

On Women in Ancient Greek Culture, Drama and Education

Ioli Andreadi

Researcher, Theatre Director and Playwright, MA Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, MA Panteion University Athens, PhD King's College London; Athens, Greece

Abstract:

Women in ancient Greek culture, drama and education is a question which has been at the centre of the theoretical debate and creative experiences at least from the middle of the twentieth century until today. This paper proposes to revisit this question based on three principles. First of all, it refers not only to the dominant model of Athens but also to other parts of Hellenism, whose political systems may be democracies, tyrannies or hereditary kingdoms. Secondly, it draws its examples from the Greek metropolis of the 5th and the 4th centuries B.C., but also from other places and periods, which cover an area from the Mediterranean to Asia and a period long before and after the classical era. Thirdly, it envisages the question of ancient Greek women not only from the angle of culture, meaning literature and drama, but more generally in all the senses contained in the ancient term *paedeia* (παιδεία), including education. To clarify the meaning of this last point I would say that I am trying to highlight that what ancient Greek women were, depended in many ways on what their *paedeia* consisted in and, more precisely, on how they were educated.

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Women in Greek culture, drama and education is a question which has been at the centre of the theoretical debate and creative experiences at least from the middle of the twentieth century until today. The following paper proposes to revisit this question based on three principles: First of all, it refers not only to dominant model of Athens but also to other parts of Hellenism, whose political systems may be democracies, tyrannies or hereditary kingdoms. Secondly, it draws its examples from the Greek metropolis of the 5th and the 4th centuries B.C., but also from other places and periods, which cover an area from the Mediterranean to Asia and a period long before and after the classical era. Thirdly, it envisages the question of ancient Greek women not only from the angle of culture, meaning literature and drama, but more generally in all the senses contained in the ancient term *paedeia* (παιδεία), including education. To clarify the meaning of this last point I would say that I will try to highlight that what ancient Greek women were, *depended in many ways on what their paedeia consisted in and more precisely on how they were educated.*

The starting point of my rapid overview will be the question of female *prosopa*/characters in ancient Greek theatre. Exponents of the women's studies have highlighted problems arising from the presentation of women in Greek – or rather Athenian – tragedy and comedy. The relation between theatrical *prosopa*ⁱ, like Antigone or Lysistrata and the condition of women in the Athenian *polis/state* during the 5th and the 4th century B.C., as well as the opposition *man/woman* and/or *male/female*, have thus to that day become a favorite topic of discussion and creative experimentation for scientists and creatorsⁱⁱ. The present paper has no ambition to offer complete and conclusive answers to the above problems. It, however, aims to put forward a series of questions arising from literary and historical texts. I will try to enumerate some of them: What are the limits of time and space to which we refer when dealing with the topic in question? What do we mean when we refer to women in ancient Greek theatre and what is the relation of female *prosopa* with women in ancient Greek societies? Is the opposition *man/woman* the only pertinent way to face the question? Before dealing with the texts and their interpretation, I will discuss some still dominant

stereotypes, concerning not only women but also Greek culture and education. I believe this is necessary because Greek Drama draws from an ampler and longer tradition, including mythology and ritual, as well as a literary tradition, especially the epics, that has introduced many elements that have influenced and inspired the ancient theatrical plays.

Greek Culture, Education and Art before and after the Classical Times

Ancient Greek culture, education and art reach in fact far beyond the time and space to which traditional scholarship often refers, because the latter mainly focuses on the polis of Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. They are contemporary, if not earlier, of the palaces at Cnossos and Mycenae and acquire their more or less standard characteristics in the period when the *polis* (Greek city-state) emerged, at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. They comprise the period in which the Greek epics were composed (probably 9th - 7th centuries BC) but also the earlier period, whose memories can be traced in the poems of Hesiod and Homer. In disagreement with the classicist opinion, arguing that Greek culture ended with the defeat of the Athenians and the Thebans at Chaeronea, in 338 B.C., scholars like François Chamouxⁱⁱⁱ and Pierre Vidal Naquet^{iv} have sustained that Ancient Greek culture remained alive and fertile during Hellenistic and Roman times, and continued being alive and fertile even after the first centuries of the Christian era. Plotinus, a great thinker, belongs to this last period.

