

Women and the thesmophoria in athens essay



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The Thesmophoria was an exclusively female religious festival that was celebrated annually, all over Ancient Greece, in honor of Demeter and her gifts. It was celebrated in autumn, during the busiest agricultural time of the year¹ and was related to both human and agricultural fertility. The Thesmophoria took women out of their matrimonial homes. During the festival women modeled their behaviour after Demeter, who, in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter is a mother solely concerned with her one, legitimate, daughter². The Thesmophoria allows one to see the paradox which was a woman's position in society in Ancient Athens.

The paradox is illustrated by the contradictions of their roles within the oikos and within the broader politico-religious sphere of the polis. Women at the same time were subservient to the men within their oikos, through the Thesmophoria, were actually responsible for "the survival of the polis [both] through food and legitimate heirs"³. In addition to bringing the complexities of the female relationship with the state in Ancient Athens to light, it also shows the more tangible aspects of a woman's position in society including the importance of being a legitimate wife and the mother of legitimate heirs and her virtual exclusion from the sacrificial altar. It also poses many questions including why the men allowed the women to dominate the political centre of the polis during the festival despite their almost total exclusion from politics and why they never used the festival as an opportunity to speak out against their social position or men. This essay will address both the paradox of a woman's position in Ancient Athens and address its more tangible aspects.

As well, it will also attempt to answer the questions of why men tolerated such a festival and why women never used the festival as an opportunity to speak out against the restrictions placed upon them by the polis. The only detailed source of what actually took place during the festival is a scholion to Lucian's Dialogues of Hetaerae, which is essentially the "marginal notes to the work of a later scholar in a manuscript produced in the thirteenth century AD" 4. The scholion describes the festival as having women throw piglets, snakes and phallus made out of wheat dough and pine branches into pits as a sacrifice of thanks to Demeter for providing the earth with fertility, because in "providing the fruits of Demeter she civilized the race of humans". The offerings were allowed to rot in the pits until the next year's festival when they were scraped up and mixed with the seeds to be sown that autumn⁵. It is possible that there are no earlier sources for what went on during the Thesmophoria because writers contemporary with the festival may have felt it would be sacrilegious to record the rites. This belief is illustrated by Herodotus: .

.. may my reverence ensure that they remain unspoken. I feel the same way about the rights of Demeter which the Hellenes call the Thesmophoria, so may my reverence ensure that they also remain unspoken, except for which can be said without offence to religion⁶. Another reason, which could explain the lack of contemporary sources for the Thesmophoria, is that fact that its rituals were "forbidden to men" ⁷ and there would have been few women who were both literate and initiated that could have recorded the secret rites.

Callimachus of Cyrene, a contemporary of the festival, provides us with a source for the parts of the festival that could have been recorded without being an “ offence to religion”. He records the initial public procession of the Thesmophoria in one of his hymns: As we walk through the city without sandals and with our hair unbound, so we shall have our feet and hands unharmed forever. And as the basket-bearers bring baskets full of gold, so may we acquire boundless gold. The uninitiated women may proceed as far as the city hall; the initiated right to the goddess’ temple.

.. In Ancient Athens men lived in both the polis and the oikos, women’s lives revolved solely around their “ membership -or lack of membership in an oikos” 9. But women were not celebrated or valued members of their oikos. They were viewed as its weakest point.

A wife was essentially seen as an outsider, a member of a rival oikos, brought in for the sole purpose of producing legitimate heirs. Daughters were viewed as costly, temporary members, destined to eventually join another, rival oikos. Also, daughters, due to their “ vulnerability”, were seen as a constant threat to the honor of the oikos¹⁰. Despite the relatively negative attitudes towards women within the oikos the importance of belonging to one, as a legitimate wife, is illustrated by the fact that only the legitimate wives of Athenians citizens were allowed to participate in the Thesmophoria.

In fact, participation in the Thesmophoria counted as “ legally valid proof that a woman had contracted a legitimate union with an Athenian who enjoyed full political rights” 11. Wives of Athenian citizens enjoyed a kind of

“ hidden citizenship” 12 and therefore, were able to participate more fully in religious festivals and sacrifices than unmarried Athenian women, young girls, slaves and foreigners. Legitimacy was a huge part of women’s lives in Ancient Athens. One wanted to be the legitimate wife of a legitimate citizen and be the mother of legitimate heirs to her oikos’s estate.

