Abstract:

Feminist-influenced treatises told of miserable treatment of women in ancient Greece and Rome, yet their first-hand sources were all written by men. New studies examine the social concept of gender, and look at what classical society thought about the condition of women.

Full Text:

The book is written in the belief that the subject is interesting ... Its history is this. I have been trying for thirty years to write a book on the late Roman Republic, and am only deterred by the knowledge that the period is one which I still do not fully understand. A few years ago I tried a new attack on the period; I tried to approach it through its women ... The result was a paper on 'Roman Women in the Late Republic', which I read at so many branches of the Classical Association that the reading of it became not merely a habit but a disease. Cauterization was the only cure; it had to be published. The Editors of History Today were good enough to translate it into their own kind of impeccable English and to publish it ... After that, Mr Colin Haycraft of The Bodley Head bullied me into taking these women and turning them into a book.

Those words come from the preface of J.P.V.D. Balsdon's Roman Women: their History and Habits, first published thirty years ago; and they show just how much studies of women in the ancient world have changed since the early 1960s. Would anyone write like that now? Surely not. It is not that Balsdon was uninterested in women's history (after all, he wrote a book on it); it is more a question of -- what kind of interest? Would anyone today write about women's 'habits'? (Is that not the language of rabbits and hedgehogs and wildlife television programmes?) Would anyone imply that it was a good deal simpler to understand women than the political problems of the Late Roman Republic? Would we not hesitate before talking about 'turning (women) into a book'? This is the language of packaging, of specimens, of nineteenth-century colonial anthropology -- getting all those weird savages safely dissected on the printed page.

The feminism of the late 1960s and early 70s changed all that; and the book that particularly marked the change was Sarah Pomeroy's, Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves (Robert Hale, 1976). This was a book that seemed to have everything. It had a catchy title and an enormously wide range: from Greek goddesses, through women in
Homer, in classical Athens, in Hellenistic Egypt, in Republican Rome, upper-class women, slave women ... almost up to (but not quite) the Christian women of the late Roman Empire. Most important, it had a sense of engagement in women's history, rather than a half clinical/half prurient remote dissecting eye. 'This book' she wrote in her preface, 'was conceived when I asked myself what women were doing while men were active in all the areas traditionally emphasized by classical scholars'. The answer to this question, of course, turned out to be, for most women in antiquity -- |having a pretty rotten time'.

That dispiriting answer set the tone for much of the work that followed Pomeroy. There seemed to be almost no end to the horrors of women's lives in Greece and Rome that you could discover if you tried hard enough. It was not just a question of there being no formal political rights for women anywhere in classical antiquity (no Votes for Women in this world), but almost every aspect of life even in the 'civilised' cities of Athens and Rome seemed actively to disadvantage women. So, for example, it was the fate of the wives of upper-class Athenians to be largely confined to the home -- bearing children, spinning and weaving, and maybe managing the domestic arrangements. No wandering in the beautiful streets for them, no going down to business in the Agora, or up to the splendour of the Acropolis -- that was men's space. Not much enjoyment of Athenian culture either. Women could not even go to the dramatic festivals that presented the tragedies of Euripides or the comedies of Aristophanes: at least, there is no clear evidence that they could attend -- and, given what we know of Athens, that almost certainly means they could not.

At home, too, women were kept very much in their place. The job of the Athenian wife was to produce Athenian children, to be a mother; it was not to be a companion to her husband. The Athenian house was divided into male and female quarters -- well described by Susan Walker in Images of Women in Antiquity, edited by A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (Croom Helm, 1983); while the wife stayed with the children and domestic slaves, the husband in his quarters would have entertained his men-friends -- and the courtesans with whom he took his sexual pleasure. Classical Athenian democracy, so you had to conclude, might have been a great thing -- but it did not offer much to these imprisoned women.

Rome hardly seemed much better. Never mind those stories of powerful empresses always ready with the poison bottle to dispatch yet another inconvenient relative. Never mind the high life of a few 'liberated' ladies in the first century BC -- the kind of women that so much of Latin love poetry seems to celebrate. These were, in any case, a tiny minority, news-worthy exceptions (the Princess Di's of the Roman world, not you and me). More to the point, Roman literature turns out to be full not just of stories of female freedom, but stories of how Roman upper-class men kept their women policed. Take the case of Egnatius Metellus, for example. This upright old Roman (according to Valerius Maximus, a writer of the first century AD):
took a cudgel and beat his wife to death because she had drunk some wine. Not only did no-one charge him with a crime but no-one even blamed him. Everyone considered this an excellent example of one who had justly paid the penalty for violating the laws of sobriety. And Egnatius Metellus was not the only Roman husband to take a strong line. Gaius Sulpicius Gallus... divorced his wife because he had caught her outdoors with her head uncovered: a stiff penalty, but not without a certain logic. 'The law', he said, 'prescribes for you my eyes alone to which you may prove your beauty ... if you, with needless provocation, invite the look of anyone else, you must be suspected of wrongdoing. All this fits nicely with that well-known Roman practice of kissing female relatives -- not (just) out of affection, but to check that they had not been drinking! (These anecdotes, and many more, can be found in a useful collection of sources in translation: edited by M. Lefkowitz & M. Fant, Women's Life in Greece and Rome, Duckworth, 1982)

