RECONSIDERING THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN ARCHAIC GREECE

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Scholarship on the subject of women in ancient Greece has long been guided by an old paradigm of social evolution developed in the nineteenth century. This interpretation held that women in the classical period (ca. 500-323 B.C.E.), especially at Athens, lived in a despicable state—they were cloistered in their homes, with few political rights, their only duty to produce more citizens for the state. But, according to this model, in earlier periods it had not been so bad. In Greece’s “Dark Age” (ca. 1100-700 B.C.E.), women are said to have experienced a far better lifestyle. Consequently, much scholarship on women in the intermediary period (ca. 700-500 B.C.E.), known as the “Archaic” period, has focused in large part on identifying the point at which the change took place. This purpose of this thesis is to examine the status of women in the earliest extant Greek literature, the poems of Homer, in order to determine whether it bears out this view. The conclusion reached is that the status of women in the Homeric poems is far more complicated than the old paradigm would hold; that women exist totally under the power of men. Further, when considered in light of recent scholarship, which has called into question the old notions about women in the classical period, the status of women in ancient Greece reveals itself to be a far more complicated question than has been assumed. Consequently, the literary, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence for women in this intermediate period must be examined in its own right, without reference to outdated paradigms of social development.
VXORI QVAM PLVS EGO OCVLIS MEIS AMO
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Problem

In his 1999 article, "Archaeology and Gender Ideologies in Early Archaic Greece", Ian Morris argues, by means of identifying changes in architecture during this period, that he can pinpoint in the physical evidence the moment at which the serious shift in the status of women took place, from the "less rigid" gender relations of Homer to those of the later archaic and classical sources. For Morris, elaborations in the complexities of Greek houses during the 8th century represent a "hardening of gender ideologies," because the new rooms served to isolate men and women from each other, and in the material evidence we can see the beginnings of the famed gunaikeion/gunaikitis of classical Athens. Morris' argument rests on two problematic premises. The first concerns his use of the physical evidence. One cannot necessarily assume that new rooms were added for the purpose of excluding women. Nor can one necessarily assume that "gender relations" were particularly less rigid in earlier times, simply because there was a lack of walls to separate men from women. The second assumption taken up by Morris is more questionable still, although it is widely shared by others. Morris assumes a general linear progression in ancient Greece from a freer and
more public woman, which he reads in the poems of Homer, to the thoroughly cloistered and socially inferior woman of classical Athens. This paradigm has its roots in the “scientific” evolutionary histories of the second half of the 19th century.

While much scholarly work in the last 50 years has gone into disproving this general picture of the changing status of women in ancient Greece, it has persisted in the scholarly subconscious. Morris takes up the communis opinio of the despised and cloistered women of classical Athens and compares that with the seemingly comparatively “liberated” women of the Homeric poems and sees two ends of a spectrum of historical development. If women once lived as freely as they seem to have in Homeric society, and 200 years later lived cut-off from society as they appear to have been in classical Athens, then there must have been a time when this shift in status took place. Morris makes it his task to pinpoint in the archaeological record the time when this shift took place. However, recent scholarship has very plausibly called into question long-held assumptions about the status of women in classical Athens.

The main purpose of this thesis is to ask the question that arises from recent scholarly discussion of the status of women in classical Athens: if women were not so severely secluded from the life of the city in the classical period, as has long been assumed, is there any reason to stretch the limited archaeological and literary evidence to pinpoint the “shift”, which probably never took place? I suggest that this is not necessary. I will offer a new reading of the evidence. This new reading involves two
main points. First, the women represented in the earliest Greek literature, particularly in Homer, do not appear to be as free as has been commonly asserted. Rather, they appear to be as much as in later periods subjected to the authority of their husbands and fathers. Then I will argue that there is no need to assume a dramatic shift during the archaic period, with the result that women’s position in the “power relations” remains essentially static at least until the beginning of the classical period.

1.2 Organization

Because of the dearth of source material, scholarship on any topic in the pre-classical history of Greece is prone to intense debate. The scholar lacks the necessary source material to form a generalized narrative of events, and what little writing survives is of debatable value for historical reconstruction. But one must start somewhere, assessing the relative value of each piece of evidence, and forcibly extracting differing conclusions from the same sources. Consequently, scholars can reach dramatically different results while basing their arguments on exactly the same evidence. Nowhere is this trend more prevalent than in the study of social structures in Dark Age (c. 1100-700 BCE) and Archaic Greece (c. 700-480 BCE), when the small communities of the former grew to form the poleis of the latter.
There is an enormous recent bibliography of scholarly work on the status of women in the classical period. However, debate has been limited until very recently. The powerful image of the cloistered and submissive wives and daughters of the classical period contrasts with the seemingly free heroines of early archaic literature. The commonly held view of the repressed Athenian woman seems hopelessly incompatible with Homer's descriptions of Penelope's cunning deception of her suitors or the free movement of aristocratic women through the streets of Troy. Scholars have attempted to explain the differences in depictions of women as a dramatic change in social status between the Dark Age and the beginning of the classical period. If one accepts that such a development took place, it is reasonable to seek the causes of the change in the development of the polis and the necessary social ramifications of such reorganization. Nineteenth-century ideas about the natural evolution of societies from primitive clan-based organizations to civilized forms, such as the polis, have continued implicitly to influence scholarship on the topic. This paradigm insists that women in the earlier stages of development held a special status in the community, because of the heightened status of the family, to which they are vital. However, according to this view, with the rise of the polis and the communal identity at the expense of the family, women lose their special status and indeed are banished to extreme insignificance. While scholars will no longer openly accept such deterministic views of historical development, it is clear that this paradigm has held sway.
This thesis will attempt to disentangle the evidence from the paradigm. In Chapter 2, I will consider the history of scholarship on women in ancient Greece. The conclusion reached in this chapter, based largely on developments in recent scholarship, is that there is significant cause for doubt about the generally accepted paradigm of women in classical Athens.

