**Women and Politics in Democratic Athens**

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Susan Cole looks at how, though formally excluded from the political process, Athena's sisters nevertheless made their mark.

The Athenians maintained that Erichthonios, the king from whom they believed they were descended, was born from the earth herself. This myth of autochthony rationalised claims to the territory of Attica, expressed a strong relation- ship with the land, and recognised male dependence on the female as nurturer of life. Even in the classical period, when many people lived in the urban area of Athens, families maintained agricultural property in the countryside and therefore continued to have strong economic and emotional ties to the land of Attica, the agricultural territory of Athens. Linguistic distinctions preserved this identification of the people with the land. Terms for the collective population were 'Attikoi/Attikai', 'people of Attica', or 'astoi/astai’ having a share in the city', used for both males and females. 'Athenaioi', from which we derive the English term 'Athenians' was almost always reserved for the male population eligible for citizenship. Females seem to have been called by the feminine form of this term ('Athenaiai') only when the issue was the religious office of a public priesthood, as 'Attikai' females were defined in terms of the land. Official documents are very precise, distinguishing those with political authority from their dependents when they refer to the whole population of Athens as 'the people (demos) of the Athenians and their wives and children'. The usual term for 'citizen' (polites, masculine singular) referred only to men; its rare feminine form (politis) defined a woman as daughter of an Athenian citizen or resident of the polis, but not as a political actor.

In the early Greek polis, political responsibility entailed military ser- vice, a fact that tended to sharpen the distinction between the lives of men and women. The lives of men were spent in public; women lived, for the most part, in the private domestic world of the home. Male and female roles were represented, paradoxicalIy, by the two great female divinities of the city. Athena was represented as Promachos, armed for battle, her perennial virginity a necessary sign of the city's invulnerability. Demeter, on the other hand, goddess of grain and symbol of motherhood, was identified with the establishment of agriculture and civilised life. The Thesmophoria, a secret festival celebrated by the wives of the city's citizens, honoured Demeter and encouraged her protection of the city's crops. Athenian democracy evolved in the context of an agricultural community, a fact recognised by the oath sworn by young men during the military training that would qualify them for full political rights. They vowed to protect the boundaries of the land of Attica and invoked as witnesses the products of the land: the wheat, the barley, the vines, the olives, the figs. Wars were fought to protect the agricultural territory and the wives and children of the Athenians, an idea reflected in a vocabulary of war that described the rape of women with the same terms used for destruction of land and crops. Full political rights were originally predicated upon pos- session of land, but even after they were eventually extended to men without land, the Athenian political system did not outgrow the hierarchy of wealth and privilege based on and derived from the land.

The basic social unit was the family (oikos, 'household'), a unit defined originally in terms of possession of land for farming (kleros, 'allotment'). Stability was represented by the land, and success was measured by the transfer of land from a father to a son. Males remained in the oikos of their birth (unless adopted by a childless family), but females had to move to a new oikos at the time of marriage, when they took property away from the natal household in the form of dowry. This movement of women between families provoked anxiety because the allegiance of a married woman could always be divided between a father's and a husband's oikos. The transmission of land from one generation to the next was another source of anxiety for husbands and fathers; first, because it required marriage and the reception of a female from another (per- haps competing) oikos; second, because it required the production of legitimate sons (but not too many); and third, because the birth of daughters, who took land away from the oikos in the form of dowry at marriage, posed a risk to the economic security of sons. This last problem could be avoided if a father had received a generous dowry with his wife at marriage. A wife's dowry enriched her husband's oikos during her lifetime and passed to her children later; to her daughters in the form of dowry, to her sons in the form of inheritance. Land, with which women were identified because of their own procreative power, could come into the oikos with women, but there was always a certain tension because it could also be lost to an oikos when the females of the next generation left to marry.

The earliest stages of participatory politics at Athens were brought about by land reform in the early sixth century, when Solon created a hierarchical system of public offices with the highest offices rotated annually among the males with the largest agricultural production. Under Solon's system, the highest political, military, and religious authority went to the men whose families possessed the best and most land, those whose families had traditionally made the best marriages. Solon's reforms rewarded the more economically successful male members of the political community with the highest political offices, but because he also restricted public displays of family wealth, he directly affected the public lives of women, especially those of prestigious families. His regulations are said to have included restrictions on the clothing and behaviour of women in public, at festivals, funerals, visits to cemeteries, and during travel at night.

