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Women in Classical Societies

India, China, and the Mediterranean, 500 B.C.E.–500 C.E.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In Chapter 1 we saw how the earliest city societies or "civilizations," which emerged about five thousand years ago, often created patriarchies where fathers ruled families, kings ruled societies, priests administered for gods, and state officials, soldiers, and police preserved laws favoring men. The patriarchies that developed in the ancient world continued through the classical age down to the recent past, if not the present.

Nevertheless, not all patriarchies were alike. Some allowed women greater freedom or autonomy. Yet, they did have one thing in common—change. In the thousand years between 500 B.C.E. and 500 C.E. the roles of women did not remain constant in any society or civilization.

Historians call this period the "classical age" because it produced some of the enduring works of a number of the world's major civilizations, some of which we read in Chapters 3 and 4. In this chapter, we will read more of these works, partly to savor their authors' vision and insights and to understand the reasons for their wide acclaim. But we will also use these writings as windows on classical social life. We will ask specifically what they tell us about the comparative and changing roles of women in the classical age.

THINKING HISTORICALLY

Considering Historical Moment and Historical Process

We can think of history as moment or process. Most popular history attempts to capture a moment. Plays, movies, even our own imagina-

tions usually try to capture moments: what it was like to live in ancient Rome, witness the assassination of Caesar or the preaching of Jesus. The appeal of a good primary source is that it can immerse us in its particular historical moment. In the previous two chapters we also used primary sources to compare two moments in different cultures—Rome with China, Greece with India, for instance—as if these moments could stand in for the whole history of a culture or civilization.

We also study history to understand how things change: How did the Roman Empire decline? How did Christianity spread? This is the study of history as process. Here we must also use primary sources (since that is, by definition, all we have of the past), but since each one represents only a particular moment we have to either examine it for evidence of change or gather many to see the changes that occurred from one moment to the next.

In this chapter we will be studying both historical moments and historical processes in the history of women in classical antiquity. We will read the efforts of historians to understand the process of change in women's history during this period. And we will examine primary sources—written and visual—that reflect moments of that past. We will also be comparing one document with another. But in addition to comparing a document from Rome, for instance, with one from China, we will also be considering how each document might reflect a particular stage or period in the longer process of the history of its civilization and of the history of women generally. We do this to understand and practice two different ways of thinking about the past.

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SARAH SHAVER HUGHES
AND BRADY HUGHES

Women in the Classical Era

Sarah and Brady Hughes are modern historians. This selection is part of their essay on the history of women in the ancient world. They write here of the classical era in India, China, Greece, and Rome. All of these were patriarchal societies, but how were they different? The authors also mention later Greek Hellenistic society and pre-Roman Etruscan society. How do these two societies round out your understanding of women in the classical era? What seem to be the conditions or causes that improved the status of women in some societies and periods?

Thinking Historically

Notice that from the first sentence, the authors are interested in understanding the historical process, specifically how the role of women changed over time. In what societies do they see change? Did the roles of women improve or decline in these societies during this period? How do the authors use primary sources to show change?

India

Women's rights deteriorated after the Vedic* period (1600–800 B.C.E.). No one has been able to prove why this happened. Scholarly interest has focused on women's exclusion from performing Hindu rituals, which was in effect by 500 B.C.E. . . . Julia Leslie thinks that women's exclusion resulted from intentional mistranslation of the Vedas by male scholars, as the rituals became more complicated and as the requirement for property ownership was more rigorously enforced at a time when women could not own property.

The falling age of marriage for Indian women is another illustration of their loss of rights. In 400 B.C.E. about sixteen years was a normal age for a bride at marriage; between 400 B.C.E. and 100 C.E. it fell to pre-puberty; and after 100 C.E. pre-puberty was favored. These child marriages also affected women's religious roles. Because girls married before they could finish their education, they were not qualified to perform ritual sacrifices. Furthermore, wives' legal rights eroded. As child wives, they were treated as minors. Then their minority status lengthened until they were lifetime minors as wards of their husbands. Finally, women were prohibited any independence and were always under men's control: their fathers, husbands, or sons. By 100 C.E. Hindu texts defined women with negative characteristics, stating, for example, that women would be promiscuous unless controlled by male relatives. While Indian women were losing their independence, Indian men continued to glorify their wives and mothers. A wife was the essence of the home, a man was not complete without a wife, and sons were expected to respect their mothers more than their fathers. As Romila Thapar sums up these contradictions, "The symbol of the woman in Indian culture has been a curious intermeshing of low legal status, ritual contempt, sophisticated sexual partnership, and deification."

