Wonder No Longer:
Spartan Women and Mythology

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HIST299

Pledge: I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work: _____

> It occurred to me one day that Sparta, though among the most thinly populated of states, was evidently the most powerful and most celebrated city in Greece; and I fell to wondering how this could have happened. But when I considered the institutions of the Spartans, I wondered no longer.[1]

When Xenopohn penned these words in 388 B.C.E., he was living in Sparta after being exiled from Athens. Xenophon was a refugee, exiled for fighting as a mercenary on the Spartan side during the Peloponnesian War (404-431 B.C.E.). His words provide an invaluable resource for scholars interested in Sparta. It is the legendary "institutions of the Spartans" he mentions that preserve the memory of Spartans well into the modern day. This applies even—and especially—to contemporary history. In the United States, when the early stages of the women's rights movement began to gain traction "reformers looked to Sparta for moral and social values."[2] In the antebellum South, southern women "continued to embrace classical culture. They often likened fellow Southern women they admired to the Spartans."[3] These antebellum southern women were the progenitors for the modern women's rights movement today. Modern feminist art is also influenced by Sparta's gender equality.[4] Much of feminism's roots are buried deep within the dirt and dust of history. Therefore, in order to better understand women's rightful place in their own societies, history must be looked to as an example.

Spartan women are well-known to historians of the ancient world for the extraordinary extent of their individual rights and equality with their male counterparts. In the rest of the Hellenistic world, Sparta was an anomaly. According to a leading ancient historian Sarah Pomeroy, "there is no period in Greek history for which our evidence of the experience

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[1] Xenophon. *Hiero. Agesilaus. Constitution of the Lacedaemonians. Ways and Means. Cavalry Commander. Art of Horsemanship. On Hunting. Constitution of the Athenians.* Translated by E. C. Marchant, G. W. Bowersock. Loeb Classical Library 183, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925) 137.

[2] Edward McInnis,"The Spartan Woman: Symbol for an Age? Antebellum-Era Images of the Ideal Female Citizen in the North and South," *American Educational History Journal* 43, no. 2 (2016): 196.

[3] McInnis, 196.

[4] Martin Kemp, "Spartan Sport Laid Bare Edgar Degas's Painting of Female Athletes Challenging Male Competitors in Classical Sparta Raises Subtle Questions about Gender, Politics and Sport," *Nature (London)* 454, no. 7208 (2008): 1053-54.

of women is more fascinating or as contradictory."[5] Women's rights in Sparta were not simply an anomaly or a contradiction, rather they were intrinsically tied to the legendary figures of Helen and Lycurgus, Spartan traditionalism, and Greek mythology's relationship with Spartan culture. Spartan women were specifically unique in how much freedom—politically, educationally, sexually, religiously, economically, and socially—they possessed in comparison to women in the rest of the Greek speaking world. Those freedoms start with the laws of Lycurgus, which often directly went against the Greek custom. Helen of Troy was the quintessential Spartan woman, so she exerted a marked influence on Spartan society and the women within it. Helen of Troy is part historical figure and part mythical archetype; therefore, she provides a convenient connection to mythology and its influence on Spartan society. Mythology and its relationship with Spartan society is best explained by renowned scholar and Anthropologist, Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. The connection between the mythical view of women and Sparta's view of women is the final justification for the unique freedom of Spartan women.

In saying that the freedoms of Spartan women were unique, it should be clarified that they were unique for the intersection of time and geography at which Sparta existed. Sparta has no official start date due to the lack of written sources, but the year 775 B.C.E. generally serves as an appropriate starting point. The choice of 775 B.C.E. is mostly because "recent scholarship has…demonstrat[ed] that the years around 775 did indeed mark the beginning of a new epoch in Greek history."[6] Ancient Greek scholars also placed the date around the same time. Though, the Greek reasoning was slightly different. 776 B.C.E. was "the traditional date established by the Sophist Hippias of Elis (c.400) for the foundation of the Olympic Games."[7] The Greeks, Romans, and other ancient civilizations of that time period had a habit

