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THE ORTHODOX AND UNORTHODOX WOMEN OF ANCIENT GREEK
CIVILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper dives into the exploration between orthodox and unorthodox women via the narratives presented by male writers along with scholarly articles. It looks at the life of a typical Athenian woman in ancient Greece while also providing contrasting comparisons and some examples of women who could be considered unorthodox. While doing so the paper aims to investigate the general view held by scholarship that the ancient Athenian women's lives were quite restrictive while presenting the belief that this is not the case. In order to provide arguments for this stand, this paper includes: a chapter by Lisa Nevett discussing the topography and movement of women in Ancient Athens. Aristophanes' plays *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen* are provided to support the argument on the basis of the degree of freedom for women in literary texts. Along with these sources, discussion on Aspasia is also present to further substantiate the argument owing to her influence and position in Athens. I believe the discussion and exploration conducted in this paper supports my argument that women's lives were not as restrictive in terms of social interactions and everyday movement.

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The Orthodox and Unorthodox Women of Ancient Greece

By reading multiple scholarly articles related to women and their lives in ancient Greece and more particularly, ancient Athens, the main view of scholars is that women's lives were rather restricted. Scholarship on this topic has tended to view Athenian women as having quite restrictive lives that offered very little economic, social, and political possibilities for them. However, there were other models of women's experiences available. This paper investigates what the life of a typical woman in ancient Athens would look like, a discussion on the reconstructed topography of women by Nevett, followed by case study of the plays *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen* by Aristophanes; this paper also discusses Aspasia as an example of an unorthodox woman as well. These case studies and discussions indicate that there was more movement and freedom conceivable, and possibly probable. This paper aims to explore the tension between these two opposing views.

A Typical Woman's life in Ancient Athens

Women don't necessarily have a positive representation in the numerous texts that have been found. Rather, they are shown to be dramatic, weak minded or even a "bane to men" as Hesiod (an ancient Greek poet) says in his writings. Semonides of Amorgos wrote a poem titled the "types of women" (also known as Semonides 7) wherein he claims that women and men were created differently by Zeus and that he created 10 different kinds of women. In that poem, he mentions that women were created from 10 different kinds of animals or natural elements and had traits similar to them. A woman who was derived from a pig is dirty, one who was stubborn is derived from a donkey; a woman who was uncontrollable and unreliable came from a skunk,

she was “wretched and baneful.”¹ He mentions that there is only one virtuous kind, who was derived from a bee, since a queen bee sits in her hive tirelessly producing heirs for the survival just as a virtuous woman “loves her husband and bears him noble and famous sons.”² Carcinus II (a tragic poet of 4th century BCE) in *Semele* questions why anyone would have the need to list off the evils of women when just saying the word “woman” encompasses and consolidates all evil in one word. A comic dramatist, Amphis mentions that hetaira are much better than wives as wives had a tendency to “sit and sulk at home”² while the hetaira puts in an effort to provide good company. On that note, I am assuming Amphis probably did not take into account that the hetairai get paid to provide the good company, while a husband also must work to be good company for his wife and not put all the onus on the woman (but I guess these are more “modern” ideas of gender equality).

Looking at all these mentions of women, along with the ones not mentioned here, it is clear that women were considered to be the “root of all evil with little to redeem them.”³ It also seems like slandering, and verbally slamming women for the purpose of entertainment was quite the norm. It also appears that women were used as the easy target to provide negative imagery and slander comedy among other negative representations. The misogynistic views of women were shared by a large number of writers. It is possible that such misogynistic views were prevalent in order to ensure women are easier to be controlled by the male figures in their lives. The reasoning behind these negative narratives is perhaps a lengthy discussion which would deviate from the topic and argument of this paper and would not be discussed in this paper all too much.

¹ Chrystal, P. (2017). *Women in Ancient Greece*. Fonthill

² Chrystal, P. (2017). *Women in Ancient Greece*. Fonthill

³ Chrystal, P. (2017). *Women in Ancient Greece*. Fonthill

In ancient Athens, women were expected to be under supervision of a male guardian, a *kyrios*, throughout their lives. Before being married, the title of the *kyrios* belonged to the father, and after marriage the woman's husband becomes her *kyrios*. Before marriage, if the father dies then the closest male relative is given the title of *kyrios*, and if the husband were to die after marriage, then her son becomes her *kyrios*. Ancient Athenian women were not considered an authority and were rather always under the constant authority of some man.⁴ Unless she was a priestess of a cult or such a figure, or even a courtesan. These groups of women were the only ones considered to have some sense of personal authority which will be discussed later.

