

The Degradation of Athenian Women in the Phallicratic Polis

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ABSTRACT

*The rise of hoplite-democracy and the virtual imprisonment of respectable women in the **oikos** (household) and the more extreme exploitation of all other women for male convenience and pleasure was no paradox of the Athenian conception of freedom. The increase in the power and wealth of Athens implied (in the male-dominated politics of the day) that respectable women, i.e., those who might bear legitimate heirs, had to be kept under close supervision, lest this all-important function be compromised, thereby jeopardizing the all the gains Athens had procured since the victory at Marathon. Self-consciously Athenians related hoplite democracy to their remarkable and sudden success. Equally, they appreciated their vulnerability, individually and politically, to domestic uncertainty. Their remedy was not merely to sequester their wives and daughters, but to degrade women generally. This process was more than an expression of male arbitrariness or an adolescent desire to have women serve male needs, cheerfully, instantly, obediently and without complication. It was seen as essential to the survival of Athens as a political entity. The Phallicratic Polis has twin foundations: (1) the need to deliver effective martial valor at the behest of the polis; (2) the need to secure domestic order, so that the **oikos**, the most important under-lying social unit of the polis, could protect family succession and property, and ultimately the polis itself.*

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Homer suggests there was a time when women of the aristocracy had a high social status and considerable freedom: they could move freely without escorts, discuss on equal terms with their husbands, and might even be present at the banquets in the great hall...

Osywn Murray

The Athenian Achievement and the Degradation of Women

Classical Greece, especially as expressed in fifth century Athens, has disturbed scholars, especially those who are sensitive to the concerns of women, because its enormous achievements were coupled with the degradation of women. As Athenian culture, power, and wealth increased, the status of women declined. What seems more troubling to contemporary scholars, as Athenian polis developed the vocabulary, institutions, and procedures of democracy, as citizenship was expanded to include all free born Athenians, the freedom of women was restricted to a greater extent than more authoritarian or more traditional regimes. So incongruous has this seemed that some scholars have labeled it a paradox of Athenian civilization, one less explicable than the coincidence of democracy and imperialism. This essay suggests that far from being a paradox the degradation of women was integral to the Athenian achievement. This is not to say it was inevitable or that Athens could not have done otherwise. It is to say that Athenians as a polis believed that their treatment of their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters, to say nothing of slaves, concubines, or prostitutes, was seen by them as necessary and prudent. Nor is it to say there were no dissenting voices. Euripides, for example, repeatedly demonstrated the folly, waste, and injustice of Athenian treatment of women.

If the degradation of women was not an explicit policy of classical Athens, it might as well have been. It certainly was not the policy of Athens to include women in the expansion and extension of political rights that characterized the fifth century. By degradation, however, I mean to indicate far more than the absence of political rights, although I do not wish to minimize their importance. Degradation is far more than paternalism, conceived as protecting

women from the real dangers of a violent world. Degradation entails: (1) the systematic reduction of the value of the female contribution to the family and the polis; (2) the catering to male desires, especially sexual, in a way which turns all women into objects of limited, if important, utility; (3) the restriction of the participation of respectable women in any public life, to the point of sequestering them in the household. Degradation was the sum and substance of the practices and values of the phallic polis regarding its women, including its female citizens.

This was a somewhat perplexing development. One might well think that in the course of moving from an estate-based society to a more modern political one, the status of women would have at the very least not declined. One might have expected that the undeniable civilizing consequences of urbanization, greater military security, rapidly increasing prosperity, and an unsurpassed cultural flowering would have implied an improvement in the status of women. Homer had foreshadowed this expectation by his sympathetic portrait of Hector:

"Hector affirms himself as a warrior by recognizing the bond that he has with his family and with his city as a whole, and he claims that his activity as a warrior is on behalf of them all. In this Hector is the prototype of the new type of Greek hero (whose) personality (according to Jaeger) is already an example of the infiltration of the new ethics of the polis..." (Arthur, p.11)."

It is remarkable that the new ethic of the polis, one emphasizing the warrior's responsibilities to his family and polis rather than to his glory did not imply in Athens an improvement in the status of women. Some scholars consider this failure a paradox. I do not. It was not even an inexplicable inconsistency. Explaining why is the burden of this essay.

The Homeric poet focuses almost exclusively on the positive side of the position of women; it emphasizes women's inclusion in society as a whole, rather than her exclusion from certain roles; it celebrates the importance of the functions that women do perform, instead of drawing attention to their handicaps or inabilities.

Marilyn Arthur¹

¹ Hans Licht partially anticipates this judgment, but, by concluding that Homeric attitudes were unchanged down to classical times, fails to consider the changes in the emergence of the polis entailed: "In Homer, Nestor calls after Athene as she disappears in the clear sky: 'But, O Queen,

The Rise of the Polis and the Politicization of Virtue

Before the emergence of the polis archaic Greece was comprised of virtually autonomous estates. Seldom more extensive than their medieval counterparts, these settlements were ruled by tribal chiefs called *basilees*². The *basileus* "stands at the head of a group which can be viewed in two different ways: in terms of hereditary descent, as the *genos* or head of family, and in terms of its economic counterpart, the *oikos* (household or estate) (Murray, O., p.41)." Each of these social functions was central to the life of early Greece. Each inevitably had women at its core. Both therefore are central to this essay. Apart from the need for self-defense, the warrior basis of archaic Greece was principally rooted in the need to secure food and other necessities for human subsistence. The more food the more population, the more population the more soldiers. The more soldiers the more food could be secured and so on. This age old oscillation of military-economic power within a relatively narrow range among rival chiefdoms began to break down in the late eighth and early seventh centuries.