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[5] Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 8.
[6] Cartledge, Paul. *Sparta and Lakonia: A Regional History, 1300-362 BC*. 2nd ed. (London: Taylor & Francis. 2002), 88.
[7] Cartledge, 2002. 88.

of tracing their founding or origins to the first Olympic games.[8] Regardless, this is a rare occasion where the ancient sources and the modern scholarship are in total agreement. Therefore, 775 B.C.E. marks the starting point for Sparta as a cultural touchstone. The Battle of Leuctra in 371 B.C.E. is traditionally seen by modern scholars and contemporaries as the end of Spartan hegemony and power in Greece. Therefore, the years of 775 B.C.E. and the Battle of Leuctra in 371 B.C.E serve as specific bounds within which the culture of the Spartans can be analyzed. For this time period, the rights enjoyed by Spartan women were unprecedented.

In Sparta, women had more freedom and power than any other civilization in the Greek world. Spartan women as a whole were economically independent, sexually liberated, and known by other Greeks for their high levels of physical and scholarly education. Inheritance was matrilineal, so when the men went to war and died, their property went to their wives.[9] Women were trusted to manage estates and massive fortunes, which grew exponentially over time.[10] Exercise was public and frequent, with women often exercising naked alongside other women. Education went on longer for girls than boys, because boys had to start training for war early.[11] Spartan women were also sexually free. Sex was common between women,[12] and monogamy was not a firm rule. There were laws in place for children conceived through extramarital affairs to be adopted and inherit wealth.[13] The reception to these rights and freedoms were not always positive.

The rest of the Hellenistic world resented Spartan women, believing their place in Spartan society eroded order. In the rest of the world, women weaved indoors, and men did

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[8] The Spartans actually had a better claim on the Olympics than the average Greek or Roman. Their founder, Lycurgus, is supposed to have had a major hand in founding the Olympic games.
[9] Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Spartan Women*. (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2002), 136.
[10] Pomeroy, Sarah. *Families in Classical and Hellenistic Greece: Representations and Realities.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 53.
[11] Pomeroy, 2002. 7-8.
[12] Pomeroy, 2002. 29.
[13] Pomeroy, 2002. 39-41.

the physical labor.[14] Aristotle, a Greek philosopher working in Sparta's rival city-state of Athens, said the ideal relationship between man and woman was akin to a master ruling over his slave.[15] According to Sphocles, an inspiration to Aristotle, "Silence graces woman."[16] Furthermore, Aristotle disagreed with Sparta's attitude toward women: "The license of the [Spartan] women defeats the intention of the Spartan constitution, and is adverse to the good order of the state."[17] Ironically, the volume of writing about Spartan women leaves a plethora of primary sources on the lives of Spartan women. By complaining incessantly about them, Greek men solidified Spartan women's place in history.

The historical precedent set by two crucial figures—Lycurgus and Helen of Troy—were key elements in the lack of limits on women's rights. The Spartan laws were established largely by the former: Lycurgus (sometimes written as Lykourgos). Lycurgus was a lawmaker, and little else is known about him. Plutarch, author of a series of biographies now called Plutarch's *Lives*, says of Lycurgus that "nothing can be said [about him] which is not disputed."[18] But understanding Lycurgus is vital because he functions as the historical founder of Sparta. As a lawmaker, Lycurgus was largely successful, forging Sparta into one of "the wealthiest [states] in Greece."[19] He molded the archetype that all Spartans, men and women, strived to fit into. Without Lycugus, there would be no Sparta. Lycurgus was not a demigod—nor was he purely mythical. As far as history can tell, he was a man who lived, died, and wrote the Spartan law code.[20] He could not have achieved this epic feat without

