

# GENDERING GREECE: INTRODUCTION

Brit Berggreen

## *The modernization of antiquity*

Ancient Greece is central to us all. It has been chosen as the cradle of Western civilization and has penetrated our thoughts and actions through religion and philosophy, statemanship, law and science. The impact of antiquity on modernizing nations from the the Renaissance on is obvious, and the role of Greek antiquity from the late 18th century onwards can hardly be sufficiently stressed. It has been studied and commented upon with terms such as “the cultural heritage of the western world” and “the legacy of Greece”. We are, perhaps, unaware of just how strong this legacy was, but when the United States of America was established serious consideration was given to making the ancient Greek the common language for this melting pot nation. As for democracy there was no other model than that of ancient Athens. In the architecture of state and federate administrative buildings the influence of ancient Greek temples is prominent. This infatuation with things Greek became fashionable among the Germans around 1750:

There (...) poets, literary critics, and historians of art looked to ancient Greece as an imaginative landscape on which they might discover artistic patterns, ethic values and concepts of human nature that could displace those of Christianity and ossified French classicism. The discontinuity between Greece and modern Christian Europe rendered the Greek experience all the more valuable and useful. Greece could represent almost any value and outlook that a writer wished to ascribe to it. (Turner 1981:3f)

That is my main point: Ancient Greece has been explored and exploited to fill the needs of modernizing individuals and nation

builders, but has also been reconstructed to fit and legitimize new values which are, in hindsight, those belonging to a bourgeois society and culture building process. Why, otherwise, would the Athenian woman have been chosen as the preferred female type rather than the Spartan? And why should men choose a version of Athenian democracy for their model state? It is easier, perhaps, to understand why the Spartan male type was chosen as a paragon rather than the talkative and quarrelsome Athenian.

It was perhaps Winckelmann who started the trend: His characterizing words "a noble simplicity and silent greatness" have been much quoted, referring to Greek art, but applied in a much wider sense to the life style. The Bavarian King Ludwig I had the means to create an Athens in Munich — and also a Munich in Athens (Seidl 1981), but others less powerful also looked to the ancients for aspects with which to become infatuated to emulate. The Greeks themselves were "taken in hand by rulers and hellenizing poets of the West, and introduced to a whole museum-load of forgotten marble relations" (Fermor 1983:104) with which to identify after an interruption of more than 2000 years. But the character of the relations was redefined according to the trends of the time. Such image transformations were noticed as early as 1897 when Gilbert Murray (in Turner 1981:13) wrote:

The 'serene' and 'classical' Greek of Winckelmann and Goethe did good service to the world in his day, though we now feel him to be mainly a phantom. He has been succeeded especially in the works for painters and poets, by an aesthetic and fleshly Greek in fine raiment, an abstract Pagan who lives to be contrasted with an equally abstract early Christian or Puritan, and to be glorified or mishandled according to the sentiments of his critics. He is a phantom too, as unreal as those marble palaces in which he habitually takes his ease.

The ancients have not ceased to change along with contemporary needs since then. Waiting to be changed are gender arrangements and interpretations of male and female. Much has been done. The literature is becoming vast. Our contributions in this volume are mainly empirical, presenting or discussing aspects of the Greeks from ancient and classical times through the early Christian epoch, and ending with the new and young woman of Greece today, but also with the conventions and ways of acting out homosexuality and transsexual dispositions in our time. The past is present in Greek matters. The lure of history and the underlying thought that goes from Achilles

to Pericles to Aristotle is unbroken and preserved in popular ways and ceremonial.

Critical modern democrats may ask what kind of a democracy would be based on slaves and the political exclusion of women. Critical modern gender studies examine the role of women behind the exclusively male presentation of their lives and ways (Pomeroy 1975, Lefkowitz 1986), and in this volume there is a reinterpretation of Penelope and her acknowledged shrewdness. She is seen as a woman who is just as fine in her power position surrounded by suitors as like a Queen Elizabeth I of England.