The persistence of the belief of several thinkers and scholars dealing with the interpretation – either theoretical or artistic – of ancient Greek drama and society that the Greek *polis* (city-state) and therefore Greek culture as a whole ended in 338 B.C., can be related to the question of *athenocentrism* recently raised by dr. Miltiadis Hadjopoulos^v. The splendor of the city-state of Athens, particularly of its theatre, and the endurance of this fascination until today, have made many people identify the term *Greek* with the term *Athenian*. This has been and still continues to be the case of many social and political thinkers, philologists, philosophers, intellectuals, educators of various disciplines, as well as artists who, either consciously or unconsciously, tend to consider ancient Greece and ancient Athens as synonymous. This seems more pertinent in the case of ancient theatre, because the great Greek dramatic texts of antiquity were written by Athenian authors. However, even as far as theatre is concerned, we need to take into account that theatre is not limited to playwrights, even when they are of paramount importance, as was the case with the three tragedians or Aristophanes. It also has to do with spaces, actors, audiences, commentators, readers, painters representing many of its scenes and characters and political orators or writers incorporating several of its elements into their speeches or texts. The presence of ancient Greek theatres, far from being limited inside Attica, extends from Italy and the North of Africa, to the Balkans, Asia Minor, Cyprus, the Middle East and Asia and goes as far as India and the frontiers of China. The theatres of Barcelona in Spain, Taormina and Syracuse in Italy, Bitola in North Macedonia, Ephesos in nowadays Turkey, Salamis in Cyprus, Petra in Jordan and the one at Alexandria Eschata, created by Alexander at the province of Sogdiani, offer a quite incomplete yet useful list. The audiences of ancient Greek theatres were not limited to Athenian men and women, but included other Greeks and slaves of various origins and, in the case of theatres outside Greece, the majority of the spectators must have often belonged to other nations. The masterpieces of the classical period probably offered a great part of the repertory, yet Plutarch, in the biography of Crassus, informs us that new Greek tragedies were written and performed along with older ones in Armenia up until the middle of the 1st century B.C.^{vi}

We have seen that the presence of ancient Greek theaters and Greek plays performed in them reaches far beyond Athens, the Greek Metropolis, or even the Greek colonies of the archaic period. This becomes even easier to understand when we refer to Greek Civilization in General. Greek politics, Greek thought, education, religion, ritual art etc. extend far away to the West, arriving to Italy and Spain as well as to the North and the North of Africa and to Asia and the influence of Hellenism lasts many centuries after the political decline of Athens: Sparta, Asia Minor, South Italy, Sicily, Macedonia and the kingdoms of the Successors (Diadochoi) of Alexander, from Bactria to southeast Mediterranean, have contributed a lot to the political and cultural prestige of the Greeks^{vii}. The replica of the Athenian Acropolis on the top of the hill of Ai Chanum, Afghanistan, as well as the thousands of Greek statues at the Kabul Archeological Museum – probably the largest surviving Greek Glyptotheque in the world – and the huge Apollo/Buddha statues, in Bamiyan, Pakistan, victims of the rage of the Taliban in the Far East, and on the other hand, in the West, the bronze youth of Agdes, modern name of the Greek colony *Τύχη Αγαθή* (Good Luck), in South France and

the Greek temples and statues of Empuries in Spain, illustrate the Greek presence from the Indian Ocean to the West Mediterranean. We certainly are unable to easily draw the complete cultural map of such an extended area, or to take systematically into account the evolution of ideas, behaviors, education, forms and culture during all that time. I will, however, try to use carefully my examples, drawing from this first attempt towards a scale that was presented above.

Women in Greek Society of the 1st millennium B.C.

The political status of women has occupied the center of discussions on gender in ancient Greece. Their position in society, education, ritual and theatre, has comparatively drawn less attention. Some specialists of ancient culture, focusing on the political side of the question, maintain that the status of women in Greek society seems to become less and less important as the institutions of the Greek city-state are being consolidated^{viii}.

The status of Penelope, Arete, the wife of Alkinoos, or Nausikaa, his spoiled young daughter, look indeed far superior to the one of the average female Athenian woman of the fifth century BC. The fact that, during the first part of the fifth BC, an Athenian had, according to the law, to be born *εξ αμφοίν αστοίν* (born from a father *and a mother* of Athenian origin), should not necessarily be considered as a proof of an upgrade of the social position of women in Athens. The aim of such measure was probably to limit the important political and economic benefits connected to Athenian citizenship to a limited number of people, excluding the sons born to Athenians from foreign women. In any case, the existing historical facts, deriving from texts such as Xenophons *Oeconomicos*, dealing with the status of women in the *polis*, are rather scarce. We therefore have to look for additional information in works of art and literature. Thus, in our research concerning the role of women in Greek culture, education and drama, we are constantly compelled to strive for an equilibrium between the *social/institutional* and the symbolic *imaginary/imaginary*. The image of the Athenian women, *parthenoi*, consorts, *etairai* and mothers, as depicted in political texts like Pericles' *Epitaphios* (funerary oration); or the Amazons portrayed on the metopes of Parthenon and on vases and far more in the Greek dramatic texts and the epics – that can be considered as the precursors of Greek drama. There is another aspect which must also be taken into account and this is ritual which, unfortunately for scholars, is covered with the secrecy connected with initiation.