Establishing a woman’s legitimacy was also a large aspect of the Thesmophoria. Women, through their participation, are being confirmed as both legitimate wives and mothers of legitimate heirs. Therefore, any sort of “ scandalous” behaviour was “ incompatible with [a woman’s] presence at the festival” 13. Taking a lover was so offensive to a celebration concerned with the production of legitimate heirs that a Pythagorean woman stated: a woman who took a lover could “ never again” participate in the Thesmophoria¹⁴. Chastity was essential to festival; women even slept on branches from a plant known as the “ chaste tree” which was said encourages chastity.

The gravity of mixing a lover and the Thesmophoria can be seen in the speech of Lysias. In this, he is trying to justify the killing of his wife’s lover by making the offence seem all the more heinous because she used the Thesmophoria, with the help of her lover’s mother, to arrange the secret meetings¹⁵. What makes the Thesmophoria interesting is not the fact of female participation in the festival, women and/or girls actively participated in about half of Athens’s religious festivals¹⁶, but the fact that carried out the celebration almost entirely without men. Men, in most of the other religious festivals either supervised women’s participation¹⁷ and/or acted a buffer between the women and the sacrificial altar. This virtual exclusion

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from sacrifice was perfectly in line with their exclusion from the political life of the polis¹⁸.

There are some exceptions to this rule including a sacrifice made to Semele and Dionysus and a sacrifice made to Ares¹⁹. But during the Thesmophoria the women worshiped with almost no interference by men. I say “almost” because there was one man permitted further into the celebration than any other. He is known as the mageiros. In Ancient Greece it was unimaginable that women could be either butchers or sacrificers. Even during the Thesmophoria, a festival which is supposed to be forbidden to men, women were not able to perform the actual slaughter.

Therefore a mageiros was hired; it was his job to do the actual slaughtering of the sacrificial animals. After the mageiros task was completed he had to immediately leave the women to their worship²⁰. The mageiros provides an excellent illustration of the unease men felt towards women worshiping and sacrificing without their presence. This is elaborated upon by Marcel Detienne: [the] prudence displayed by the city in giving the task of slaughter only to one of their own, who, moreover is immediately dismissed, is equaled by the fear of death the cloistered women of the Thesmophoria foster among men²¹. Another thing that made the men of Athens uneasy about the Thesmophoria was the fact that during the festival women were “taking over (part of) men’s predominance while expelling them from the centre of things and adopting their dominant roles”²². During the Thesmophoria the men were literally expelled from the “centre of things”.

The women celebrated the Thesmophoria on the Pnyx, thereby displacing the Ekklesia²³. In general, with the Thesmophoria men saw the “ ever-lurking threat of matrons running wild materialized” ²⁴. Why did the men of Greece allow the women they dominated both politically and religiously to have such a female centered festival in the heart of the city? Why were the women in charge of worshiping the deities responsible for ensuring both legitimate heirs and food in stead of the men? These questions are especially valid within the context of Athens, where misogyny and distrust towards women was greater than anywhere else in Greece²⁵. According to Detienne: Contradictions within a society and system of thought that deliberately neglects the female sex to the periphery of the politico-religious space, but finds itself led, by certain limitations inherent in it’s own values, to give women a determining role in the reproduction of the entire system²⁶ Essentially, the responsibility of ensuring legitimate heirs and food falls upon the shoulders of the women due to the values held by the polis itself. The complex relationship between women and the polis is also addressed by Lin Foxhall. She states that the cultivation of cereals was the most important signifier of a civilized society in the Greek world.

Cereals, according to the Greeks, were gifts of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. Women, due to their sex alone, were the mediators between the polis and these two goddesses. It is due to their position as mediators between these two goddesses, who are responsible for civilized life, and the polis that women have such a complex relationship with the state²⁷. The relationship between the women and the two goddesses ensure the success of the polis through both food and the production of legitimate heirs. It has

even been suggested that the Thesmophoria was actually a celebration of the “city of men” that the participating women helped to produce and not actually a celebration of women²⁸.

This could be one answer as to why the men of Greece tolerated a festival that displaced them from the heart of the city and granted women uncustomary liberty. Women escaped from the “restrictions that normally governed their lives”²⁹ during the Thesmophoria. They chose among themselves who would preside over the ceremonies and voted, alone, without the presence of men³⁰. But, there is no indication that they used this opportunity to protest their social situation or the way men were “running the world”³¹. It is entirely possible that the women of Ancient Athens understood their role within their society to a degree unattainable by the modern scholar, and that to them their position did not seem paradoxical at all.

To them their complex relationship with the state could have been both a normal and essential aspect of their lives and therefore they did not feel the need to protest the way men were “running the world”.