In Chapter 3, I will suggest a new reading of the evidence. I will argue that deterministic theories have blurred our vision in respect to "Homericae society" (as far as such a notion can be asserted), so that we are forced to interpret the literary evidence in light of severely limiting assumptions about the status of women. Particularly, I will attempt to show that the picture of the status of women in the poems of Homer is dramatically different from what is presented in the old paradigm. Women, rather than being free and equal (or at least more equal than their classical counterparts) to men, are entirely subjected to the power of their husbands and fathers. I will argue that archaic women appear to serve as the tools of the political and social aspirations of their men folk. In short, they serve as living, breathing agalmata in aristocratic competition. I hope it will become clear that the very public life of the aristocratic woman in this period, far from being a measure of her status as an individual in the community, is simply another expression of her husband’s or father’s wealth. A well-adorned wife is paraded in the street by her aristocratic husband like any other impressive piece of property, just as she
was given to him by her father as an expression of his own self-fashioning in the highly competitive political culture of the developing Greek polis.
CHAPTER 2

HISTORIOGRAPHY

2.1 The 19th Century Paradigm

It is a common claim to make when beginning a work of scholarship on the topic of women in antiquity that historians in the past have simply ignored the question. The long dead scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries are ideal fodder for this kind of attack, and the assertion is rarely examined. But the second half of the 19th century saw the beginnings of social history and the history of the family, one of whose primary interests is the role of women in the family and in society and their relationships with men. The ideas developed in these early stages of scholarship on the family have deeply influenced later thinking on the subject, and the paradigms developed, although now often rejected explicitly, still implicitly guide the thinking of scholars.

Fustel de Coulanges was one of the first to pursue the history of the family in antiquity. His idea, laid out in *The Ancient City*, is that the structure of the classical family, and consequently of the classical city, derives from a primordial patriarchy. In his view, the patriarchy originated through religious institutions. According to Fustel, "it was perhaps while looking upon the dead that man first conceived the idea of the supernatural... [Death] raised his thoughts from the visible to the invisible, from the
transitory to the eternal, from the human to the divine.”

It was with the association of the hearth fire with the worship of the dead that the patriarchal form of the family began to take shape. Marriage was “the first institution that the domestic religion established.”

It took a woman away from the domestic religion of her father and his ancestors, to that of her new husband. The family cult was passed on from male to male, and the head of the household served as its priest, but the women played a key role. The original purpose of marriage was not pleasure, but rather the continuation of the family’s cult through the production of male heirs. If the cult of the ancestors were to continue, “every family must perpetuate itself forever.”

Thus, according to Fustel, the subjugation of the woman had as its beginning the very foundations of the family, which itself originated with the establishment of the cult of the ancestors. Fustel was primarily interested in the origins of the family for its relationship to the development of the city. He was attempting to explain the origins of the institutions of the classical Greek and Roman world. While he never posits a primordial situation in which women enjoyed a preeminent position, as many of his contemporaries would, the subjugation of women is intimately tied to the development of the institutions of the community.

A contemporary of Fustel and also a believer in the new “scientific” model of evolutionary and comparative history was Henry Maine, whose *Ancient Law: Its*

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1 *The Ancient City* p. 25
2 Ibid. p. 47
3 Ibid. 49-50.
Connection with the Early History of Society, and Its Relation to Modern Ideas was published in 1861. Maine, too, drew the distinction between the family and the state, which he saw as polar opposites. Maine took his evidence from ancient legal texts, believing that these were the only trustworthy sources for ancient history. "The effect of the evidence derived from comparative jurisprudence is to establish that view of the primeval condition of the human race which is known as the Patriarchal Theory," argues Maine. The basic social group of society, the building block of the community, was the family. This "elementary social group" was deathless and was and always had been, presided over by a man.

According to Maine, society was "an aggregation of families" rather than a "collection of individuals." For Maine, the origins of the subjection of women can be found in this early patriarchy. The primitive family was dominated by men, and women held the sole responsibility of reproducing. Descent was traced through the father's side, and kinship could only be claimed through the father. The community, being simply a corporation of families, therefore, excluded women from participation.

A contemporary of Fustel and Maine and one of the first to attempt a comprehensive study on the family in antiquity was Bachofen, with his Myth, Religion, and Mother Right, published in 1861, the same year as Main's Ancient Law. Bachofen explicitly and emphatically utilized myth in his approach to the subject. Bachofen argued

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4 Ancient Law 72-76.
from the assumption that ancient mythological and historical sources presented a continuous and valid history of the family. Bachofen believed that myth provided a blueprint for lost social orders. The historian was responsible for identifying the “origin, progression, and end” of the organization of the family. According to Bachofen, the very abnormality of myth, with its stories of the reversal of sexual orders (like the Amazon women living without men, or wives killing their husbands), proved the historical validity of the stories. The limited “patriarchal” mind of the ancient Greeks could not have perceived of such things if they had not at one point been so.

According to Bachofen, humans had passed through three major stages of sexual organization. There was the first stage, which he called “hetaerism”, in which sexuality was indiscriminate. Then women, dissatisfied with the moral distastefulness of it all, established a period of matriarchal monogamy. Finally, this order is superseded by the absolutely civilizing force of patriarchy. Bachofen believed in the unity of the human experience, that all of humanity had passed through these phases, or still had yet to pass through them. While Bachofen believed that the patriarchal epoch represented a higher stage of civilization, still he asserted that the morality of sexual monogamy and maternal love were essential and good.

The final victory of man and manliness over the woman and the feminine “brings with it the liberation of the spirit from the manifestation of nature, a sublimation of
human existence over the law of material life.”\textsuperscript{5} Clearly the final stage is superior in Bachofen’s model, and the city that achieved this stage most clearly in the classical period was Athens, which “carried paternity to its highest development; and in one-sided exaggeration…condemned woman to a status of inferiority.”\textsuperscript{6} Bachofen’s account does not explore the classical ramifications of the change in great detail, but his ideas will greatly influence later thinkers. For Bachofen, women had once held a preeminent place in the social order, but with the establishment of patriarchy, the classical woman had become completely subjected to men.