One of the causes for this deterioration of women's rights and independence was the increasing rigidity of Hinduism under the influence of the Brahmans. By 600 B.C.E. sects were springing up that opposed Brahman power and ostentatiously omitted some of the Hindu essentials, such as priests, rituals and ceremonies, animal sacrifices, and even caste distinctions. Jainism and Buddhism are two of the sects that have survived. They were especially attractive to women. Jainism, the older religion, gained prominence with the efforts of its last prophet, Mahavira, who lived at the end of the sixth century B.C.E. Jains sought to live without passion and to act "correctly." One could achieve liberation only by living within a monastery or nunnery. Women who sought to join a nunnery found that the Jains had no membership restrictions. Many women entered and found new and exciting roles that were for the first time open to them. . . .

Mahavira's contemporary, Gautama Siddhartha* (the Buddha), began the religion that eventually spread throughout Asia. Among studies of Buddhist women, the early years have been a focus of interest. While Buddhism had no priests, it relied on celibate monks, who were initially homeless, except in the monsoon season, and had to beg for their necessities as they spread their ideas. The Buddha was reluctant to allow women to become nuns. He refused even the women in

*GAW tah moh sih DAHR thah

his family who sought to become nuns until he was reminded repeatedly by his aunt and his disciple Ananda of his stated principle that anyone could attain enlightenment. The Buddha then reluctantly accepted women followers, and they, like monks, eventually lived in their own self-governing celibate monasteries. . . .

China

. . . For Chinese women the ideas of Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) have been most influential. There is little mention of women in his *Analects*. His neo-Confucian interpreters corrected this omission, however. They made explicit men's desire for a woman's subordination to her family, her husband, and her sons. For example, Lieh Nu Chuan (also known as Liu Hsiang, 80–87 B.C.E.) wrote *The Biographies of Eminent Chinese Women*, in which he included 125 biographies of women from the peasant class to the emperor's wife, taken from prehistoric legends to the early years of the Han dynasty.

Although the purpose of these biographical sketches was to provide moral instruction in the passive ideals of Confucian womanhood, translator Albert Richard O'Hara's analysis of the women's actions reveals their influence on events that were important to them. The traditional Chinese interpretation of the genre is evident in one of the best-known biographies, that of the widowed mother of Mencius (Meng K'o, or Meng-tzu), whose stern supervision and self-sacrifice were shown to have shaped her son's character and philosophy. This tale drives home the point that a woman's highest ambitions should be fulfilled indirectly through the talents of her sons. Pan Chao,[1] a female scholar in the first century C.E., wrote *The Seven Feminine Virtues* as a Confucian manual for girls' behavior. Its prescriptions of humility, meekness, modesty, and hard work continued to be copied by generations of young women until the twentieth century. . . .

Occasionally, imperial women seized power to govern when acting as regent for an underage emperor. Usually regents exercised this power cautiously behind the scenes because there was much opposition to women's open governance. Two famous empresses ruled openly, however, and sought to transfer royal descent to their own natal families. The first, Empress Lu, violated every canon of Confucian femininity. The widow of Gaodi, the first Han emperor (ruled 202–195 B.C.E.), Empress Lu acted swiftly and brutally to eliminate competitors at court during the near-fifteen years of her rule as regent for her son, her grandson, and another adopted infant grandson. By retaining power

[1]Ban Zhao in selection 26. [Ed.]

until her death in 181 B.C.E., she expected that her own nephews would succeed her. Instead, a civil war over the succession ended the period of peaceful prosperity, low taxes, and lessened punishment for crimes that had made her reign popular with the Chinese people. . . .

Greece

Classical Greece has long been admired for its political theories, philosophy, science, and the arts. Until recently, Greek social history was largely ignored. Slavery, homosexuality, and subordination of women are topics once dismissed as insignificant but now recognized as important to understanding the culture. In the classical period there were actually many "Greeces," with distinct societies developing in the city-states of Athens, Sparta, and Thebes. Gender patterns varied considerably among these cities. Sparta's aristocratic women, for example, were often left alone to acquire wealth and some autonomy when their mercenary husbands soldiered elsewhere. To some Athenian men such as Aristotle, Spartan women were thought to be despicable, licentious, greedy, and the reason for Sparta's decline.

