

THE POSITION OF ATTIC WOMEN IN DEMOCRATIC ATHENS*

1. Evidence

The study of the women of classical Athens involves an evidentiary paradox. Women and their pastimes were prominent subjects in this state's literature and in the pictures on its painted pottery, while its comedies and tragedies regularly had articulate and forthright female characters.¹ But none of this gives us access to the ways in which women conceived of their own lives; for they were – as the late John Gould explained so well – ‘the product of men and addressed to men in a male dominated world’.² What is more, we lack any works from democratic Athens by female writers to counter this persistently male perspective.³ Two further biases complicate the study of Attic women. What evidence we have focuses almost without exception on the girls and the wives of Athenian citizens and so provides limited insight into the different circumstances of female slaves and female resident aliens. Typically this evidence also presents the life of wealthy females as the norm for every Attic woman, hampering our ability to reconstruct how exactly the daughters and the wives of poor citizens lived their lives.

To a large extent this second bias can be overcome. This article will show how archaeology reveals similarities between the lives of rich and poor women. Moreover, while public speakers, comedians, and tragedians belonged to the city's upper class, they had to win over audiences of lower-class citizens and so had to tailor their works to the latter's point of view. Consequently we can call their speeches and plays

* Greek translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹ R. Just, *Women in Athenian Life and Law* (London and New York, 1989), 1–12; S. Lewis, *The Athenian Women. An Iconographical Handbook* (London and New York, 2002), 13–58; A. Powell, *Athens and Sparta. Constructing Greek Political and Social History from 478 BC*, second edition (London and New York, 2001), 348–50, 384–7.

² J. Gould, ‘Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens’, *JHS* 100 (1980), 38.

³ Though we do have such texts from other eras of antiquity: see e.g. I. M. Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome. An Anthology* (London, 2004).

popular literature, and the lower-class point of view which they articulated popular culture.⁴ Thus, while this literature may have focused on the pastimes of wealthy Attic women, its assumptions about the nature of Attic women and what they should be doing were those of poor Athenians. In the light of these evidentiary constraints this article seeks to analyse the manmade parameters within which Attic women lived and what social and religious roles they performed inside and outside the home. It shows how the subordination of daughters and wives under the democracy was legitimized by the prevailing view of the ‘nature’ of women in popular culture.

Before doing so we must clarify the nature of social classes in democratic Athens.⁵ Sometimes the Athenians divided themselves up on the basis of military roles income-bands, occupations, or places of residence. But the distinction which they used much more often than others and which demarcated the most important social cleavage was between *hoi plousioi* (‘the wealthy’) and *hoi penētes* (‘the poor’). The wealthy led lives of *skholē* or leisure and so did not have to work for a living.⁶ Wealth enabled them to pursue pastimes which were simply too expensive and time-consuming for the poor. Thus groups of wealthy friends regularly came together for a *sumposion* or drinking party.⁷ The members of this class stood out for their wearing of distinctive clothes, their undertaking of public services, such as sponsorships of a chorus or a warship, and their paying of the *eisphora* or emergency tax on property for war.⁸ Politicians were also drawn from their ranks. They numbered around 5 per cent of the whole body of Athenians. The Athenians classified the rest of the citizen body – ranging from the truly destitute to those sitting just below the elite – as the poor. What the members of this social class had in common was a lack of *skholē* and hence a need to work for a living.⁹

⁴ For this performance dynamic, see D. M. Pritchard, *Sport, Democracy and War in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2013), 9–20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2–9.

⁶ E.g. Ar. *Plut.* 281; *Vesp.* 552–7; Men. *Dys.* 293–5.

⁷ E.g. Ar. *Vesp.* 1216–17, 1219–22, 1250.

⁸ E.g. Ar. *Eq.* 923–6; *Ran.* 1062–5; Dem. 4.7, 10.37, 27.66; Lys. 22.13.

⁹ See e.g. Ar. *Pax* 632; *Vesp.* 611; *Plut.* 281; Lys. 24.16.

2. A man's world

Athenian democracy was, truly, a men's club where the right to attend the assembly, the law-courts, and the council was restricted to adult males whose fathers were Athenian citizens and whose mothers were legitimate daughters of citizens.¹⁰ This exclusion of 'Athenian' women from politics operated simultaneously at the levels of mythology, language, institutions, popular culture, and social practice. At the level of mythology every male Athenian – it was believed – was a direct descendant of the demi-god Erichthonios.¹¹ According to this myth, Erichthonios' parents were two of the city's major deities, Athena and Hephaestus, while this hero was born out of the earth herself. That every Athenian male had come from this divine birth was used by Athenian democracy to justify the political equality of every citizen.¹² Women had no part in this myth. The Athenians accepted the account of the origins of the *genos gunaikōn* ('race of women') as spelt out in the *Theogony* of Hesiod.¹³ In order to punish mankind Zeus created Pandora, from whom, Hesiod explains (381–92):

...comes the fair sex;
 yes, wicked women are her descendants.
 They live among mortal men as a nagging burden
 and are no good sharers of abject want, but only of wealth.
 Men are like swarms of bees clinging to cave roofs
 to feed drones that contribute only to malicious deeds;
 the bees themselves all day long until sundown
 are busy carrying and storing the white wax,
 but the drones stay inside in their roofed hives
 and cram their bellies full of what others harvest.
 So, too, Zeus who roars on high made women
 to be an evil for mortal men.¹⁴

¹⁰ E. Fantham, H. P. Foley, N. B. Kampen, S. B. Pomperoy, and H. A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World. Image and Text* (Oxford, 1994), 74.

¹¹ N. Loraux, *The Children of Athena. Athenian Ideas about Citizenship and the Division between the Sexes*, tr. C. Levine (Princeton, NJ, 1993), 37–71; R. Parker, 'Myths of Early Athens', in J. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (London and New York, 1988), 200–2; J. L. Shear, 'Polis and Panathenaia. The History and Development of Athena's Festival' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 2001), 55–60.

¹² E.g. Eur. *Ion* 670–5; Pl. *Menex.* 239a.