Anyone who wants to examine gender roles must know past and present conventions of accepted behaviour. She or he must investigate situations where conventions are broken and consider transgressions of gender role rules in order to understand total social and cultural patterns. Our two workshops aimed at presenting any aspect of gender associated with the past or present Greek culture. The intention was not to develop theory but to present situations on which theoretical platforms could be considered. Still there are a few presuppositions and theoretical insights that should be mentioned, one concerning the gender concept, the other concerning "gendering" Greece.

### ***Gender has no sex***

Granted that cultures are coded systems of display and concealment, there is a challenge for the lay and learned to find out what "really" goes on and with what intention. There are riddles for "the other" to interpret. We may question how women's worlds are interpreted by men who had no access to them. We may also ask what women understand of men's priorities and acts. What we should take for granted is that every culture has scripts — prescriptions — for its members to follow, and that the roles that are prescribed differ according to social status, profession and age group, as well as that of sex.

Conventionally there are two sexes according to our western and modern cultural codes. They are valid for household and family building purposes. At least this is where biology matters. The codes we go by may seem universal and "natural", the patterned ideal overshadowing real structures. Real structures which are not culturally acknowledged must be concealed, some so well that we shall never learn about them. The historical dimension contributes to confusion. What is normal or accepted today might be seen as unusual or even criminal yesterday or vice versa. Consider such a simple thing as colour coding: In her book on sex role manipulations Marjorie Garber (1992) begins by referring to an article in the *New York Times*

in 1989 informing its readers that until World War I pink for little boys was seen as a "stronger, more decided color" while girls wore blue. Blue was seen as "delicate" and "dainty". Even when knowing that until the 1920's little girls and boys were dressed in identically cut frocks, this piece of information startled a reading public, accustomed to gender-colour-coding down to disposable pink and blue diapers. Such small reversals create large effects because minds are conservative but easily reprogrammed to practiced innovations.

In real life there is ambiguity. There are transgressions and concealments. Cross dressing – transvestism – may be based on a practical and occasional need, or on a more physiological and psychological urge. A woman is generally a member of a female sex-social group with its cultural expressions, but she may feel comfortable only in the vestiges of men, just as some men prefer the occasional or constant vestiges of a female, and leave the mainstream male culture. Such cross dressings may occur in order to pass unnoticed, or as part of some ritual or celebration. Women dress as men to fight when conventions say that fighting is a male prerogative, whereas men may dress as women to flee. We know this from many instances. Occasions and situations where cross dressing takes place are multiple. Evidence may be hard to come by when the intention is to avoid being discerned. Interpretations of cross dressing without knowledge of the cultural context may also be difficult. There is much cultural decoding and interpretation ahead.

The word *gender*, both as a noun and a verb has not yet entered the general dictionaries. Still, it is one of the words which more frequently enters headlines, especially within the fields of sex role studies and women's studies. Here it provides a term denoting the close association of cultural phenomena with sex as a classificatory term, as a non-physiological aspect of sex. Within academic disciplines headlines occur as in "gendering archaeology", "gendering anthropology" or "gendering botany" etc. The immediate intention is to signal that any cultural expression has a meaning that differs from one sex to the other. *Gender* was chosen as a technical term to avoid the biological and erotic connotations of *sex* while stressing the social aspect of male and female. We may say that *gender* is the performative aspect of sex, but also its manipulable aspect. Gender rules provide scripts of behaviour related to both males and females, while on the other hand they provide a set of expectations as to what kind of behaviour may be expected from either sex. These are conventions which exist within all cultures, even if the rules are circumscribed and frequently broken.

Joan Wallach Scott (1988) has written with resigned humour on the history of *gender* as an auxiliary term for sex related studies.