Women of Athens and of the rest of the Greek world were generally accepted not only in theatres but also in the most sacred of rituals, like the Eleusinian Mysteries, which constituted a fundamental part of Athenian and Greek *paideia* (education). Women were, in fact, not only accepted there as initiates, but could assume the highest functions^{ix}. If we read Diotimas' words to Socrates in Platos' *Syposium* as an initiation, as well as a lecture on *eros*, we can suspect that a woman could retain this double function of high priestess and teacher. According to Mary Ellen Waithe^x, her teaching, different from that of Socrates, testifies in favor of the historicity of the person. Paul Cartledge, who has dedicated a chapter of his book *The Greeks. A Portrait of Self and Others*^{xi}, to the prophetess of Mantinea, also considers that she was a historical person.

Hesiod and Homer: Women in Poetry, Myth and Ritual. The *Genos Gynaikon* in Hesiod; The Gender Opposition in Ancient Greek Epics.

Hesiod appeals to religion and what we today call mythology, in order to find answers for the dire condition of farmers in Beocia of his time (8th or 7th century BC.). In this context, he attacks both the existing, mortal women of his time and the female figures of mythology, like Gaia or Pandora, considered to be their archetypes.

Women, argues Hesiod, especially those who are not bees but κηφήνες (drones) are in great part responsible for the condition of men. They are just insatiable bellies (*γαστέρες οίον*) devouring the product of their husbands' toil. Far worse, Gaia in *Theogony* is depicted like a womb (*νυδύς*) causing castration. Gaia, the wife of Ouranos, wishes to avoid her husband's sexual approaches. She therefore hides her son, Cronos, armed with a sickle in ambush in her womb, and while the celestial father, Ouranos, tries to penetrate Gaias' womb, he is castrated^{xii}. Pandora, the puppet woman, is, according to Hesiod, the trap (*μηχανή*) set by Hermes, acting according to Zeus' orders. She opens the famous box, therefore becoming the initiator of evils for men. Olympia, the heroin of Hofmann, in literature and Opera, *Lulu* by Vedekind and probably

Nabokovs' *Lolita*, are Pandora's literary descendants. Hesiod constitutes the paradigm par excellence of the radical opposition of the two sexes, persistent in many other cases in Greek culture and also in tragic and comic plays from Euripides' *Medea* to Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusa*e (Women at the Thesmophoria ritual).

Dialogue and opposition of sexes in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo

The Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*, related to the symbolism of Delphic topography, can offer important information regarding the male/female dialogue and the question of political and social equilibrium in ancient Greece. Speaking of topography, one has to keep in mind the symbolic values incorporated into the two sanctuaries; the one dedicated to Athena *Pronaia*, situated in the lower part of Delphi and the one alternatively dedicated to Apollo during the summer and Dionysus during the winter. The fact that the whole sacred area of Delphi is divided between two major deities of Greece, the one female and the other male, is already significant and can serve as a key to the interpretation of other Delphic symbols. The slaying of the Dragon by Apollo – Greek version of a universal topic – can serve as an entry point of our investigation. According to the *Homeric Hymn*, Python the Dragon, obeying great goddess Hera, attacks Apollo, but is killed by the dragon-slayer god. Apollo therefore becomes the lord of Delphi, but Python's name survives in more than one way. The God makes a pact with goddess Pytho, elder female occupant of the sanctuary, whose name reminds us that of Python, and his prophetess is called Pythia, the name referring both to Python and Pytho. Delphi becomes the prototype – religious but also political – of negotiated equilibrium of opposites. Every winter Apollo, the god of light, offers his sanctuary to the god of darkness, Dionysus^{xiii}. The Hyperborean maidens, according to the testimony on archaic pottery, bring Apollo back every spring. The sanctuary of Delphi represents a synthesis of opposite sexes and a point of rapprochement – at least temporary – between opposite policies. The principle of the synthesis of opposites might be linked to the political institution of the *Ekekcheiria* (truce) during the celebration of the Pythia festival. Female presence plays an important role in such an equilibrium: Athena *ζωστηρία* (the adjective deriving from the woman who loses her virginity belt to become a wife), is, despite her virginity, the protector of child-bearing in Delphi and the goddess to whom the south part of the sacred sanctuary is dedicated. The opposition and the dialogue of sexes in Delphi passes from the Homeric hymns and ritual to the Greek Drama. As we shall see further on, the *Oresteia*, the Theban plays of the three tragedians and especially Euripides' *Ion*, as well as a series of comedies by Aristophanes, reproduce and develop the same topic.