A certain degree of military success led to a certain degree of urbanization³, which freed some citizens from the demands of a primitive agrarian economy, which created more wealth and more division of labor, and therefore created more capacity to support more soldiers and so on. This very success was the effect of rational policies pursued by more or less traditional leaders who had no intention of undermining their own authority and who certainly saw no relationship between greater economic and military security and their decline.

The decline of the *basileus*-based estate changed the status of women, and especially wives, in archaic Greece. According to Osywn Murray, the polis

be propitious and grant me fair renown, to me myself and to my children, and to my revered wife' (*Odyssey*, iii, 380). We may say that these words express the moral ideals of the Greeks (Licht, p.3)."

2. The *basileus* was not simply the lord (*kyrios*) of an *oikos*. The *basileus* was more than the head of a kinship group located on an ancestral parcel of land. A *basileus* had performance, not simply hereditary criteria to meet. "The claim to be a hero, an *agathos*, depended in the first place upon family, but high birth was not enough; to sustain the claim other qualifications were required, the principal one being the strength and fighting ability necessary to protect a hero's family and possessions from would-be marauders, and perhaps also the ability to augment his possessions by plunder. For the individual hero this meant the ability to take vengeance in person upon individuals who molested him and his *oikos*; for the *basileus*, one of the higher chiefs, there was in addition the ability to marshal other heroes to support him in larger-scale struggles, and a man's rank in the hierarchy of heroes depended on the number and quality of his following (Lacey, p.38)."
3. "The process of forming *poleis* was accomplished more quickly in some areas than in others. Physically, *poleis* tended to coalesce quickly where the need for local self-defense was great and drove the families together (Lacey, p.51-2)."

implied lower status for women⁴. While it is clear that they became less important in the ever-widening scope of political activity—they were all but excluded from it—their lack of participation should not be taken to mean that they were unimportant politically, that is, to the life of the polis. I do not mean here important "only" because the species requires females to reproduce itself, but important to the survival of a polis as a polis. It is not the insignificance of married women that led to their degradation but their growing importance. "The high value placed on children also made a fertile wife much valued (Lacey, p.169)." This value became politicized with the polis⁵. The measure of Athenian paternalism may have been that the political degradation of women and the consequent trivialization of their roles in society was in direct proportion to their increasing significance.

While the embryonic polis transmuted its ideal from Achilles to Hector, its further development did not expand or spread the new Hectorian model, as might have been expected. In the most rapidly evolving and most innovative polis, Athens, there was a modification of the Hector-model which amounted to a perversion of the Homeric canon. As Athens became more "civilized", that is, as it became more complex, economically and socially, and more diverse, as it attracted skilled and talented people and dragooned slaves from the entire Greek world, as it became the most democratic polis, as it did all these things, it became more hostile to women. How could such a highly civilized culture—one which has often been cited as the high water mark of human development—have acted with barbaric insensitivity to its mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives?

At the very least an explanation is called for, although we may have to settle for a coherent account which must remain speculative. What happened, in my view, was too much success born of too much change in too short a period. The resulting sense of precariousness was too strong to allow for the question-

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4. "In later Greek society respectable women were largely confined to their quarters, and took little part in male social activities at home or in public. The change in status is probably related to the movement from an estate-centered life to a city-centered one: the urbanization of Greek culture in most communities saw the increasing exclusion of women from important activities such as athletics, politics, drinking parties and intellectual discussion; these characteristically group-male activities resulted also in the growth in most areas of that typically aristocratic Greek phenomenon, male homosexuality.... In other words, women had once been valuable social assets in an age where family and marriage alliances were more important; in the development of the city-state they were no longer at a premium (Murray, O., p.44)."
5. "Some of Solon's most far reaching acts...were concerned with the family and its property. Their principal effect was to liberate the conjugal family (the *oikos* of husband, wife, children and dependents) to some extent from the wider kinship-groups in the matter of property-ownership (Lacey, p.88)."

ing of the premises of Athens' preeminence in the Greek world. The freeing of economic forces, the liberating of individual efforts, the increase in social and political alternatives, and the consequent breakdown of traditional—read stifling—social structures, however progressive they seemed or actually were, created a great deal of anxiety, social upheaval, and political turmoil.

Just as economic and military success unintentionally under-mined the status of the *basilees*, the reforms of Solon and Kleisthenes lowered the status of women⁶. Women's inferiority implied by Solon's reforms, notwithstanding their legal status and protections, now was by the time of Kleisthenes buttressed by the necessity for political accommodation on an unprecedented scale with unprecedented stakes. The more Athens succeeded, the more it had to lose, the more critical its politics became, the less importance the private lives of its citizens became, the more isolated its wives. Note that I have carefully not said the less important its married women. I believe wives became even

6. Marilyn Arthur's analysis is worth quoting in full: "It is clear that the program (Solon's) was a progressive one, and women derived some particular benefits from it. The social role which women had always played, that of wives and mothers, was now legally established as their right as well as duty, and was recognized, through various religious festivals, as a vital and honored contribution to the state. However, Solon's re-introduction into society of the distinction between public and private, albeit in a new form, had some important ramifications for women. In Dark-Age society...the heroic code reflected a culture which conceived of the female and male spheres of activity as two separate entities, existing of necessity side by side, but fundamentally unrelated to each other. In the city-state, the private side of man's existence, his headship of an *oikos*, is the condition for his incorporation into the state as citizen. The distinction between public and private is therefore maintained, only now the private life of man is a sub-category of the public sphere. Insofar as women continued to be associated with the private side of life alone, they now appear as a sub-species of humanity. That is to say, women had before been conceived as an aspect of life in general; now they are seen as an aspect of man's existence. The difference is an important one, for it means that the inferiority of women, their subservience to men, has to be explicitly recognized. Formerly, women's inferiority was merely implied by the fact that the cultural ideal (the hero) was male. Now, the social and legal structure of the state specifically endorses and prescribes the subservience of women to men (Arthur, p.36)." The impact of Kleisthenic reforms in this respect has been less understood. In one sense any lessening of the political importance of the brotherhoods might seem to have favored women, at least to the degree that such groups of men became less self-sufficient—socially and politically. Married women might have been expected to fill the emotional and social vacuum created by the decline of the *phratría*. But this expectation presumes too much of a modern and Unathenian orientation. To the extent that one social structure was no longer adequate to males as individuals or as citizens, another was created, one equally devoid of complex, open-ended spousal relations. Kleisthenic reforms, by lessening the range of "categorical" relations and by increasing the importance of noncategorical political arrangements and agreements, placed an unprecedented and unequalled premium on public life. Ironically, the decline of the *phratría* implied a decline of the private life, and the further isolation of Athenian wives from meaningful relations with their husbands. In this as in other respects, Kleisthenes supplied the Solonic social structure with a durable political infrastructure.

