Spartan Shifts:

An Investigation into the Changing Perception of Spartan Women

How have historians’ portrayal of Classical Spartan women changed over time and to what extent are these changes the result of a changed cultural context?

Synopsis

This historical inquiry focuses on the role of four different historians in shaping the portrayal of Classical Spartan women. I seek to determine which contextual factors have contributed to each historian’s assessment of Spartan women, and the impact that this has had on their work. As such, this historical investigation aligns well with the “Who are the historians?” component of the Extension History course.

This question evolved from research into the lifestyle of Classical Spartan women. I realised that there were large discrepancies in the appraisal of Spartan women by different historians. Whilst the ancient writers were altogether negative about the impact of Spartan women on the constitution of the state, modern feminist historians were eager to praise the contribution that Spartan women made to their society. Therefore, this essay follows chronologically the portrayal of Spartan women over time.

Aristotle and Plutarch, two of the ancient historians whose portrayal of Spartan women have been extremely important points of reference for historians up to the present day, were influenced by their cultural context which was not supportive of any form of freedom permitted to women. Similarly, George Grote, the Victorian era historian,
portrays Spartan women negatively. Grote’s context has had an impact on his depiction of Spartan women, as he was a man living before ideas of women’s liberation and suffrage were widely supported. Finally, Sarah Pomeroy’s works on Spartan women, written at different times in the development of ‘feminist history’ have also shaped her portrayal of Spartan women.

The five main sources that I have used in this essay have been carefully selected. Each is a clear product of its era, and provides different insights about Spartan women. Furthermore, each text has been regarded as a benchmark for its respective era and has provided basis for much scholarly debate.

Ancient historian Heraclitus acknowledged that “everything is in process and nothing stays still”¹, and this is certainly true of the portrayal of Classical Spartan women. Indeed the representation of these women has changed over time, from the Classical Grecian period (c. 500 - 336 B.C.E.) to the modern era (1975 - present). This is an inevitable change, as there is no contextual constant that has influenced the way in which every historian has written about Spartan women. Perceptions of Spartan women have shifted from the “pernicious”² women that Aristotle described during the third century B.C.E., to contemporary historians like Pomeroy who see merely “differences between Spartans and other Greek women”³, which are not necessarily pejorative. The changing historiography of Spartan women reveals how approaches to history and the influence of cultural context have produced a topic area often contradictory and confusing.

Some consider Aristotle (c. 350 B.C.E) “one of the fiercest misogynists of all times”⁴ and his portrayal of Spartan women and women in general is a reflection of the strong anti-female sentiment that is evident in his historical works. It is important to establish that as an Athenian male, Aristotle perceived all women to be “infertile male[s]...female on account of a kind of inadequacy”⁵ and despite how at odds to feminism and liberated

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² Arist. Ath. Pol. 2.2
perceptions of women this may be to contemporary historical viewpoints, the philosophy that women were less important than men was held by the majority of Athenian males during this era. Aristotle believed that a morally righteous woman was one who had “bodily beauty and physique, sexual self-control and modesty, and liberal industriousness”\(^6\) and as such, he perceived Spartan women to embody none of these qualities. Instead, he supported the role of his female Athenian contemporaries who by law had “no independent existence”\(^7\) and were expected to be obedient housewives engaged in domestic duties including spinning and weaving wool. In addition, contained within Aristotle’s work *Politics*\(^8\) is a chapter entitled “Proposed Ideal Constitutions” in which Aristotle assesses the constitutions of various Greek city states. He affirms that at Sparta, the freedom given to women defeated “the aim of the Spartan constitution” and was “harmful to the welfare of the state”\(^9\). In addition to this, he asserts that “female licence…tends somehow to foster avarice… [and spoils] the harmony of the constitution”\(^10\). Evidently, Aristotle sees concepts such as women owning land and exercising naked as threatening the ability of the Spartan constitution to function properly. He even goes as far as to state that “a lack of men was her [Sparta’s] ruin”\(^11\). However, contemporary historians perceive Aristotle’s grim portrait of Spartan women to not “cut much ice”\(^12\) as his limited world view clearly shaped his overwhelmingly negative portrayal of this group. It is evident that Aristotle’s membership of a society which seldom recognised the rights of women produced a historical account of Spartan women which reflects resoundingly the attitude of many Athenian males towards women and the Spartans.

