Gender, Greek and Roman

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The English word “gender,” which derives from Latin genus, kind or type, has lately come to signify “sexual identity, especially in relation to society and culture.” It differs in meaning from “sex,” which refers to the biological categories of “male” and “female,” based on reproductive organs and functions, rather than to social and cultural categories derived from human perceptions and practices. So, too, “gender” is to be distinguished from “sexuality,” the quality or state of being sexual, particularly in regard to sexual activity and receptivity.

The category of “gender” has proven an innovative and helpful tool of analysis in the study of Classical Antiquity. Investigations into women’s sexual identities in ancient Greece and Rome can claim major credit for initially illustrating the importance of taking gender into account in studies of literary texts, cultural and historical phenomena, and material remains. But classical scholars have also applied gender as an analytical category to illuminate relationships between men and women, and among men, as well as to understand constructions of masculinity itself.

Greek, Roman, and Late Antique representations of sexual identities testify to the historical as well as social and cultural factors at work in the construction of male and female gender roles. These sources indicate that gender roles in ancient Greece, Rome, and later Classical Antiquity assumed different forms in different periods, locales, and political contexts, and also varied according to age and social class.

Despite these variations among gender roles from society to society, era to era, and place to place during classical times, sexual inequities and asymmetries characterized all gender systems throughout the ancient Greco-Roman world. At no moment or place did women in Classical or Late Antiquity, even those from wealthy and privileged families, enjoy the same opportunities, advantages, and therefore possibilities for agency and action that men did. Although deaths in childbirth were not uncommon, women’s lives did not entail the same risks as men’s: women were not, for example, expected to engage in military combat. Yet women suffered deeply from the persistent presence, and consequences, of war: when it deprived them of the male kin on whom they relied for their physical and economic survival, and when – owing to the defeat of their menfolk – they were enslaved and separated from loved ones.

Four lines spoken by the Trojan warrior Hector in the Iliad at book 6: 490–3 are repeated, nearly verbatim, and twice, by Telemachus, son of the Greek hero Odysseus, in book 1: 357–60 and book 21: 351–4 of the Odyssey. These words illustrate some important gender inequities and asymmetries operative not only in the social order depicted by the Homeric epics but also in other, later Greco-Roman societies. Both men order a female family member – in Hector’s case his wife Andromache, in Telemachus’ his mother Penelope – to return to her loom, distaff, and domestic tasks, and to let men handle their own responsibilities. For Hector, these manly responsibilities are the conduct of war. For Telemachus in Odyssey 1 they are discussion and speech; in Odyssey 21 they are “the bow,” which his mother has decided that the man hoping to replace the long-absent Odysseus as her next marital partner must string successfully.

Throughout Greco-Roman Antiquity, women of all social classes were, like Andromache and Penelope in these Homeric passages, consistently identified with domestic tasks, spinning and weaving chief among them. So, too, public verbal displays and exchanges – at political assembles that regulated social interactions, and at recitations and performances of dramatic and epic poetry that articulated powerful ideological messages – rarely incorporated women’s voices. To be sure, mothers and
other mature women of privileged background, in contrast to the mythic Penelope in these Homeric episodes, could exert some sway over male kin in the private sphere, within their individual households. A few women from politically well-situated families, most obviously those that ruled the Greek Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Empire, thereby managed to influence public decision-making if not join in public discussion.

Yet women did not engage in family business on the same terms as their men folk. Upon reaching childbearing age in their early to mid-teens, they entered marriages, to partners several years their senior, which were arranged, and on occasion dissolved, by elder (and usually male) family members. For their entire lives women in both ancient Greece and Rome ordinarily remained under the legal control of a male guardian, with the same rights as their own offspring. In the mid-teens BCE the Roman emperor Augustus exempted some women from guardianship, but only freeborn women with three, and freedwomen with four, children.

Women did take an active and public part in religious cults and rituals. Certain celebrations—such as the Thesmophoria honoring the Greek agricultural goddess Demeter—were restricted to female participants. But women’s worship, whether of male or female divinities, was accorded less visibility and prestige than the veneration of male deities occasioning the pan-Hellenic festivals in honor of Zeus at Olympia and Apollo at Delphi, noteworthy for athletic events in which only men competed.