more important politically in the polis than in Homeric times and not simply because politics became an obsession with Athenians⁷.

As the polis grew in wealth, size, complexity, and impersonality, as it evolved from the estates of early Attica into the polis of the classical period, the power inherent in the provision of legitimate male heirs became more important. More than the peace and tranquility of the household were at stake. The survival of the polis—as a political and cultural entity, and therefore as a source of male esteem and distinction—was seen to be dependent on females who provided indispensable functions⁸. For Athenians this dependence on unreliable females endangered the polis, and the polis was much more important than biological survival. The polis not only made life worth living, it made human life possible⁹.

The unprecedented power and wealth of Athens heavily depended upon its military success, upon its ability to deliver more martial virtue at the point of attack than its enemies. As hoplite-democracy extended the need for valor from the aristocratic warriors to middle-class farmers, naval democracy extended it to virtually all adult male citizens. Athens became, among other things, a school for the creation of male virtue with a special emphasis on its military expression. The need for this was unquestioned. There is no recorded dissenting voice. The price for this was increasingly paid by women. For the social equation seemed to be this. We, the polis, require a great deal from we, the male citizen-soldiers. Nothing therefore should be stinted those who not only provide the basis for the existence of the polis but literally are the polis. If

7. "For many citizens their commitment to politics ...must have proved so compelling--and fulfilling--that politics became a way of life. They discovered their identity in politics and found 'self-realization' in political action (Meier, p.144)."

8. "In the rising 'middle' class which Hesiod represents...there was far greater fragmentation and far deeper divisions between class members (than in Homeric times). For these people a policy of aggressive individualism and fierce competition was dictated; the nuclear family was a necessity of life for this group, and the wife was part of the corporate effort which made possible her husband's ascent up to the economic and social scale. In particular, the most important function of women, that of providing an heir, was crucial to the survival and continuance of the family in an era when the availability of land was increasingly restricted, and the continuance of rights over family land dependent upon the existence of an heir. From the point of view of this class, women's sexuality emerges as a threat and as a potentiality which required regulation and supervision... Apart from their sexuality, hostility to women was a product of the perception that women had no concrete stake in any particular social or political order, or even of any particular family. The liability of women to be transferred from one family to another, their freedom from any major social and political responsibilities, caused fears about the fickleness of their allegiances (Arthur, p.24)."

9. "He who is without a polis, by reason of his own nature and not of some accident, is either a poor sort of being, or a being higher than man: he is like the man of whom Homer wrote in denunciation: 'Clanless and lawless and hearthless is he.' (Aristotle, 1253a, Barker, p.5)."

the polis depended for its survival, to say nothing of its prosperity and glory, upon citizen-soldiers, it was necessary to do everything possible to secure effective citizen-soldiers. Domestically, this meant that the household would be protected by the assurance of inheritance through the male line. Anything or anyone who threatened this inheritance would be dealt with accordingly. The discipline of the field of battle would find its analogue in the virtual sequestering of wives and daughters to the household. The primacy of the mission in combat, entailing the subordination of an individual soldier's life, would find its analogue in the birthing bed. The elimination of those personal relationships which might endanger the mission would extend to spousal relations. Taken together this social equation made fifth century Athens a phallic society.

Thus the phallus became a religious symbol; the worship of the phallus in its most various forms is the naive adoration of the inexhaustible fruitfulness of nature and the thanks of the naturally sensitive human being for the propagation of the human race

Hans Licht

The Athenian Oikos as the House of Legitimacy

Although we have anticipated much of the argument of this section, it may be useful to examine the Athenian *oikos* in greater detail. Household, the usual translation of *oikos*, fails to convey the power the term held for a middle or upper class Athenian. The modern connotation suggests the routine of domestic life, a place where the necessities of physical existence are provided for and by a family. An *oikos* included all this, but so would a military camp, *albeit* less comfortably. If household is too sterile, home is too sentimental, too caring and sharing. Not only was the struggle for domestic provision in general too sharp to have allowed for much sentiment, what sentiment existed in Athenian society did not generally take place in the *oikos*, except regarding children. The notion of a home as a refuge from the world could not have been more alien to the Athenian ideal. It would be closer to the truth to suggest that the public life of Athens was a refuge from the necessitous implications of the *oikos*, chief of which was the procreation of a male heir in order to protect the property of the *oikos*. The only justification of an *oikos* – as a social organization and not merely as the location of property--was the opportunity it provided for the siring of a legitimate son. This was the necessity only an *oikos* could have provided¹⁰.

¹⁰. "An *oikos* without children was also not fully an *oikos*. Every Greek family looked backwards

Everything else could have been supplied by alternative social structures without violating Athenian values, everything except private property, the reason for needing an heir in the first instance. Thus an *oikos* was a social mechanism for the transferal of property from father to son, the only viable means of conserving or enhancing it in the face of death:

"But for a hero death in the act of saving his family and its livelihood was bearable. Hector can say 'But fight, all of you, by the ships; and if one of you is struck by bolt or spear and meets the doom of death he must die; it is no disgraceful thing for a man to die in defense of his country; but his wife will be left behind and his children, with his house and his lands secure if the Achaeans sail home in their ships' (Lacey, p.34)."