Plutarch’s representation of Spartan women (c. 97 C.E.) has had “more influence than any other ancient author in shaping ideas about Sparta”\(^13\). In *Life of Lycurgus*\(^14\) Plutarch makes a number of interesting assertions about Spartan women that appear to have been

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\(^7\) Blundell, op. cit., p. 114.
\(^9\) Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 2.2
\(^10\) Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 2.2
\(^11\) Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 2.3
\(^12\) Cartledge, op.cit., p. 89.
shaped by his cultural context as a Greek male. He denies Aristotle’s claim that Lycurgus (the ‘legendary lawgiver’ of Sparta) tried to restrain women’s freedom; rather, Lycurgus “could not overcome the great licence and power which the women enjoyed”16. Plutarch recognises the liberty exercised by women was on account of the “many expeditions in which their husbands were engaged”17. He therefore lays blame on the males in Spartan society for allowing females freedom, a concept altogether unconsidered by Aristotle. Indeed it is true that Plutarch is “full of enthusiasm”18 for the freedom enjoyed by Spartan women. He even remarks that the nudity of Spartan women in public processions was not “disgraceful…for modesty attended them”19. Evidence of Plutarch’s inherent misogyny is not apparent in such statements, but upon closer inspection, Plutarch’s anti-female perspective is belied in other observations about women. This is demonstrated through Plutarch’s attribution of negative characteristics such as jealously and possessiveness to women. Lycurgus was able to “free the men from the empty and womanish passion of jealous possession”20, an indicator of Plutarch’s perception that negative traits in a human being have their origins in females. Thus Plutarch’s perspective as a Greek male who did not support licentiousness permitted to women, underscores his depreciatory characterisation of Spartan women.

Plutarch’s other important text on Spartan women; Sayings of Spartan Women in Plutarch on Sparta21 provide numerous examples of Spartan women’s stoicism and lack of emotional attachment to family members, characteristics more commonly associated with the portrayal of men in ancient history. Whether or not Plutarch merely reported the ‘sayings’ as he heard them, or whether he manipulated them for a defamatory effect, is unknown, nonetheless provides an interesting scholarly debate. For if he did exaggerate or fabricate the ‘sayings’, this would most certainly be evidence of anti-Spartan and anti-female sentiment. Plutarch observed that a Spartan mother exclaimed to her son

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15 Mestrius Plutarchus or ‘Plutarch’ was from Chaeronea in Boeotia (Greece), however became a Roman citizen in later life.
16 Plut. Lycurg. 14
17 Plut. Lycurg. 14
19 Plut. Lycurg. 14
20 Plut. Lycurg. 15
“[Y]ou’ve acquired a bad reputation. Either shake this off or cease to exist”\textsuperscript{22}. Such an obvious lack of maternal attachment was forgone in the woman’s determination to ensure Sparta’s success in the military field. Furthermore, Plutarch reports that a Spartan mother informed her son as she handed him his shield “Son, either with this, or on this”\textsuperscript{23}. This meant that the woman wished her son to either die in war, or come back victorious, not having lost or been deemed a coward. It is evident that such was the woman’s desire to see Sparta have military success that she was willing to relinquish her maternal attachment to her son in order for this to be achieved. The accumulation of such statements, establish Spartan matriarchs as uncompassionate and war-like individuals, interested in Sparta’s military achievements only. No less, Spartan males manipulated them into observing such a strictly defined ‘maternal’ role for the benefit of the state. Plutarch’s portrayal of Spartan women through their ‘sayings’ is an interesting historical anomaly. It is difficult to ascertain whether Plutarch was accurate in his citation of Spartan women, or whether he deliberately created propaganda that emphasised the ruthless nature of this social group. Regardless of which is true, it is evident that Plutarch’s portrayal of Spartan women in \textit{Plutarch on Sparta} provokes debate as to the effect of cultural context on works of history.