The culmination of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century model of evolutionary history is probably the great book \textit{Ancient Society, or Researches in the Lines of Human progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization}, by the American Lewis Henry Morgan. This book, published in 1877, followed the evolutionary model of earlier scholars, but would challenge them in many important ways, and his ideas would have a significant impact on later studies of Greek family history.

Morgan was influenced most in his approach to the history of ancient society by his involvement with the Iroquois nation of his home state of New York. As the title of the books suggests, Morgan adopts a universal, unilinear evolutionary model of the history of society. Indeed, he takes this model to the extreme, arguing that all human societies must pass through certain stages in order to advance to the enlightenment of

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Mother Right} p. 109
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid. p. 111
civilization. To Morgan, the Greeks represented the birth of civilization, while his contemporary model, the Iroquois, were still in the phase which he called "barbarism". Morgan rejected Maine's notion of a primeval patriarchy, and his arguments for a primitive matriarchy were embraced widely by evolutionary historians.\(^7\)

Where Morgan agreed with Maine was in his assertion that society had advanced from an earlier stage, in which the family held preeminence (Morgan called this phase the "gentile"), to a more civilized phase characterized by the dominance of the community. This is the advancement from barbarism to civilization, and, according to Morgan, the Greeks were the first to take this step. Morgan applied Greek and Roman terminology for social organization to the circumstances of the contemporary Iroquois, and came up with his theory. The Greeks and Romans had once passed through the historical phase in which the contemporary Iroquois were living in his time. In this period, the family held sway, as it did in the Iroquois community in the 19th century, and as with the Iroquois, women in early Greece, being of vital importance to the functioning of the family, particularly through their role in deciding kinship in a matrilineal society, held a position of prominence within the community. In the latter stages of barbarism, particularly those represented in the society of the Homeric epics, the matrilineal system was replaced by patrilinearity and the intense patriarchy of classical times. According to Morgan, the

\(^7\) For an overview of the reception of Morgan's ideas by historians who followed the evolutionary model, and particularly those who held the view of a primitive matriarchal phase of society, see Feaver From Status to Contract: A Biography of Sir Henry Maine 159-170.
family structure, as we have seen in other 19th century scholars, ceded power to the territorial state.\textsuperscript{8}

The evolutionary thinking so prominent in the 19th century led to this paradigm. While scholars disagreed on the details of societal evolution, there was basic agreement on the outline and nature of the history of human society. Early man lived in a primordial state of indiscriminate living (in Morgan's terminology, "savagery"), in which sexual roles were blurred and the community had yet to assert itself over the family. The Greeks and Romans had passed silently through this unflattering phase in prehistory, but scholars could look to the savages being discovered and studied for the first time at the outskirts of the British Empire for proof of its existence.\textsuperscript{9} The position of women in the next stage is disputed. Fustel and Maine hold that their subjugation came in this period, as men, either for religious or economic reasons, asserted themselves over them. Bachofen and Morgan, on the other hand, argued that the evidence suggested otherwise. The confused sexual relationships of Greek myth proved to Bachofen that there must have been an early phase of matriarchy and matrilinearity, while to Morgan the Iroquois, whom he studied, represented an earlier stage of human development, through which the Greeks and Romans must have passed. In both models, the next stage, the development of civilization, brought with it the subjugation of the family to the community.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Ancient Society} 263-284.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid. 8-18, for a discussion of the nature of savagery and its evidence.
For Bachofen and Morgan, the subjugation of the household meant the subjugation of women.

This brief overview is in no way a comprehensive discussion of the "evolutionary" and "scientific" movement of history in the second half of the 19th century. I have chosen to discuss these four authors in particular, because they best represent the paradigm that was developed at that time. Each in his own way deeply influenced later scholarship on family history, but the model of primitive matriarchy, and its eventual subjugation with the triumph of state over family, was the one that most completely impacted the thinking of scholars in the 20th century, particularly feminist scholars beginning in the 1960s and 1970s.

2.2 The 20th Century Readings

Scholarship on ancient Greek women at the end of the 19th and in the first half of the 20th centuries followed two paths. Many scholars simply followed the system of antiquarian textual analysis, which was prevalent in the 19th century, and to which the "scientific" model of history was a reaction and a criticism. The majority of work in the first half of the century, however, followed the evolutionary paradigm. Most scholars adhered to the general notion that the women of Homer enjoyed an exalted position, while their classical descendents would live in utter subjection. This general view of scholarship in the first half of the 20th century is articulated by A.W. Gomme, "It is a
commonplace that, whereas in the Aegean age and in Homer the position of women was a noble one, in Athens of the classical period it was ignoble.\textsuperscript{10} Gomme’s contemporaries could cite as evidence for this reading the Periclean axiom that “the best woman...is she of whom ‘least is said for either good or harm.’”\textsuperscript{11}

H.W. Haley, for instance, used the plays of Aristophanes as a particularly useful mine of information about women in classical Athens. The verdict derived from these comic creations was universally negative. He asserted confidently that “[i]n the historic period women occupied a lower position than in earlier times.”\textsuperscript{12} Haley took very literally the deprecation of women in Aristophanes as excessively fond of drink and sex, as being seen not as the peers and confidants of their husbands, but rather as household managers, respected only in their limited sphere. He felt he could accept these representations, because “[a] certain degree of verisimilitude is necessary to comic effect.”\textsuperscript{13} Haley was particularly impressed by circumstances in Aristophanes where a woman’s fear of divorce compelled her to obedience. However, he admitted exceptions to this even within the Aristophanic corpus, but exceptions to his strongly held view could be rejected as “unusual” and “exceptional”.