When a law sponsored by Perikles changed requirements for citizenship in 451 BC, women assumed a greater political importance to their sons (without gaining any for themselves). Before Perikles' law, participation in the Athenian political community was open to any man whose father belonged to that community. After 451 (except for a brief period during the Peloponnesian War), both parents had to be from Attic families. The democratic polis recognised women's contribution to the reproduction of the citizen body by defining citizenship according to the status of mothers as well as fathers and protected this relationship by linking the political status of husbands to the sexual fidelity of their wives. Athenian political language preserved the archaic terminology of honour and shame, and infractions of the code of sexual honour could have political consequences. Citizenship (epitimia) was described in terms of rights and privileges (timai, 'honours'); loss of these rights and privileges and loss of rights of political participation were described in terms of dishonour and disgrace (atirnia). The polis protected the transfer of property at the level of the oikos by protecting the legitimacy of children and by requiring the appearance of sexual fidelity of citizens' wives. A citizen's political status would depend on his wife's sexual reputation. A husband who caught another man alone with his wife could kill the offender with impunity, but if he continued to live with a woman whose sexual reputation had been compromised, he could lose the rights and privileges of citizenship, be permanently excluded from the political community, and described as dishonoured (atimos) . As a consequence, restrictions on citizens' wives tended to increase in proportion to a husband's political activity or public prominence. The woman held to the highest public sexual standard was the wife of the most important ritual official in Athens, the basileus. She not only had to maintain sexual fidelity to her husband, but was required to have been a virgin (partbenos) at marriage and never to have been married to any other man.

Women were invisible as individuals. In Perikles' famous Funeral Oration, Thucydides defines good reputation for women in terms of the least possible celebrity among males. As a result of this attitude, it was not considered proper for men to name in public women from families of citizen status. If it was necessary to mention them at all, they were identified not by name, but in terms of a relationship to a male relative or husband. This convention was followed in law- court speeches (unless the status of the woman herself was the issue under discussion), as well as in conversations represented in comedy. When Demosthenes went to court to obtain his inheritance, he had to discuss his mother's status after his father's death without mentioning her name. If it were not for a remark in Plutarch, we would never have known that her name was Kleoboule. Women could call each other by name and name themselves in public, but even in comedy a free Athenian male did not mention a citizen's wife by name. A woman's personal name was mentioned in public speech outside her family only if she were a slave, hetaira (prostitute), priestess in a public priesthood, or dead. Official naming practices differed for males and females. Athenian men had three names when named officially in public: personal name, patronymic, and demotic (the name of the family's original deme or place of residence, indicating registration in the deme and therefore eligibility for citizenship). Women had personal names and were identified further by a father's or husband's name in the possessive case, but they did not have demotics and were not recorded on lists of phratries (hereditary kin groups for males) or on deme registers. The protocol persisted even in death. Attic grave inscriptions for women from citizen families give the demotic of a woman's father or husband.

In classical Athens women inhabited a negative political space. Essential to the reproduction of the citizen body, they were nevertheless passive participants in a society based on public competition between males. In the fifth century BC the priestess of the city goddess Athena Polias had a front row seat in the theatre, a privilege called proedria and reserved for those who performed extraordinary service to the city, but public honours for women were granted only for their role in religious activities. It is uncertain whether other Athenian women besides the special priestess even attended the plays. When the women of the chorus in Aristophanes' Thesmophoriazusai make a joke about honours for women whose sons performed great service to the city, they do not propose proedria at the Great or City Dionysia, but proedria at their own much smaller festivals, the secret Stenia or the Skira.

The judicial system recognised occasions when a woman's testimony might be needed in a dispute, usually in paternity cases where only a mother could identify her son's father. However, women did not appear as formal witnesses in court. Women had access to the judicial system only through a male guardian or authority (Kyrios), and may not have appeared in court even when charged with a crime. In a well known case where a woman was charged with murder, it was her son, not she herself, who swore that she was innocent.

Asymmetry between male and female in the public political life of the city was directly related to asymmetry of authority within the family. Marriage itself was the result of an agreement between two men without participation of the female involved. The father of a bride promised a dowry and daughter to a potential husband with an agricultural metaphor: 'I give you this girl for the ploughing of legitimate children'. This metaphor reflects the Greek terminology for verbs of sexual inter- course, used in the active voice of the male, and in the equivalent of the passive for the female. A significant bridal gesture suggests a similar relationship. At the time of marriage the bride gave her body to her new husband for the first time by lifting her veil away from her face with her hand, a gesture of submission called anakalypteria (uncovering). Xenophon describes Athenian marriage as a partnership, but relations between husband and wife were never like a relationship between equals. The marriage relationship was sometimes described in terms of mutual affection (philia), but a bride's first experience of sexual intercourse was often described in literature in terms of dominance and submission with language used elsewhere for the taming of animals. The image of the anakalypteria of Hera for Zeus was enshrined on the Parthenon to symbolise the harmony of marriage, but it also represented the unequal relationship between the divine husband and his wife.