In public, women were not called by their names but were called as a person's wife or daughter, while their personal name only being used at home or within the family.⁵ This can not only be depersonalizing but also further remove authority from their person. However, it is also not necessary that this view of experiencing a sense of depersonalization would hold up as this could be a more modern view of looking at personal authority and would probably not hold credibility in that time period due to the culture and norms of ancient Athens.

Although they were restricted from having a public voice, and excluded from the civic sphere almost entirely, theoretically there were gendered roles where the man would go outside the house to be involved in civic and work related spheres in the polis however, "only the most affluent households could afford to put it entirely into practice."⁶ An average Athenian household would have few to no slaves at all to run errands and do outdoor chores. This would imply that "the women of the poorest citizen classes might have to work alongside"³ female slaves and metic women who typically held the role of doing outdoor chores. Even "Aristotle

⁴ MacLachlan, B. (2014). *Women in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook*. Bloomsbury

⁵ Aristophanes, Henderson, J. (2010). *Three Plays by Aristophanes: Staging Women*. Routledge

⁶ Aristophanes, Henderson, J. (2010). *Three Plays by Aristophanes: Staging Women*. Routledge.

observed that in a democracy it was impossible to prevent the women of the poorer classes from going out to work.”⁷ Furthermore, women were expected to control and restrict their diet, the belief was held that if a woman was unable to keep her diet in check and control it then this somehow reflected that she was also unfit for handling the household and her family.

Along with managing the household chores and expenses and taking care of children, women also created textile to sell at the agora. Working on the loom and creating textile “was an essential activity of women in the Greek world,”⁸ It provided income for the household when required. Additionally, women were permitted to visit their friends or close relatives that lived nearby. Many scholars also discuss the restrictions enforced on women in terms purchasing power and funds. Women had the power to sell vegetables and crafts at the agora, along with the ability to make purchases for the households. However, “for anything else, theoretically at least, she required the permission of her kyrios.”⁹

The freedom of women in terms of movement around the city were not too restricted, especially in the case of lower-class women. Women were permitted to visit their friends or close relatives that lived nearby. They visited other various parts of the city, like the agora. The movement of women would be explained more in detail further into the paper.

Topography of women

An informative chapter by Lisa Nevett titled, “Towards a Female Topography of the Ancient Greek city: Case studies from the Late Archaic and Early Classical Athens (c.520-400 BCE) provides the readers with insight into the topography of women, their movements within

⁷ MacLachlan, B. (2014). *Women in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook*. Bloomsbury
MacLachlan, B. (2014). *Women in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook*. Bloomsbury

⁹ Chrystal, P. (2017). *Women in Ancient Greece*. Fonthill

the city while going about their daily lives. Although lacking testimonies from women, Nevett aimed to create an extensive model accounting for the topography of women. She makes use of extensive documentation made available from the late 6th and 5th century BCE in Athens and provides us with logical and reasonable evidence to support her claims in this article. It is also important to note that although Nevett also discusses the role women had in the civic sphere (which was not much during the long span of ancient Greek history), she only looks at about one and a half to two centuries. This suggests that the significant events that were specific to this time period may have resulted in women's presence in the civic sphere whereas these events may not have a lasting effect. Furthermore, the second point that is necessary to bring up is that these changes could not be generalized all too well to the social culture and topographical mapping of women in the whole history of ancient Greek civilization.

An important observation to note is that although a large chunk of the duties and interactions within the domestic sphere pertained to women, men were involved in this sphere as well. The reason being that it was important for men "both as a status symbol and as an arena for entertaining friends and associates,"¹⁰ through holding symposiums. Nevett made a valid claim when she discussed the idea that the ethos, or the culture of the city had a bidirectional relationship with architectural planning since the environment and social interactions would shape one another, be it consciously or not.

The discussion by Nevett then shifts to discourse on how the architecture of city and its planning reflects onto the social culture, especially for women. She makes it a point to provide

¹⁰ Foxhall, L., Neher, G., & Nevett, L. (2013). *Towards a Female Topography of the Ancient Greek City: Case Studies from Late Archaic and Early Classical Athens* (c.520-400 BCE). In *Gender and the city before modernity*. essay, John Wiley & Sons

the readers with the necessary background information regarding the architecture and set up of the houses to better facilitate the mapping of women's topography.