\textsuperscript{10} Gomme (1925) p. 1  
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{12} Haley (1890) p. 161  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p. 160
By 1925, A.W. Gomme saw this trend as unacceptable. He was not ready to reject entirely the notion of the repression of women in classical Athens, but he found reason to question the blind acceptance of the paradigm. Having described in some detail the outstanding role of women in classical drama and on vase paintings, namely the appearance that women were not so severely cloistered in their homes, but could be seen outside in the community without derision, asks his readers:

Imagine a student, especially favored of Heaven, to come to the study of Homer, say, Sappho, Alcman, Simonides, and the three tragedians, and of Attic vases and sculpture, without having read anything that scholars have written about ancient life; would he suppose that there was anything remarkable about the position of women in Athens? Could he imagine that they were kept locked up and despised? “Ah,” will be the answer, “that only shows the dangers of half knowledge; wait till he comes to Thucydides and Aristotle.” But at least there is a conflict of evidence, something that challenges thought and demands explanation? There is a puzzle?¹⁴

But Gomme’s reasonable resistance was unsuccessful, and was followed in 1931 by Alfred Zimmerm’s grim assessment that classical Athenian ladies were cloistered, cut off from society, “restless, uneasy, perplexed...[v]ery jealously they were guarded within

¹⁴ Gomme (1925) p. 6
the peaceful shelter of the home, ringed round like precious possessions from the outer world.\textsuperscript{15} And this view stood, being bolstered at every opportunity, both in general works of the history of Greece, and in articles devoted specifically to the topic.

Finally in 1951, Kitto attempted a rehabilitation of the classical woman, suggesting far more plausible readings of the regularly cited passages for the seclusion of women.\textsuperscript{16} But still the old view persisted. Kitto and Gomme were ignored, and scholars like Bonnard, Page, and Rostovtzeff persisted in their characterization that the emergence of the polis and the establishment of democracy “banished women from the street to the house.”\textsuperscript{17} It was not until 1971 when a serious resistance was tried again. D.C. Richter attempted to bolster the arguments of Gomme and Kitto for a more balanced and comprehensive reading of the evidence, comparing the relative seclusion of women in classical Athens to any other period in the history of pre-modern human society.\textsuperscript{18}

At last, with the publication in 1975 of S.B. Pomeroy’s \textit{Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves}, there was a systematic and thorough treatment of the subject of women in antiquity. Pomeroy pursued the ancient woman from the primordial mists of Greek myth through classical Athens and into the early Roman empire. However, contrary to what you might expect, given the rude reaction of much of the establishment

\textsuperscript{15} Zimmerman (1931) p. 328
\textsuperscript{16} Kitto (1951) pp. 219-236
\textsuperscript{17} Bonnard (1957) Greek Civilization pp. 126-131, Page (1955) p. 141, and the quote is from Rostovtzeff (1926) p. 176, but the idea is repeated in his 1963 book \textit{Greece}.
\textsuperscript{18} Richter (1971)
of classical studies, Pomeroy is in the end unable to challenge the dominant paradigm. Her chapters on the women of classical Athens maintain the bleak picture of the cloistered "*hausfrau*", while the women of the "Bronze Age", as represented in Homer, are presented in the normal way, as free to move about in public and to speak their minds to their husbands. Ignoring the obvious methodological concerns of reading into Homer any glimpse of Bronze Age realities, Pomeroy struggles to find examples of strong women in the Homeric epics to fit the paradigm. Her conclusions about women in classical Athens are not so much based on a strained reading of the evidence, but more on an old fashioned ignoring of the alternative readings and new evidence presented by scholars like Gomme and Kitto.

In the last twenty years, scholarship has begun in earnest to be interested in the rehabilitation of the picture of the status of women in classical Athens. Scholars are finally beginning to take up the new evidence offered up in the first half of the 20th century, and are also beginning to present new readings of their own. A few examples of the trend will illustrate my point. In his 1989 article, "Seclusion, Separation, and the

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19 A prime example of this reaction is J.P.V.D. Balsdon’s review of the book, which he concludes with the summation: “Perhaps one day, after whatever series of cataclysms, man will regain his one-time equality and somebody will write a book about Man in the Ancient World—not, it is to be hoped, with the title, *Gods, Pimps, Racist, Husbands and Slaves.*”

20 Consider, for example, her attempt to find a strong woman in queen Arete, where she is eventually forced to admit that “even Arete’s prestige is only noteworthy when compared with ‘other women who keep house subordinate to their husbands’ (p. 22).” Her inability to find in Andromache’s mother an example of a woman ruling a city is explained with the hopeful rationalization that “possibly we have here a conflict between a tradition reporting the reign of a queen, and an addition by a poet who could not conceive of a female ruling a city (p. 23).”
Status of Women in Classical Athens,” David Cohen argues quite convincingly that the representations in classical literature of a secluded status for women is largely a construct of the male mind, whereby men lay out their expectations for the behavior of women, which are quite often distant from the realities of the everyday human experience. Cohen’s argument finds its roots in recent changes in anthropological perspectives. Cultural anthropologists, gathering material from their male informants, record faithfully what they find out. But recent studies in modern Mediterranean cultures have found that what one is told by male informants about women, the things they do, they way they act, think, and feel about themselves in respect to men, is often quite different from what one finds when the women themselves are approached and asked the same questions.

David Schaps’ 1998 article, “What Was Free about a Free Athenian Woman?” attempted to return to many of the questions asked by Gomme. Schaps presented a picture of the classical woman quite different from the general view. In particular, he argued convincingly against one of the common misperceptions about the status of classical Athenian women, namely that they were little more than the first slave in their husbands’ households. His answer to the question laid out in the title of the article is a confident “everything”. Certainly it would be better to have been born a free man, and it was quite a different thing in the eyes of the community and the law to be a man, but free women exhibited all of the characteristics of free people in the ancient world, including the ownership of property (including slaves), freedom from a master (despotes), and the
freedom to speak her mind. Further, in 1999, Tyrrell and Bennett offered an alternative reading of the seemingly damning passage in Pericles’ funeral oration at Thucydides 2.45.2. The passage in question in this outstanding article is Pericles’ statement:

If I must recall something about the excellence of those women who will now be widows, I will point out everything with brief advice. Great is the glory for you not to become worse than your innate nature as is hers whose fame, whether for excellence or blame, is spread least among the males.