It is impossible to overstate the significance of the family and *oikos* to the Athenian polis. Thus it should not be surprising that Aristotle began the *Politics* with a discussion of the family, making women as indispensable to the polis as they are to human reproduction. The family, village, and polis were species of the same genus, combining the most basic animal properties with the most human. "Because it is the completion of associations existing by nature (the family and the village), every polis exists by nature, having the same quality as the earlier associations from which it grew (Aristotle 1253a, Barker, p.5)." The functions of these earlier associations, the family and groups of families, were biological and economic. The centrality of women did not imply their equality, either for Aristotle or the average Athenian male citizen, before or since. "Again, the relation of male to female is naturally that of superior to the inferior--of the ruling to the ruled (Aristotle, 1254b, Barker, p.13)." No assertion of their "inferiority", however, could be taken to imply their insignificance. Quite the contrary. My belief is that the undeniable and increasing value of women to both household and polis arose with and perhaps generated much of the misogyny of the classical era. Over and above the mistrust, misunderstanding and misappreciation of the Other, Athenians feared the power of women and constructed elaborate social structure to control it¹¹.

and forwards all the time. It looked backwards to its supposed first founder, and shared a religious worship with others with a similar belief; it also looked forwards to its own continuance, and to the preservation for as many future generations as possible of the cult of the family which the living members practiced in the interests of the dead. The son of a house was therefore (in the best period of the Greek polis) under a strong obligation to marry and procreate an heir.... (Lacey, p.15)."

11. "Archaic attitudes to sex were closely related to the social institutions of the aristocracy. Marriage was for the upper classes an occasion for creating political and social ties between different families and so enhancing the status of the genos within the individual city-state, or among the wider circle of the international aristocracy... For marriage in all classes was an institution concerned with social standing, property, and inheritance, or with the practicalities

It can now perhaps be understood why the *oikos* carried so much political and emotional freight. Only under the aegis of the prime importance of the *oikos* can Athenian marriage be understood. "Marriage in Athens was a contract between families, not individuals. Until the head of her *oikos* gave her in marriage into another *oikos*, she was not married, and her children were not legitimate; and these were matters of which the Greeks kept a very careful record (Schaps, p.41)." The implication is easily drawn, although, except in the most idiosyncratic of cases, the "ifs" of Schaps' comment seem needlessly conditional: "If a marriage is designed to build up a household, a childless marriage is not really a marriage at all; if it is designed to secure companionship for husband and wife, the presence or absence of children should not affect it (Schaps, p.90)."

While it is impossible to adduce evidence regarding the personal lives of Athenian spouses sufficient to suit social scientific methods, it can be said with assurance that the structure (as well as the single-minded purpose) of Athenian marriage militated against the general presence of companionship. Among respectable Athenian families, it was common and ideal for a man to be married when his father was about sixty and he was about thirty to a virgin girl about fifteen. She would be expected to become pregnant as soon as possible. Under the best circumstances, it would have been difficult for a husband and wife who were strangers to each other--strangers as a result of the sequestering of respectable girls--who were separated by fifteen years--one an adolescent, the other a man designated to be competent to rule an *oikos*—difficult to achieve a level of companionship and intimacy that moderns find desirable before they contemplate marriage. "From the point of view of society and social life, one inevitable and evil result of the immaturity of Athenian brides, and the wide gap in age that was normal between husband and wife, lay in that they were unlikely to have any common friends (Lacey, p.163)." And unlikely to befriend each other.

Athens did not provide the best circumstances. It was the very opposite of desert island--far from the hurly-burly, separated from the getting and

of peasant existence, not an occasion for emotion... Any deeper love of woman was a sign of degrading effeminacy. The Greek conception of romantic love was homosexual...the concept of love as permanent, destructive, irresistible, the basis of all human actions; idealization, unattainability and the idea of purity in the loved one; the importance of pursuit and conquest over satisfaction; the torture of jealousy--these are all expressed primarily in relation to members of the same sex. Such attitudes were established by the archaic aristocracy, and remained especially characteristic of aristocratic circles later (Murray, O., p.205)." Although this comment would benefit from qualification, some of which will follow, here I need to emphasize that deep attachment to, much less, romantic love of, one's wife--present or potential--was what the society wished to avoid and therefore ridiculed as effeminate.

spending--where a mutually attracted couple could be "swept away" at least for a time, developing attachments which would stand them in good stead for the times of troubles to come. While the young wife was isolated from all public life--the mature man was all the more immersed in it. For now he was a full-fledged citizen, a *kyrios*, the lord of his *oikos*. Although neither intimacy nor companionship could have been expected, for the bride marriage promised the fulfillment her entire social justification: the opportunity to give birth to a son who would in time also become a *kyrios*. "The young bride, sequestered in her new home, had to live with the considerable likelihood of death in child-bearing. Society glorified such a fate as female martyrdom, analogous to heroic death on the battlefield for men (Keuls, p.138)." For this service she could have expected a quiet and protected life, if she behaved in accord with the customs and practices of respectable Athenian wives. Athenian paternalism was pervasive.¹²

It would be easy to depreciate the importance of physical and social protection by the application of contemporary Western standards. As we have emphasized, Attica was a dangerous place. Survival was wrested from a poor land--Attica was especially infertile--and secured by an ability to defend oneself against aggressive neighbors. To live outside an *oikos* was to be wretched, homeless and vulnerable. For a woman so fated, her life would have been precarious at best and her subsistence earned by the sale of herself in one way or another. An Athenian wife was fortunate among women. With these realities in mind, a leading scholar of the Athenian family concludes: "Within this middle class, however, women were probably as well protected by the law as in any century before our own, and, granted a reasonable husband or father, enjoyed a life not much narrower and not much less interesting than women in comparable classes of society elsewhere (Lacey, p.176)."