¹³ For this myth, see Loraux (n. 11), 72–110. For its currency in Athens, see e.g. Ar. *Thesm.* 789–99; Eur. *Hipp.* 616–24.

¹⁴ Tr. A. N. Athanassakis.

A woman was almost never called a *politēs* or citizen.¹⁵ This word was used to describe a male who enjoyed full political and legal rights in a *polis* ('city-state'). Instead she was called an *astē* ('a woman belonging to the city') or an *Attikē gunē* ('an Attic woman/wife'). Notably, the adjective *Athenaios* ('Athenian') was typically reserved for male citizens. Moreover, the state's administration never registered women as citizens: their names were not included in the *lexiarkhikon grammateion* – the register of citizens held by each suburb or village in Attica – nor were they ever presented to a phratry, that is, one of the 'brotherhoods' to which every Athenian male belonged and whose members served as witnesses of his legitimacy and citizenship.¹⁶ After the introduction of Pericles' citizenship law of 451/0 BC, which restricted citizenship to the sons of Athenians and women who were daughters of Athenians, Athenians not infrequently found that they had to prove in a law-court that their mothers were indeed 'Attic women'.¹⁷ In the absence of public records this was done by calling surviving witnesses to her betrothal (see part 4 below) and by drawing attention both to the state's repeated acceptance of her male relatives as citizens and also to her participation in religious rites which were reserved for the wives of citizens, such as the Thesmophoria.¹⁸

In popular culture and social practice it was the norm for the wives and daughters of citizens to have no part in either politics or the secular affairs of Athenian democracy. Thus the eponymous heroine of Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* complains that whenever she asks her husband about what happened in the assembly, he tells her to be quiet, as it is none of her business (507–15), or 'at once he'd give me an angry look and tell me to spin my thread or else he'd see I had a headache for weeks: "war is for men to take care of"' (519–20). Such passages help us see that comedies, such as *Lysistrata* and *Assembly Women* by Aristophanes, in which women takeover the running of public affairs, were not proto-feminist works. Rather they were male-chauvinist fantasies which represented and legitimized the views that the male theatregoers had of women.¹⁹

¹⁵ S. Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (London, 1995), 128; Loraux (n. 11), 116.

¹⁶ Gould (n. 2), 45.

¹⁷ A. L. Boegehold, 'Perikles' Citizenship Law of 451/0 BC', in A. L. Boegehold and A. C. Scafuro (eds.), *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology* (Baltimore, MD, 1994), 57–68.

¹⁸ See e.g. Isae. 8.18–20; also A. C. Scafuro, 'The Case against Neaira and the Public Ideology of the Athenian Family', in Boegehold and Scafuro (n. 17), 162–4.

¹⁹ The presence of even a small number of Attic women at the dramatic contests for Dionysus continues to be hotly debated: see e.g. D. K. Roselli, *Theater of the People. Spectators and Society in Ancient Athens* (Austin, TX, 2011), 158–94.

Women were expected not only to keep clear of politics but also to avoid being mentioned in public fora.²⁰ And so in legal speeches the names of the wives and the daughters of citizens were usually suppressed and they were referred to by roundabout phrases. Here we can recall what Pericles says about the *aretē* ('excellence') of women in his *Funeral Oration* (Thuc. 2.45.2): 'About the virtues of a wife, I can convey my whole message in a brief exhortation: your glory is great if you do not fail to live up to your own nature, and if there is the least possible talk of you among men either for praise or blame.'²¹

The proper place for Attic women was thought to be in the home, but even here they were subordinated to men and treated as perpetual minors.²² A woman never gained complete independence: she was always considered to be part of an *oikos* ('household'), which was controlled by her *kurios* or male guardian.²³ Before marriage she was under the guardianship of her father, with her husband becoming her *kurios* in due course.

3. Girlhood and schooling

From the age of six, boys were sent to the classes of a *grammatistēs* or letter teacher and – if their families were wealthy – also to classes run by an athletics teacher and a music teacher.²⁴ For their part, girls remained inside the *oikos* until marriage, learning how to run a household.²⁵ Instruction in domestic duties took the form of helping with cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and the making of clothing. Wealthy girls do not seem to have missed out on such lessons, for even the bride of Isomachus, who was a wealthy man, apparently knew how to make a cloak and to get the slave girls to spin wool.²⁶

Some wealthy girls may have been taught reading and writing, although the existence of female literacy in classical Athens continues to be hotly debated.²⁷ We do have thirty-five images on Attic pots

²⁰ Gould (n. 2), 45.

²¹ Tr. P. J. Rhodes.

²² Blundell (n. 15), 114; Gould (n. 2), 43.

²³ Powell (n. 1), 357.

²⁴ Pritchard (n. 4), 34–83.

²⁵ Blundell (n. 15), 131–4; S. Blundell, 'Women in Classical Athens', in B. A. Sparkes (ed.), *Greek Civilization. An Introduction* (Oxford, 1998), 234.

²⁶ Xen. *Oec.* 7.6.

²⁷ Powell (n. 1), 352–3.

depicting women using book-rolls for the reciting of poetry.²⁸ For nineteen of these, the women are clearly identified as the Muses, that is, the goddesses of poetry and music.²⁹ Another is explicitly named as the poet Sappho.³⁰ Nonetheless the status of the women on the thirteen others is not entirely clear. As Attic pots usually depicted the lives of the wealthy, they might be literate women of this social class.³¹ Alternatively they might be unnamed Muses, Sappho, or even *hetairai* ('courtesans'), whose educated conversation was greatly savoured by their wealthy clients.³²

Contemporary written evidence for female literacy is also ambiguous. In Euripides' tragedy *Hippolytus* the non-Athenian Phaedra seems to be literate (856–81), while in another of his plays a wealthy maiden does not know her letters (*IT* 582–7). More promisingly, Isomachus is proud that his teenage wife is able to write down what furniture and utensils she gives out to the slaves.³³ There is, however, no uncontested visual evidence and certainly no literary evidence for Attic girls ever going to school classes to learn how to read and write.³⁴ Consequently, if some rich girls could do so, they were probably taught literacy in private classes at home.