Homer considered the first tragedian

According to leading poets and thinkers of Greece, including Aeschylus, Plato and Aristotle, Homer is considered to be the first tragedian, the patron and precursor of Tragedy. The tragic form was invented centuries after his death by Thespis, yet the great tragedians constantly based many of their works – to reference Aeschylus' expression – on "rugs from Homer", namely plots, persons, situations and dialogues.

For some modern scholars, the poems of Homer are somehow situated between myth and history. However, not only we must realize that myth and history do not constitute two totally alien domains, but also to understand that, despite the arguments of the scholars who raised the Homeric Question^{xiv}, the existence of Homer does not constitute an unreal "myth". The question whether he was a historic person and whether he composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is still debated, yet it was not questioned by ancient Greeks of the both archaic and the classical period and there is archeological evidence to support the fact. This common ancient Greek agreement that Homer existed and was the creator of the two epics, was related to the appreciation of the structural unity of the plots, as well as the style of the works and was reinforced in modern times by the awareness that the centuries separating the time of composition of the epics from the classical times constituted no problem for their thorough transmission from one generation to the next^{xv}.

Based on the assumption that *mythos* and *logos* – either philosophical, scientific or political – differ, but far from being radically opposed, communicate and interpenetrate each other, we are going to visit Homer in search for female figures or –to use the tragic term – *prosopa*, who reappear in Attic Drama. Such tragic dimension of Homeric heroines might help us to interpret female characters in several tragic plays as well as the ambiguous light in which they appear.

Andromache and Hector: the Ideal Consorts

Strangely enough, Hector seems to be the ideal Hoplite^{xvi}. In the Z of Iliad he and his wife appear as the ideal couple. Andromache adores him but scolds him severely for his uncontrolled courage and the couple is reconciled only when the baby Astyanax bursts to tears. Euripides in his plays *Trojan Women* and *Andromache*, will reconfirm this image of this woman, who remains decent and honest even after she becomes the slave of Achilles' son, Neoptolemus. We must pay attention to the fact that her character is quite different from the cliché of the good wife as depicted by Athenian politicians and essayists of the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. and she probably is, among Euripides' female characters, the one that bears few elements of ambiguity.

Helen or the Illusory Ghost of Desire

Helen on the contrary is constantly changing and shifting in every aspect. Ambiguity is her permanent characteristic. She is of course seen by many – but not all – Greek writers as the infidel wife who abandoned her husband and daughter, causing so many evils to both Trojans and Greeks. Yet Homer in the *Iliad* tells us that Trojan men admire her, Hector treats her kindly, and at least some Trojan women, like Hecuba and Andromache, do not curse her. In the *teichoskopia* of rhapsody Γ (C) of *Iliad*, she describes, upon Priam's request, with poetic fervor, the best of the Achaeans. She and Achilles seem to be the two characters endowed with poetic talent emulating Homer. In the fourth rhapsody of *Odyssey*, she boasts shamelessly about her talent in imitating other women's voices, in order to cheat the Achaeans hidden in the Belly of Dureios Hippos, the wooden Horse that caused the fall of Troy. Yet she runs no risk, because besides being *phonomimos* (imitator of voices), she is also endowed with magic powers. The drink she administers Menelaus and his court^{xvii}, is able to make people totally indifferent to pain and mourning. If a female *prosopon* or character is a chameleon par excellence, this is Helen and this is further confirmed in her two appearances in Euripides' *Trojan women* and *Helen*. She is the shameless whore and sophist in the first play and the faithful, affectionate, courageous wife, innocent victim of calumniators in the second. She constantly appears under the sign of the double – in the two senses of duality and of a ghostly existence. Whore or/and faithful, dwelling in Troy or in Egypt in the two Euripidean plays, she haunts as a ghost or specter *Kolossos*, in the palace of Mycenae in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Her –involuntary or voluntary – abduction by Paris opens another topic, connecting ancient Greek poetry and drama with ritual. The abduction theme is connected with the theme of the *double*, dominant in rituals like the Eleusinian mysteries. Like Persephone, to whom a highly significant choral ode is dedicated in Euripides' *Helen*, the daughter of Leda is repeatedly abducted, by Theseus when she was a very young girl and afterwards by Paris as a married woman.

From Circe to Penelope. On some more Homeric female persons.