The authors argue that the interpretation of this statement as an exhortation to silence on the part of women is sorely mistaken. They argue that the passage ought to be read in light of women’s responsibilities in the funerary rites being undertaken at the time. The pitiful ululating of women at the funeral could serve as a volatile force at a time of war and incite dissatisfaction among the populace. Pericles recognized, however, that the women’s role in funerals was essential, so that he could not silence them altogether. Accordingly, he urged them to maintain moderation in mourning, neither to be recognized for the bad for their inadequacy as mourners, nor, because it could prove dangerous to Pericles’ policies, for the good for their zealousness in mourning.
One of the most lucid and convincing expressions of this renewed attempt to rehabilitate the classical picture, is that made by Edward Cohen.²¹ In his brilliant book *The Athenian Nation*, Cohen argues that the common belief that free women in Athens were not citizens. While certainly the Greek word for “citizen”, *polites*, is an explicitly masculine word, and it carries with it the exclusive right of attendance at the *ekklesia* and of the holding of political office, Cohen is able to answer back with the word, *politis*, which is precisely the feminine version of the word for “citizen”. The *politis* not participate in the assembly or hold political office, but she had her parallel realms, both in the domestic sphere, and in the very public practice of religious observance. A *politis* was a female citizen of Athens.

None of these arguments is wholly satisfying. Given the amount of effort put into this question by some of the best scholars in the past century and a half, a tidy solution to these questions would have to ignore the arguments and evidence presented by one side or the other. But the recent trend of questioning the old assumptions about the status of women in classical Athens leads inevitably to the questioning of the other aspects of the paradigm. To repeat Gomme’s insightful flourish: “But at least there is a conflict of evidence, something that challenges thought and demands explanation? There is a puzzle?”²² If the position of women in classical Athens was not, in fact, so despicable as has been assumed, does the evidence necessitate the view that the rise of the polis in the

²² Gomme (1925) p. 6
archaic period must have forced women out of the public eye and into the gunaikitis? Is the notion that gender ideologies before the “eighth-century revolution” were somehow less defined borne out in the earliest traces of Greek literature, the works of Homer?
CHAPTER 3

WOMEN IN HOMER

3.1 Purpose and Methodology

In Chapter 2, by laying out the history of trends in scholarship on women in ancient Greece, I hope to have accomplished two things. The first was to show that modern interpretations of the history of women in ancient Greece in terms of a shift from public to private, free to suppressed, unfettered to cloistered, have echoed 19th century evolutionary models. The second point was to show that recent scholarship has sufficiently called into question the end-point of that model, that is, the traditional view of the cloistered woman of classical Athens, that it is no longer viable to assume it. It is the purpose of this chapter to reexamine the foundations of the evolutionary model, to look closely at the earliest Greek literature, the Homeric epics, for evidence to shed light on or to call into question that primordial state of freedom and status for women.

The value of Homer for historical inquiry has been debated in earnest since the publication of Moses I. Finley’s landmark work on the subject, originally published in 1954, which argued that the society represented in the Homeric epics was internally consistent and could with good results be mined for historical material.23 It would not be

23 The World of Odysseus. The most recent edition, including responses to his critics was published in 2002.
suitable here to attempt to review the debate, but interpretations have ranged from Finley’s extremely hopeful outlook, to the idea, put forward by Ian Morris, that the society presented in the Homeric poems is a fictional construct, whose purpose is to call early archaic Greeks to remember and emulate the way of life of some fictional earlier heroic generation.\textsuperscript{24}

Whether one chooses to interpret the Homeric epics as accurately representing the historical realities of life at any one point in the late Dark Age, or as a political treatise, or even if one chooses to ignore the historical usefulness of Homer at all, the question is not significant to this paper. I am here examining Homer, because his works represent the earliest extant literary output of the Greeks. Starting with Finley, scholars have sought to learn something about the Dark and early Archaic Ages from the Homeric epics, because it appears that they were composed at some point around the end of the 8\textsuperscript{th} century, the very beginning of the Archaic Age. While I myself take a very minimalist view of the utility of “Homeric society” for historical inquiry, I believe it is reasonable for the purposes of this study to accept for the moment that the society portrayed in Homer represents the realities of the late Dark Age, because the argument of this chapter is essentially negative. If one cannot discern in Homer, the earliest extant Greek literature,

\textsuperscript{24} Morris (1986). Morris (1999) sums up his own view of Homer’s intentions and the resulting problems for historical interpretation: “Homer offers us one poet’s vision of what the vanished heroic age ought to have been like; how does his picture compare to normative eighth-century ideas about gender relations? How much did such norms vary by location and class? How much does contrasting them with the radically different genres of lyric, elegiac, and iambic poetry tell us about changes through time? And where did Homer stand in the longer-term development of gender ideologies?”
any traces of the elevated state of affairs for women posited by 19th-century scholars, then it does not matter how we choose to interpret the Homeric corpus historically; that situation cannot be shown with evidence to exist. It is precisely the contention of this chapter that, far from being exalted and possessing freedom of action and movement, women as represented in the earliest Greek literature are objectified in the extreme and subjected to a state of affairs unenviable even to women of the classical period.

Before I continue, it is important to make a brief methodological statement. In the various stages of development of this thesis, it has been suggested to me several times that I consider the goddesses and other non-human and extraordinary female characters of Homeric epic, such as the Amazonian women. In doing this, I would certainly be in good company.\(^25\) However, I am uncomfortable with the intellectual implications of such a discussion within the confines of a Master’s thesis. In an attempt to discern the position of women in the power relations of a society, even a fictional one, it seems obvious to me that we will find in the goddesses persons of exalted position. While there clearly exists among Homer’s Olympians a certain hierarchy, which includes distinctions between gods and goddesses, including them in a discussion of “Homeric society”, that is the mundane context in which Homer was writing, denies the creative element of composition. To claim, for instance, that, in describing the posture assumed by Thetis in book 1 of the Iliad while imprecating Zeus in the interests of Achilles, Homer had in mind the behavior

\(^25\) See, for example, Pomeroy (1975), who devotes a chapter to goddesses, and Blundell (1995), who employs one chapter to discuss the Olympian goddesses, and yet another for the Amazons.
of human women, denies the strong probability that Homer could imagine that goddesses
would behave to their gods quite differently from the way in which women of his day
behaved toward their men. 26 That is a psycho-cultural step I am unwilling to take at this
point. This is not to say that I would deny that the society of the gods somehow reflects
the social and cultural realities of the author’s day, but simply that I am unsure of how to
approach it in the current context.