These stories derive, of course, from upper-class behaviour. In some ways perhaps the rich women in the ancient world got the worst deal. For what peasant, anxious to get his crops harvested or his sheep tended, would have had the time to bother about segregating his wife, locking her up with the other women, checking up on her drinking? He needed her help more than anything else; a peasant and his wife would have worked side by side -- no separate quarters in their cottage. But even if poverty did paradoxically liberate women from some of the constraints, there was always biology and the patterns of their reproductive life to make sure that they could not really ever have a good time. Women married young (in the upper-class, where property and politics were tied up in marriage alliances, sometimes as young as twelve or thirteen); and they were destined to an unremitting life of childbearing, without any effective contraception, except risky, crude and uncleanly practised abortion. Many of them died in the process -- childbearing probably carried off as many women as war killed men. And those who did survive nursed and tended babies who themselves died in enormous numbers; as in most pre-industrial societies, around 50 per cent of children in Greece
and Rome would not have survived their first twelve months. For all women, rich or poor, their prime function as producers of children condemned them to a life of danger and sorrow.

This was the gloomy message of much of the first feminist (or feminist-influenced) wave of writing on women in the ancient world. It was not, perhaps, quite so unrelieved as I have suggested; there was always the odd piece of female achievement triumphing through, to offer the reader some brighter horizon -- the poetry of Sappho, for example, or Hortensia's fine speech in the Roman forum, denouncing the tax demands loaded on rich women during the civil wars of the 40s BC. But generally nothing much improved the picture. It was an extraordinary contrast with the rather comfortable and undisturbing image constructed by Balsdon (who, for example, had thought the Roman Vestal Virgins rather like dons at Oxford women's colleges!). Here was a bit of brutal reality (or so we all thought) -- and so much the better for that.

But in the end, the problem with this revised picture was quite simply: so what? It was not so much that it was wrong in its details. Maybe it was a bit too sweeping; maybe just a bit too self confident in its certainties. Isn't it, after all, rather arrogant for a historian to come along and write off nian marriage as 'just for child-production'? Every marriage? How could we possibly know?) But it was, surely, broadly on the right lines. The problem was in fact that it was all rather too obviously true. And where did it take you? Is there any society that we know in history that has not oppressed its women in some way or another? What should we do with the knowledge that the Greeks and Romans were guilty too? We might investigate the distinctive and idiosyncratic ways in which they practised their own particular version of misogyny. But then what? The history of women's oppression might be more convincing history than Balsdon's in all sorts of ways; but if all we find ourselves saying is that Classical Antiquity was yet another bad time for the females of the species, then maybe there is not too much further mileage there.

Over the last few years historians and classicists have started to open up new ways of thinking about women in the ancient world -- building on the work of Pomeroy and her successors, but with a rather different agenda. Central to these new approaches is one very simple fact: nothing that survives from antiquity was written by women (with the exception only of the fragments of Sappho -- on which, the best treatment is now J.J. Winkler's chapter in his The Constraints of Desire (Routledge, 1990) -- and a few other snatches of poetry). This is not, of course, a new fact. Almost every book or article ever written on women in Greece and Rome has started from the observation that all our 'evidence' comes from men. And almost every book has then proceeded largely to ignore the fact, and to treat ancient literature as if it provided a clear enough window onto the real lives of women. (There might be differences in the accounts that scholars offered -- but those differences depended mostly on which window, Valerius Maximus or Catullus, say, they chose to look through.) Some of the best recent work has struck
much more firmly to the implications of that male authorship: ancient literature is not
evidence for women's lives in antiquity; it is a series of representations of women, by
men; and we cannot hope to understand what it is saying, unless we reflect on who is
speaking, to whom, in what context and why.

This very simple change of emphasis makes a tremendous difference to our reading of
some of the most important pieces of 'evidence' for women's roles in Greece and Rome.
Think for a moment of the famous lines in Euripides' play, Medea, where Medea says
that she would rather stand in the battleline three times than give birth once. These lines
often come into discussions of ancient childbirth; and are used as evidence for the
sympathy a few Greek men might show for women's plight -- Euripides, the male
play-wright, giving voice to a female point of view. Now think about the context in which
those words were spoken. It was a dramatic festival at which (most likely) no women
were present; even the part of Medea herself would have been played by a male actor
wearing a stylised female mask. And think about Medea's character within the play: she
was no meek Athenian wife, but an abominable foreign witch, who had already killed
her brother, and was about to kill her own young children. What difference does this
make to how we read these words 'as evidence'? Is it really possible in this context to
think of Euripides as straightforwardly sympathetic to the female condition -- or, for that
matter, to imagine the audience returning home to their wives with a heightened
appreciation of the pains of childbirth?