George Grote’s portrayal of Spartan women (1851 and 1875) reflects his puzzlement at the freedom that they enjoyed. Grote, seen as the leading Victorian Age historian of Ancient Greece, looked upon his subjects “as if he had been an Athenian”\textsuperscript{24} and did not “view Ancient Greece through the spectacles of modern society”\textsuperscript{25}. As a consequence, his representation of Spartan women expresses his confusion at the behaviour and liberty they exercised, much like the ancient Greek historians. Grote’s most famous statement in relation to Spartan women reveals his genuine sense of mystification; “of all the attributes of this remarkable community there is none more difficult to make out clearly than the condition and character of the Spartan women”\textsuperscript{26}. Living at a time before women had the

\textsuperscript{22} Plut. \textit{Sayings of Spartan Women}, Unnamed Spartan Women 10
\textsuperscript{23} Plut. \textit{Sayings of Spartan Women}, Unnamed Spartan Women 16
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, p. 248.
\textsuperscript{26} G. Grote in Michell, op.cit., p. 45.
right to franchise\(^{27}\), it is no surprise that Grote, found it difficult to “appraise fairly the contribution made by the women to the Spartan way of life”\(^{28}\). However, he does recognise women’s role in “corrupting the character of the men”\(^{29}\). Such a statement reflects Grote’s prejudice against Spartan women, as their role in society challenged the Victorian middle class ideal of a wife as the “Angel in the House”, one of which Grote would have been supportive. Women during the Victorian era were expected to be “angels”; “confined to the home to…protect them from the immoral influences of the world, in order that they…should exert their good influence on their husband and children, and through them the society at large”\(^{30}\). Spartan women’s role could not have been more different. Although they did remain at home, women were not expected to exert an influence on their husbands and sons, as men were frequently engaged in military operations or “ephebic training”\(^{31}\) and hence did not live with women. On the other hand, Athenian women’s role in society was typified by the “Angel in the House” concept. Grote’s shock at women publicly “playing the flute [and] dancing crowned with wreaths”\(^{32}\) is hardly surprising considering his cultural perspective which endorsed the notion of the “Angel in the House”, and his tendency to regard Greek history from an Athenian point of view. Likewise, his limited references to Spartan women reflect the degree to which women’s history was ignored during the Victorian era. It is not really surprising that the “desire to uncover a female past, and to ‘gender’ history”\(^{33}\) was not felt strongly by Grote as the context in which he wrote was not supportive of women’s history or indeed, ‘history from below’. He most certainly “systematically applied his…experience to the interpretation of Greek history”\(^{34}\).

\(^{27}\) British women achieved full equality regarding suffrage in 1928.

\(^{28}\) Michell, op.cit., p. 45.


\(^{34}\) Demetriou, op. cit., p. 247.
Pomeroy’s 1975 work *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* is further evidence of the role that context plays in shaping history. This work, republished in 1995 with a new preface, reveals Pomeroy’s acknowledgement that she would “present some [of the] material slightly differently today.” Originally published during the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s-1970s, Pomeroy was compelled to write about women’s experience in Classical Antiquity after historian M.I. Rostovtzeff’s statement that there was only “two unenfranchised classes in Greece: the resident aliens and the slaves.” Pomeroy was abhorred at Rostovtzeff’s ignorance to the fact that women were also unenfranchised and had a desire to rectify this lack of awareness. Evidently, *Goddesses* was ‘reactionary’, a response to her desire to present women’s history as a “legitimate aspect of social history.” Pomeroy’s portrayal of Spartan women is at times, almost hagiographic. She idealises their fabled forthrightness and found it “difficult to believe that Spartan women, who were notoriously outspoken…passively submitted to being lent by their husbands as childbearers to others.” Pomeroy attempts to demonstrate their defiance of social convention to a feminist audience who would have appreciated such insubordination. However, other historians have conceded that Spartan women’s behaviour was “far from feminist.” Indeed, it served a male prerogative and the greater good of males in positions of authority. Furthermore, in another of Pomeroy’s later works she does realise that Sparta was a “forerunner of totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany,” a clear indicator that her idealisation of Spartan women in *Goddesses* was ill-guided. As a result of the discovery of new sources, *Goddesses* would “paint a considerably bleaker picture of Greek and Roman women now than in 1975.” Pomeroy is a historian who has acknowledged the innate flaws in her own work that have arisen because of her cultural context as a Professor of Classics during the Women’s Liberation Movement. Despite this, she believes that *Goddesses* has historical integrity and value as it was published.