I have no quarrel with Lacey's conclusion, but his tone suggests an altogether too roseate view of Athenian marriage. After all marriage is not a matter of cross cultural comparison. What could it have mattered to an Athenian wife to know that her cohort in Persia was equally or more miserable or to realize, if

12. "Since a woman's sphere of life was her family, her active life did not really begin until her marriage... (that is) when she was passed from one *kyrios* to the house of another, with some money or property going along with her as a dowry. But concomitant with the patriarchal marriage-rules was a pervasive paternalism, a solicitude for the bride's interest that was seen in terms of family responsibility. This paternalism was based, of course, on a presumption that men were more intelligent than women--a presumption so basic to Athenian male society that they rarely bothered to state it... Athenian men did recognize that women were people, and they were interested in their well-being; but they would not entrust to a woman the power to guarantee that welfare. Protection of women was thus expressed not through direct legal rights, but by a system of rights and obligations of men (Schaps, pp.92-3)."

she could, that women would for another two millennia be largely in the same position, prisoners of their biology, captives of their indispensable function, occasional bedmates of strong willed strangers, who resented them and even more their own dependence on female favors and issue? The Athenian wife of the favored classes needed neither social scientific data nor much of an imagination to count her blessings. She could have seen the plight of her own household retainers, slaves, servants, concubines *et al*, to say nothing of those even worse off, like the women of the streets and brothels. But no knowledge, no perspective, no wisdom beyond her years could have assuaged the effects of her isolation, if not from the political life of Athens *per se*, from her only connection to it, her husband. This isolation was no accident of marriage, of having made a bad match, of simply not being personally attracted to one's spouse. In my view it was an effect of the entire Athenian attitude toward marriage, an attitude which can be deduced not only from the ruthlessly instrumental nature of the marriage itself but from the life of the husband whose activities—personal, sexual, and political—achieved their meaning apart from his wife. There is little need to dwell on the Athenian infatuation with political life. Less well understood is how the pursuit of the other Athenian obsession—sexual pleasure—impacted political life and also per force the *oikos* and the lives of women. We now leave the *oikos* and enter the agora and the other public places of male achievement and pleasure.

Until the end of the Periclean Age, 430 B.C., a pronounced phallicism prevailed in classical Athens, which we will take to mean a combination of male supremacy and the cult of power and violence...

The suppression of women, the military expansionism and the harshness in the conduct of civic affairs all sprang from a common aggressive impulse.

Eva Keuls

The Sexual Politics of Athens

Female power—in sense of the power the Athenians as a matter of policy feared—was thus not the sexuality Christians have feared since St. Paul. No Athenian could have said, "It is better to marry than to burn." To the contrary, "the inmost nature of the Greeks is naked sensuality, which indeed, rarely becomes brutality—as in the case of the Romans—but yet impresses itself upon

their collective life, while the confession of sensuality or its manifestation in life is unchecked by rigorous state laws or the hypocritical condemnation of public opinion (Licht, p.5)." The last thing Athenian male wanted was chaste women; wives were another matter.¹³

Not only was heterosexuality central to both the healthy and the good life, marriage was seen as essential to an effective household and therefore for a successful polis. "All the Athenian law was framed with this membership of the *oikos* in view; a man's *oikos* provided both his place in the citizen body and what measure of social security there was, and this helps to account for that passionate determination to defend the *oikoi* alike against foreigners and against grasping individual Athenians which is characteristic of the democratic period (Lacey, p.118)." For only marriage could provide legitimate male heirs. "Greek family law... reveals two profound and abiding concerns: to ensure man's unquestionable paternity of his offspring and to preserve family property (Keuls, p.101)."

When the presumed natural inferiority of women is placed in the context of the centrality of hoplite democracy to the success of the Athenian polis, the premises of our discussion of the sexual politics of Athens are nearly complete. All that remains is the need to see how sexual practices of Athenian males dovetailed with the policies of Athenian democracy. We shall then see that the sexual politics of Athens does not so much refer to the "political" rule of husband over wife and household but to the importance of sexual activity to the politics of the polis as a whole, including the indispensability of the *oikos* to the stability of Athenian political life and of the generation of ever increasing amounts of martial virtue to meet the needs of an increasingly imperialistic policy.

One can only speculate on the amount of sexual activity an average Athenian male engaged in. While it may be impossible to assess the significance of male desire with social scientific rigor, there is a great deal of evidence which suggests that Athenian males indulged in adolescent hormonal urges and fantasies well into middle age. Sexual or quasi-sexual activity began early and continued with many partners throughout adult life:

13. "An Athenian woman had no sexual liberty, but the explanation of the Athenians' attitude was primarily civic, not moral... If an Athenian male had an affair with a citizen-woman not his wife, a baby would not have any claim on his property or family or religious association, nor impose on them a bogus claim to citizenship; but a woman would be compelled to claim that her husband was the father, and his kinship-group and its cult was therefore deeply implicated, since it would be having a non-member thrust upon it, and if she were detected, all her husband's children would have difficulty in proving their rights to citizenship if they were challenged (Lacey, p.115)."

"Infidelity, as we call it, can never have been spoken of by an ancient Greek, for in his day it never occurred to a husband that the idea of marriage connoted the renunciation of aesthetic enjoyment, and still less would the wife have expected such a sacrifice from him. The Greeks are, therefore, not more immoral, but more moral, than we are, since they recognized the polygamous tendency of the man and acted accordingly.... (Licht, p.59)."