4. Marriage

At the onset of menstruation, which seems to have occurred around fourteen years of age,³⁵ a girl would be married.³⁶ Puberty was thought to make girls more wild and difficult to control.³⁷ As such, a girl of marriageable age could be described metaphorically as a young female

²⁸ S. G. Cole, 'Could Greek Women Read and Write?', in H. P. Foley (ed.), *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York, 1981), 223, 229 nn. 22–3. For the images, see e.g. F. A. G. Beck, *Album of Greek Education. The Greeks at School and Play* (Sydney, 1975), figs. 349–73.

²⁹ Cole (n. 28), 223–4; Powell (n. 1), 356.

³⁰ Beck (n. 28), cat. no. X.27, fig. 366.

³¹ For the elite perspective in the pictures on Attic pots, see D. M. Pritchard, 'Fool's Gold and Silver: Reflections on the Evidentiary Status of Finely Painted Attic Pottery', *Antichthon* 33 (1999), 1–27.

³² M. Golden, *Children and Childhood in Classical Athens* (Baltimore, MD, and London, 1990), 74; W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1989), 107; Lewis (n. 1), 157–9.

³³ Xen. *Oec.* 7.5, 9.10.

³⁴ Cole (n. 28), 226; Harris (n. 32), 9. *Contra* F. A. G. Beck, 'The Schooling of Girls in Ancient Greece', *Classicum* 9 (1978), 1–9.

³⁵ See e.g. Dem. 27.4, 29.43; Xen. *Oec.* 7.6.

³⁶ Blundell (n. 15), 119–24; Just (n. 1), 40–75.

³⁷ Blundell (n. 15), 79, 99.

horse and marriage as her ‘taming’ or ‘yoking’.³⁸ Normally a girl’s bridegroom would be around thirty.³⁹ Since marriages were arranged by guardians, she had no say in who her husband would be.

That girls did not choose their husbands is borne out by Menander’s *Bad-tempered Man*, despite its dramatization of a betrothal which ostensibly involves *erōs* or sexual desire (786–7). In this play, the god Pan causes a rich youth, Sostratus, to fall in love with a girl, who, being a respectable woman, is not named. Yet Sostratus never converses with her nor is she asked what she thinks of him. Instead, he tries unsuccessfully to get permission to marry her from her *kurios*, namely her father, who is unfortunately a violent misanthrope (72–3; see also 57–68). By the end of the play the guardianship of the girl has passed to her step-brother, Gorgias (735–9). As Gorgias, who is poor, now counts Sostratus as his best friend and wants to find a way to support this male friendship, he betroths his step-sister to him (759–66). For the same reason, Sostratus tries to convince his father, Callippides, to betroth his sister to Gorgias. This wealthy man initially refuses to do so on the grounds that he does not want two ‘beggars’ in the family (794–6). But he is finally persuaded. Thus he stands in front of Gorgias and declares (842–4): ‘I hereby betroth my daughter to you, young man, for the ploughing of legitimate offspring, and I settle on her a dowry of three talents.’

This declaration constituted the *enguē* or betrothal of a girl, which was the most important proof of a marriage.⁴⁰ It was therefore performed in front of several witnesses. This metaphor of a husband ‘ploughing’ his wife is by no means accidental. Female and agricultural fertility were strongly associated in popular culture and the chief value of a woman – not to mention the goal of marriage – was her bearing of children.⁴¹ The dowry was agreed upon at the time of the *enguē* and usually represented between 10 and 20 per cent of the estate of a girl’s *kurios*.⁴² While the dowry, as her share of her father’s estate, remained her property, it was managed by her husband alone.

The *gamos* or wedding served as further proof of a marriage. Just before it, sacrifices were offered by the families of the bride and

³⁸ For such metaphors, see e.g. Eur. *Andr.* 621; *Hec.* 142; for her ‘taming’, see e.g. Eur. *Med.* 804.

³⁹ Blundell (n. 25), 234.

⁴⁰ Blundell (n. 15), 122.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 100, 106; R. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford, 2005), 276.

⁴² Blundell (n. 15), 115–16; Powell (n. 1), 358.

bridegroom to Hera, Aphrodite, and Artemis, with the last goddess receiving as dedications the girdle of the bride-to-be and her toys and other tokens of childhood.⁴³ These goddesses were so honoured because of the power which they had over important aspects of marriage or a girl's transition to womanhood. Aphrodite ensured that a marriage had enough *erōs* to be a success. Thus it is no surprise to find the winged Eros or Cupid, who is Aphrodite's regular companion in Greek art, helping brides to prepare for the wedding ceremony on red-figure pots.⁴⁴ Hera, as the wife of Zeus, guaranteed the prerogatives of the wedded wife. Since Artemis had protected the bride-to-be in the wildness of her childhood, she had to be thanked so that she would not cause calamities for the young wife, such as death during childbirth.

The wedding day began with a sacrifice in the house of the bride's father. In the evening the bride was formally escorted from the *oikos* of her father to that of her husband. Depictions of this ritual on pots have the wife conveyed on a donkey cart, with slaves carrying her *lebēs gamikos*, which was a pot specifically used in a bride's pre-wedding bath, and her other possessions. However, as pottery-painters represented the lives of the wealthy, these pictures cannot be used as evidence that every bride enjoyed such a procession. Fortunately, other archaeological evidence suggests that brides of both social classes had similar weddings, for the *lebēs gamikos*, the 'nuptial vase *par excellence*', has been found in the houses of both rich and poor residents of Attica.⁴⁵ For example, fragments of such a pot were found during the excavations of the so-called Dema House.⁴⁶ The great size of this country house and the absence of any evidence of farming or business activity around it show that it was owned by a wealthy family.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, a *lebēs gamikos* was found, too, in the House of Mikion and Menon in the south-west corner of the *agora*.⁴⁸ The broken tools and the chips

⁴³ L. B. Bruit-Zaidman and P. Schmitt-Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, tr. P. Cartledge (Cambridge, 1992), 68–72.