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35 Pomeroy, 1995, op. cit., referred to henceforth as *Goddesses*.
36 Ibid, p. x.
37 Ibid, p. xvii.
38 Ibid, p. xvii.
“early in the development of the history of women in antiquity”\textsuperscript{43}, a time when feminist ideas were being embraced not only in politics and society, but also in the field of academia.

Pomeroy’s other important historical work, \textit{Spartan Women}\textsuperscript{44}, is a clear product of the post-feminist era. \textit{Spartan Women}, written 27 years after \textit{Goddesses} is not so much a hagiography, as it is a critical analysis of Spartan women’s role in society. However, it remains to be a ‘reactionary’ work, much like \textit{Goddesses}. Pomeroy was impelled to write the work after hearing a referee comment that “there were no female Spartiates [Spartan citizens i.e. had legal rights]”\textsuperscript{45}. Hence, both \textit{Goddesses} and \textit{Spartan Women} are ‘reactionary’ in the sense that they were produced in reaction to Pomeroy’s belief that some Classics scholars are still ignorant to the role of women in Classical Sparta. Pomeroy has relied heavily upon primary sources in \textit{Spartan Women} and she acknowledges that she has given “more credence”\textsuperscript{46} to such sources than other historians. The credibility of historians including Herodotus, Xenophon and indeed, Aristotle and Plutarch is highly questionable, and does undermine the reliability of Pomeroy’s own analysis. Nonetheless, she does not heavily rely on fifth century C.E. historians Critias or Plato, who are credited with promulgating ‘le mirage spartiate’\textsuperscript{47}. Interestingly, Pomeroy realises that “current scholarly consensus is more nuanced and less influenced by information emanating from the mirage”\textsuperscript{48}. Her own work is proof of this. Other historians have also acknowledged that in addition to an historical shift from the ‘mirage era’, Pomeroy’s work has been “enriched by nearly a generation’s accomplishments in the historiography of women”\textsuperscript{49}. Although Pomeroy herself was one of the pioneers in writing Classical women’s history, the publication of \textit{Spartan Women} would not have been possible without the shifts in approaches to history that have occurred in the last 30-40 years. Moreover, Pomeroy asserts that it is “anachronistic to discuss Spartan women

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, p. ix.
\textsuperscript{44} Pomeroy, 2002, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, p. vii.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, p. viii.
\textsuperscript{47} ‘The Spartan Mirage’; phrase coined by François Ollier referring to Western idealisation of Sparta as stable, non capitalist society: P. Cartledge, 2005, \textit{The Socratics’ Sparta and Rousseau’s}, \url{http://www.history.ac.uk/eseminars/sem23.html}, 28/6/06.
\textsuperscript{48} Pomeroy, 2002, op. cit., p. 71.
\textsuperscript{49} T. Figueira in Pomeroy, 2002, op. cit., back cover.
in terms of contemporary feminist criteria and goals\(^{50}\). She implies that because of the constantly changing and diverse aims that feminist historians have, it would be ineffectual to attempt to assess Spartan women in terms of such criteria. Pomeroy is rather disparaging towards feminists like Simone de Beauvoir who admired how in Sparta “woman was treated on almost an equality with man”\(^{51}\). Pomeroy indicates that de Beauvoir’s portrait of Spartan women was “utopian”\(^{52}\) and thus, in some ways part of ‘le mirage spartiate’. What constitutes historical reality (von Ranke’s “wie es eigentlich gewesen”\(^{53}\)) and what are “distorted, more or less invented images”\(^{54}\) of Spartan women is always going to be a contentious historical debate. Pomeroy’s Spartan Women is merely one work that provides an insight into the issues. It too has been shaped by her own cultural context.

Spartan women comprised an integral part of an ancient society whose historical interpretation over time has been incongruous. Women played a major role in the functioning of Spartan society, and both ancient and modern historians acknowledge this. However, due to some of their unconventional behaviour they have been harshly treated by ancient and Victoria era historians, despite being “objects of wistful wonder on the part of Athenian women”\(^{55}\). Feminist historians of the 1960s-1970s such as Pomeroy have idealised Spartan women to the extreme, but come to realise the error of their ways in subsequent historical works. There is no real continuity in the historiography of Spartan women as the cultural context of each individual historian has left a discernible imprint on the history that they have produced. This is the nature of history. As renowned Australian historian Manning Clark observed “what comes up from inside the historian influences what [s]he sees”\(^{56}\). The perception of Spartan women over time reflects this concept in every way possible.