Circe holds a position quite close to Helen, yet she is similar and different. Helen constantly moves, Circe waits for her visitors dwelling on her island. Helen changes herself. Circe changes males into beasts. Helen administers drugs and Circe does the same, but the effect of each potion is different. Finally, like Helen, Circe changes from a destroyer of males into the benefactor of Ulysses, the male hero par excellence of *Odyssey*. On the island of Scherie, the point of contact between the non-human world of Circe, Calypso, the Cyclops etc. and the human world of Ithaca, the virgin Nausicaa becomes Ulysses' savior. Nausicaa and queen Arete, Nausicaa's mother, enjoy a status of freedom and respect, rather unknown to Athenian women of the fifth century B.C.

This is also the case with Penelope in Ithaca. She and her traveling husband constitute a typical couple of opposites, her immobility constituting the counterpart and the complement of Ulysses' mobility. Yet in more than one way she is a female Ulysses. Like her cunning husband who constantly cheats his enemies, she constantly cheats the suitors. She certainly is the paradigm of the faithful wife, yet one of the suitors, the young Antinomos, is her favorite, and in other non-Homeric traditions she is presented as a whore (*μάχλος*). Penelope's dream at the T (T) rhapsody of the *Odyssey*, where she narrates her dream to the man she still has not recognized as Ulysses, is revelatory. She tells him she has dreamt of some fifty male geese that she did like very much. An eagle has come down from heavens and killed them all and she kept weeping for their loss. Ulysses interprets the dream as a preannouncement of his return and the extermination of the suitors but he is cautious enough to unveil his identity. One might suspect that one of the reasons of Ulysses' reserve is that his wife has been too long the closest friend to Melanthe (the black flower), who, at the time Ulysses returns to Ithaca, has become the lover and ally of the most arrogant of the suitors, Antinoos. While Melanthe and her accomplice female slaves finish hanged by a rope like birds, husband and wife enjoy an

epic night of perfect intercourse. Yet, already in antiquity, the non-Homeric mythic version of the new departure of Ulysses, his killing by Telegonos, Circe's son, and the marriage of Telegonos with the widow of his father, sheds some shadow on the fate of what seems the most perfect couple in the *Odyssey*. The way for the version of events in Dante's *Inferno*, with Ulysses damned in Hell, is therefore already open.

On Historical or Semi-historical Figures of Women. Gorgos' Rule and Sapho's Teaching.

Non-Spartan authors, including Plato, affirm that Spartan women enjoyed a particularly privileged status concerning education, family position, property etc. In this sense, they are seen as the antipode of the status of women in 5th and 4th B.C. Athens and it is reasonable to agree with those believing that Spartan women were a source of inspiration for the ideas expressed in Plato's *Republic* concerning the upgraded status of women of the Republic. The well-known citation that they "ruled men", should not, however, convince us that they were also able to take political decisions. The episodes concerning Gorgo as a child, mentioned by Herodotus^{xviii} and by Plutarch^{xix} narrating her sayings and conduct as a child, the daughter of King Kleomenes and as the adult wife of the hero of Thermopylae Leonidas, offer a good example of such effective yet implicit rule: in both cases Gorgo speaks as an equal first to her father and then to her husband. In both cases, they remain the ones that take the final political decisions, while she, in a way, imposes what needs to be done. More importantly, this does not happen merely because she is a royal princess and consort and not only because the laws of Sparta recognized to women a higher position to the ones of Athens. Gorgo is the product of a very concrete *paideia*/education. We are informed that she has been trained in athletics, music and philosophy and this makes her able to express a thorough opinion on these matters. Her high and multilateral education is part of the Lacedaemonian constitution, which had an important influence upon the Athenian intellectuals, and *mutatis mutandis* served as a source of inspiration for the ideas expressed on the subject of education by Plato in his *Republic*.

The "rule" of Sapho, the most famous of a series of excellent women poets of the archaic period in Greece, was of another kind^{xx}. Long after her death, she was acknowledged by Plato as "divine" and the poetic circle constituted by her and her followers in Lesbos is something we do not find in the following classical period. Her work constitutes in a rupture and a continuity. She is inspired by precedent epic poets, as her vocabulary and style owe much to Homer, however her poetry is in more senses a sensational example of what we today call women's discourse. Moreover, she is the one that has taught to the Greeks – and through them to those inspired by Greece - the ways to express themselves creatively in the field of *eros*. I cite the first strophe of one of her poems, dear to antiwar activists and feminists, because it constitutes in a splendid archaic version of the contemporary slogan "Make love not war":

Some say horsemen, some say warriors

Some say a fleet of dark ships is the loveliest

Vision in this gloomy world but I say it's

What you love.