The young Athenian male was often introduced to sexuality as the passive object, the "beloved," of the ardent attentions of a middle-aged man¹⁴. There was little expectation of reciprocal affection in these relationships. Perhaps Athenian pederasty can be best understood as an aesthetic experience with erotic overtones. The boy was admired by the adult as one might appreciate any object of art. The "art object" received these attentions and other gifts without a prescribed response, although it is certain that a wide range of responses were achieved. Less passively, pederasty can be understood as a *rite de passage*, something a boy had to endure, like the experience or not. This purpose of this enculturation was more than an introductory to sexual life. "Paedophilia was to the Greeks at first the most important way of bringing up the male youth (Licht, p.441)." It reinforced the male-domination ethos of the society. Adult males could do more or less as they pleased subject only to the limits of their own re-sources, including the resources of other adult males, and to the needs of the polis. Slaves, women, children, even beautiful boys whose

¹⁴. There is no need to enter the debate regarding the subtleties of homoerotic practices. "It is the common opinion of Dover and others that the peculiarity of Athenian social behavior was not that Athenian men practiced homosexuality...but that Athenians sanctioned it and even glorified it as a useful institution. In contrast to this familiar argument, I will try to show that, although male homosexuality was widely practiced, in the classical period it was, at the most, only half-heartedly condoned (Keuls, p.275)." In Osywn Murray's opinion: "The emphasis initially (early archaic) is on the musculature of the male athlete, and even women are portrayed with generally masculine characteristics, narrow hips, small breasts, and pronounced musculature. At the end of the archaic period there is a marked tendency toward greater effeminacy in the portrayal of young men, and a correspondingly greater accuracy in the portrayal of women. At the same time the *kalos* inscriptions (so and so is beautiful) begin to disappear, and other indications suggest that the great age of homosexuality was passing (Murray, O., p.206" At the same time it would be as foolish to deny the reality of widespread homosexuality, even by the narrow definition of adult reciprocal anal penetration employed here. Just as it must have been true that deep companionship and occasionally romantic love existed between husband and wife, notwithstanding a great deal of social structural opposition to it, there must have been lasting, complex homosexual relationships, despite social and legal disapproval of the practice. One does not need to prohibit what does not occur. Nevertheless, Eva Keuls conclusion seems well-balanced: "Summing up this examination of homosexual practices, one must conclude that the striking feature of Athenian is not the glorification of pederasty but the extraordinary propensity for prostitution, both heterosexual and homosexual (Keuls, p.299)." Thus, in homosexual relations, we see the same tendency to attack passionate attachment between adults of the same social level, whatever the sex, by making the physical side of the relationship readily available.

attributes justified coaxing, were expected to submit to or at least entertain male prerogative, individual or collective.

Heterosexual initiation took place early as well, usually with an experienced prostitute. "His (the young man's) contact with prostitutes...seems to have served to liberate him from any vestige of awe of his mother and the other female authority figures of his childhood, which he might still be carrying around from his early years in the woman's quarters (Keuls, p.168)." Not only were young men were expected to gratify their urges without restraint, the state supported their activities from Solon through the classical age.

"You, Solon, saw the city full of young men, under the pres-sure of a natural need, and going off the track in disreputable ways. So you brought up women and set them up in various places to be used in common, ready and primped for all. So there they stand, all naked, so you don't get fooled, all's there for you to see. Perhaps you don't feel so well, or have some sorrow; the door is open, one obol and in you jump. No prudery, no nonsense, no rejection. You get laid right away, which is what you want, and in any manner you wish. Once you have come out, you can tell her to go to hell, she's a stranger to you now." (Fragment of a comedy by Philemon, Athens 913, 569e-f, Keuls, p.153)."

Remembering that marriage did not normally occur until a man was thirty, his sexual experience, attitudes, and propensities would have been established over a period of fifteen years or so. Typically, a thoroughly jaded and sated adult male would confront a virginal, mid-teen age wife on their marriage bed.

A married Athenian man was not expected to exhaust his sexual impulses with beautiful boys any more than he was expected to have sex only with his wife. There were three types of women who served male pleasure: concubines, prostitutes, and courtesans (*hetaerae*). A common practice was prostitution. Its purpose was to meet the crudest and most impatient of male needs: lust, often tintured with brutality¹⁵. In this exchange male and female were reduced to their organs, one as victor the other as vanquished. While undeniably

¹⁵ The brutality of Athens has generally been attributed, when it has been recognized at all, to the deterioration of civic morals under the pressure of the Peloponnesian War. Yet Eva Keuls has amassed an impressive array of evidence which suggest that physical violence was a common occurrence in Athens. Women and slaves were often objects of beating, rape, and even torture. "A practice exclusive to Athens among Greek cities (with the possible exception of the Asian city of Miletus) was the routine torture of slaves in legal proceedings... The State maintained a public torture chamber for legal purposes (*basanisterion*). The interrogations there were a form of popular entertainment (Keuls, p.7)."

prostitution met enduring male needs for physical relief and psychic domination, it could not suffice.

Athenian men often required more complex and refined female companionship. Hence *hetaerae*: "The *hetaerae* stand on a much higher level and occupy a far more important position in Greek private life. They are distinguished from the girls of the brothel especially by the social respect they enjoyed and by their education.

"Many of them", says Helbig, "are distinguished by refined education and a wit quick at repartee; they know how to fascinate the most distinguished personalities of their time--generals, statesmen, men of letters, and artists, and how to keep their affection; they illustrate in the manner indicated a mixed existence of fine intellectual and sensual pleasures, to which the majority of the Greeks at that time paid homage" (Licht, p.339)."

Concubines were more or less permanent members of the household, for the more or less private pleasure of the master. These categories of female servant, slaves, companions, and pleasure providers often overlapped.