Aristotle and other Athenian men dominate the discourse from classical Greece. Their male descriptions tell how Athenian society secluded elite women, denigrated and exploited them, and made them the legal dependents of men. Because no women's writings survive, only indirect evidence suggests how Athenian wives escaped their lives of hard work in the isolated, dark rooms that their husbands imagined necessary to preserve their chastity. But as drawn on vases, groups of Athenian women read to one another, spun and wove, shared child care, or talked. Women are shown in public processions and getting water from wells. Bits of documentary records show respectable married women earning their livings as wet nurses, farm workers, and retail vendors. Most records reveal the lives of privileged women, yet many Athenian women were slaves. Exposure of unwanted female babies was one internal source of slaves, for the rescuer of such an infant became her owner. Athenian enslavement of females was exceptional in its celebration of prostitution in literary and artistic records. One explanation for the large number of slave sex workers may be the Athenians' desire to attract sailors and merchants to their port.

Research on women in the Hellenistic period concentrates on Greek women living in Egypt. These women were much more assertive and influential than their sisters in either contemporary Greece or later Rome. Women in the ruling Ptolemaic family often actually ruled Egypt, some as regents, others as queens. Cleopatra VII (69–30 B.C.E.), one of the best-known women in ancient history, guided her country from a tributary position in the Roman Empire into a partnership with

Marc Antony that might have led to Egypt's domination of the eastern Mediterranean. Non-elite women had unusual freedom. They owned property (including land), participated in commerce, produced textiles, were educated, and enjoyed careers as artists, poets, and farmers. But some women were slaves. . . .

Rome

As late as the sixth century B.C.E., Rome was dominated by its northern neighbors, the Etruscans. Although no body of Etruscan literature exists, scholars have sought evidence of women's lives from inscriptions and art found in their tombs. Upper-class Etruscan women were more autonomous and privileged than contemporary Greek women. Paintings of husbands and wives feasting together horrified Greek males, who only allowed prostitutes to attend their banquets. Etruscan women were not restricted to their homes as Greek women were and attended the games at gymnasiums. In Italy, all women left votive statues of women in sacred places, probably as a fertility offering, but only Etruscan statues included a nursing child, suggesting an affection for children that paralleled the affectionate touching between couples occasionally shown in their art. Finally, Etruscan women had personal names, in contrast to Greek women, who were known first as their fathers' daughters and later as their husbands' wives.

The Romans did not duplicate the autonomy of women in Etruscan society. Roman women legally were constrained within a highly patriarchal agricultural system organized around clans. A father could kill or sell his children into slavery without fear of legal action. Husbands could kill their wives if they were caught in adultery. Women did not speak in public meetings. They could not buy and sell property without their male relatives' approval. Legally treated as minors, women were first the responsibility of their fathers, then of their husbands, and finally of appointed guardians. Rome was a warrior society and a male republic. Men even dominated the state religion, with the exception of the six Vestal Virgins who served as priestesses. Roman society remained staunchly male until conquests brought wealth to Italy in the second century B.C.E. Changes that accompanied the booty of empire gave women a measure of economic and marital independence that is illustrated by the loosening of legal restrictions against women's property ownership.

The paterfamilias, the oldest male in the family, had complete *manus* (legal control) over his children. In marriage, manus passed from the paterfamilias to the new husband. Among other things, that meant the husband then controlled all of his wife's property. Before the first century B.C.E. some Roman marriages were made without transferring manus to the husband; the wife and her property would remain under her father's control, whose approval was theoretically required for the daughter to buy or sell property. Susan Treggiari explains how this enabled many women to gain control over their property:

> Given ancient expectation of life, it is probable that many women were fatherless for a relatively long period of their married lives. The pattern . . . for the middle ranks of Roman society is that girls married in their late teens and men in their mid- to late twenties. If expectation of life at birth is put between twenty and thirty, then 46 percent of fifteen-year-olds had no father left alive. The percentage grows to 59 percent of twenty-year-olds and 70 percent of twenty-five-year-olds. So there is about a 50 percent chance that a woman was already fatherless at the time of her first marriage.

Upon a father's death, manus was transferred to a guardian, and women began to choose as their guardians men who agreed with them. By the later years of the Roman Republic, therefore, many women bought and sold land as they pleased. Rome's expansion contributed to this change as it fueled a growing market in real and personal property.

In the third century B.C.E., Rome began two centuries of conquests that eventually placed most of the land surrounding the Mediterranean under Roman administration or in the hands of client states. Roman wives farmed while citizen-soldiers of the Republic were on campaigns, sometimes for more than a decade. Successful wars enriched a Roman elite who accumulated estates worked by male and female slaves as small farmers sold their lands and moved to the city with their wives and children. Elite Romans, both men and women, possessed large estates, luxurious urban houses, much rental property, and many slaves. By 50 B.C.E., Rome had a population of approximately one million. Slaves poured into Italy after successful campaigns, when the defeated enemy was enslaved. As the Romans conquered country after country, they brutalized the captured women, enslaving many. Ruling queens in subdued countries were inevitably replaced with either indigenous male elites or Roman officials. Queen Boudicca of Britain, for example, led a revolt that ended in her death in the first century C.E. Queen Zenobia of Palmyra's invasion of the empire in the third century C.E. was so well organized that Roman authors praised her. Cleopatra of Egypt committed suicide when her plan to make Egypt a regional partner of Rome failed.