Houses that were near or adjacent to the valleys of the hilly terrain were made into the hillsides and their orientations were diverse as they were dependent on the directions of the roads and slopes of the hills. Houses were mostly located near areas which experienced a high amount of human activity such as the agora of the city or near major routes connecting significant areas of the city. Additionally, from observing the architecture of Athenian houses on an individual level, it is noticed that there is importance given to ensuring the interior space of the house is isolated from the outside view of the city. Furthermore, most houses generally, could only be accessed through one door from a street entrance to limit the possibility of having too many options for inviting the outside view into the house, with the rooms of the house facing a central courtyard which was used for movement within the house to go from one room to another. Neveit bring up a great point that if there was any movement in the house, or if someone wished to leave or enter the house would have had to do so by going through the courtyard, and all these movements would be transparent as all the courtyard was visible from all the rooms or via the rooms' windows which faced the courtyard for letting the light enter in.

Considering that the houses were designed to minimize the interaction between the inside and outside world, it was most likely that all the windows of the houses would face the courtyard and not the city. Nonetheless, since the houses were on uneven terrain, neighbors could also possibly have a view inside one's courtyard from the terrace which could lead to possible interactions among the neighbors. There is documentation providing us with information that there were differing attitudes towards women making use of the balconies extensively. Some sources mention that since women were not physically easy to access, they could use these

balconies to privately view the outside world while remaining at home but on the other hand, it could have also been considered slanderous as it would also imply that it would give women the opportunity to be flirtatious and interact with other men leading to illicit activities. The balconies would have also provided women with excellent opportunities to interact with their immediate neighbors to create various kinds of bonds or relationships.

Keeping all this information in mind regarding the design of the houses itself, it would not be a stretch to say that these concepts played a role in the movement (and restrictions) of women. If a woman were to move around the house, she would be in view of anybody present in the house itself, if she were to leave or enter then it would have been known by the other members of the household. This ensured that women were kept under visible supervision at most times while they were coming or going, or inside the house itself. However, they still had opportunities for interacting with their neighbors through terrace access.

Moving away from specifically discussing the design of the individual house, Nevett then proceeds to discuss the design of a cluster of houses together, or rather a neighborhood. These clusters of houses designed in such a way that “female residents may have felt relatively safe and may have been likely to encounter, by and large, relatively fewer strangers.”¹¹ Such micro communities were not just present in ancient Greek civilization but in other cultures as well such as in the Islamic world, where there are a cluster of houses built around mosques and such facilities to ensure that people need not venture out of the safety of their community in order to use such facilities.

¹¹ Foxhall, L., Neher, G., & Nevett, L. (2013). *Towards a Female Topography of the Ancient Greek City: Case Studies from Late Archaic and Early Classical Athens (c.520-400 BCE)*. In *Gender and the city before modernity*. essay, John Wiley & Sons

Smaller streets were often arranged parallel to each other which resulted in the formation of small neighborhoods, or micro communities like in the Islamic world, each neighborhood had its own orientation to create an even safer environment and minimize outside travelers. The territory of the city, through the political lens, was divided into smaller sections throughout Attica. These small divisions of areas were called “demes” and rural and urban demes had their own subcultures as well as interactions. For example, each deme would have had its own take, unique to that deme, on celebrating festivals such as Thesmophoria. These smaller sections would probably also increase women’s chances to build better bonds with the people who they met frequently in their vicinity.

Fountain houses were one of the places in the city that were frequented by women on almost a regular basis, these fountain houses have also been depicted in numerous iconographies as well as texts. Women were shown with vessels on their heads which was presumably to or from the water fountains to carry water back to their houses. Though it is unknown exactly how many fountain houses were there in Attica, Nevett mentions that they were built away from the various civic centers of the cities. The task of fetching water was laborious work, and a full vessel of water would have weighed about 16 kilograms, while women of higher economic status could send domestic slaves to fetch the water, women who were not from rich households had to fetch the water themselves. Although a laborious process, this would result in an array of women interacting with one another at the fountain houses, since it was a place of frequent visit. There is also a possibility that wells, and cisterns were built for each neighborhood and these fountain houses were used to bring water on special occasions or for rituals such as part of the bridal ceremony where the women partake in a bath in holy spring water before her wedding.

Another location that women frequented were the cemeteries, which lay outside the city walls and near the roads which led to the countryside. They tended to the grave sites, were there as mourners or even to walk in the funeral processions as a part of the cultural norms. Furthermore, in contrast with the graves of people who have passed, the graves of infants and small children were lined closer together and more immediately outside the city walls. They were also clustered closer to the roads that led up to temples that women frequented during festivals or cult rituals which implies they were designed to be placed in a way which was more accessible to women and more familiar as well in order that they feel safer and familiar with their surroundings.