The enjoyment of female companionship, like unashamed sexual activity, became an art form and was celebrated as such. "The symposium was the most characteristic feature of Athenian sexual and social life. Literally meaning "drinking party", it was a unique gathering, dedicated to a varying blend of eating, drinking, games of all sorts, philosophical discourse, and public sex with prostitutes, concubines, and other men, but never with wives (Keuls, p.160)." Symposia occurred in the houses of married men in a room especially designed, furnished, and serviced for the purposes of male enjoyment: the *andron* (men's quarters). "Not surprisingly, the *andron* complex was usually the largest and most luxurious part of the house, and often the only one to have the floor covered with mosaics. It formed an intermediate zone between the private domain of the household and the public arena of civic buildings and squares where men spent most of their lives (Keuls, p.165)." Wives, daughters, mothers, and all other respectable women were forbidden entrance to the *andron*, filled as it usually was with erotic art and paraphernalia. Female servants and slaves of course were expected to perform the requisite domestic maintenance.

It may be useful to put these sexual practices into a psycho-social perspective before drawing their political implications. Pederasty can be seen as an intimate, if one-sided, relationship between social equals. It is essentially transient and without issue, therefore of little danger to the stability of the

society. Homosexual activity, that is, adult reciprocal anal penetration, can be intimate like pederasty but is much more likely to be two-sided, unless it is commercial. "Given these derogatory associations of anal penetration, one may safely assume that in most cases where it takes place between two ordinary adult males, it implies male prostitution (Keuls, p.293)." Although it cannot provoke legal disputes regarding inheritance, its two-sided potential presented a danger to the state:

"Pederastic sex as a rite of transition is sharply distinct from adult homoerotic relations. In fact, while submission to anal sex may serve as a way of acculturating the young male, adult homosexuality constitutes a rebellion against the social order. A mutual sex relationship between two adult men of approximately the same age and social standing negates the use of sex as the underpinning of the power structure, be it of man over wife, man over prostitute, or adult male over young boy. It is probably for that reason, and not because it is 'unnatural', or breaks the link between sex and procreation, that true male homosexuality is almost universally censured, as in the case of Classical Athens... In the Classical Athenian relationship between 'lover' and 'beloved', some overtones of ritual initiation through pederastic sex remain. However, what is far more striking in Athenian homosexual behavior is the pseudo-parental behavior of the 'lovers' in the sixth century B.C. and, second, the stringent legal and moral prohibitions, adopted in the fifth and fourth centuries, against the two outgrowths of this pattern--adult male homosexuality and homosexual prostitution (Keuls, p.277)."

In this catalogue of pleasure, there was little room for spousal affection. "In a strongly male-dominated society marriage serves largely as an instrument for the extraction of services normally rendered by female to male: sexual satisfaction, childbearing, and cheap labor. The benefits which may accrue to the female, such as protection, companionship, and her own sexual gratification, belong in the somewhat more balanced social structure. Of the three types of services, the Athenian man virtually disregarded the category of sexual pleasure in marriage. The institution of slavery provided him with ample sex outlets, female and male, and he much preferred his *hetaerae* and pleasure-boys over his wife (Keuls, p.99)." I do not believe this was simply a matter of preference. In other words, the Athenian appetite for pleasure providers outside of marriage did not cause a male-dominated society as much as the sexual bazaar was caused by the need to perpetuate the perceived relationship of widespread martial valor and an obsessively male Athenian polis. While, as in most complex relationships, causality was reciprocal, insofar as there was a decline in the status of married women as the Athenian polis developed, this preference for extramarital pleasure was supported by, if not entirely created by, the state as a way of fulfilling its priority needs. The state-supported

brothels, festivals, athletic events—along with the structure of Athenian marriage, to say nothing of symposia and the *andron*—did not occur as a way to meet preexisting male demands for sexual outlets. This is not to say that young males did not have sexual urges and mature men did not have extra-marital sexual desire. But other societies have met these needs without the extreme degradation of women Athenians found necessary. Characteristically, there was a psycho-social mythology for the Athenian approach to these problems. Females were not only naturally inferior; if left to their own devices, they would have been uncontrollably wanton. "Since Athens' society had promoted the male organ as the symbol of fertility, parenthood, creativity, and self-defense, it is not only natural that Athenian men could not conceive of women otherwise than as obsessed with insatiable lust to fill up their vaginal void with penises, real or artificial (Keuls, p.82)." Therefore, of course, they would not be left to their own devices, except when it suited men to do so. Under control, the better, that is, more useful female traits, could have been cultivated. "In classical Athens the rift between the notions of sex for procreation and sex for pleasure and release, between Demeter and Aphrodite, was so complete that it left its marks on almost all facets of organized society (Keuls, p.205)." This dichotomization of females into two discrete types is no mere primitivism of ancient society. It has formed the basis of many favorable estimations of ancient Greece¹⁶.

Licht, like so many other male scholars of his and earlier generations, does not understand what to contemporary scholarship is an outrageous compartmentalization and implied trivialization of female roles. It's as if multiplicity, to say little of complexity, was (and is) simply too much for women—and therefore a peril to the state—however appropriate it was (and is) for men. Arthur clearly has the better of the dispute:

"This ideological polarity, which identified women with passion in the love-relationship, with the family in all social relationships, and with the chaotic in the world-order, was a product of the social and political structure of the polis, in which women were recognized as an aspect of men's existence rather than as existents in their own right... For the perception of women as a threat, and hostility toward them as sexual beings, implicitly understands the need to

¹⁶ "It is hardly necessary nowadays to emphasize the fact that the assertion, once often heard, that the position of the Greek married woman was an unworthy one, is fundamentally wrong... The modern idea that there are two types of women, the mother and the courtesan, was recognized by the Greeks in the earliest times of their civilization, and they acted in accordance with it. Of the latter type, we will speak later, but no greater honor could be paid to the woman than the Greeks assigned to the mother type. When the Greek woman had become a mother she had attained the object of her life (Licht, p.18)."

assert their claims in these regards, and implicitly understands the need to justify the prevailing order against such claims (Arthur, p.50)."