⁴⁴ V. Sabetai, 'Aspects of Nuptial and Genre Imagery in Fifth-century Athens: Issues of Interpretation and Methodology', in J. H. Oakley, W. D. E. Coulson, and O. Palagia (eds.), *Athenian Potters and Painters. Issues of Interpretation and Methodology* (Oxford, 1997), 319–35.

⁴⁵ C. Bérard, 'The Order of Women', in C. Bérard et al. (eds.), *A City of Images. Iconography and Society in Ancient Greece*, tr. D. Lyons (Princeton, NJ, 1989), 97.

⁴⁶ J. E. Jones, A. J. Graham, and L. H. Sackett, 'The Dema House in Attica', *ABSA* (1962), 88.

⁴⁷ Pritchard (n. 31), 5–6; S. Walker, 'Women and Housing in Classical Greece: The Archaeological Evidence', in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London, 1983), 84–5.

⁴⁸ Inv. no. P28056; see T. L. Shear, 'The Athenian Agora: Excavations of 1968', *Hesperia* 38 (1969), 391–2.

of marbles found on its floors prove that this was the house and the workshop of a family of marble workers.⁴⁹ As wealthy citizens avoided direct contact with business, this family were non-elite residents of the city.

5. The normal place for a wife

A woman's place was in the *oikos*, where she would be responsible for its management. Isomachus explains to his new wife that she will be 'the queen bee' of the household, who 'does not allow the bees to be idle; but those whose duty it is to work outside she sends forth to their work; and whatever each of them brings in, she knows and receives it, and keeps it till it is wanted'.⁵⁰ This account of a woman's place, which probably reworks Hesiod's misogynist view of women as 'drones' (see part 3 above), dovetails with popular literature, where the role of the Attic woman is always to be a homemaker.⁵¹ She was to supervise slaves undertaking – or in the absence of slaves undertake herself – the household's food preparation and storage, cooking, cleaning, spinning, weaving, clothes-making, and child-rearing.⁵² Thus the *aretē* of the wife consisted not only of her invisibility in public but also of her being 'a good housewife, careful with her stores and obedient to her husband'.⁵³

For the classical Athenians, spinning and weaving were 'the quintessential feminine accomplishments'.⁵⁴ Their pots regularly depicted women undertaking these tasks, and the eponymous heroine of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* presents them positively as the activities which allow the women of Greece to fix up public affairs (567–86). Tragedy sometimes horrified male theatregoers by making wives use their products of spinning and weaving to murder their husbands or his loved.⁵⁵ Archaeology confirms again that the wives of both social classes undertook these tasks: loom-weights, whorls, and other equipment for spinning have been found in rich and poor homes, such as

⁴⁹ Pritchard (n. 31), 15–21; Shear (n. 49), 383–94.

⁵⁰ Xen. *Oec.* 7.32–4; tr. E. C. Marchant.

⁵¹ E.g. Ar. *Lys.* 16–19; *Eccl.* 211–12, 215–17, 221–8, 599–600; *Lys.* 1.7.

⁵² Blundell (n. 15), 140–5.

⁵³ Pl. *Meno* 71e–2a.

⁵⁴ Blundell (n. 25), 237.

⁵⁵ E.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 1125–6; Eur. *Med.* 785–9, 1156–1230.

the Dema House and the modest Houses C and D in the south-west corner of the *agora*.⁵⁶

As part of her explanation of why women have hard lives Medea declares (Eur. *Med.* 248–51): ‘They say of us women that we live a life without danger at home, while they fight with the spear. In this they think badly. How I would prefer to stand three times by a shield than to give birth once.’ This passage bears out the parallel between childbirth and battle in the thinking of the ancient Greeks. Whereas the goal of a man was to be a hoplite, the goal of a woman was to bear children. In particular she had to bear males, who alone could guarantee the continuity of her husband’s *oikos* and could serve as soldiers in the city’s army.⁵⁷ And so it is unsurprising that the babies depicted on Attic pots were always male.⁵⁸ In the same vein, Athenians believed that soldiering and giving birth involved *ponoi* or toils.⁵⁹ This view of childbirth was justified: the ancient Greeks had no medical procedures for dealing with problem births, which would presumably have been common, as many first-time mothers were young teenagers.⁶⁰ Consequently, child mortality may have been as high as 30 to 40 per cent and maternal mortality 10 to 20 per cent.⁶¹

6. The ideal and the reality of seclusion

The twentieth century witnessed a hot debate about the place of Attic women, which focused on the issue of their seclusion.⁶² The first salvo was fired by F. A. Wright, whose book of 1923 argued that Attic wives were treated really badly and kept in ‘oriental seclusion’ by their husbands.⁶³ Wright’s argument was not especially new. The accounts of

⁵⁶ For these objects in the Dema House, see Jones, Graham, and Sackett (n. 47), 83. For Houses C and D, see R. S. Young, ‘An Industrial District of Ancient Athens’, *Hesperia* 20 (1951), 206, 242.

⁵⁷ E.g. Ar. *Lys.* 588–90; Thuc. 2.44.3–4. See also Powell (n. 1), 362.

⁵⁸ Fantham *et al.* (n. 10), 104.

⁵⁹ N. Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias. The Feminine and the Greek Man*, tr. P. Wissing (Princeton, NJ, 1995), 45–7.

⁶⁰ Blundell (n. 15), 110–11.

⁶¹ Golden (n. 32), 83; Blundell (n. 15), 110.

⁶² D. Cohen, ‘Seclusion, Separation and the Status of Women in Classical Athens’, *G&R* 36 (1989), 3–15; S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves. Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York, 1975), 58–9.

⁶³ F. A. Wright, *Feminism in Greek Literature. From Homer to Aristotle* (Port Washington, NY, 1923).

the first Europeans to travel to Greece under the Ottomans made much of the oriental seclusion in which contemporary Turks *and* Greeks kept their female relatives.⁶⁴ As this period's ancient historians thought that modern observations could be drawn on productively to write the history of the ancient Greeks, they used these descriptions of 'oriental seclusion' as evidence of how the ancient Greeks had treated their wives and daughters.