The distinctive gender system functioning in the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta attracted attention from ancient authors such as Plutarch—in chapters 14–16 of his life of the legendary Spartan leader Lycurgus—because of its apparent sexual symmetries. Spartan society configured both female and male roles so as to maximize the contributions of both genders to the military might of their state. Like Spartan boys, girls underwent a formal education that included strenuous physical exercise. Spartan women were married later than other Greek women: in their late teens, to husbands approximately their own age. Nevertheless, these practices, and others—among them dressing a bride in male military garb and shaving her head—that differ strikingly from the mores of other city-states in Classical Greece, evidently functioned to render women more desirable as sexual partners to Spartan men (who lived in all-male military barracks from their early years), and more fit for producing numerous offspring: healthy sons to serve in the Spartan army; daughters equally well equipped for frequent childbearing.

Athens, in contrast to Sparta, valued women for their bloodlines rather than their childbearing capacities, sharply differentiating between male and female roles. To qualify as an Athenian citizen, a male needed to establish that an Athenian citizen was his father and the daughter of an Athenian citizen his mother. But women from citizen-families did not receive educations remotely comparable to those afforded their male relatives. Nor did they have much chance to benefit from the rich cultural atmosphere of their cosmopolitan, intellectually vibrant city. They occupied separate household quarters from men, rarely venturing outside their homes, and did not even attend social events with their own men folk. The females at symposia, drinking parties memorable for lively and learned conversations on significant philosophical topics, were *hetairai*, cultivated “female companions.” From non-citizen families, and from elsewhere in the Greek world, they accepted payment for their pleasurable company, and their sexual favors.

Female characters figure prominently in an array of Greek literary works dating from the seventh through the fifth centuries BCE. Some of them—*Homer’s* *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Hesiod’s epic *Works and days* and *Theogony*; the tragedies of the Athenian playwrights *Aeschylus*, *Sophocles*, and *Euripides*—feature legendary characters from the distant Greek past. Others—lyric poems; the comedies of the Athenian playwright *Aristophanes*—supposedly offer portraits of actual, contemporary women,
albeit somewhat fictionalized. Whether they are mythic or historic, however, several of the women vividly depicted in these works resemble one another in major respects, most notably Hesiod’s Pandora, Homer’s and Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra, Euripides’ Phaedra, various women catalogued and ridiculed by Semonides of Amorgos, and Aristophanes’ libidinous, bibulous “assemblywomen.” All are portrayed as “the Other,” creatures altogether different from men: an untrustworthy, separate species driven by ungovernable emotions and unquenchable sexual appetites, needing to be controlled by males for the sake of social stability.

Literary texts of different kinds from classical Rome also subscribe to this notion of women as “Other,” a “breed apart” from men. Among them are fragments from orations delivered by the ultra-conservative second century BCE politician Marcus Porcius Cato, quoted by Aulus Gellius at Noctes Atticae 1.23, as well as speeches that the later historian Livy, at 34.1–4, maintains were delivered by Cato himself; the Augustan love poet Ovid’s descriptions of women’s erotic needs in his lovers’ “how-to” book, the Ars Amatoria; and the first century CE satirist Juvenal’s harsh criticisms of marriage in Satire 6. Furthermore, like their Greek counterparts, Roman women were under the legal authority of a guardian, and barred from formal participation in political activities.

Yet a concept of women as “Same” co-exists with this Roman view of women as altogether different from men, in temperament and by nature. We find this concept of female “Sameness” expressed by authors ranging from Cicero and Vergil to the younger Seneca, the younger Pliny, and Tacitus, in contexts where they describe elite women as public representatives of their blood families. Such authors attribute these women with, and praise them for evincing, the qualities of mind and character that have brought their male kin to much-merited public prominence. From the republican period onward, moreover, elite Roman women could possess and inherit property in their own right, and socialize with men both inside and outside their family circles. Occasions when women represented their families in public, with a measure of political impact, occurred with some frequency.

Owing to the rise of Christianity, women in Late Antiquity had access to unprecedented opportunities for an independent existence. For the first time, women could reside in a single-sex community apart from men, and receive, through charitable sources, financial support for a lifestyle that did not depend on marriage or subsidies from a male protector. Women gained a greater share of legal rights, and enhanced their status as patrons through the bestowal of Christian charity. Christian imagery also confounded earlier Greco-Roman notions of what constituted “male” and “female” through “gender-bending” associations: representing ascetic and martyred women as male; feminizing men in their relationship with God; and even portraying males as manly eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake.

SEE ALSO: Family, Greek and Roman; Femininity; Marriage, Greece and Rome; Women, Greece; Women, Roman.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS