WOMEN IN ANCIENT GREECE

Sue Blundell

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SUE BLUNDELL

Introduction

Traditionally, the study of Ancient Greece has taken as its focus the political, military and cultural activities of the male half of the Greek population. In this, of course, it differs very little from studies of other historical eras. During the last twenty years, however, this male-centred view of what constitutes a significant area in past human experience has been challenged in a number of quarters.

> It is now at least acknowledged that while men were performing the feats, building the institutions, producing the goods and cultures, ruling the peoples, and generally busying themselves with those activities we are wont to call history, women were invariably doing something – if only bearing more men to make more history and more women to permit them to do so.
>
> (Fox-Genovese, 1982, p. 6)

What women were doing – and what was being done to them – is a subject which now attracts a growing amount of attention from historians studying a wide range of historical societies, including that of Ancient Greece. Since 1975, when Sarah Pomeroy published her ground-breaking work *Goddesses, whores, wives and slaves*, there has been a plethora of books and articles which have examined diverse aspects of the lives and representation of women in the Ancient Greek world, with the focus broadening in recent years to embrace issues involving relations between the sexes. Very few overviews of the subject have been produced, however. In attempting to make good this omission, I have benefited enormously from the dedication, research and innovative thinking of numerous scholars who have preceded me.

In broad terms, this book aims to fill the gap which women, and their relationships with men, ought to have occupied in general histories of Ancient Greece. Before turning to the complex question of what the word 'women' means in this context, I must first explain the expression 'Ancient Greece'. Conventionally, the term 'ancient' is applied to a span of several thousand years in the history of Greece, extending from the emergence of a Bronze Age culture in about 3000 BC, to the Christianization of Greece

in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. In this book, however, I shall be focusing on a much more limited period, beginning in 750 BC and ending in 336 BC. This comprises what are generally known as the Archaic and Classical Ages, during which a distinctive and in many ways short-lived civilisation was being shaped. The political, social, legal and cultural structures which came into being during this time were to determine the nature and quality of women's lives in a number of important respects.

The word 'Greece', in the context of the Archaic and Classical Ages, denotes a wider geographical area than the one embraced by the modern state. From about 1000 BC, Greek-speaking peoples from the mainland and the Aegean islands had been migrating to other parts of the Mediterranean basin, and to the Black Sea area, and had established flourishing Greek communities in a number of coastal regions. Potentially, then, 'Greece' refers to all the far-flung settlements inhabited by Greeks. However, the scope offered by this concept of Greece is not, unfortunately, as broad as it may seem. The majority of our sources for the history of Ancient Greece, particularly those relating to the Classical Age, derive from the city of Athens, whose literary output seems to have far exceeded that of other states. Inevitably, the 'women of Ancient Greece' will often, although by no means invariably, be represented in this book by the women of Athens.

There are many other factors which limit the identity of the 'women' who are to be the subject of this book. The study of Ancient Greece is in general hampered by a lack of detailed source material and, needless to say, those sources that do survive are concerned primarily with the activities of men. Often the women of Ancient Greece are to be encountered only in asides, inferences or vague generalisations. Very few real women are known to us as individuals, and even fewer are accorded the dignity of a name. Moreover, the class bias of the sources is such that most of the women who do put in an appearance belong to the upper echelons of the citizen body. The evidence relating to slaves, foreigners and lower-class citizen women is particularly fragmentary. If we are to avoid the danger of seeing women as an undifferentiated group, we need constantly to remind ourselves that their lives were subject to considerable social and economic variation.

The identity of the women whom we will be studying is also circumscribed in a more fundamental way. In Ancient Greece women were generally denied a public voice, and today they speak to us directly in only a very limited number of contexts. A few scraps from poems composed by a handful of women writers have survived, of which the most numerous are those representing the work of the Archaic poet Sappho – yet these amount to scarcely more than forty battered fragments. These verses tell us something about the preoccupations and attitudes of the individual woman who wrote them, but they furnish us with very little information about the experiences of the female population in general.