By the early twentieth century, ancient historians had changed their minds. An increasing number of them refused to believe that an Athenian would have treated his wife differently from the way in which, for example, an English gentleman treated his. This change was due to the fact that in the intervening century Athenian democracy had become an inspiration for the English upper class and a powerful historical case study for proponents of political reform. Indeed, George Grote and other leading liberals of Victorian England employed this example of a stable democracy to build support for extending the right to vote.⁶⁵ The women of Great Britain themselves gained this franchise in the aftermath of the First World War.

At the same time as Athens was being used as part of the campaign for extending the right to vote, the artists and writers of European countries were representing 'the orient' as the opposite of their civilization and so ripe for European colonization.⁶⁶ In view of these changes it is not surprising that, two years after the publication of Wright's book, A. W. Gomme attacked the idea of oriental seclusion. In 'The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC', Gomme, who would go on to write a famous commentary on Thucydides, argued that Attic wives could come and go freely from their homes and were held in the highest possible regard by their Athenian husbands.⁶⁷ This reaction had as much to do with the changing place of Greece in European discourse and the new voting rights of English women as it did with the actual place of women in classical Athens.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ C. Schnurr-Redford, 'Women in Classical Athens: Their Social Space: Ideal and Reality', in M. Golden and P. Toohey (ed.), *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Edinburgh, 2003), 23–9.

⁶⁵ D. M. Pritchard, 'The Symbiosis between Democracy and War: The Case of Ancient Athens', in D. M. Pritchard (ed.), *War, Democracy and Culture in Classical Athens* (Cambridge, 2010), 3–4.

⁶⁶ E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978).

⁶⁷ A. W. Gomme, 'The Position of Women in Athens in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC', *CPh* 20 (1925), 10.

⁶⁸ B. Wagner-Hasel, 'Women's Life in Oriental Seclusion? On the History and Use of a *Topos*', in Golden and Toohey (n. 65), 241–52.

The seclusion debate which Gomme's article started ran its full course during the twentieth century and ended, unexpectedly, with a qualified rejection of his position. In fact the Athenians agreed that their sexually mature females should ideally be segregated from men who did not belong to their household.⁶⁹ This ideal of seclusion required women to stay indoors as much as possible and not to be seen by passers-by.⁷⁰ The *Electra* of Euripides shows how it was 'shameful for a woman to be standing outside with young men' (343–4).⁷¹ Menander's *Bad-tempered Man* similarly demonstrates how not just a woman's *kurios* but her male relatives also were anxious about unrelated males approaching her, on the grounds that that it could lead to a shameful scandal (218–47). Men had to live up to this ideal too. They were under pressure not to enter another man's household if he was not in.⁷² They were also supposed to be ashamed to speak in public with females to whom they were not related.⁷³

Keeping males outside the family away from its women lies behind the design of houses in classical Athens.⁷⁴ The typical house of both rich and poor families had one outside doorway leading to a courtyard into which the rooms of the dwelling opened.⁷⁵ As the walls of Athenian houses were made of unfired mud bricks, which disintegrate when exposed to the elements, no examples of them have survived. But the excavations of ancient houses made out of stone elsewhere in Greece indicate that the windows were placed high enough in the walls to prevent passers-by from peering in.⁷⁶ A house's internal rooms were divided into the *andronitis* ('men's quarters'), which included the *andron* ('men's room'), and the *gunaikonitis* ('women's quarters').⁷⁷ A sense of shame stopped guests from entering the *gunaikonitis*, while females would not join them in the men's room; doing so

⁶⁹ E.g. Ar. *Thesm.* 789–99; see also Blundell (n. 15), 134–8; Gould (n. 2), 47–9.

⁷⁰ E.g. Eur. *Tro.* 648–52; Lycurg. 1.40.

⁷¹ Cf. Lys. 3.6–7.

⁷² E.g. Dem. 47.35–8; Lys. 1.25, 3.6–7.

⁷³ E.g. Eur. *IA*, 821–34.

⁷⁴ L. Nevett, *House and Society in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁷⁵ M. H. Jameson, 'Private Space and the Greek City', in O. Murray and S. Price (eds.), *The Greek City. From Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990), 181–2; J. E. Jones, 'Town and Country Houses of Attica in Classical Times', in H. Mussche, P. Spitaels, and F. Goemaere-De Poerck (eds.), *Thorikos and Laurion in Archaic and Classical Times* (Ghent, 1975), 127, fig. 21.

⁷⁶ L. Nevett, 'Separation and Seclusion? Towards an Archaeological Approach to Investigating Women in the Greek Household in the Fifth to Third Centuries BC', in M. P. Pearson and C. Richards (eds.), *Architecture and Order. Approaches to Social Space* (London and New York, 1994), 108, 110 n. 7.

⁷⁷ See e.g. Lys. 1.6–9. Also Jameson (n. 76), 187–90.

in a wealthy home was the preserve of courtesans and the flute-playing prostitutes who were hired for a drinking party. Interestingly, domestic excavations show how rooms other than the *andron* were used by both sexes on different occasions.⁷⁸ Thus the boundary between the gendered spaces of a classical Greek house was ‘essentially conceptual and behavioural’.⁷⁹

In spite of this ideal of seclusion, women were not prisoners in their homes.⁸⁰ They visited each other to borrow commodities, to help with a baby’s birth, or to celebrate its arrival.⁸¹ They left the house for family funerals and religious festivals, such as the Thesmophoria.⁸² For many poor women, too, seclusion was very far from a reality, as their families lacked enough or any slaves and so had to rely on the labour of children and wives.⁸³ The result was that some poor women travelled outside to fetch water from a fountain, to help with a family’s farming, or to perform other tasks.⁸⁴ Some of them took paid work beyond the household.⁸⁵ While many of the female workers in classical Athens were resident aliens, Attic women are known to have worked as grape-pickers, wet nurses, washerwomen, and sellers of bread, garlands, and vegetables.⁸⁶

Despite not always being able to keep their women inside, poor Athenians manifestly endorsed the ideal of seclusion.⁸⁷ Tellingly, for example, those voicing concern about violations of this ideal in *Electra* and *Bad-tempered Man* are poor, while the speaker of

⁷⁸ J. Davidson, ‘Bodymaps: Sexing Space and Zoning Gender in Ancient Athens’, in L. Foxhall and G. Neher (eds.), *Gender and the City before Modernity* (Malden, MA, and Oxford, 2013), 107–24; Jameson (n. 76), 183–93; L. Llewellyn-Jones, *Aphrodite’s Tortoise. The Veiled Woman of Ancient Greece* (Swansea, 2003), 193–4, *pace* Walker (n. 48).