\(^{50}\) Pomeroy, 2002, op. cit., p. 160.
\(^{51}\) S. de Beauvoir in S. Pomeroy et al., 1994, Women in the Classical World, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 56.
\(^{52}\) Pomeroy, 2002, op. cit., p. 70.
\(^{54}\) Cartledge, 2005, op. cit.
Bibliography

Books:

**Ancient:**


**Contemporary:**


**Journal/Magazine Articles:**


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Source Evaluation


Politics and The Athenian Constitution is an historical work written c. 350 B.C.E. outlining the constitution of 158 states known to Aristotle himself, including that of Sparta. The part of the work that is concerned with Sparta argues that Spartan women had “free reign to every form of intemperance and luxury” and that “[Spartan] women had their fingers in many a pie”. In this way, Aristotle is highly critical of Spartan women as he perceives them to have a “licence” that was not permitted to his female Athenian contemporaries. Politics and The Athenian Constitution is an extremely useful source as it provides an ancient Athenian male’s perspective of Spartan women and an interesting point of investigation for my Major Work. However, Aristotle’s judgements of Spartan women are certainly not highly reliable due to this same fact. Being a male and an Athenian gave Aristotle an innate prejudice against Spartan women, as he lived in a society which endorsed the subordination of women, and had contempt for Spartan ideals. In reality, it is not surprising that Aristotle portrayed Spartan women so negatively as his context was one which did not support Spartans nor women. Politics and The Athenian Constitution has been thoroughly scrutinized in my Major Work because of my awareness of the lack of reliability in Aristotle’s appraisal of this social group.

*LIFE OF LYCURGUS* in Plutarch’s *Lives: Volume I* is a biography of the ‘legendary lawgiver’ of the Spartans, Lycurgus. It outlines the reforms Lycurgus put in place, as well as the social conditions of Spartan life. Plutarch argues that the nudity of Spartan women in public processions inspired the Spartan men “with great ambition and ardour”. He believes that Spartan women’s behaviour was neither “disgraceful… [nor] wanton”, a surprising attitude considering Plutarch’s context as a non-Spartan male. This source has been extremely useful in my Major Work as it has provided a less misogynistic ancient perspective on Spartan women. However, it is apparent that Plutarch does not embrace female autonomy entirely as he attributes negative characteristics such as jealousy and possessiveness to women. In relation to the reliability of *Life of Lycurgus*, Plutarch admits that “the history of these times is such a maze” and was a suitable caveat to me as a researcher, that his work is not entirely reliable. Furthermore, some historians believe that the admiration Plutarch felt for Spartan society led him to “exaggerate its monolithic nature, minimize departures from ideals of equality and obscure patterns of historical change”57. Despite these factors, *Life of Lycurgus* has proved to be an extremely useful source for my Major Work as it is a somewhat paradoxical perspective of Spartan women.

3. Pomeroy, Sarah B., 2002, *Spartan Women*, New York, Oxford University Press. *Spartan Women* is the first contemporary full-length historical examination of various aspects of Spartan women’s lives during the Classical and Hellenistic periods. Pomeroy argues that the perspectives of Plutarch and Xenophon have “shaped our views of Spartan women” more than any other historians, and hence, her work attempts to rectify this imbalance in the reliance upon these sources. This has been achieved through Pomeroy’s analysis and exploration of “every ancient text that appeared relevant”. She also argues that there needs to be a shift from feminist idealisation of Spartan women to an “appreciation of Spartan motherhood and to criticism of societies [i.e. Spartan society] based on…totalitarian programs”. *Spartan Women* has been an extremely useful source for my Major Work as it is not only “the first book-length examination of Spartan

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women”, but also a unique insight into the lives of Spartan women of all classes. In terms of reliability, Spartan Women is a reasonably reliable source. Pomeroy acknowledges that historians differ in the interpretations of “historical reality, and what was part of the “Spartan mirage”; an indication that she is aware that her perspective as a twenty-first century feminist historian, influences her perception of Spartan women’s history. Pomeroy’s context has been vital in shaping her work and provided much scope for analysis in my Major Work.

Source: Claire Hunter