This dichotomization of women was no decree of nature, but the centerpiece of a political ideology which intended to serve hoplite-democracy.

While it can be surmised that such marriages took tolls on both husband and wife, it is without question that the Athenian social order did all in its power to compensate fathers for their "sacrifice" and the bare minimum of physical protection for mothers. The limit of the state's protection of women citizens was centered on provision for their marriage. Athenians believed all female citizens should be married, almost had a right to be married, if she were healthy and chaste and had an appropriate dowry, that is, if she were the product of a good *oikos*. Once married, she would leave her father's care, coming under the protection of her husband; if she were fortunate to give birth to a son, she was guaranteed in law to come under his protection in the event of her widowhood.

Although there can be no gainsaying the destructive elements of such arrangements, regardless of the process of acculturation, my point takes the opposite tack. Where Keuls correctly sees this dichotomization of female roles as a "splitting of the female psyche", which ramified throughout the entire society, I emphasize the perceived social and political needs having a devastating effect on marriage. Athenian marriage was political in the profoundest sense. It existed to serve the needs of the polis and was seen to do so in a much less reciprocal way than ever before. The larger social order did not cease to protect the *oikos*, of course, but this primary rationale for the development of larger and larger political structures gave way to a justification of the polis for its own sake.

The hoplite democratic polis, as the incarnation of masculinity, expressed male desire and *arête* at every opportunity. Phallic symbols pervaded the city¹⁷. To

¹⁷. "Such statues (of Hermes) were present in Athens by the hundreds, not only in the private but the public areas of the city. To the women of Athens they must have been a constant reminder of the phallic powers which governed their lives (Keuls, p.30)." Licht sums up Athenian attitudes with the faithfulness of an apologist: "Everything that made Greece great, everything that created for the Greeks a civilization which will be admired as long as the world exists, has its root in the unexampled ethical valuation of the masculine character in public and private life (Licht, p.440)." There was much more to this highly phallicized society than a celebration of the male virtues or a perpetuation of adolescent sexual energy, real or imagined. "This parade of masculinity was the fruit in large part of an increased social unity within the polis. Leaders met often in the agora or in the council chambers, and served side by side in the infantry phalanx; when gymnasia came into existence in the sixth century, men vied with each other in athletic activities, and did so nude (Starr, *Economic*, p.131)."

Athenians, masculinity was not merely the fruit but the seed of the unity of Athens. Male virtue bonded by hoplite activity enabled the democratic polis to emerge from the cycle of tribal strife, aristocratic domination, and tyranny which had marked the history of Attica for the past two hundred years. Athenians did not create phallicism to amuse themselves, although it certainly performed this service. Athenians expressed the phallicism which had enabled them to become democratic and imperial in the first place. Athenians believed they discovered in phallic democracy the secret to political success. For now heroic qualities could be expected from nearly all its citizens, giving it the ability to dominate its neighbors, forge an empire, and pay its social and political bills at the expense of others. As Finley has demonstrated, the empire paid¹⁸. Under these circumstances, the conjugal family at best became sublimated to the politics of democratic Athens. At worst, it became the summation of merely physical necessities, the least heroic, least masculine, least political elements of an *oikos*, dispensable in all respects save one.

Thus, Athens minimized the importance of the nuclear family and degraded married women as a matter of "policy", in effect if not intent. Such a counter-intuitive and drastic process could not be relied upon to occur naturally. After all, if a great hero like Hector succumbed to the joys of married life, why not the ordinary Athenian citizen? Furthermore, it took the heroic attachment to duty for Hector to enter what he knew to be a futile last combat, overcoming his wife's pleas. To counter this danger, or at least, this complication to the securing of male *arête* on behalf of the state, it was thought wise to reduce the emotional content of marriage, especially as it concerns the wife. A highly masculine, phallicized social order seemed the best chance to ensure the military security and the economic well being of the polis. Not to restrict women to instrumental value risked (in the Athenian view) reversion of the polis to pre-Solonic individualism or tribalism which had almost prevented the emergence of the Athenian polis in the first instance and which continued to threaten its survival. Athenian marriage practices reinforced the social and political equation of the Periclean polis. It made the burdens placed on males easier to bear; it coerced wives to their duty both in the bearing and the rearing of offspring. It made almost certain the extension of the *oikos* into the next generation.

¹⁸. "The material gain to Athens is easily catalogued: an annual income from the empire somewhat larger than the total public revenue from domestic sources, the most powerful navy in the Aegean and probably in the Mediterranean world, security for her corn imports (which were sea-borne), and a host of secondary benefits which always accrue to a successful imperial state (Finley, p.82)."

From the perspective of Athenian culture and politics, one cannot escape the conclusion that if Athenians had been able to structure another way to protect their property, their way of life, and their polis than the creation of legitimate male heirs by means wives, they would have done so. This is more than saying that men have often regretted and resented the role women have in the reproductive process, and few men more than Athenians of the classical period. It is to say that the indispensable role of wives in the creating of legitimate sons implied a tension in Athenian society. With its entire justification reduced to this indispensable and indeterminate function, Athenian marriage had little room for sentiment or spousal affection and an enormous capacity for abuse, resentment, betrayal and rage. In this context one of the most bitter comments of all history becomes all too believable, if atrociously and typically one-sided: "There are only two happy days in a man's life with a woman: The Day he marries her and the day he buries her" (Hipponax, Fragment 68, Keuls, p.129)." The wife's analogue was, after one night of pleasure, a life of misery. In Homeric times it was common for the victors to take as wives the widows of those they had vanquished and mothers of sons they had slaughtered. One can hardly imagine worse circumstances for an affectionate marriage. Yet how much better could a typical Athenian marriage have been? And yet, in the view of male Athenians, all had to be endured, if the *oikos* were to survive, and with it Athens.

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