During major festivals however, women had even more freedom of movement. The procession for festivals such as the Panathenaia (which happened once every four years) started from the Sacred gate and proceeded down the Sacred Way which led into the Agora and ended up at the acropolis where the sanctuary of Athena was located. Women walked in the procession, carrying vessels or baskets. These festivals were a hub of activity and people from various socio-economic backgrounds were present there.

The case studies of various locations of Athens enables us to gain a better understanding of the presence of women in various parts of the city and the significance of these areas in women's lives. This chapter also further enables us to see what kind of freedom and the variety of movement women had in the 5th and late 6th century BCE in Athens. Although only a glimpse, it still reflects on the freedom and restrictions imposed on the women of ancient Athens. There were some restrictions and in certain contexts, like at home where the women were under watchful eyes.

Even so, women had a considerable amount of freedom of movement and ability to socially interact than is often thought previously. As mentioned before the discussion of the chapter by Nevett, and average Athenian woman was able to go out and about in the Agora and other places to conduct business and carry out errands. Additionally, places of frequent visit such as the fountain houses, cemeteries and agora would result in women of various social classes interacting which would result in the development of friendship and considerable number of interactions. All these interactions and a significant depth and more vibrancy to women's experiences than many scholars have been able to imagine. Keeping all this in mind, it is my view that women would have been socially fulfilled to some extent if not as socially fulfilled as the men in ancient Athens.

Unorthodox Women: Some Examples from Herodotus

Even though there have been a handful examples of women who didn't quite fit into the mold of an orthodox women. Examples of women with more "masculine" characteristics, so to say, that made their mark in ancient history have probably been mentioned by Herodotus to the ancient Greek society, considering he was a well-travelled historian.

Queen Pheretima (who died around 515 BCE) was the wife of the Cyrenaean king Battus III, she was the last queen of the Battiad dynasty. Herodotus mentions her in his writings, writing that when Battus' father had passed away around 530 BCE, Pheretima's son, Arcesilaus III became the king. When Arcesilaus faced defeat around 518 BCE in a civil war that occurred and was exiled. Following a series of events, Pheretima was left to rule the city. When her son was killed, she approached the Persian governor of Egypt at the time to get aid in order to avenge her son. She then made her way into Barca and ordered that the ones who murdered her son should

surrender. The Barcans refused to adhere to this demand which resulted in Pheretima laying a nine-month long siege to Barca. During which time she got the Barcan wives rounded up and their breasts removed.

Another fitting example to mention here would be Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus, described as “wondrous” by Herodotus himself. She ruled by herself from 353 to 351 BCE after the demise of her husband, king Mausolos. Artemisia commissioned the creation of a mausoleum for her departed husband which turned into one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Furthermore, she provided freedom of expression by organizing competitions for oration and poetry to honor her husband. The queen also had excellent military skills as she was able to ward off an attack from Rhodes. Another queen of her namesake, Artemisia was given the epithet of “androboulos” which means “advising like a man” to honor her military wisdom and skills.

However, it is important to note that women are neither Athenian, nor Greek. There are not many narratives or accounts available to us of unorthodox women in Athens besides perhaps one extremely prominent woman, Aspasia. Aspasia will be discussed in more details further into the paper. Coming back to Herodotus’ mention of these two women, it is possible that the exceptionalism of these two women motivated him to memorialize their deeds and ferocity. Being active in Athens in the 5th century, he most likely would have performed publicly and given mention to these women. It is likely that these women may have been known broadly in the Athenian society. Despite these women not being Greek or Athenian, however I feel these are excellent examples of what unorthodox women looked like in ancient societies, yet they provide a wonderful contrast with the idea of the orthodox women and the narratives of typical women available to us in ancient Greek history.

Aristophanes' Women

Aristophanes was an ancient Greek playwright whose representation of women was different in comparison to other writers. Born around 450 BCE, only 11 out of 40 plays have survived. He is one of the most prolific writers of ancient Greece, he is well known for his comedic plays, at that time as well as now. He is known to have won at least six first position awards along with 4 second position awards for his plays during various competitions and festivals. I have personally enjoyed reading quite a few of his plays. To be able to see the plays at the festivals, people had to pay upwards of two obols, this may have implied that the audience of the plays did not include lower-classed Athenians and consisted mostly of middle and upper class.¹² This however, does imply that the plays were designed while keeping this targeted audience in mind, this would result in the plays having certain concepts and ideas which would be more appealing and speak better to the middle and upper class of Athens. Nevertheless, in contrast with civic, religious, and sporting festivals, women, children, and slaves were welcome to attend these festivals and be a part of the audience so long as they could pay the two obols attendance fee. The plays were designed while keeping this targeted audience in mind, this would result in the plays having certain concepts and ideas which would be more appealing and speak better to the middle and upper class of Athens. His witty dialogues and bold ideas are a delight to read and entertaining every second. This paper focuses on 2 of his plays: *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*. Both plays are discussed in length owing to the fact that in these plays Aristophanes plays around with the themes of power, peace, and gender politics.

