

The rights and privileges of ancient women essay

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



With modern feminist movements, there has been much speculation as to the role of women throughout history, including that of ancient women. Some feminists would suggest that ancient women had no rights, power, importance, or prospects. While it is true that women had lesser rights and power than men, their role was considered important, and women of some places held more power than others. This is clearly shown through a study of ancient texts, written by both men and women.

Firstly, it is important to realize that women were oppressed and expected to be submissive to men. For example, The Law of Manu, an Indian text, emphasizes the role of women, suggesting that women should be especially monitored so that they bring honor unto the family (13). This suggests that women were given more regulations and watched closely by men. Another text, written by a woman from ancient India, suggests her oppression and unhappiness. In her poem "A Women Well Set Free!" she talks about her endless days attending to the house and the kitchen. She bears a sarcastic tone as she explains that her grueling days are all the same, how she lacks power, and how "happy" it makes her (56). Her poem is one of the earliest indications that some women were not content with their position. Another text from ancient China, called The Book of Songs: The Odes, contained a heart-wrenching poem from a woman scorned by her husband. In the poem she regales the early years, their happy beginning and how wonderful she felt. After three years of marriage, it was all taken away from her. Although she does not explain why, it is implied that he betrayed her in such a despicable way that the marriage ended. She says that she must bear it in silence (89). However, in an Indian text, The Ramayana, when Rama's wife is

expected to have been unfaithful, Rama nearly takes her to be persecuted (59). This suggests that ancient women had less power over their bodies. While they were expected to remain faithful, a husband was not. The fact that the women from *The Book of Songs: The Odes* emphasized her fate as bearing in silence speaks volumes of the submissive state women were expected to be in. Another example of a woman's expected submission is shown in an ancient Greek text, *The Iliad*. In *The Iliad*, Hector's wife pleads him not to go to war, because she has lost almost everyone in her life and she does not want to lose him. Despite her heart-wrenching plea, he replies nonchalantly, explaining that he must fight to keep his honor. He then blesses his son, hoping that his son will grow to be a fighter as he is. When his wife shows distress at this, he tells her not to grieve, but to go back and take care of her duties of the house, for war is not for women (97). This scene is a clear example of how men were seen to be above women, and how women were expected to bear their grief in silence.

Despite the challenges ancient women faced, they did hold small measures of power and importance. The first example of this is in the Code of Hammurabi. The Code of Hammurabi, though directed toward men, provides a list of guidelines for the ancient people. One of the rules explains that if a husband accuses his wife of adultery, but he cannot prove it, she is simply to say a prayer and go home; if she is caught, she is to be killed (13). This indicates that while men certainly had power over women, they could not make such accusations without proof, and this provided women minor protection. An ancient text that praises the role of women is *The Law of Manu*, an Indian text. The Law of Manu explains the importance of women as

home-makers and child bearers. It emphasizes the fact that the role of a woman is sacred, and that women must be honored and protected (49). Though this did not provide Indian women with rights, it did allow them to receive more respect, and for their role to be regarded with importance. When it comes to power and education, however, there are a couple of ancient texts that imply a woman's access to these. The first is the infamous Greek comedy, *Lysistrata*. *Lysistrata* follows a group of women, led by the character *Lysistrata*, who are opposing war. To do this, they exercise one of their only powers over men: their bodies. They shout that they will not give into their husband's sexual demands as long as they continue to fight in war (106). This suggests that though women were left with almost no power and high regulation of their bodies, they were also able to use their bodies to their advantage. Other Greek texts that suggest a woman's access to power and education are the texts written on the women of Sparta. Spartan women were more uniquely privileged than most ancient women. Although their primary role was still as child bearers, and they weren't allowed to fight in war, they were expected to participate in sports. Spartan women were encouraged to be robust, strong, and competitive, unlike the dainty, submissive women of other cultures. This was done so that they could bear strong children. They were also provided minimal education and were allowed more freedom with their bodies, so that they could provide better childcare and bear intelligent, strong boys for the Spartan army (111). In conclusion, the women of the ancient world were oppressed. They were expected to bear their roles in silence, and were given strong regulations on their bodies. However, their roles as homemakers were regarded with

importance. These women also sometimes received opportunities to exercise power with their bodies. Spartan women, though still primarily child bearers, were given more freedom and access to power than most ancient women.

Works Cited