The same kind of questions make a difference to our reading of some of those Roman
anecdotes about the appropriate treatment of wives that I have just quoted. Who was
this Valerius Maximus, who records so many of them? What was he writing, and for
whom? He was, in fact, a great magpie compiler; his book, Memorable Deeds and
Sayings, was a collection of useful anecdotes, designed as a short cut for orators
looking for nice examples to incorporate into their speeches (a bit like a joke book for
after-dinner speakers). None of the stories I mentioned is set in Valerius Maximus' own
day -- the first century AD; their heroes are men from the distant Roman past, the kind
of Real Men we (and the Romans) like to think must have lived in those early days of
the city. We have no idea at all whether the anecdotes were literally true -- whether the
poor wife of Egnatius Metellus really was cudgelled to death for having taken a quick
swig from an amphora. But we can be pretty certain that the literal truth (or
truthlessness) was not a central factor in their retelling.

As the material for public speechmaking in first century Rome, these stories evoked a
world that had passed -- a world whose customs, habits and rules were long lost, about
as foreign to the Romans of the early empire as they are to us. If these stories are
evidence for anything, they are not evidence for Roman women's lives at any period
whatsoever -- they are evidence for how some men in Rome imagined what relations
between men and women might once have been like (but no longer were); how they
represented to themselves one particular 'ideal' of marriage. No less interesting for that,
of course; a society's fantasies are just as important a historical topic as its economy or wars.

This recent stress on representation rather than social reality has gone hand in hand with a stress on gender as a focus of study, rather than women (a transition clearly discussed by Pauline Schmitt Pantel, 'Women and Ancient History Today', in A History of Women: from Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints edited by Schmitt Pantel (Harvard, 1992)). 'Gender' is not a biological category; it is not the set of genital differences that makes half the world 'male' and half 'female'. It is rather the set of social and cultural differences that societies construct (and constantly represent to themselves) to distinguish maleness and femaleness over a much wider spectrum. In our terms, to say 'Real men don't eat quiche' is a joke on and about gender (rather than just 'men'); so likewise a little girl may reflect traditional assumptions about gender, when she aims to become a nurse rather than a doctor. In thinking about the ancient world, an emphasis on gender means an emphasis not on what women did or did not do, but on how ancient culture, ancient literature or ancient art defined and debated the differences between males and females; on what was implied by the ideas of 'maleness' and 'femaleness'; and on how that distinction overlapped with (or reflected) all kinds of other distinctions within ancient societies -- between good and bad, civilisation and barbarity, victory and defeat...

Gender distinctions had a symbolic resonance that extended far beyond the real or imagined differences between men and women -- into almost every other sphere of life from warfare to morals. Take the decoration of the Parthenon in Athens, for example. One side of the temple (on the sculptured metopes) displayed scenes of Greek men in conflict with Amazons -- that mythical race of wild warrior women who lived (it was said) beyond the edges of the world, where everything was topsy turvy. Why such scenes on this great temple? Partly, maybe, for aesthetic reasons. But that cannot be all. Athenian sculptors were here choosing to display, as publicly as they could, a representation of the wildest tribe of women, tamed by the male forces of civilisation. Was not this in some ways the ultimate mythical justification for male control of women in Athens itself? And wasn't it also connected with the very reasons for building this particular temple? The temple celebrated the Athenian defeat of the Persians. The Persians themselves were nowhere shown on the building. But didn't these Amazons call them to mind -- the Persians who (when they were represented) were often shown in rather 'feminine' clothes? Weren't the conflicts between Greek men and wild women somehow doing duty for the conflict between Athens and its great enemy? Paradoxically gender was not just about men and women.

In Rome too gender was an inescapable part of politics. As Catherine Edwards has shown in her recent Politics of Immorality In Ancient Rome (Cambridge, 1993) Roman political debate often focused on 'maleness' versus 'femaleness'. Roman politicians repeatedly attacked their opponents by undermining their maleness -- by claiming that
they were 'soft' and 'smooth' (like a woman), or even (the logical conclusion) that they submitted to sexual penetration by other men. Whatever qualities she suggests, were undesirable in a male member of the Roman elite were termed 'feminine'.

To study gender is to study a lot more than 'women'; it is to study a set of oppositions and differences that underscore almost every aspect of ancient (and modern) life.

This stress on representation has not entirely blotted out all work on the 'reality' of ancient life. If, by now, you are feeling nostalgic for a little straightforward social history, rest assured it still exists -- in a somewhat transmuted form. Books like Beryl Rawson's collection, Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome (Oxford, 1991) give a good idea of how what used to be 'women's history' has expanded into a rich new vein of family and demographic history (how many children? how often married? how often divorced?) But even here the main flavour of the times is question and uncertainty. It is a flavour well summed up by Schmitt Pantel's History of Women. This is the 1990s version of an introduction to ancient women; and the contrast with Pomeroy (let alone Balsdon) could hardly be clearer. Where Pomeroy could feel happy to take on the whole range herself (a one-women show), Schmitt Pantel's version of women's history is a collaborative exercise. The subject has simply got bigger since the 1970s -- no-one can seriously handle it on their own any more. Besides we have become a lot less certain about what the subject at issue actually is. Where Pomeroy plunged happily into a review of Greek divinities and Homeric heroines, Schmitt Pantel's first chapter is called 'What is a goddess'. What is a woman', too? -- We might well ask...

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