¹² That being said, this statement is more of an assumption while researching than a valid statement and cannot be backed up by credible sources and information.

Lysistrata

Lysistrata was performed in Lenaia (an annual festival in Ancient Athens where there were competitions held for dramas) in 411 BCE, while the Peloponnesian War was still ongoing between Athens and Sparta. Aristophanes, being from Athens, was experiencing the heavy negative impact it had on the people and economy of Athens, morale of Athenians at the time was low. Around this time, Athens had found herself being surrounded by the Spartan army and was losing the war. This play was meant to provide comedic relief through presenting a novel idea for ending the war and solving the issues for both Athens as well as the Spartans.

The play is named after the woman, Lysistrata, who organized a successful in cohorts with all the women of Athens as well as Sparta. This was a two part plan, wherein all the married women of Sparta and Athens refused to partake in sexual activities with their husbands lest they ended the war, the second part of the plan consisted of all the widowed and older women (who were not able to take part in the conjugal strike) to take over the acropolis (including the cared citadel and the treasury of Athens), to bar any access to the treasury to fund the war. After six days of this strike, the men were so sexually deprived that they decided to call a truce and agree to Lysistrata's demands, while also inviting her to join them in the peace talks between Athens and Sparta.

The play depicts women being frustrated with the men of the polis to the extent that they are unable to reach a common ground. Therefore, Aristophanes created a plot where the women to assume the responsibility to solve the problem and create "long-lasting peace."¹³ One of the most important things to point out is, it was unheard of for a woman to be the savior-hero of a

¹³ Aristophanes, Henderson, J. (2010). *Three Plays by Aristophanes: Staging Women*. Routledge

comic play. The heroine in this plot is also not on a solo mission to achieve her goals but rather brings the whole community of women in solidarity to achieve peace.

What is interesting to note here is that Aristophanes did not make the women step out of their comfort zones and depicted them to have achieved their goals through taking advantage of their strengths in their spheres of influence: the domestic sphere. This play does not show women trying to seize power away from the men. Instead, the women, as mentioned before, attempted to bring back the peace and normalcy which they experienced before the war started. Furthermore, acropolis was not the property of the male led government but rather Athena's, moreover, the notion of women taking over the acropolis would not be too outrageous either since women frequented there more than the men for their daily business.

Women of ancient Athens had no political influence, *Lysistrata* - in contrast- however, is invited by the men of Athens and Sparta to join in on creating a peaceful resolution between the two sides. She is created by keeping two significant female inspirations in mind: Athena, the Greek goddess of war and wisdom herself, along with Lysimache who was a priestess of Athena Polias. She is shown to be authoritative and able to fearlessly take charge.

In contrast to *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes also created female characters such as Kolonike and Myrrhine, who were not just included to provide comical relief, but they were given dialogues which were shown to have a negative connotation to women's ability to actually achieve goals outside of the domestic sphere of influence. Being aware now that this play was being presented at a festival that was open to most people who could afford the admission fees, it can be said that Aristophanes was aiming to create a diverse set of female characters to reflect this diversity in his audience and make it more relatable to them. Since this play was his way of providing his comments and thoughts on the ongoing war and political situation, it would make

sense that these characters were created to appeal to the audience so as to get his thoughts and message across.

Nevertheless, even with such conflicting characters and their individual differences, Aristophanes shows that they had the ability to come together in solidarity for the benefit of the greater good, which apparently the men were unable to do since they were profiting from the continuation of this war. This was a commentary on how the opposite sex could not reconcile their differences in order to end the war which was leading to suffering from both sides. The women were shown to enact their civic responsibilities despite being excluded from the civic spheres in ancient Athens.