In the fourth century, the city of Athens used the same image to illustrate the text of the alliance between the demos of the Athenians and the demos of the Corcyreans. The relief shows the goddess Athena with her hand held out in a gesture signifying advice, directing a wedding between a seated male and a standing female figure. The scene is reminiscent of similar scenes showing the anakalypteria of Hera, but the seated male figure also resembles representations of the personified demos of the Athenians. If he represents Athens, then the female figure represents the land of Corcyra, seductive but submissive as she lifts her veil away from her face in the bride's gesture of anakalypteria. The ritual of diplomacy defined the relations between cities joined in alliance in terms of friendship (also philia), but the relief exploits the ambiguity of the imagery of marriage to represent more accurately the reality of diplomatic agreements.

The nature of women's contribution to the city was directly related to the role of women within the family as wives and mothers, providers of nourishment, and producers of clothing. Unlike the variation of the countryside, the uniformity of the urban landscape, where the patterns of intersecting streets determined the size of houses, created a new domestic equality for the women of the city whose work was located inside the home. Rich and poor, the women of Athens worked side by side with their female slaves to produce at home the textiles that clothed their families.

A pair of matched vases, possibly once a gift to a bride, recognises the link between the two primary roles of a citizen's wife: reproduction of the oikos and production of clothing. The first vase shows the bride moving by wedding cart from her father's house to her husband's home, already making the gesture of anakalypteria, which symbolised sexual union with her husband. The second vase shows the domestic labour of married women on the warp-weighted loom where Athenian housewives painstakingly made by hand every item of clothing worn by themselves, their children, and their husbands. The other side of the vase shows a woman taking the unspun wool from a wool basket, another woman spinning the wool with her spindle, and a second pair of women folding the finished cloth. The shoulders of both vases are decorated with a circle of dancing figures, probably representing the wedding dances performed by the bride's friends. The bride herself takes the central position, seated directly above the centre of the loom, her veil held out in the suggestive gesture of anakalypteria.

Public civic ritual recognised the contribution of citizens' wives and daughters to the prosperity of the city. Athena was goddess of women as well as goddess of men. As protector of weaving she received dedications from women in her sanctuary on the acropolis. The original ritual of her major festival, the Panathenaia, required a select group of women and girls to weave a new robe (peplos) for her statue. The frieze of the Parthenon depicts the procession that brought the citizens of Athens to the acropolis for the central sacrifice, and as the only known temple frieze to represent mortals, manages to raise the Athenian experience to a mythical plane. Included in the procession are the Ergastinai, the women and girls who made the robe. Together with the female libation bearers for sacrifice, these are the only mortal females represented on the frieze, far outnumbered by the males in the procession. Their gift points in two directions, to the divinity whose robe they bestow, and to the women of Athens whose labour they represent.

Public images, like that of the Parthenon, carried dignified political messages that linked domestic life with the public life of the city. Messages moved in the opposite direction as well. For example, Athenian coins carried the imagery of Athens throughout the Mediterranean. They showed Athena Promachos on one side and her owl on the other, a predator with keen vision whose chilling stare, like that of the gorgon on Athena's breast, was meant to paralyse the enemy. Byzantine commentators tell us that ancient Greek women sang as they worked at their looms. We do not know the songs they sang or the stories they told, but we do have thousands of the ceramic loomweights to which they tied the warp of their simple movable looms. Some were even inscribed with the name of the woman who used them in her work, others were decorated with simple images. One such loomweight from Tarentum, decorated with the owl of Athena, translates the political imagery of Athens into a domestic setting. The owl of Athena imitates the owls of her coins, faces the same way, with her feet in the same position. A simple tool, but decorated for a female audience, the loomweight makes its own political statement. Here the owl is transformed into a spinner, equipped like the spinner on the wedding vase. She has acquired two hands to manipulate the distaff; at her feet is her wool basket (kalathos) and her spindle.

She cocks her head and turns her face to the viewer, demure, yet open, and unmistakably feminine. A symbol of Athenian public life, famous at home and abroad, has been appropriated for the private, constricted world in which most women lived out their lives, a contrast to Athena herself, endowed with the paraphernalia of war in the male realm. Here we find Athena's owl domesticated, a sly challenge, perhaps, and an affirmation of women's worth.