⁷⁹ Jameson (n. 76), 192.

⁸⁰ Blundell (n. 25), 243.

⁸¹ E.g. Ar. *Eccl.* 348–9, 526–34; *Lys.* 700–2; *Thesm.* 407–8, 795–6; *Lys.* 1.14.

⁸² See e.g. *Lys.* 1.8, 1.20.

⁸³ See e.g. Arist. *Pol.* 1323a5–7. For child labour, see Golden (n. 32), 34–6. For women’s labour, see Blundell (n. 15), 145; M. Jameson, ‘Women and Democracy in Fourth-century Athens’, in P. Brulé (ed.), *Esclavage, guerre et économie en Grèce ancienne. Homages à Yvon Aárlan* (Rennes, 1997), 104. For the extent of slave-holding, see e.g. E. M. Wood, *Peasant-citizen and Slave* (London, 1988), 173–84.

⁸⁴ For water-carrying, see Ar. *Lys.* 327–31; Eur. *El.* 102–3; for farming, see Men. *Dys.* 329–34; for other tasks, see Arist. *Pol.* 1300a5–6.

⁸⁵ Blundell (n. 15), 136–7, 145–6; Cohen (n. 63), 7–9.

⁸⁶ For grape-pickers, see Dem. 57.45; for wet nurses, see Dem. 57.35. For washerwomen, see e.g. M. R. Lefkowitz and M. B. Fant, *Women’s Life in Greece and Rome. A Source Book in Translation*, second edition (London, 1992), nos. 50–1. For Attic women as sellers, see e.g. Ar. *Ran.* 840; *Vesp.* 497, 1390–1; *Thesm.* 387, 443–58; Dem. 57.31, 34.

⁸⁷ Jameson (n. 84), 104; Llewellyn-Jones (n. 79), 192.

Demosthenes 57 explains to predominantly lower-class jurors that his women were ashamed to take jobs outside the home (31). Moreover, as Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones has put beyond doubt, Attic women of both social classes veiled their heads and their faces as is done in conservative Islamic cultures today.⁸⁸ The veil was conceived as an extension of the house.⁸⁹ Indeed, the veil of the late classical and Hellenistic periods was actually called a *tegidion* or little roof. As long as she had a proper sense of shame about consorting with strange men, this veiling helped a woman to respect the ideal of seclusion while moving outside her *oikos*.

7. The perceived wantonness of women

In *Women in Athenian Life and Law*, Roger Just details how the exclusion of Attic women from politics and their ideal seclusion at home were justified by the perceptions which classical Athenians had of their 'nature'.⁹⁰ He cautions: 'By "nature" I mean simply the set of characteristics, real or imaginary, which in the writings of fifth- and fourth-century Athens men commonly attribute to women as natural to their sex.'⁹¹ In Athenian popular literature women lacked *sōphrosunē* ('moderation') and so could not regulate their bodily appetites and desires.⁹² Thus they were thought to be gluttons and big drinkers of alcohol.⁹³ More worryingly, they were much too fond of sex.⁹⁴ As far as Athenian men were concerned, their wives enjoyed sex much more than they did and so found it hard to reject the advances of a handsome youth or man. This surprising characterization of women as nymphomaniacs can be seen very clearly in the comedy *Lysistrata*, when the eponymous heroine explains how a sex strike will force their husbands to stop making war (124–37):

LYSISTRATA: What we must do is abstain from penises. Why are you turning away from me? Where are you slinking off to? Why are you

⁸⁸ Powell (n. 1), 371.

⁸⁹ Llewellyn-Jones (n. 79), 194–5.

⁹⁰ Just (n. 1), 153–93.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 153, 164.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 166–7.

⁹³ For gluttony, see e.g. *Ar. Thesm.* 418–20; for alcohol, see *Ar. Eccl.* 14–15, 32–6, 153–7, 1118–24; *Lys.* 114, 195–206, 395, 466; *Thesm.* 347–8, 733–61.

⁹⁴ E.g. *Ar. Eccl.* 228, 877–1111; *Nub.* 1068–70; *Lys.* 23–5, 125–39, 404–19, 715–80.

- going pale? What are those tears? Will you do it or not? Tell me.
- MYRRINE: I could not do it. Let the war go on.
- CALONICE: My god, me neither. Let the war go on.
- LYSISTRATA: What about you, little flounder? You said you would split yourself in two for peace?
- CALONICE: Anything you want. I could walk through fire if I have to. But not penises. There is nothing like them, Lysistrata.
- LYSISTRATA: And you?
- MYRRINE: I would rather walk through fire.
- LYSISTRATA: Oh, what a thoroughly buggered race (*genos*) we are. No wonder they write tragedies about us.

What the Athenians feared was that this wantonness of their wives could turn casual contact between them and unrelated men into adulterous affairs.⁹⁵ Such an eventuality would be a disaster for a husband. His enemies could question the legitimacy of his sons, which, because bastards could not be heirs, also threw the continuity of his *oikos* into doubt.⁹⁶ As citizens had to have an Athenian father and an Attic mother, who also, by the fourth century, had to be properly married, a wife's adultery might also imperil the citizen status of sons. Here we see the impetus for sexual segregation and the close supervision of Attic women.

Women, finally, were thought to lack a capacity to reason – which was something every citizen in Athenian democracy was thought to have – and to be cowardly by nature.⁹⁷ For their part, philosophers also judged females to be much less intelligent than males.⁹⁸ Therefore, like barbarians and slaves, they were unable to deliberate about public affairs and could not fight in battles as citizens were required to do. Their nature, clearly, did not allow them to be citizens.