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[14] Lewis, Sian. *The Athenian Woman : An Iconographic Handbook*. London ; Routledge, 2002. 83.
[15] *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation.* 3rd ed, Edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant. (Johns Hopkins University Press. 2005), 39. (Aristotle, Politics. 1260a9).
[16] Sophocles. *The Ajax of Sophocles*. Edited by Sir Richard Jebb. (Cambridge University Press. 1893), Line 290-295.
[17] Aristotle. *Aristotle's Politics*. (England: At the Clarendon Press 1920), 1260a9
[18] Plutarch. *Lives, Volume I: Theseus and Romulus. Lycurgus and Numa, Solon and Publicola.* Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. (Loeb Classical Library 46. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), 205.
[19] Cartledge, 2002. 103.
[20] Plutarch himself struggled with this, writing: "However, although the history of these times is such a maze, I shall try, in presenting my narrative, to follow those authors who are least contradicted, or who have the most notable witnesses for what they have written about the man." (Plutarch. *Lives, Volume I: Lycurgus.* 207).

genuine intelligence and realistic expectations of how human society functioned. He was aware of what roles were best filled by men and which were best suited to women. His view of women and men was concerned first and foremost with practicality, equality, and the benefit of the state. Lycurgus saw women as a vehicle for childbearing, but he did not want to oppress women. Childbearing has often been used throughout human history to oppress women, usually keeping women indoors, docile, and sexually imprisoned. Spartan women were able to leverage bearing children as a tool which only they could use. Children were not a Spartan woman's sole reason for existence. The important thing was conceiving healthy, physically fit children. It was thought that strong, healthy, beautiful women were more likely to have children bearing the same qualities. In this way, Spartan women were encouraged by Spartan legislature and culture to be strong, smart, and happy, because that would make better children. In fact, losing a son or husband was not the end of the world. Spartan women had support systems, friends, lovers, and a life outside their husbands and sons. Losing the men in their life was sad, yes, but if it was an honorable death, it was worth it.[21] Spartan women were chiefly charged with upholding the integrity of the state, not the family. But this came with responsibility and power. Women oversaw the children, but they also oversaw finances, property, and the government when the men were away. Spartan men did not rankle at this sharing of authority, in fact, they relished in it. The main concern with children was not even raising them, it was making them strong. Monogamy was discarded as well. The child being of one father or twenty was irrelevant—a good soldier was a good soldier.[22] Women had a duty to provide children just as men had a duty to protect those children on the battlefield.

Lycurgus designed the gender stereotypes around cooperation: Spartan men fought for the society that Spartan women upheld. Lycurgus's aim was to shame men out of sex, as he believed the woman was better suited to decide who would father the best children. He

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[21] Pomeroy, 2002. 60.
[22] Cantarella, Eva. *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 43.

decreed, “The husband should be ashamed to be seen entering his wife’s room or leaving it.”[23] Lycurgus had no qualms about playing against gender stereotypes, and the same applied to sexual liberty. For example, Xenophon says Lycurgus dictated a law which, in the case of a husband being too old for his wife, “requir[ed] the elderly husband to introduce into his house some man whose physical and moral qualities he admired, in order to beget children.”[24] The rule also applied to inverse situations. If a man wanted children but did not want to get married, the man could “obtain…consent, to make [another man’s wife] the mother of his children.”[25] Lycurcus’s laws were unorthodox, but the Spartans were ferociously devoted to them. Though he was a real historical figure, Lycurgus was also a man steeped in his own mythology.[26] He was supposed to have one eye, losing his other “because of the opposition to his reforms.”[27] The mythic tradition around Lycurgus and his laws is a massive part in the staying power of those laws and the effect he had on Spartan women’s role in society.

The next actor in the great Spartan epic is arguably more important and decidedly more influential on society then and today. Helen of Troy is a woman who defies explanation. The “the face that launch’d a thousand ships, And burnt the topless towers of Ilium”[28] almost needs no introduction. Helen of Troy was a Spartan woman who, after being kidnapped by a prince named Paris, was held hostage in the great city of Ilium (or, Troy). She was the crux of the Trojan War, made famous by Homer’s *Iliad,*[29] and thus, Helen the most important Spartan who ever lived. Helen of Troy is portrayed throughout the *Iliad* as both a villain and a victim. One passage from the *Iliad* says, “No one could fault with the Trojans or well-greaved