3.2 Women in the Iliad

In her discussion of the Iliad, Blundell makes the very salient point that “[t]he
Iliad is a poem about war.” 27 As such, of course, the Iliad is a poem about men, since, as
Hector tells us, “war is men’s business.” 28 Indeed, women play only a very small role in
the action of the poem, and when they show up, they are almost always only passive
participants. But any reader familiar with the poem or with Greek myth at all will quickly
object that a woman features very prominently in the poem, and in fact serves as the root
cause of the conflict. The episode is absent from the poem, but the reader is expected to
understand that Helen, the wife of the Spartan king Menelaus, went back to Troy with the
Trojan prince Paris. Whether she went willingly or not is immaterial, because her

26 Consider, for example, Mackie (1996), who shows that Homer is able to make clear distinctions in
language and behavior between Greeks and Trojans. Since Homer is capable of imagining and
representing differences between two peoples very subtly, then it is not too great of a stretch to assert that
he can equally imagine such differences between humans and gods.
28 ll. 6.492. Quotes from the Iliad are from the translation of Richmond Lattimore (1951).
husband certainly did not approve, and he and his brother Agamemnon mustered a massive international Greek expedition to retrieve her. Thus began the Trojan War.

Helen's role in the story is obviously of tremendous importance to our discussion, but interpretation is difficult. Helen is at some level responsible for the war. Menelaus considers her abduction sufficiently insulting to be a pretext for war. That the Greeks are willing to fight for one man's wife appears to tell us that women are tremendously important in "Homerian society." But the specific nature of that importance is difficult to extract. It is possible to argue that Menelaus so loved his wife that he felt compelled to fight a war to retrieve her, but this seems an unlikely motivation for an international expedition. 29 It seems far more likely that Menelaus was acting to regain status after an open act of disrespect on the part of a foreign prince. Possession of a woman of Helen's extreme beauty and divine ancestry serves in itself as a status marker for the king. The greatest motivation for Menelaus' actions is to be found in his position as king of Sparta. According to a tradition not found in the Iliad, Menelaus had gained his kingship upon the death of Helen's father Tyndareus, whose male heirs, Castor and Polydeuces, had already died. 30 Menelaus derived his position of power in Sparta through his marriage with Helen. Rather than attempting to retrieve his beloved wife, Homer's Menelaus is a

29 Euripides (Iphigenia at Aulis) records the story that Helen's father, Tyndareus, prior to Helen's marriage to Menelaus, demanded that all of her suitors promise to protect the eventual husband from any potential quarrels. This is offered as an explanation for Menelaus' and Agamemnon's ability to muster such a massive force in the attempt to retrieve one man's wife.

30 While the story is not expressly represented in the epic, Homer is likely aware of its existence.
man with a more mundane motivation. Surrendering his wife without a fight, Menelaus would suffer a loss of the basis of his authority, marriage to the daughter of the previous king.

Helen’s actual involvement in the action of the poem is extremely limited. She appears only three times. The rarity of her involvement is extremely telling. The character of Helen is not foremost on the minds of the poem’s actors. When she appears, her responsibility for the conflict is always raised, but the question is noteworthy for its ambiguity. When she appears on the towers of Troy before a battle, the old men comment on her beauty, saying “still, though she be such, let her go away in the ships, lest/ she be left behind, a grief to us and our children.”31 Helen clearly acknowledges her role in the outbreak of hostilities, but she can be consoled by Priam as a victim of circumstances and the gods’ ill-will: “to me the gods are blameworthy/ who drove upon me this sorrowful war against the Achaians.”32 Homer recognizes Helen’s role in the opening of hostilities, but views her as a passive participant in the action. While her abduction was the motivation for war, she has no control over the actions either of her abductor or of her husband.

Just as Helen is responsible for the war, another conflict over women sets off the narrative of the poem. In book 1, Menelaus’ brother Agamemnon is forced to surrender a girl, Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of Apollo, whom he had taken as his portion of the

31 Il. 3.159-60.
32 Il. 3.164-65.
spoils of battle. To Agamemnon, his being put in this position is an affront to his position as commander of the expedition. "What do you want? To keep your prize and have me sitting here/ lacking one?" In order to salvage his dignity, Agamemnon demands that Achilles surrender his captive, Briseis, to him. Achilles' initial response to this insult is violent, but he is swayed by divine intervention and chooses to leave the camp and withhold his participation in hostilities.

Agamemnon's control over the expedition is precarious. His authority is based in large part on prestige. When his prestige is compromised by his being forced to surrender his booty, he must compensate for the affront by reasserting himself at the expense of Achilles, his strongest rival in the Greek force. Achilles is unable to do anything about it, with the exception of withdrawing from the expedition. As is the case with Helen, women play a prominent role in this episode. The two women, Chryseis and Briseis, are entirely passive actors. They do not say a word in the exchange and are powerless to affect the outcome of events. It is clear that women are vitally important to the status of the heroes, but their interests are not considered. This is further illustrated in the episode in which Agamemnon attempts to reconcile with Achilles. Agamemnon's offer includes "gifts (agalma) in abundance." Among these agalmata are tripods,

33 II. 1.133-34
34 As illustrated by the strange episode at the beginning of book 2 in which a rather insecure Agamemnon tests his men's desire to continue fighting by feigning an offer to let them return home.
cauldrons, gold, horses, and seven women of Lesbos, skilled in weaving.\textsuperscript{35} Here the women are included among other prizes, and their position is not exalted among them. They are nothing more than another kind of desideratum offered by one hero to another in an attempt at reconciliation.