8. Women and religion

Classical Athenians may never have extended the right to vote to female relatives and may have kept them at home as much as possible. But they did not deny that their wives had a unique relationship with goddesses

⁹⁵ E.g. Lys. 1.8.

⁹⁶ Powell (n. 1), 368.

⁹⁷ For lack of reason, see e.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 1401; Xen. *Oec.* 2.9–12; for cowardice, see e.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 259; Lys. 2.5. See also Just (n. 1), 154, 164–5.

⁹⁸ E.g. Arist. *Pol.* 1254b; Pl. *Resp.* 455c–e.

and performed rituals which were vital for maintaining the fertility of farms and families.⁹⁹ Thus religion was the one area in which Attic women had prominence and independence. Indeed, for rich women festivals and funerals were among the few activities for which their husbands or fathers would allow them to leave the *oikos*.

This prominence of women in religion rested on three popular beliefs. The first was that the age and the gender of the personnel of a cult should correspond to those of the object of worship.¹⁰⁰ Thus it was usually the case that males served as priests for gods and females as priestesses for goddesses. The second belief was that an undertaking could only succeed if it had the support of the god or the goddess who had most influence over it. The Athenians believed that the individual or the group who depended most directly on such assistance should have the leading role in the rituals which maintained the *kharis* ('gratitude') of the relevant deity. The corollary was that Athenian males, for example, conducted festivals and set up thanks offerings for Zeus and other gods who, they believed, brought them victory on the battlefield,¹⁰¹ while their wives and daughters took responsibility for worshipping the goddesses who had power over childbirth, childhood, and marriage. Finally, the Athenians allowed their wives to have religious roles, because they believed that they were more capable than men of keeping divine support for agriculture and progeny.¹⁰² This belief was a consequence of the analogy which the Athenians drew between agricultural and human fertility and the fact that the deities who controlled them were female. Thus, as Sue Blundell concludes, the roles which they 'accorded both to the goddesses and to their female worshippers can be seen to entail an acknowledgement of the social significance of the female principle'.¹⁰³

Attic women had a variety of roles in the state's festivals.¹⁰⁴ For example, some daughters of traditional priestly families served as basket-carriers in the processions of the Great Dionysia and the

⁹⁹ Blundell (n. 15), 134–5, 160–9; Blundell (n. 25), 241–2; J. B. Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess. Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); M. Dillon, 'The Construction of Women's Gender Identity through Religious Activity in Classical Greece', *Australian Religious Studies Review* 19 (2006), 221–43.

¹⁰⁰ Blundell (n. 15), 160; Connelly (n. 80), 29–30.

¹⁰¹ E.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 230–2.

¹⁰² See e.g. Eur. *Supp.* 28–31.

¹⁰³ Blundell (n. 15), 163.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g. Ar. *Lys.* 638–48; also M. R. Lefkowitz, 'Women in the Panathenaea and Other Festivals', in J. Neils (ed.), *Worshipping Athena. Panathenaea and Parthenon* (Madison, WI, 1996), 78–91.

Panathenaea,¹⁰⁵ while forty Attic women were the priestesses of the city's cults, including those of Demeter, Persephone, and Athena Polias.¹⁰⁶ For Athena Polias, girls served year round as bearers of sacred things, cleaners of her temple, and the workers who wove her *peplos* or robe. The wives of rich and poor Athenians also participated in several female-only festivals, including the Adonia and the Thesmophoria.¹⁰⁷

This last festival was held in honour of Demeter Thesmophoros and took place just before the sowing of the wheat and barley crops.¹⁰⁸ It was supposed to be celebrated by every Attic wife and so participating in it could be used as more proof of a marriage.¹⁰⁹ The Thesmophoria took place on the hill of the Pnyx where the Athenian assembly met, and in many other sanctuaries of the goddess across Attica. In it wives performed rituals which were connected to their own fertility and that of agriculture and re-enacted the mourning of the goddess for her abducted daughter, Persephone. The festival's three days were called *anodos* ('going up'), *nēsteia* ('fasting'), and *kalligeneia* ('beautiful offspring'). A commentator's note on a manuscript of Lucian provides the best account of its rituals.¹¹⁰ The women brought to it piglets and penis-shaped cakes, which they tossed into pits. On the last day some women climbed down into pits which contained the offerings of the previous year's Thesmophoria, scooped up 'the rotten remains' and distributed this goo to the other worshippers. This commentator explains: 'They think that anyone who takes some of this and mixes it in when sowing will have good crops.' As Greek words for pig were 'the commonest slang terms for the female genitalia', the wives at this festival no doubt associated their offerings with their own fertility.¹¹¹ Indeed, the commentator states that the Thesmophoria was thought to guarantee agricultural *and* human fertility. Athenian husbands manifestly judged their wives' celebration of this festival important. In spite of the ideal of seclusion, they allowed them to spend three days camping away from home. Each suburb or village of Attica appointed a wealthy resident as a liturgist to pay for their local

¹⁰⁵ Thuc. 6.56.1–2.

¹⁰⁶ Bruit-Zaidman and Schmitt-Pantel (n. 44), 105–7.

¹⁰⁷ See e.g. Ar. *Thesm.* 834–5.

¹⁰⁸ Blundell (n. 15), 163–5; J. D. Mikalson, *Ancient Greek Religion* (Malden, MA, Melbourne, and Oxford, 2005), 144–5; Parker (n. 42), 270–83.

¹⁰⁹ See e.g. Isae. 6.49–50, 8.19; also K. White, 'Demeter and the Thesmophoria', *Classicum* 39 (2013), 3–12.