In this poem Sapho enumerates the military bodies and weapons only to conclude that the handsome little foot of her friend Anactoria is ten times more valuable than spears, shields, chariots or ships. In yet another poem, the somatic and psychic passions are described with the precision of a lover and a physiologist. She confesses that, when facing her beloved, her body freezes from love. Passion makes her unable to pronounce a single word and she feels like she is almost dying. The body and the love for the body are not absent in Homer: Yet, with Sapho, they acquire a new status, somehow occupying the front stage of poetic creation. It is worth remembering her case was not unique. Still during the end of the archaic and the beginning of the classical era we meet other poetesses. Corinna seems to have been Pindar's teacher, critic and rival and some of the surviving fragments of her work prove that she shared with Sapho a concern for what I have previously called women's discourse.

The lack of such figures in the following period constitutes a further indication of the consolidation of the city-state as men's private club. *Polis* viewed as a men's private political and social club that has caused the regression of the status of women is a common topic for eminent scholars, like Nicole Loraux and Froma

Zeitlin^{xxi} and others, who have dedicated much of their research to feminist or female readings of Greek culture. In her book *L'Invention d'Athènes*^{xxii}, centered on the interpretation of a series of funeral orations, to start with the *Epitaphios*^{xxiii}, Loraux underlines the injunction addressed by the Athenian statesman to the widows of the warriors fallen in battle. In this famous text, where the city-state of Athens is presented almost as the ideal city, Pericles tells mourning women they must keep silence concerning their lives, thoughts and deeds. To remain completely unnoticed would be for them the best praise. They should be buried in that silence as the bones and ashes of their beloved will be buried in the Athenian ground.

This indeed is a terrible declaration, which must however be accepted with some reservations. The text of the *Epitaphios* has been transmitted to us by Thucydides. We know, based on the very statements concerning his working method, that, in this and in other cases, the ancient historian was the critical editor of the final written form of oral speeches. We therefore know what Pericles, husband of Aspasia and leader of the innovators, said on that occasion, thanks to Thucydides, who was a conservative. Should we believe that the historian – and unlucky *strategos*/general during the Peloponnesian war – is somehow ironic against the politician, whose wife was the target of a constant and poisonous gossip?

This, however, is not certain, because, although their political ideas did not coincide, the historian held in great esteem the leader of democratic Athens. It is, therefore, also possible that Thucydides puts in the mouth of Pericles what he thinks the politician *should have said*, which might be close to his own ideas regarding the right conduct of women. A conduct we will find analyzed *in extenso* in the *Oeconomicus* of Xenophon, Socrates' conservative pupil who, in his *Hellenika*, has completed the missing part of Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian war. To conclude, although the distance between the formal rhetoric of the orations and everyday life was, as it still nowadays continues to be in our contemporary societies, considerable, one must accept that the condition of Athenian women of the 5th and the 4th centuries B.C. was inferior to that of women in the precedent eras.

Were the Tragic Heroines the Antipode of Women in Everyday Life?

One is forced to admit that, during the 5th century BC, while the Athenian women were, if not buried in complete silence, at least hidden in the modest twilight of their domestic occupations, an impressive series of tragic heroines, like Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Antigone, Electra, Helen, Iphigenia, Medea, Lysistrata, dominate the center of the attic theatrical stage^{xxiv}. The fact that readers and spectators feel, from ancient times until now, that such heroines are so real, or, as some have stated, somehow autonomous beings, independent of the texts, is probably the reason why we sometimes forget they were the creations of male playwrights. It has been maintained that female *prosopa* of the ancient Greek drama reflect the conceptions of men about women. Such statement might be true up to a certain extent and is corroborated by the fact that sexes are presented to be at war in several plays.

This is the case in the *Oresteia* trilogy and the *Suppliant Women* by Aeschylus, where we see the clash between human and divine beings of both sexes. It is also the case in Euripides' *Medea*, where the female chorus composed by Corinthian Greek women, not only does not denounce Medea's criminal plans of revenge, but also expresses general statements on the dire condition of women. In Sophocles' *Antigone* Creon understands his clash with the daughter of Oedipus as an *agon* or war between men and women. This, however, is refuted by Antigone and, turning our gaze to examine comedy, we notice that the same is valid for the heroin of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, whose ultimate goal is peace between sexes and states. This element of reconciliation of opposites, raised to the status of a universal maxim, is splendidly epitomized in Antigone's famous words *ου τι συνέχθειν αλλά συμφιλείν έφουν*^{xxv}, a condensation of union in the psychic, familial, political and cosmic levels. The same element of human and cosmic reconciliation dominates at the end of the trilogy starting with Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, while Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* evolves from the clash between men and women to a general reconciliation concerning both the genders and the city-states. One must, however, recognize that, although not unilaterally dominant, the element of confrontation between genders is present and that the possibility of the victory of women against men is not absent. Despite her death, Antigone opposes victoriously Creon's despotism. Medea, supported by Corinthian women, accomplishes her criminal plans against Jason, Creon and Creusa. Lysistrata and the other women impose their will for peace upon the Greeks. Male *prosopa* like Creon in *Antigone* or Euripides in the *Women in the Thesmophoria* denounce women as a terrible threat for the male order, and men are

summoned to unite and fight against them like hoplites in a real battle. Certainly, dramatic texts are constantly ambiguous, multileveled and ironic, so we must be very careful not to always take them *a la letter* (literally). Nevertheless, a certain feeling that the ghost of a female power threatening male predominance, seems to haunt the stage of ancient Greek Drama^{xxvi}.

