THE MISOGYNY OF HOMER: LIFE FOR WOMEN IN ATHENS AND SPARTA

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Throughout history, people’s tendency to subconsciously look to fictional characters for guidance has remained consistent. Members of modern audiences everywhere continue to mimic the thoughts and actions of those they admire. They take note of Harry Potter’s bravery in the face of death, the constantly vocalized resentment of Holden Caulfield, and the general tolerance and kindness expressed by Atticus Finch. They then attempt to incorporate (or avoid incorporating) these habits and mannerisms into their own actions. Similar behavioral patterns can be traced back to much older roots, particularly those stemming from the city-states of Ancient Greece. As they developed a love for the heroic characters found in the tales of Homer, they absorbed many of his ideas and slowly began to apply them to their daily lives. Although Homerian heroes boasted a variety of admirable character traits, these characters had a tendency to treat women unfairly and promote inequality among the sexes. Inspired by the misogynistic undertones of Homerian literature, men in the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta regarded women as pieces of their property, exemplified by their marriage practices and familial customs.

While the famed literary works of Homer had settings throughout different parts of Ancient Greece, the far-reaching impact of his words affected the lifestyles of those residing in Athens and Sparta. Athenian and Spartan men held a deep admiration for the epic heroes described in Homerian works and often modeled their behaviors (including their treatment of women) after the actions of these characters. In *The World of Odysseus,* one author attempts to convey the severity of Homer’s anti-feminist themes:

“There is no mistaking the fact that Homer fully reveals what remained true for the whole of antiquity, that women were held to be naturally inferior and therefore limited in their function to the production of offspring and the performance of household duties, and that the meaningful social relationships and the strong personal attachments were sought and found among men.”1

As a result of Homer’s negative influence on male audiences, women living in Sparta and Athens found themselves subject to inequality and unfair treatment at the hands of their male counterparts throughout their lives. This mistreatment extended into multiple social realms, including the institution of marriage as women in these city-states were frequently forced to tolerate polygamous relationships and numerous extramarital affairs. One fictional case can be found in Homer’s *Iliad*, in which the chieftains’ legitimate wives were forced to tolerate their husbands keeping multiple female concubines (who were often slaves) at all times.2 Additionally, in *The Odyssey*, Homer’s portrayal of Odysseus as a morally sound hero can be regarded as a misogynistic gesture. While Penelope remained completely faithful to her husband throughout his absence (despite being pursued by numerous men), Odysseus enjoyed two lustful affairs with Circe and Calypso.3

Influenced by Homer’s messages, Athenian and Spartan governments maintained sexist legislation regarding the repercussions for committing adultery. In both city-states, a man whose wife had committed adultery was automatically entitled to file for divorce; however, a woman whose husband had committed adultery remained bound to him and unable to file for divorce.4 The romanticizing of male adultery (and conversely, the hypocritical condemnation of disloyal women) contained in Homerian works mirrors the similarly unfair status-quo that women in Athens and Sparta were forced to deal with: that male infidelity could be tolerated (and in many cases, encouraged) while women had to remain faithful to their husbands. Homer’s literature contributed significantly to these marital inequalities throughout Athens and Sparta.

Additionally, Homerian works frequently portrayed women as only useful in furthering the success of their husbands. An example of this can be found in *Iliad* through the subtly demeaning plot surrounding Penelope and Odysseus. When Odysseus returns home from his journey, Penelope proves vitally important and helpful to Odysseus as she assists him in regaining the throne.5 Though a female character committing such a feat may initially appear to be a positive portrayal of women’s importance in Greek society, one can conclude the opposite upon further examination. In his work, Homer made the discreet implication that Penelope only triumphs through helping her husband achieve success and glory. This element in the story is indicative of the widespread Ancient Greek mindset that women exist only to benefit men, further perpetuating their generally unfair treatment. Several historical examples of this mentality exist in Athens and Sparta.