This is not the only episode in the Iliad in which women are listed among other objects of heroic currency. For the funeral games in honor of Patroclus, Achilles sets up a wrestling match. To the winner go the greatest spoils, to the loser the lesser prize:

\begin{quote}
...a great tripod, to set over fire, for the winner.

The Achaians among themselves valued it at the worth of twelve oxen.

But for the beaten man he set in their midst a woman

Skilled in much work of her hands, and they rated her at four oxen.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Here the woman is listed as a prize, and only a secondary one awarded to the loser for his participation. She is reckoned only as having one third the value of the tripod. To be sure, Briseis and Chryseis, the Lesbian weavers, and the woman skilled in handiwork are all slaves, captured in war and only to be reckoned as of little value. But they seem little different from Helen. They are prizes; living, breathing \textit{agalmata} in the zero-sum game of aristocratic competition. Just as Menelaus is willing to go to war in order to rectify a loss of prestige suffered when his wife is taken from him, so Achilles is

\textsuperscript{35} ll. 9.119-135.
\textsuperscript{36} 23.702-5
willing to forswear nine years of fighting when his own prestige is harmed by the loss of a woman. What is in it for him, if the spoils of war can be taken from him at will?

But women are not always slaves and spoils of war; they are also wives and mothers. There is one example of the good wife in the Iliad, Andromache, whose dialogue with her husband Hector provides valuable insight into this aspect of a woman's life. Returning from battle, Hector is greeted at the city walls by his wife, and she entreats him not to return to the fighting. She has lost her parents and all of her brothers, so Hector's death would leave her without a family. "Hector thus you are father to me, and my honored mother,/ you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband./ Please take pity on me then, stay here on the rampart,/ that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow."37 Blundell is certainly right that "[h]ere is a woman whose place in the world is defined by her relationship with men, and who will be helpless once those men are no longer there to protect her."38 In response to his wife's imprecations that he stay within the walls and defend the city, he dismisses her curtly and sends her home to tend to her responsibilities: "Go therefore to our house, and take up your own work,/ the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaids/ ply their work also; but the men must see to the fighting,/ all men who are the people of Ilion, but I beyond others."39

37 ll. 6.429-32.
39 ll. 6.490-93
For the first time we are presented with a moving glimpse at the private life of a married couple. Both husband and wife are horrified by the fate that will befall Andromache when Troy is sacked. Andromache begs her husband to stay within the walls and protect his wife and child, but Hector admonishes her that it is not her place to advise her husband on military matters. Instead, she is to go home to her place as the manager of the home and the overseer of the slaves. In this episode we get a rare glimpse at the woman’s voice in the Iliad, but her desires are quickly dismissed by her husband. Hector clearly cares deeply for the well being of his wife, but this is only a secondary concern, and in the end his martial responsibilities take precedence. Hector’s response comes in very strong terms, with a very strict notion of gender roles.

It has been suggested that the role of women in the Iliad is to exert, or at least to try to exert, a restraint on men.\textsuperscript{40} This point is illustrated both by Andromache’s words detailed above, and Hector’s mother Hecabe’s begging him not to accept Achilles’ proposal of single combat. Blundell agrees and elaborates:

\textsuperscript{40} See Kakridis (1971) pp. 68-75.
Women provide causes and rewards, encouragement or restraint; they reflect the sufferings of warfare and represent the social ties which form the background to the battle scenes. Always, they exist only in relation to their menfolk. Although they are implicated in life's most serious transactions, they do not take active part in them.  

As I have tried to show above, Blundell is correct in asserting women's passivity in the narrative of the *Iliad*. Women are, indeed, causes and rewards, and at times provide encouragement to men to keep up the fight. But I am unable to find any instance where a woman serves successfully to restrain her husband, son, or father. Hecabe and Andromache try to prevent Hector's suicidal heroism, but they fail. Yet again, the women of the *Iliad* are powerless in the games their men play.

3.3 Women in the *Odyssey*

Because of my self-imposed limitations (i.e. leaving the divine actors out of the discussion), the consideration of women in the *Odyssey* will necessarily be far more limited. The female element is more apparent in the later epic, but the world portrayed here is a divine one. Usually the effect of the female presence is detrimental to the wandering hero, Odysseus. The female monsters Scylla and Charybdis, the evil

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42 For instance, Helen's chastising Paris in the bedroom, accusing him of cowardice for not joining in the battle, then derisively sneers "No, better not, you will probably get killed." Il. 3.432-6.
seducresses the Sirens, divine captors Calypso and Circe all serve to slow Odysseus’ progress homeward. On the other hand, there is Athena, the virgin goddess, an explicitly asexual figure, who works behind the scenes throughout the entire narrative to help the hero on his journey. The *Odyssey* provides an abundant source for Freudians and literary theorists, but for the purposes of this paper, I shall focus my attention on the less prominent human female element, particularly on the poem’s secondary protagonist, Odysseus’ wife Penelope.

When it seemed clear that Odysseus was not going to return to Greece with the other heroes who fought at Troy, Penelope attracted many suitors. The suitors required that she choose one of them for marriage, but holding out hope that her husband would return, Penelope planned to delay the inevitable decision as long as possible. Her plan is famous. She announced that she was weaving a shroud for Odysseus’ father, Laertes, saying that she would choose a husband as soon as she had finished her weaving. But each night she would unravel what she had completed that day. By these means she was able to ward off the decision for more than three years.\(^43\) In this way Penelope reveals herself to be an active agent in a way that no woman does in the *Iliad*. She is both clever and determined, but, according to Blundell, these characteristics are only asserted with “the weapons traditionally associated with females; the deceptive use of weaving and words is typical of the behaviour ascribed to women in the *Odyssey*,” and it lends