¹¹⁰ Parker (n. 42), 272–5. I am using Parker's translation.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

celebration of the Thesmophoria and some of their wives as magistrates to take charge of it.¹¹²

The performance of services and rituals for the dead was another important aspect of women's religious activities.¹¹³ The classical Athenians believed that the burial of the dead was a common custom of the Greeks which was sanctioned by the gods.¹¹⁴ It was the responsibility of citizens to uphold this *nomos* at home and to make sure that the customary rituals were performed at the graves of their forebears.¹¹⁵ The Athenians took a dim view of anyone who failed to pay these honours to the dead. Failure to bury an *oikos*-member could be held against a citizen who was seeking to be a magistrate, while the neglect of the customary visits to the tombs of parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents left a man open to prosecution for *kakōsis goneōn*, that is, the poor treatment of ancestors.¹¹⁶

Athenians relied on women to carry out these customary honours. Indeed, the mothers, sisters, and daughters of the dead were thought to be deeply committed to ensuring their burial and the visiting of their graves.¹¹⁷ They judged it right for their women to ready the dead for burial by washing and clothing their bodies, to mourn for them at the *prothesis* or pre-burial display, and to take part in their *ekphora* or procession to the tomb.¹¹⁸ Thus, in images on Attic red-figure pots it is women who wash and dress the body, and who, at the viewing of the dead, raise their hands, strike their heads, and tear their hair.¹¹⁹ Likewise on white-ground *lekythoi*, which are common offerings for the dead, women are depicted more frequently than men making a visit to a tomb, where they leave pots of this shape, wreaths, ribbons, and food.¹²⁰

Athenian democracy had laws in operation which sought to regulate the behaviour of Attic women who performed these rituals for the

¹¹² E.g. Isae. 3.80, 8.19; *IG* ii² 1184.3.

¹¹³ Blundell (n. 15), 161–2; R. Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 21–37, 104–20; S. C. Humphreys, 'Family Tombs and Tomb Cult in Ancient Athens: Tradition or Traditionalism?', *JHS* 100 (1980), 96–126.

¹¹⁴ E.g. Eur. *Supp.* 16–19, 24–8, 61–2.

¹¹⁵ See e.g. Isae. 6.40–1, 65; [Dem.] 43.57–8, 65; Lys. 1.8.

¹¹⁶ For failure of burial, see [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 55.3; for neglect of visits, see Dem. 24.107.

¹¹⁷ See e.g. Eur. *IT* 700–5; Soph. *Ant.* 450–70; also M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge, 1974).

¹¹⁸ Isae. 6.40–1, 8.21–4.

¹¹⁹ Blundell (n. 15), 161.

¹²⁰ J. H. Oakley, *Picturing Death in Classical Athens. The Evidence of the White Lekythoi* (Cambridge, 2004).

dead.¹²¹ Fourth-century Athenians certainly believed – as did writers of the Roman period – that they had been introduced by Solon in the early sixth century.¹²² These *nomoi* forbade women from being part of a *prothesis* or *ekphora*, unless they were closely related to the deceased, and from lacerating themselves or wailing as part of their mourning. They also required that the *prothesis* take place inside a house, that the *ekphora* set out before sunrise, that the women follow the men in this procession, and that none of the mourners lament for anyone other than the relative being buried.

Thus classical Athenians appear to have had a contradictory view of this religious role of their female relatives: while they thought it right for them to perform these acts for the dead and relied on them to do so, they still felt uneasy about female emotionalism.¹²³ What they feared was that such displays on the part of their womenfolk could undermine their own self-control.¹²⁴ Certainly, they wished to limit the scope of Attic women to speak out about or mourn for sons and husbands who had fallen in battle.¹²⁵

It is therefore unsurprising that at the public funeral for the war dead bereaved females were pushed to the margins.¹²⁶ By providing a funeral and a tomb for the war dead and honouring them annually through yearly contests and sacrifices, the Athenian democracy appropriated the traditional obligations of close relatives to bury their kin and to look after their tombs.¹²⁷ The orators at the public funeral may have noted in passing the relatives' *lupē* ('pain') and *penthos* ('mourning') but consistently urged them to restrict these troubling emotions as best as they could by remembering the *aretē* which the war dead had put beyond doubt and the support which the city would give to those relatives whom they had left behind.¹²⁸ The involvement of bereaved females was limited to the leaving of offerings for their dead relatives during the public *prothesis* or

¹²¹ [Dem.] 43.62–5.

¹²² E.g. Plut. *Vit. Sol.* 21.

¹²³ Fantham *et al.* (n. 10), 78; Humphreys (n. 114), 100.

¹²⁴ See e.g. Aesch. *Sept.* 182–202.

¹²⁵ E.g. Ar. *Lys.* 37–8, 588–90; *Pax* 647–56; Eur. *Supp.* 942–6.

¹²⁶ Loraux, N. 1986, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, tr. A. Sheridan, (Cambridge [Massachusetts], 1986), 22–8.

¹²⁷ Pl. *Menex.* 249b; Thuc. 2.34.

¹²⁸ E.g. Dem. 60.32–7; Hyper. *Funeral Oration* 41–3; Lys. 2.71–6; Pl. *Menex.* 247c–8d; Thuc. 2.44.

pre-burial display of their remains and the lamenting of their own relatives beside the grave.¹²⁹

9. Conclusion

For the classical Athenians, the right place for Attic women was at home. They encouraged their wives to focus on making meals and clothes and on running the *oikos* more generally. They expected them to produce sons so that their households could live on. They genuinely valued their wives as homemakers and mothers, but they also constantly worried that they lacked self-control. They were obsessed by the possibility that Attic women might have sex outside marriage. The result was that husbands tried to keep their wives away from unrelated men. They expected male guests whom they had invited into the *oikos* to keep out of the rooms where their wives were. They built houses which lacked windows for passers-by to look in and wives to look out. At the same time, they believed that their wives were better placed than they were to worship the goddesses who controlled the fertility of crops and households. They also relied on them to perform the customary rites for dead relatives. Often, too, poor wives had to help to keep family businesses or farms going. Thus every Athenian allowed his wife to participate in female-only festivals and funerals and – if his poverty made it necessary – to work outside the *oikos*. Yet in doing so he insisted that she keep away from men who were not part of the family. Thus as she walked through the streets she had to avoid talking with such men and to keep her face well hidden behind her veil.

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¹²⁹ E.g. Thuc. 2.34.2, 46.2; see also P. Hannah, 'The Warrior *Loutrophoroi* of Fifth-century Athens', in Pritchard (n. 66), 266–303.