“Those who would codify the meanings of words fight a losing battle”, she decides (p.88), quoting from Fowler’s *Dictionary of English Usage* which insists that *gender* is “a grammatical term only.” She then proceeds through observations of persisting patterns, concluding that, “In its simplest usage, ‘gender’ is a synonym for ‘women’:

Any number of books and articles whose subject is women’s history have, in the past few years, substituted ‘gender’ for ‘women’ in their titles. In some cases, this usage, though vaguely referring to certain analytic concepts, is actually about the political acceptability of the field. In these instances, the use of ‘gender’ has a more neutral and objective sound than does ‘women’. (Scott 1988:31)

Turning from history to anthropology we see the same phenomenon occurring. *Gender and power in rural Greece* (Dubish 1986) is in reality a book about women and power. That is, in all chapters but one, it is hard to see that this is not, in fact, a book about women. Michael Herzfeld, who goes a step further, is the only contributor to consider the female bias of gender studies, writing with regard to earlier ethnographers who generated “complementary oppositions” which we are familiar with. He mentions “honor/shame, men/women, public/domestic” as instances. “They”, he writes:

sacrificed *complementarity* to *opposition* and so lost their significance as essentially manipulable and rhetorically subtle symbols. By separating men and women from each other with a rigidity that far surpassed that of the actors they sought to describe, ethnographers for a while ignored the lability of male and female stereotypes and their capacity for variation and change. (Herzfeld 1986:215)

If anything this “capacity for variation and change” is under scrutiny in our volume. The social experience of women and the social experience of men are acknowledged to be differing, and it is obvious to everybody that their cultural expressions differ. Descriptions and generalizations referring to one sex are overwhelmingly likely not to cover the experienced reality of the other. Still, there should be room for doubt. There were the times before and after the French enlightenment philosopher Jean Jaques Rousseau who designed and constructed a new maleness and femaleness which was seen as men’s and women’s nature. There were times before and after the concept of Natural Law which constructed universal rights where before local jurisdiction had presented a varied pattern. There is contemporary research going on to break up and reconsider the modern, western

bourgeois construction of reality. We are in the middle of this process. There is no doubt that the revival of the ancient Greek culture and its selective penetration into Western and westernizing cultures and nation building processes must lead to a new round of investigation and interpretation, and new understanding of cultural forms as belonging to strategies and willed processes.

### *Gendering Greece*

I mentioned "casual astonishments" above in being confronted with our gendered world slightly upset through a change in the history of colour coding. Astonishment is too mild a word to describe my own reaction to Greek revolutionary history from around 1821, and its heroines. There was Laskarina Bouboulina of Spetsai in her role as admiral, commanding a fleet of eight ships, gun in belt. Such warrior heroines multiply as modern Greek history is studied. There was Mando Mavroyeni of Mykonos, a contemporary of Bouboulina, and later Peristera "one of the leaders in western Macedonia" during the Balkan wars. (*Macedonia* 1988:461). The role of Epirot women as warriors in the civil war that followed World War II is well known. Nicholas Gage writes in his "novel" *Eleni*, based on real characters and events, of the shame his sisters felt when communists forced them to carrying weapons dressed in trousered uniforms, omitting that at least the warrior part was not foreign to the population. The history of the area, in fact, presents female warriors as a traditional feature. Such women are far removed from the image of the Greek woman "of the house".

Approximately at the same time as Mando Mavroyeni and Laskarina Bouboulina fought the Turks in the name of freedom, two Norwegian girls wrote letters to each other discussing their prospects for performing heroic deeds for *their* native country, admiringly referring to a "Celia" who swam to Rome to save her country, and to a Spartan woman who bit off her tongue in order not to betray her country. The Norwegian girls concluded that they were permitted to serve their country only as sentries by the tea pot.

Does it matter that ancient Greece had the warrior goddess Athena? And how come that *Panaghia*, the virgin Mary herself, is not above taking part in war in orthodox Greece? Headlines from World War II newspapers relate how she interfered in the battles. It is well known how, in the Boeotian village of Orhomenós the Panaghia — "over-saint" — forced German lorries and tanks into the ditches in 1943. Almost like the ancient Athena she took active part in warfare. Replicas of holy icons showing the episodes are on sale by the village church.