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[23] Xenophon. 1925. 139.
[24] Xenophon. 1925. 139.
[25] Xenophon. 1925. 141.
[26] Д. В. ПАНЧЕНКО “Lycurgus, the Celestial Patron of Sparta.” *SHOLE. Filosofskoe antikovedenie i klassičeskaâ tradiciâ*, 2020. 1.
[27] Д. В. ПАНЧЕНКО “Lycurgus, the Celestial Patron of Sparta.” 2020. 1.
[28] Marlowe, Christopher. *Doctor Faustus.* (Dover Thrift Editions. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 1995), Line 163.
[29] Small note here: because Troy can also be called Ilium, the title *Iliad* translates to “Poem of Troy.” This poem was widely read even at the time. It is by far the most common text found in archaeological digs by many magnitudes of order. Alexander the Great even slept with a copy of the *Iliad* under his pillow every night. Suffice it to say, Helen of Troy had significant name recognition even at the time.

Acheans for enduring sorrow for so long a time for the sake of a woman like Helen—she looks dreadfully like the immortal goddess."[30] According to modern scholars, the verdict is clear: "The Homeric woman is not only subordinate but also victim of a fundamentally misogynist ideology."[31] This did not apply to all of the Greek world. Helen was also a deeply respected and revered figure. The Spartans worshiped her and saw her as a role model. Greeks across the Hellenistic sphere of influence setup cult centers to properly worship her.

Her role as a woman, hostage, and Spartan are threaded together throughout the *Iliad*. In Sparta, Helen was seen as a pseudo-Divine figure.[32] The cult of Helen was a key fixture in the Spartan religious pantheon. Women's participation in religion throughout the Greek world was limited in some places, but in Sparta, it was a key aspect of femininity. According to Pomeroy, "Spartan cults for women reflected the society's emphasis on female beauty, health, and most of all, fertility."[33] In comparison with other Hellenistic women, the "[religious] activities of Spartan women included substantially more opportunities for racing and far less weaving."[34] Helen of Troy had extensive reach across Sparta as a religious figure.[35] Ritual celebration included feasting, dancing, and singing with fellow women.[36] In her section on the Cult of Helen, Pomeroy summarizes, "Helen as a religious figure reflects the lives of mortal Spartan women."[37] Helen was the quintessential Spartan woman, and the Spartans knew this. She was the ideal that Spartan women strived to be. She was strong and beautiful,

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[30] Homer, A. T. (Augustus Taber) Murray. *The Iliad*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), Line 3.156-58.
[31] Cantarella, 1987. 27.
[32] The historical evidence here is sparse. Most of what historians have to go on is based on Archaeology, which often lacks proper context. But there are multiple examples of cult centers throughout the Greek world that were dedicated to Helen. Spartan women were chief members and leaders of these cults, so it can be safely assumed that Helen's home country looked on her with pride rather than disdain.
[33] Pomeroy, 2002. 105.
[34] Pomeroy, 2002. 106.
[35] Pomeroy, 2002. 114.
[36] Pomeroy, 2002. 114-118.
[37] Pomeroy, 2002. 114.

and so Spartan women exercised and held themselves to high beauty standards. She was intelligent, encouraging Spartan women to educate themselves in a wide variety of fields.

There is a distinct connection between Sparta and its traditions, this connection formed a social ladder—built upon the structure of Spartan mythology—which Spartan women could climb. Sparta was traditional in the sense that Spartan laws remained largely unchanged over hundreds of years.[38] Tradition has often been used throughout human history to justify oppression and blind adherence to an unequal status quo. For Sparta, commitment to tradition meant a commitment to equality. Sparta held onto its traditions not out of stubbornness, but devotion. Sparta's laws and customs held strictly to human nature and thus, human rights. Spartans held to their laws and customs through cultural ties to the past and to the human condition. Spartans were devoted to Sparta because being Spartan was analogous with being a free, equal, and respected member of society. Therefore, the laws of Lycurgus and the mythology surrounding Helen had massive consequences for Spartan society, because they elevated Spartans to that position of equality and freedom. Functionally, the stories Spartans told about themselves had a massive effect on Spartan social life, religion, gender roles, and sexuality. More than other societies of the time, mythology determined Spartan culture.