Almost everything that we know about Greek women is derived ultimately from a masculine source – from the things which men said about women, from the images of women which they created in literature and art, and from the informal rules and legal regulations which they constructed in order to deal with women. Both as a group and as individuals, the women of Ancient Greece are to a large extent creatures who have been invented by men. This is most obviously the case with the fictional women who feature, sometimes in an unusually prominent manner, in imaginative works such as Homer's *Odyssey* or the plays of fifth-century Athenian tragedians. But even the 'real' women who are discussed in the law-court speeches or medical treatises of the fourth century BC have to be seen in some sense as male inventions. They are presented to us only in

portions – as receivers of dowries, bearers of heirs, possessors of wombs which are not behaving quite as they ought to. These portions have been selected by men, in accordance with their own personal views about what it is in a woman that makes her significant. None of these women is allowed to speak for herself. None is able to tell us what *she* thinks about her life and the place which she occupies in Greek society.

This is not to say, of course, that a Greek woman's own account of her nature, role and activities would not have been equally one-sided, equally subjective. The fact that women in Ancient Greece are a 'muted group'[1] does not mean merely that we have been deprived of a valuable source of information on what women did in the privacy of their own homes. It also means that women's subjectivity has been denied to us. The only 'truth' about Greek society which we can hope to recover is inevitably going to be a male 'truth'. The alternative female 'truth' – the way in which women viewed themselves, their menfolk, and the world in which they were living – is almost entirely inaccessible to us. Before embarking on any study of women in Ancient Greece, we have to come to terms with this tremendous drawback.

Given that we are unable to get inside the minds of Greek women, what then is to be gained from studying the texts in which they appear? I believe that the benefits are twofold. In the first place, women in the 1990s are still interested in recovering their own history; and though Greek sources have to be treated with caution, they nevertheless have something to tell us about the reality of women's lives during a significant period in Europe's past. These texts provide us with a limited amount of information about women's day-to-day experiences and, more importantly, they furnish evidence for the legal, social and economic position accorded to women. While it would obviously be a mistake to believe that these man-made regulations can tell us the whole truth about the female population of Greece, it would be equally misguided to assume that they played no part whatsoever in shaping women's reality. To one extent or another, women in Ancient Greece were obliged to live by men's rules. Secondly, the male view of women – provided that it is recognised as a partial and not a universal view – is worth studying in its own right. By examining the roles which men constructed for women, and the system of gender differences into which they were incorporated, we gain an insight into the cultural dynamics of a male-dominated society. This insight has a contribution to make to two different kinds of history. It provides a key to an understanding of one of the strands in the history of the subordination of women; and at the same time it broadens our knowledge of the history of Ancient Greece.

This book, then, has two principal objectives – the study of Greek women's social reality, and the study of their place in literary and visual representations. Inevitably, since it is only through the representations that we can attempt to reach the reality, there is going to be tension between these objectives. In Part I, on women in Greek myth, the focus will be on the second objective, since here we will be examining images of women which involve an obvious element of fantasy. Parts II, III and IV, on the Archaic and Classical Ages, pursue a chronological approach to the study of Greek women. Here, I have tried as far as possible to separate my treatment of women themselves from my treatment of representations of women. The chapters on 'Women and the poets' and 'Women in stone', in Part II, and Part IV, on 'Ideas about women in the Classical Age', are all explicitly concerned with the male view of women which is being presented in particular cultural media; while Part II's 'Women as poets: Sappho' is devoted to the one reasonably coherent expression of the woman's viewpoint to have survived from Ancient Greece. The remaining chapters in Parts II and III seek to examine various

aspects of the lives of real women. But it must be borne in mind that all these women are brought to us by courtesy of male authors and artists. In these sections, the tension between representation and reality is particularly strong.

This introduction has been full of warnings, and I am going to conclude with two more. The nature of women's domestic role has altered very little in the course of history, and in Ancient Greece, where women were less involved in extra-domestic activities than they are today, their lives would have been subject to far fewer changes. The chronological treatment which they have been accorded in Parts II, III and IV may therefore seem somewhat artificial. The features which seem to us to distinguish the Archaic from the Classical Age are of a political and cultural character, and would have had a greater impact on men than they did on women. The division into Ages is probably justified, both because it is now a traditional element in the study of Ancient Greece, and because the political and ideological developments which mark the transition to a new 'Age' would have influenced male attitudes to women. But the reader should bear in mind that a Greek woman living in the Classical Age would probably have been less aware of the effect of these changes on her life than her male counterpart.

My last warning is more general. This book, like many that have been written in recent years, represents an attempt to 'add women on' to men's history. I believe that this is a necessary process if the role which women have played in historical societies is to be recognised. But it carries with it the danger that the women of the past will become ghettoised – thus reinforcing the notion that women are a special case, and do not conform to the norm of human experience. If this danger is to be avoided, then books like this one must be seen as essentially transitional. When 'general' historical studies have been broadened so as to incorporate the other half of the human race, then 'Women in . . .' books will have become redundant.

PART I

WOMEN IN MYTH

I

Myth: an introduction

WHAT, WHEN AND WHO?

The English word 'myth' is derived from the Greek *muthos*, which originally meant speech or utterance, but later came to signify a spoken or a written story. By the fifth century BC, a distinction was being made between a *logos*, a rational account, and a *muthos*, a more imaginative narrative. This is not to say that the distinction between the two was necessarily seen as one of truth versus falsehood. In Classical Greece, as today, there was a wide variety of opinion about the significance of myth. There were doubtless many Greeks who still believed that the strange events recorded in myths had actually taken place in the distant past. Some people, however, dismissed them as 'old wives' tales'; while others saw them as expressions of the relationship between gods and humans, or as allegories of scientific or moral truths.

Myths are traditional narratives in which the many-layered significance of human situations is explored through the application of fantasy. The words 'traditional' and 'fantasy' employed in this basic definition merit some further comment. In placing my chapter on myth at the beginning of this book, and separating it out as a topic from the chronological accounts, I do not want to create the impression that I see myth as a timeless entity which can be divorced from the processes of historical change. Greek myths were invented by human beings who lived in particular societies at particular points in time; and as time went on, and circumstances changed, the narratives were freely adapted and embellished to suit the particular preoccupations of their audiences. Nevertheless, myths were at the same time traditional. The same basic stories were handed down from generation to generation, and, in spite of adaptations, someone who had had a hand in shaping a tale in about 1200 BC might still have recognised it when it was being told in about 30 BC. Myths represent an element of continuity in Greek life, and cannot generally be pinned down to a particular historical period. This is the reason why I have chosen to deal with myth as a separate topic.

The notion that myths are invented, and that they involve fantasy, does not necessarily imply that there is no grain of historical truth in them. Some of the human beings named may really have lived, some of the events recounted may actually have taken place, and the background to the story – the social customs, the places and the objects mentioned – may have had some basis in reality. But all of this is overlaid with a strongly fictional element. Moreover, the versions of Greek myths which we possess were generally composed several centuries, in some cases several millennia, after the events which they purport to describe. It follows that to use myth as a source of information about historical events and societies is a rather dangerous exercise.

This brings us to the question of who made Greek myths, and when. Our main source for myth is literature, and, in particular, poetry. The earliest Greek poets to whom we can give names, and who provide us with some of our most important mythological narratives, are Homer and Hesiod, who were probably writing in about 700 BC. But although this is an early date where literature is concerned, in a mythological context it is very late. Undoubtedly, many myths would have come into being long before that time, and would have been handed down by word of mouth. In the Archaic Age, epic poems, hymns to the gods, shorter lyric songs and 'wisdom' poetry (conveying information about the gods and about important aspects of human life) were the main media through which myth was transmitted. All of them formed part of the cultural apparatus of the community, and were performed at events such as religious festivals, banquets, weddings and funerals. The invention of a system of writing in about 750 BC meant that some of these poems were also written down. In the Classical Age an important new vehicle for myth came into being, for the fifth century BC was the great age of Athenian verse drama, and epic poems in particular furnished tragedians with a rich source of material for their plots.