One may be tempted to argue that this dominant presence of female *prosopa* in ancient drama constitutes, speaking in Freudian terms, a psychic/artistic and social return of the repressed power of the archetypal Mother over the male child, or the resurgence of a prehistoric era of female predominance, cherished by those believing in the existence of a period of Matriarchy in the history of humanity, whose traces can be detected in ancient myths. Instead of expressing an explicit opinion on the matter, I will conclude with a reference to Varo, the Latin scholar who reproduced an older mythic tradition, which has become popular among feminist thinkers of our times: According to this tradition, Athenian women have voted on the occasion of the contest between Athena and Poseidon and, having outnumbered men by one vote, ensured the victory of Athena, who thus became the god protector of Athens. Poseidon, God of the sea, the tempests and the earthquakes, started devastating Athens and women, considered responsible for his wrath, were condemned not to vote again, not to give their name to their children and never to be called Athenians. This, however, is a later Latin text and, on the other hand, several other elements point towards a different direction. There were other exceptions to the common fate of women in classical Athens: Elpinike, a noblewoman of rare education and beauty and Aspasia, the beautiful and intelligent hetaera, are among the more conspicuous and influential. Elpinike, Cimon's sister, in Plutarch's *Life of Pericles*, is not only a renowned beauty, but also a very capable political lobbyist who, when young, had rejected Pericles' flirt. Aspasia, Pericles' wife, converses with top philosophers, artists, politicians. Yet we should not completely trust Plato when he presents her in his dialogue *Menexenus* as the *Teacher of Socrates in the field of rhetoric* in his mock Epitaphios. On the other hand, we cannot be sure that either Socrates, or his pupil, Plato, the philosopher who criticized democracy, seem to assert here that, in such a decadent regime, political speeches are composed by whores. As a general statement, we can rather tend to believe that the condition of common housewives was very distant from that of Elpinike and the one of common hetairai – not to speak of female slaves – and had little to do with that of Aspasia. It is plausible to assert that the predominant role of female *prosopa* in 5th and 4th centuries B.C. theatre cannot be interpreted as the reflection of the everyday lives of Athenian women. It is true that Plato – who was the critic but also the admirer of Homer and the tragedians – in his *Republic*, as well as other thinkers and artists, have presented women in a different light from the dominant during the 5th and the 4th centuries B.C. in several Greek city-states. However, one may argue that the tragic and the comic poets of Athens, who were aware of facts concerning women and their education in other centers of Hellenism, like Sparta, had foreseen and preannounced changes regarding the social, educational and political condition of women (as well as the one of the slaves) that gradually emerged during the following era of the Diadoches of Alexander in the Greek Metropolis as well in the entire Hellenic World. May I add, that theatre artists and thinkers who very often were in trouble with the laws, the interests and the spirit of their times, were, like Shakespeare and Molière, the prophets of changes that happened after them – and perhaps others that we still await to come.

The translation often in use for the Greek word *prosopa* in studies about Greek theatre is *characters*. However, the dramatic *prosopon*, the term used to denote the roles in the introductory notes of Hellenistic codices that have conserved tragedies, has, according to me, a broader sense: We study the *characters* of Antigone or Creon based only on what those two say and do. On the other hand, the full meaning of the *prosopa* of Antigone or Creon emerges when we manage to link their words and deeds with what all the other *prosopa* of the play say or do, including the collective *prosopon* of the Greek Chorus.

Bonnie MacLachlan, *Women in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook*, Bloomsbury Academic/Bloomsbury Sources in Ancient History, 2012. MacLachlan's book work constitutes in an essential synthesis of works on

the topic of women in Greece, citing ancient literary, philosophical, political and other topics, as well and a rich contemporary bibliography. It is worth noting that it refers not only to the Greek Metropolis but also to the Greek colonies of West and East Mediterranean. As the reader will see below, such broader view of Hellenism and Greek women inspires also the present text.