Lysistrata, by all means was shown to be the exact opposite of what a typical Athenian woman would have been like. She was shown to be outspoken, strong, confident, and not afraid to back down. Lysistrata was somewhat presented to be like an army general bring together her troops to win a war (albeit a small war in the manner of protesting and striking), she did not back down even when they were threatened by the magistrate or the guards who threatened to hurt and burn them down. Furthermore, Lysistrata was displayed to have an even greater degree of freedom than the regular Athenian woman as she was included as an influence in the civic sphere.

Aristophanes presenting his audience with a group of empowered women, exhibiting the women to have power over their husbands along with the ability to take over the polis shows while making it somewhat relatable may be an indication to the notion that maybe it was not so unimaginable.

Assemblywomen

Another play written by Aristophanes, in this play the women wake up before dawn, meet before the assembly begins and then plan on infiltrating the assembly to introduce an idea they collectively come up with, and ensure their voices are heard. They steal their husbands' clothes and gather together to prepare for the assembly. Ensuring that they are dressed like men and have correctly donned their fake beards. The prologue begins with them gathering and practicing to find out which of the women can correctly imitate a man and get away with it. They each take turns and it turns out that Praxagora (the female protagonist of *Assemblywomen*) is the most qualified. Thereafter, they proceed to then infiltrate the assembly and introduce the idea of letting women run the polis instead of the men by providing logical reasoning as to why they would be more qualified. Following this, the play proceeds to show the enactment of policies the women have introduced after being handed the responsibility of governing the polis of Athens; the play concluded with the depiction of success of these policies in action.

Athens had lost the Peloponnesian war in 405 BCE, along with a sizeable chunk of its empire and navy and this play was produced in 391 BCE, around the time of major social, political, and economic instability. Athens was slowly gaining back its stability ever since the end of war. There is no doubt that it would take time for a polis to recover from a war that lasted about 26 long years (from 431- 405 BCE). The Peloponnesian war had taken a huge toll on the people of Athens, and they were hoping for better policies and better government owing to the fact that no one wanted a repeat of this war.

One significant political change that came about (and created the setting for the play) was a move introduced by Pericles, where the first 6000 citizens who attended would get paid. This was an incentive created to ensure men would take more initiative to be involved in creating a

process of democracy that was more efficient in nature. This move also provided an opportunity for the common men to have their voices and concerns heard by the government and was a successful one at that.

The reason being that when the move was first introduced, attendees were only paid one obol which then changed from two to three obols for attending. This initiative is also alluded to in the play by the chorus in lines 260-265 saying that if the men “fail to come bright and early... he’ll not get his three-obol pay”¹⁴ since the “magistrate has sounded his warning.” Thus, the women meet earlier than the assembly in order to properly prepare themselves and practice for what is to come, while also ensuring they arrive in time to gain entry into the assembly. However, since women were excluded from such meetings, their voices went unheard. Even though the male “head” of the family were supposed to represent the interest of all the members which included their wives and other female members of the family, it does not necessarily mean that it held true. It would have been quite likely for women’s views and ideas to be dismissive. Resultantly, the women in the play resorted to disguising themselves as men (male clothing and fake beards, along with practicing how to talk like the men did) to ensure they could voice their opinions and viewpoints and gain that credibility. The other women were “acting too womanly” to pass off as a man and since Praxagora succeeded she was shown to possess “the manly desired traits for politics.”

This play is a way to convey not just his message but relay the tension and feelings of the general public too. The idea that men were doing such a terrible job of governing the polis of Athens that even women could do a better job on the surface seems just as misogynistic as the many other male writers of the time. Nonetheless, he still empowers and provides the female

¹⁴ Aristophanes, Henderson, J. (2010). *Three Plays by Aristophanes: Staging Women*. Routledge

characters of a sense of authority and purpose rather than going through their daily chores every day. He gives them a sense of civic responsibility, empathy for the masses along with freethinking which gives them the power to act out their plans in *Assemblywomen* and *Lysistrata*. The other women were shown to be distracted and constantly thinking about things such as household chores, sex. Additionally, they were depicted to be lacking a strong mind along with knowledge of politics though they came up with this scheme together with Praxagora. This was probably done deliberately by Aristophanes to provide more relatability, comic relief for the audience along with ensuring there is a sharp contrast drawn between Praxagora as the protagonist and the other women.