Roman women did not publicly speak in the Forum (where men debated civic affairs), with the notable exception of Hortensia in 43 B.C.E. She was the spokesperson for a demonstration of wealthy women who protested taxation without representation for civil wars they did not support. Elite women usually indirectly influenced political decisions

century B.C.E., wives of some tyrants even made temporary political decisions. On a wider scale, middle-class and elite women took advantage of the turmoil at the end of the Republic to acquire businesses, as analysis of Pompeii shows. Prostitution flowered in Rome with the inflow of slaves, both male and female. A small part of the elite lived in the self-indulgent luxury that became famous in literature. In a brief period of two generations at the end of the first century B.C.E., Roman elite women eschewed children and family responsibilities for a glamorous and self-absorbed life of parties and lovers. In this period men and women were openly adulterous. This "café society" flourished in the chaos of civil wars that nearly destroyed the prestige of the elite and killed or exiled many of them.

This era of chaos ended during the reign of the emperor Augustus (ruled 27 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), who sought to stabilize Roman society in part by reducing women's freedoms. Women were criticized for adultery, wearing too much makeup, having immodest dress and conduct, and especially for refusing to have children. Augustus procured laws that intended to remove control of marriage and reproduction from the family and allow the state to regulate marriage and reproduction. He attempted to penalize women between the ages of twenty and fifty and men over the age of twenty-five who did not marry and have children by denying them the right to inherit wealth. Furthermore, women were not to be released from male guardianship until they had three children. The Augustan laws made the state the regulator of private behavior and attempted to raise the birthrate of citizens while accepting some of the social changes that had modified the patriarchal society of the old Roman Republic. Augustus sought political support from conservative males by decreasing the autonomy of women who had less political influence than men.

Comparing Women's Status in Various Societies

As discussed earlier, the major literate civilizations of the ancient world were patriarchal. Later records from preliterate societies of the ancient period indicate that women in such societies could be more independent and have a higher status (for example, in many Southeast Asian and African societies). An appearance of universal subordination of women results from focusing only on early literate civilizations while ignoring the lives of women in nonliterate societies.

In the twentieth century, individual choice in personal relationships has replaced family selection of spouses in many societies, although arranged marriages persist in some cultures. In the ancient patriarchal world, however, the family chose spouses for their daughters and sons. Women lived with few civil rights in male-dominated societies. In interpreting ancient women's lives, scholars are faced with two contradictory images. The harsh portrayal is that women were sold by their fathers or brothers to husbands who abused them and that they were considered to have the intellectual capacity of a child, perpetually dependent on a male. Alternatively, some documents reveal women who were loved by their parents, husbands, and children. These women could use the love and affection of their male relatives to gain personal advantages that society would legally deny them. More likely, both explanations accurately reflect aspects of women's lives. Women negotiated a daily balance of gender power in personal relationships, often ignoring disadvantageous laws or ritual regulations, but those laws and regulations could also fall with terrible force on any woman in the ancient patriarchal world.

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R. K. NARAYAN

From The Ramayana

The Ramayana is a classic Indian epic that originated as an oral tradition between 1500 and 400 B.C.E., and was first recorded in the first century C.E. by the poet Valmiki. The poem celebrates the virtues of Prince Rama and his wife Sita, who eventually came to be worshiped as deities in the Hindu pantheon. Exiled from his father's kingdom, Rama goes to live in the forest, and Sita, a dutiful and devoted wife, follows him. Sita is abducted by Ravana, an evil king who holds her prisoner in his kingdom. Rama eventually defeats Ravana with the help of the god Hanuman and brings his beloved Sita back to his own kingdom, which he rightfully regains. But before Rama can fully accept Sita as his queen, she must prove that she has remained loyal to him during her captivity.

There are innumerable versions and variations on this basic story, which is divided into distinct episodes, two of which you will read here. The first selection, the story of Ahalya and Gautama, serves as a prologue to the main tale of Rama and Sita, and focuses on female loyalty. We skip over the main body of the epic and pick up at the end

R. K. Narayan, *The Ramayana* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 20–22, 161–64.