*Like ancient goddess Athena the holy virgin Mary takes part in war. This icon shows her celebrated participation in saving the Boeotian village Orchomenós from the German occupation forces during the second world war.*

Whatever else was “imagined” and constructed of ancient Greek matters for export to modernizing nations, warlike women were not among them. But in the heyday of infatuation with the ancients, weeping men spread throughout Western Europe. For a while they were in high fashion, as when Goethe’s literary fashion hero Werther

shed tears. So did the Norwegian viking hero Frithjof as described by Sweden's national bard Esaias Tegnér fifty years later, (published 1820-25). These heroes bear a likeness, which cannot be accidental, to the heroes of Homer, as when the Trojans weep tears for their dead while identifying them as they wash blood off their lifeless and disfigured bodies (*Iliad*, 7,426f) or "Phoenix the aged horseman Phoenix"... "spoke out in a stormburst of tears" (9,433f) Nestor "wept warm tears, and gave Achilles his sorrowful message" (18,16ff) and the swift-footed Achilles himself "letting fall warm tears" (18,234). Odysseus, when deeply touched and in disguise had his cheeks wet with tears on hearing a great bard praising the deeds of Odysseus and his Achaian compatriots inside the walls of Troy. But his weeping is, it is commented, "as a woman weeps embracing her beloved husband who has fallen before his own city and his own people and sees the man dying and breathing heavily ..." (*Odyssey*, 8, 520ff). I shall not discuss here the reasons for either male or female weeping, just point to male weeping being surprising for generations accustomed to a blank and tearless expression of grief among male heroes. The romantic heroes Werther and Frithjof of northwestern Europe represent a mingling of sentimental romanticism and ancient Graecaecisms. Werther carries his Homer, and Tegnér's epic is infused with ancient Greece in meters and allusions. Frithjof suggests to his beloved Ingeborg – "a fair haired Iphigeneia who manifests the Goethe-Schillerian feminine ideal" – that they flee to colonise and settle in the deserted temples of Greece. Indeed a union of the Viking age and Greek antiquity. There has been a hellenization or Graecaefication of North European cultures and a Graecaefication of gender roles along with our understanding of male and female as gender classification.

Close reading of ancient texts, new theories, open minded interpretations and scrutinizing of iconography in differing contexts and research lights bring about new images and understandings of antiquity and modern Greece alike. Along go new insights into the consequences of our having been seduced by the building fathers of civilization who were seduced by Greece.

### ***Bibliography***

- Berggreen, Brit. 1990: Heltinner i Hellas og Norge. In Øivind Andersen & Tomas Hågg (eds.) *Hellas og Norge: Kontakt-komparasjon-Kontrast*. Bergen:231-246
- Dubish, Jill (ed.) 1986: *Gender and power in rural Greece*. Princeton:Princeton University Press
- Fermor, Patrick Leigh, 1983: *Roumeli: Travels in Northern Greece*. London: Penguin Books. First published 1966
- Finley, Moses. 1975: *The use and abuse of history*. London: Chatto & Windus

- Garber, Marjorie, 1992: *Vested interests: Cross dressing and cultural anxiety*. New York: Routledge
- Herzfeld, Michael, 1986: Within and without: The category of 'female' in the ethnography of modern Greece. In Dubish (ed.): 214.233
- Homer: *The Odyssey*, translated by Albert Cook. New York 1967:Norton
- Homer: *The Iliad*, translated by Richmond Lattimore Chicago 1951:University of Chicago Press
- Just, Roger, 1989: *Women in Athenian law and life*. London:Routledge
- Lefkowitz, Mary R., 1986: *Women in Greek myth*. London:Duckworth
- Macedonia*, 1988: 4000 years of Greek history and civilization. Athens:Ekdotike Athenon
- Lowenthal, David, 1985: *The Past is a foreign Country*. Cambridge:Cambridge University Press
- Pomeroy, Susan B., 1975: *Goddesses, whores, wives and slaves: Women in classical antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books
- Scott, Joan Wallach, 1988: *Gender and the politics of history*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Seidl, Wolf, 1981: *Bayern in Griechenland: Die Geburt des griechischen Nationalstaats und die Regierung König Otto..* München: Prestel
- Turner, Frank M., 1981: *The Greek heritage in Victorian Britain*. New Haven: Yale University Press