Assemblywomen is somewhat similar to *Lysistrata* on the grounds that this play revolves around the themes of peace, power, and gender politics too. Like *Lysistrata*, Praxagora is a confident and strong female protagonist who is not afraid to take up an authoritative position among her peers. Just as in the previous play, women in *Assemblywomen* seize the power away from men however the methods employed in this play by the women are in contrast with the methods used in *Lysistrata*. Unlike *Lysistrata*, where the women took advantage of their power in the domestic sphere, in this play the women penetrate the civic spheres, which were exclusively for men. Another stark difference in the methods is that in *Assemblywomen*, Praxagora makes use of her excellent debate and rhetoric skills by providing logically sound arguments in a debate. This is what resulted in the women emerging victorious from the debate and implementing new changes with fruitful results.

Praxagora brings up five logical reasons as to why women would be more qualified than men to run the polis of Athens effectively. The first argument being that each woman runs her household, which is a complex task and requires her to take care of multiple things such

as household expenses, food, clothing, taking care of children and husband, among other things that were mentioned before. The second argument being that women are more conservative and can better uphold the traditional values and norms of the city than men can. The third argument being that women are mothers of the soldiers being sent for war; they would be better at being able to supply the soldiers that are needed for war. The fourth point was that women would be more inventive at raising money as they do so for their household; the fifth and final point being that women were much harder to deceive, and this would enable them to run the polis with deception and harm. Although Aristophanes was not for giving women their deserved part as autonomous beings in the sphere of civics, it is quite ironic to see him bring these logical points up to justify how women can possibly be better than men or equally good at certain things. He probably provided these reasons after certain amount of deliberation and observation from his part, indirectly empowering and approving of the women of Athens being qualified and capable enough.

There is also a scene which depicts an inverted gender and power play where Blepyros (Praxagora's husband) is shown to try his best to relieve himself outside his house. Praxagora is shown to run off to the assembly to enact civic duties while Blepyros on the other hand is shown to be at home, in women's clothing and enacting out him being constipated and being compared to a pregnant woman. While he is trying to relieve himself, he prays to the goddess of childbirth to enable him in "delivering" the burden in his bowels.

The second half of the play involves the enacting of the new policies Praxagora introduced, where everyone would have an equal right to the polis resources and no one would go hungry, cold, or sexually frustrated. The second half also shows that the new policies brought about by the women were successful since people were giving away their property, such as the

scene where the neighbor was taking his utensils to be surrendered at the agora. The neighbor gets into a discussion with a man who refuses to give up his property. The selfish man discusses how first he wants to see how many people are willing to give up their property and accept the new rule. While the neighbor and selfish man were arguing, the heraldess comes in and announces hearty feast and clothes awaiting all the people who give up their property to the polis. Thus, cementing the idea that this new form of government is indeed successful.

Aspasia

Aspasia was perhaps one of the most influential and well-known women in the history of ancient Athens, even though a metic (a person who was not a citizen of ancient Athens but still lived there and could enjoy some benefits of being a resident without being recognized as a citizen). Perhaps being a metic aided in her being set apart from the other Athenian women along with gaining an even higher degree of freedom which the other women could not experience due to the norms, gendered expectations, and attitudes. Additionally, she was also a hetaira (an ancient Greek courtesan), her name meaning “the desired one”¹⁵ was most probably a name she chose later and not one which was given to her at birth.

Highly professional, the courtesans also “cultivated their minds and talents to a degree”¹⁶, they were highly skilled in the areas of arts and music, these abilities were far superior to those of regular Athenian women as they were not permitted to develop and hone their skills to such an extent as the hetairai. The hetairai also were one of the few communities of women that were

¹⁵ Kennedy, R. F. (2016). *Immigrant Women in Athens: Gender, Ethnicity, and Citizenship in the Classical City*. Routledge

¹⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Hetaira*. Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved May 6, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/hetaira>

able to live independently (without a *kyrios*), were wealthy, and able to own homes. In addition to these things, her wealth and influence enabled her to open a school for *hetairai* where girls could learn the skills and knowledge needed in order to become courtesans.

Being a *metic* implied that she was required to pay taxes though she could not marry an Athenian. Aspasia and Pericles were known to be in a long-term relationship despite the facts. Despite this, she and Pericles still had a son, Pericles the younger outside of marriage.

However, due to her being a *metic* and being linked to Pericles and a few other high-profile people, like with the Alcibiades' family, she was also often subjected to verbal public and literary attacks. She was also “sexualized and demonized” due to these reasons and was “rumored” to have controlled and influenced Pericles on account of his strong affection for her.

Aspasia, being an excellent rhetorician, “was known to be in the midst of the famous and intellectual circle in Athens; her influence extended to Socrates, Plato and Pericles.”¹⁷ “Plato, Xenophon and Aeschines treated her to something akin to a *sophist*,”¹⁸ while a few other writers like Aristophanes also mention her or are influenced by her in their writings and literary texts. Pericles and Socrates were known to have commended her wisdom of politics which was rare for a woman and in addition to mentions by these men, Cicero also memorialized her in his writings.