\(^{43}\) Od. 2.94-110, 19.138-56.
Penelope a shady and ambiguous character not unlike the one accorded to Helen.\textsuperscript{44} While Blundell is certainly right that Penelope uses tricks to get her way, the point remains that she is essentially and ultimately limited in her decision-making ability. She gets to choose her suitor, but she must choose one. Furthermore, it is a stretch for Blundell to say that Penelope “exerts authority in a more direct fashion” when she “roundly rebukes the suitors for their violent behavior,”\textsuperscript{45} since her rebukes invariably go unheeded. Like women in the \textit{Iliad} Penelope is powerless to control her circumstances. Her influence is limited to her ability to convince men to do what she wants, either through deceit or through entreaty. Her uneasy position can be seen clearly when Telemachus, her son, hitherto a very weak character in the poem, rebukes her for demanding that the bard stop singing about the return of the Greeks from Troy. He commands her to go back into the house and continue her spinning, “but the men must see to discussion,/ all men, but I most of all. For mine is the power in this household.”\textsuperscript{46} Penelope’s cunning can be very impressive and inspiring, but we must be careful not to read into it any semblance of a woman’s authority, even over her adolescent son. Telemachus, unable to assert himself against the suitors, dismisses his mother without hesitation, and he does so in very strongly gendered terms.

\textsuperscript{44} Blundell (1995) 55.  
\textsuperscript{45} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{46} Od. 1.358-9.
Perhaps the key point here is not Penelope's agency, however, but the suitors' intentions. Interpretation is difficult, but important. Scholarly debate has continued for decades with no conclusion. It seems, however, that what the suitors are after is not necessarily Odysseus' property (which they are spending wastefully as they pursue Penelope's hand), nor the affections of Penelope herself, who does not seem to possess the same physical gifts as Helen, but rather political power in Ithaca. This is, of course, a tendentious opinion, but I think it can be supported. First, consider the origin of Menelaus' rule in Sparta, discussed above. Menelaus derived his position of power through marriage to the daughter of the dead king. Since he had no male heirs, power was passed on to his daughter's husband. The suitors, I contend, sought the hand of Penelope in order to gain control of the dominion of her seemingly dead husband. Their desire to kill Telemachus, Odysseus' only heir, I think, lends credence to this view.

3.4 Conclusion

While the example of Penelope seems on the surface to offer an alternative to the view, which I have put forth, that women in Homer lack agency in their circumstances, I hope to have shown that even her outstanding character is limited by her ability to persuade—and that is clearly very limited. Homeric women are pawns of their men, used through marriage to form political alliances or to shore up lines of succession, or through

47 See Scodel (2001) for a brief overview of the debate, as well as an interesting attempt at solving the problem using Game Theory.
gift offerings to cement pacts between warriors. Marriage to a woman descended from a god or an important man brings with it political standing, and the theft of such a woman can be devastating to her husband if she is not retrieved. A husband can be expected to love his wife, as in the case of Odysseus and Penelope or Hector and Andromache, but that love seems to have little capacity to compel men to succumb to their wives’ wishes. Far from living in an exalted state far superior to that of their classical counterparts, Homeric women are subjected completely to the authority of their menfolk.

If my view is accepted, and women in Homeric epic do not experience such a favorable state of affairs as has often been assumed, and, too, the emerging scholarly consensus that women in classical Athens are not so extremely oppressed, then we must reconsider the necessity of finding in the Archaic Age a period of transition in the status of women.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In the previous two chapters I have attempted to show that there is significant reason to doubt the long standing paradigm in Greek social history, which holds that the status of women during the classical period in Athens was so demonstrably worse than it had been during the Dark Age that we must suppose that a dramatic shift in women's place in society took place during the Archaic Age. This paper has not itself been a study of women in the Archaic Age, their status, their public and private roles, or their place in domestic "power relations", but it is written with the intent of clearing up some very important critical concerns, which ought to be settled before such an effort is undertaken.

I hope that the arguments, as they are laid out in the last two chapters, justify the effort. In the article "Archaeology and Gender Ideologies in Early Archaic Greece," Ian Morris undertakes the noble task, as he puts it, to "argue that we can only hope to write proper histories of Greek gender ideologies in the archaic period if we find ways to ground our arguments in the archaeological record." Certainly this is a reasonable view, because, as Morris says, "The only part of the data base likely to expand significantly is the archaeological record."48 Morris' view is the right one, that the ancient historian, so limited in sources, ought to take into account every trace left behind from the people he is

studying. And this is what he does. Seeing in the 8th century a change in house design in central Greece from small, one room affairs to larger and more complicated buildings, Morris suggests that this great change “reveals hardening gender ideologies.” Of course Morris realizes that the elaboration of house design is not enough to posit such an ideological shift, but he calls for support upon the literary evidence.

Before 750, it is not easy to see how the relationships between space and gender taken for granted by authors from Hesiod to Demosthenes would have worked in a world of one-roomed houses in very open settlements; by 600, the inward-turned courtyard house with functionally specific rooms was normal everywhere. I cannot prove that this was directly linked to more rigid gender distinctions. Eleventh- through ninth-century Greeks may have interpreted their simple, open houses in much the same ways as archaic and classical Greeks did the subdivided space of their courtyard houses. But putting together the poetry and the transformation of house forms and activity areas between 750 and 600, the most economical theory is that the gender ideologies did change in this period… 49

He is not wrong. The archaeological evidence is not conclusive enough by itself to reveal gender ideologies at any one period. Archaeology is only useful to the historian when the historian asks it the right questions. In this instance, Morris asked the evidence

to help him pinpoint when the dramatic hardening of gender ideologies took place. The problem is that this is the wrong question, since, as I hope that I have shown, there is no need to approach our sources with the assumption that such a shift ever took place.

This has been an historiographical essay, written with the goal of imploring historians and archaeologists approaching the evidence for women in the Archaic Age to leave behind notions of an evolutionary shift in gender ideologies. If this paper has been convincing, then there is sufficient cause for doubting the old paradigm. Blundell begins her chapter on the subject, "The Archaic Age was a critical period for women...it was within the developing framework of the polis that the laws and customs were established which were to determine the position of women for several centuries to come."\textsuperscript{50} If we approach the study of the development of those "laws and customs" with the assumption that they are part of the evolutionary paradigm, then we can only interpret them in that light.

\textsuperscript{50} Blundell (1995) p. 65.
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