Mythological narratives were also constructed visually, most notably in relief sculpture and in vase paintings. Although literature remains our most important source for myth, occasionally one of the visual texts provides us with evidence for an entirely new episode in a story. More importantly, by presenting the story in a different context and a different symbolic language, these texts allow us to recover meanings of myths which may not be apparent in the literary versions.

This very concise history of Greek myth-making raises a number of points. Firstly, myths have come down to us largely in the form of the sophisticated and selfconscious versions created by educated members of the upper classes. Almost all of these people were, moreover, male. Although women may well have had a hand in early myth-making, at the stage when these narratives became embedded in the culture of the community they were being handled by and large by men (the work of the woman poet Sappho being the only notable exception). As Odysseus's son Telemachus says to his mother Penelope when she tries to cut short a recital of an epic poem, '*muthos* is the province of men' (*Odyssey* 1.356–9). We should be wary, however, of seeing women merely as the objects and passive recipients of male myths. Although Greek literature offers very little evidence for women's responses and reactions, we should not assume for this reason that these did not exist. A story which had been shaped by men could easily have been transformed in meaning when women came into contact with it. One such alternative view has, in fact, been preserved for us, in Sappho's albeit very brief treatment of the story of Helen (see p. 89–90).

The second point to bear in mind is that myths went through a constant process of adaptation. A story that began its existence in, say, 1500 BC may have come down to us in

a form which was devised over a thousand years later; and such a story is probably going to tell us as much about what people were thinking in the fifth century BC as it does about the Bronze Age in which it originated. Even basic factual details could be altered. For example, according to Homer, when King Agamemnon returned to Greece from the Trojan War he was murdered by his wife's lover Aegisthus. By the fifth century BC we are being told that it was the wife herself, Clytemnestra, who did the killing (see p. 173–4). A change like this one is clearly of some significance, particularly where the attitude to women is concerned.

The third point is related to the last one. The process of adaptation means that there is no definitive version of any one Greek myth, let alone a 'bible' which serves as a hallowed source for the whole of Greek mythology. Moreover, writers often allude to only one episode in a story, assuming that their audience would be familiar with the rest of it. As a result we are frequently in the position of having to piece together a narrative from a number of different sources, and we should not get too upset if the bits do not always fit together very neatly. Often an author would try to make what he was saying harmonise with the versions of his predecessors, but this was by no means always the case, and absolute consistency cannot be expected.

This is not the place to discuss the merits of the numerous theories of myth which have been produced since the nineteenth century. However, in considering the relationship between myths' meanings and their representation of women, it is obviously of peculiar significance that the major role in shaping the narratives was played by men. These stories can help to reveal to us the response to women experienced by men living in a patriarchal society: what makes myth a very different source from, say, a philosophical treatise on the duties of a wife, is the fantasy element. Through myth we can reach the unconscious, rather than the logically-argued, notions which men entertained about women. In this way we can gain an insight into the symbolic value accorded to women – into what, in fact, the term 'Woman' meant to men. In the words of John Gould (1980, p. 55), 'myth may significantly add depth to (our) sense of the woman's role in society . . . This is because it brings into view ambiguities, tensions and fears, deep-seated fears, which the norms of law and custom are intended to control and even suppress: myth in some sense contradicts the comfortable surface normality of the social structure defined by law and custom, and points to conflict at a deeper level within the dominant structure.'

WOMEN IN MYTH: GODDESSES, ROYALS AND MONSTERS

Women are certainly not thin on the ground in Greek myth. Often they are accorded considerable prominence. In this Part, therefore, I have had to be very selective, and have chosen to concentrate on certain topics which, for one reason or another, seem to me to be fundamental. Chapter 2 deals with creation myth, which is basic both in narrative terms – it takes us back to the imagined beginnings of time – and because it includes the creation of Woman. The following chapter discusses the six Olympian goddesses, all of whom were worshipped widely throughout the Greek world by women and men. The subject of Chapter 4 is Homer, whose poems were the most authoritative source of mythological narratives for Greeks of every era. Finally in Chapter 5, on the Amazons, a myth about women will be discussed which was immensely popular in Classical Greece, and was to become a source of inspiration for twentieth-century feminists.