As mentioned earlier, she was subject to public slander, there are also conflicting sources pertaining to Aspasia. The misogynistic and xenophobic attacks were also fueled by the fact that she was a *metic* and a way to disregard or deny her (and the average Athenian women in general) was to “completely disregard and silence her,”¹⁹) just as Thucydides had done.

¹⁷ Glenn, C. (1994). *Sex, Lies, and Manuscript: Refiguring Aspasia in the History of Rhetoric*. *College Composition and Communication*, 45(2), 180. <https://doi.org/10.2307/359005>

¹⁸ Kennedy, R. F. (2016). *Immigrant Women in Athens: Gender, ethnicity, and Citizenship in the Classical City*. Routledge

¹⁹DiamantaKou–agathou, K. (2020). *From Aspasia to Lysistrata: Literary Versions and Intertextual Diffusions of the Feminine Other in Classical Athens*. *A Journal of Ancient Theatre*, 10

Aspasia, I believe, probably was not only the most influential female figure, but also the most controversial owing to the fact that she was perhaps the least restricted woman in Athenian history. This did not sit well with the men of Athens, who were used to controlling the female narrative and liked to believe they held the power over women thus controlling them. Aspasia, who broke free from all these chains, flourished in her own rights as a free woman with great mental and cultural prowess.

Conclusion and Discussion

Although there is a negative narrative surrounding women via multiple writers of ancient Greece, we can still see some sources which provide us with a refreshing view of ancient women, such is the case with Herodotus and his mention of certain influential women such as Queen Pheretima and Artemisia. Although they were not Athenian women, their potential and power to make their mark as equals amongst people of influence was reason enough for Herodotus to acknowledge and memorialize their deeds. Herodotus being a person who travelled far and wide, saw it fitting to mention these women, amongst examples of few other women, who were set apart from the average woman in the ancient world.

This paper has provided multiple instances and support for the argument that women's freedom was far less restricted as it has been stated by most scholarship material. Nevett's article itself provides extensive and expansive mapping of women's reach in the polis Athens. The women were not only able to venture to the agora for shopping, selling, trading, running errands around the city, but rather they had the ability to safely venture outside the city walls to visit temples and graveyards as well. Furthermore, their daily lives not only consisted of tending to the house and keeping up with errands but also provided them with opportunities to interact with

women from various parts of the neighborhood, city, and social classes in certain areas of the city such as the fountain houses. These social opportunities and reason for increased freedom of movement were also present around the time of major festivals that took place in Athens.

The plays by Aristophanes give us a fresh view and idea of women seizing or being in positions of power. Although they are plays and not necessarily true to life, does not imply that his inspiration to produce plays with such ideas was solely based on his imagination and not from real life events and happenings in the city of Athens. In view of the fact that Aristophanes usually produced his plays as a way of sharing his personal views (and relating to the sentiments of the audiences watching his plays) it would make sense to assume to some degree that he would have made use of real-life events as inspiration behind the plays discussed at length in this paper, *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*. It would not be right to call him a feminist- or someone who fully supported the free agency of women, keeping in mind that his depiction of women being in power was more a rhetoric towards the men's inability to run the polis properly. The idea was that the men were doing such a pathetic job that even women would do a better job being in power, was created to slander both genders at the same time. Nonetheless, these ideas presented in his plays were far more progressive than the narratives of women available to us. Inadvertently his plays may have even empowered women to some extent by depicting the fact that they could bring about a change, be united and have qualifications of handling various affairs at par with men.

Aspasia of Miletus is the best and most fitting example of an unorthodox woman who, despite being a metic and hetaira, was affiliated with the cream of the crop in Athens in terms of people of influence and high intellect. She was unfettered owing to her status as a non-Athenian

citizen, which enabled her to not be restricted by the gendered expectations put on Athenian women.

Even though this paper goes into detail pertaining to positive narratives of women and examples of progressive women in literature and real life, it would have added additional depth if the paper also looked deeper into negative narratives of women. Considering the topic, discussing and comparing Athenian women to Spartan women could have also provided a deeper and better insight into the differences in the very idea of what an orthodox woman was in these differing poleis. Though despite all this, I believe this paper does show, through various sources, that women were not as confined and restricted as is previously thought. This notion of confinement of women should be revised keeping in mind the power and freedom they did possess.

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