1. François Chamoux, *La Civilisation hellénistique*, Paris, Arthaud, coll. « Les Grandes Civilisations » (n° 17), 1981, 1st edition.
2. Pierre Vidal Naquet, *Le chasseur Noir*, La Decouverte Poche/Sciences Humaines et Sociales, 2014.
3. Mitliadis Hadjopoulos, *Ancient Macedonia*, Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2020.
4. According to the *Biography of Crassus* by Plutarch – 45-47 to 120 A.D. – Euripides' *Bacchantes* were performed at the Armenian court in 53 BC. during the celebrations for the victory of the Parthians against Crassus. This is the last historical information we have concerning the staging of an ancient Greek tragedy. In the same text, we are informed that the king of Armenia was the author of Greek tragedies).
5. On the astounding Hellenistic findings of Dr. Sarianidi in Bactria and Turkmenia see Nadezdha A. Dubova “Victor Ivanovic Sarianidi”, *Journal of Indo- European Studies*, Vol42, No. 3&4, Fall November 2014, with a rich bibliography. Sarianidi has brought to light the connection of the Greek culture with the Kushans, who later on governed the North of India.
6. Claude Mosse, *La Femme dans la Grèce antique*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1983; Nicole Loraux, *Les Enfants d'Athéna. Idées athéniennes sur la citoyenneté et la division des sexes*, Paris, Maspero, 1981, rééd. augmentée d' une postface, Seuil, coll. « Points/Essais », 1990 ; *L'Invention d'Athènes. Histoire de l'oraison funèbre dans la « cité classique »*, Paris/La Haye, éd. de l'EHESS/Mouton, 1981, nouvelle éd. remaniée, nouvelle préface, Payot, coll. « Critique de la politique », 1993 ; *Façons tragiques de tuer une femme*, Paris, Hachette, coll. « Textes du XX^e siècle », 1985; *Les Expériences de Tirésias. Le féminin et l'homme grec*, Gallimard, Paris, coll. « NRF Essais », 1990; *Les Mères en deuil*, Paris, Seuil, coll. « La Librairie du XXI^e siècle », 1990.
7. Martin P. Nilson, *Greek Popular Religion*, BiblioLife, 2009.
8. Mary Ellen Waithe, "Diotima of Mantinea", in Mary Ellen Waithe (ed.), *A History of Women Philosophers: Vol. I: Ancient Women Philosophers, 600 BC–500 AD*. Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, pp. 83–116, 2018.
9. Paul Cartledge, *The Greeks. A Portrait of Self and Others*, Oxford University Press, 2002.
10. For the psychoanalytical reading of the Ouranos/Cronos myth, see, among others, Karl Abraham “Dreams and Myths: A study in folk-Psychology”, 1909, in Hilda, C., Abraham, M.D.(Ed.), *Clinical Papers and Essays on Psycho-Analysis*, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London, 1955.
11. The other face of Hades according to Heraclitus fragment 15.
12. Such scholars appeared already in late antiquity, but from 1795, when Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824) published his *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, the question about the existence of Homer, the authenticity and the veracity of his works etc. became central until today. See also: “Homer”, The Biography.com Website, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.biography.com/people/homer-9342775#synopsis>; “Homer”, The British Museum, accessed May 7, 2015, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/articles/h/homer.aspx>; “Homer.” Encyclopedia Britannica. accessed May 7th 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/270219/Homer>.
13. Modern theatre and film directors have often created shows based on his works. There are many movies based on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, some of them of high artistic quality and/or very popular. With few exceptions, theatrical adaptations have not been equally successful.

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14. The famous verse pronounced by Hector in the *Iliad* 12, 243 *εις οἰωνός ἀριστος ἀμύνεσθαι περί πάτρης* : “defending ones’ own country is the best of omens”, condenses the ancient military ideals of Greeks and has become a moto for contemporary Greek armed forces.
 15. On *νηπενθές*, a drug liberating from mourning, *πένθος*; see *Odyssey* fourth rhapsody 219 sq.
 16. Herodotus, *Histories* 5, 51.
 17. Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 14, 4. See Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Spartan Women*, Oxford, 2002.
 18. Bartolo Napoli, Angela Pits, Judith Hallet, *Ancient Women Writers of Greece and Rome*, Routledge, 2022.
 19. “The dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Myth-making on the *Oresteia*” in Peradotto J. and Sullivan J.P., *Women in Ancient World*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984.
 20. See above note 8.
 21. Transmitted by Thucydides who informs us it was pronounced by Pericles at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian war.
 22. To explain this apparent paradox, Bernard Knox in his *The Oldest Dead White European Males and Other Reflections on the Classics*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1993 has stated that on the tragic stage women interpret parts that real life completely denied them.
 23. *Antigone* 525 “I was born in order to unite in love and not to divide in hatred”.
 24. Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine*, University of Michigan Press, 2003.