Numerous Athenian men elected to marry solely to further their own success. One author writes that “many Athenians in fact decided to marry, not only in order to obtain a son, but also to make sure of a good housewife”.6  Such practices demonstrate how Greek women served the condescending purpose of helping men achieve social and financial prosperity. Unfortunately, providing assistance to men came at a high cost for Athenian women, who could be married off as early as fourteen years old.7 Marriages between freeborn citizens consisted of a formal ceremony known as “pledging” in which the bridegroom and his future wife’s “kyrios” (her father or legal guardian) entered into a binding oral contract regarding the conditions of the marriage. Historians have not determined whether the bride attended the pledging ceremony; however, if she did, she certainly did not play a significant role in the outcome of the procedure and her consent remained a matter of irrelevance.8 These inhuman procedures reflected the mindsets of Athenian men as they entered into marriages, influenced by the misogynistic descriptions of Homer’s works.

Though women in Sparta received slightly different treatment from those living in Athens, Spartan men were still influenced by the anti-feminist work of Homer. Thus, Spartan women received a similar lack of respect throughout their lives. This began at an early age as young Spartan girls received their educations. Though they were forced to physically train alongside the boys, they never accompanied them to school and received little to no academic education. Typically, Spartan girls were taught only arbitrary household tasks that would prepare them to assist their future husbands and sons.9 These customs serve as examples of Homer’s messages (in which women serve only to help their husbands) in action.

These unfair practices extended into Spartan marriage as well. In *Love in Ancient Greece*, Flacelière describes marriage in the city-state as “a process of abduction” in which young wives were forcefully taken from their homes. After being given a butchered haircut and men’s clothing, the woman would lay in waiting on a straw mattress for her future husband to arrive. After the bridegroom and his male friends had dined together and gone about their normal routines, he would visit his wife in secret, employing every possible precaution to ensure that they were not discovered. Numerous historians contend that because of these stealthy habits, husbands would often receive children without having ever seen their wives by daylight.10 This practice demonstrates the unfair idea that spending time in the company of a woman was regarded as a shameful activity that should only be done in an effort to conceive children, further perpetuating their mistreatment.

Additionally, both poleis reflected disrespectful Homerian ideals about women through limiting the amount of societal power that they could hold. Finley describes the world created by Homer in *The Odyssey* as a sexist environment, stating “not only was this a man’s world, it was one in which the inferior status of women was neither concealed nor idealized.”11  Due to strong feelings of intimidation, Athenians frequently expressed sentiments of disgust and hatred when confronted with intelligent women such as Pericles’ lover, Aspasia.12 Athenian government also excluded women from participation in the Aeropagus or serving in elected positions, which were reserved solely for free-born men over the age of 18.13 Similar conditions could be found within the ruling dual monarchy of Sparta, in which even women of royal families had no true power.14 These unjust restrictions limited women and kept them under the control of their dominant male counterparts.

The discreetly misogynistic themes promoted throughout Homerian literature served as a negative influence over the Athenian and Spartan men and led them to mistreat women living in these city-states. Historical evidence of this phenomenon can be found through examination of their oppressive marriage proceedings, anti-feminist familial customs, and the efforts they employed to prevent women from gaining power in government and society. Even in today’s world, audiences frequently become affected by the messages and ideas of characters from books, television shows, films, and theatrical performances. With this knowledge in mind, one should consider the values that they promote by mimicking the actions of these seemingly admirable characters.

Notes

1. M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1954), 138.

2. Robert Flacelière, *Love in Ancient Greece* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1962), 9.

3. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Albert Cook (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967), 3.

4. Flacelière, *Love in Ancient Greece,* 117.

5. Homer, *The Odyssey,* 235.   
6. Flacelière, *Love in Ancient Greece*, 111.

7. Joshua Cole and Carol Symes, *Western Civilizations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), 75.

8. Flacelière, *Love in Ancient Greece,* 113.

9. Ibid., 109.

10. Ibid., 115.

11. Finley, *The World of Odysseus,* 136.

12. Flacelière, *Love in Ancient Greece*, 118.

13. Cole and Symes, *Western Civilizations,* 65.

14. Ibid., 66.

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