. Examining how the text has been interpreted over time, readers will understand how the influence of the text has changed in the centuries following its original production. Epictetus' teachings were originally intended for a male audience. Given the historical context in

which Epictetus wrote the *Enchiridion* it is clear he never intended to take a position about women's status in society and certainly never intended to be a spokesperson for women's liberation. Nonetheless, Epictetus' *Enchiridion* has influenced thinking about gender-based power differentials in both European and North American society nearly two thousand years after the creation of the book by Arrian. Although Epictetus did not intend for his teachings to have implications for women, they have been used to support both the oppression and liberation of women.

By examining the ways in which Epictetus' teachings have been cited in connection with the issue of women's status in society, we gain insight into how textual interpretation can change over time from the intended message of the author and then continue to change based upon why and in what context a person is interpreting the document. In the case of the *Enchiridion*, different connections have been made over time between gender-based power structures and Epictetus' teachings about how humans attain happiness. The various ways in which the *Enchiridion* has been cited as relevant to the status of women in society illustrates the way in which the meaning of a text can be divorced from its context and interpreted through a new lens.

Notes

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4. John Sellars, *Stoicism* (England: Acumen, 2006), 3.
5. Long, *Epictetus*, 8.
6. Long, *Epictetus*, 68.
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8. Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, trans. George Long (New York: Dover Publications), 5.
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