The connection between women, myth, and society is best illustrated by Joseph Campbell—a world renown scholar on the relationship between myth and society—in his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's landmark 1949 work on mythology and culture provides an invaluable resource for dissecting the mytho-social relationship. According to Campbell, myth and society are intrinsically related: "Mythology…is psychology misread as biography, history, and cosmology."[39] Myth, according to Campbell, is representative of the society it inhabits. To understand a society, one must understand its

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[38] Cartledge, 2002. 276.
[39] Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), 256.

myths. Greek mythology (which permeated the Hellenistic world) provides an example of how mythology can be used to oppress women. The relationship between myth and society can simultaneously function on an individual scale and also a grand "monomyth" that encompasses the entirety of the human condition.[40] On a grander scale, mythology is the "great vision of the creation and destruction of the world."[41] This monomyth applies to the whole of human society, regardless of class, gender, or race. The monomyth is (largely) universal across cultures and countries. Joseph Campbell, in his exhaustive research, was "presented with astonishing consistency in the sacred writings of all the continents."[42] The role women play in mythology is as comprehensive as covering everything from the moment of birth to the final moment of death. In mythology, the woman is a protector: "the hero who has come under the protection of the Cosmic Mother cannot be harmed."[43] One of these female figures who protects by nature of her femininity is Helen of Troy.[44] The woman is also the source of each individual moment of creation, because "the peace of Paradise…was known first within the mother womb,"[45] In Campbell's view of mythology, the woman's place in the cosmos is that of life itself, "for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master."[46] The woman is a symbol in mythology for creation, divine intervention, and in the ultimate freedom of bringing life into the world that was not there before. Like Lycurgus, Campbell recognizes birth as the ultimate act of creation that keeps human society in perpetual motion. Campbell writes, "[The woman's] womb…summons to itself by its very readiness the original power that fertilized the void."[47] In the cycle of mythology, the creation of the universe is repeated on a biological scale within the woman. Helen's place in the *Iliad* as the genesis for the Trojan war is its own act of creation. Without Helen, there would be no

[40] Campbell,1949. 2.
[41] Campbell, 1949. 38.
[42] Campbell,1949. 39.
[43] Campbell, 1949. 71.
[44] Campbell, 1949. 71.
[45] Campbell, 1949. 71.
[46] Campbell, 1949. 120.
[47] Campbell, 1949. 308

war. The Trojan war was a cornerstone in the formation of Greek culture as it is thought of today. Without the Trojan war, there would be no Greece. Helen launched a thousand ships, but in return, she birthed a nation whose ideas still influence political thought, philosophy, math and science today. Spartans, because of their connection with Helen of Troy, felt that the mother of Sparta was also the mother of the entire world they inhabited. It was common knowledge at the time (because of the popularity of Homer's *Iliad*) that the Greek world began with the Trojan war, and it was also common knowledge that the Trojan War began with Helen of Troy; furthermore, Helen of Troy gave Sparta a sense of national pride. Helen was the mother of Sparta and the Greek world as a whole. Sparta's devotion to mythology, Helen, and the Spartan women who descended from Helen all serve as proof that Spartan women were well aware of their place in the cosmos.

Spartan women were able to leverage the society they lived in and its cultural values to empower themselves. Spartan women drew on law, legend, mythology, and religion to carve out a place in their social hierarchy. Spartan women should stand as a shining example of liberation through culture, and Sparta as a whole is an example of conservation of tradition without relying on oppression and bigotry. When Xenophon wrote his treatise on the Constitution of the Spartans, he set out to explain how a society like Sparta could not only survive, but thrive. Many people look at Sparta and their women today and ask themselves the same question. Up into the modern era, feminists have been pointing to Spartan women and wondering how they were able to live freely in such a restrictive time. However, when one considers the "institutions of the Spartans,"[48] the precedent set by Lycurgus and Helen, Spartan traditionalism, and women's place in mythology, one truly can wonder no longer.

[48] Xenophon. 1925. 137.

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