

**SHORN HAIR AND BOYS' GARB**  
**DEFEMINIZATION OF SPARTAN WOMEN**  
Joanna Lim TC '05

Spartan society shared the long-popular opinion that women are the weaker sex. However, rather than merely accepting women's femininity and physical inferiority, as the people and governments of Athens and other Greek city-states did, the Spartans created institutions of marriage and education designed to strengthen their women by making them more like men. When the legendary Lycurgus implemented his constitution of uniformity and discipline, he went beyond reforming the present, reforming Sparta's future as well. Hence, he created a state-controlled educational system for the youth, both boys and girls, and made Sparta the only polis in which the training of girls was specifically mandated by the state.<sup>1</sup> Boys entered the *agoge* at age seven, where they lived, learned, exercised, and played together until the age of twenty-nine. They learned to read and write but "just enough to serve their turn, [because the educators'] chief care was to make [the boys] good subjects, and to teach them to endure pain and conquer in battle."<sup>2</sup> The boys were also educated in philosophy, music, poetry, and quick-wittedness. As they grew older, they were more closely disciplined. For example, they were purposefully underfed, so that they would learn to steal food and thereby master deceit.

To foster solidarity, young men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine were assigned to boys over age twelve as mentors and sexual partners. These relationships were seen as "a positive contribution to the solidarity of the *homoioi*," the Spartan citizen-hoplites.<sup>3</sup> The older boys, the *erastai*, were responsible for the conduct of the younger boys, the *paidika*. The *erastai* shared the *paidika*'s honor and disgrace with the *paidika*'s family and later provided materially for the *paidika*'s household.<sup>4</sup> These relationships encouraged loyalty among citizens and de-emphasized loyalty to one's nuclear family.

The tenets of the boys' education provide important windows into the nature of girls' education. Scholars have long debated how

these programs paralleled each other, but it is certain that the girls received education in all of the same areas, if not always to the same degree. Their physical requirements paralleled those of the boys, if less demanding: racing, wrestling, and discus and javelin throwing.<sup>5</sup> To the great astonishment of the other Greek communities, women trained in the nude, just as men did. Plutarch explains that Lycurgus created this program because he thought it would ease child-birth and “take away [women’s] overgreat tenderness and fear of exposure to the air, and all acquired womanishness.”<sup>6</sup> Sparta required that women aspire to man-like strength, thereby casting off their weak “womanishness.”

Boys and girls also received the same spiritual and intellectual education, consisting of training in reading, writing, philosophy, public speaking, and *mousike*: music, dancing, and poetry.<sup>7</sup> This equality in education was intended to produce the best mothers and citizens possible, not to serve an agenda of equal rights for women.<sup>8</sup> However, since boys were required to dedicate time to military training, girls may have benefited more from these aspects of their education, as they had more time to dwell on their studies. Finally, unlike their counterparts in other Greek poleis who probably married shortly after beginning puberty, Spartan women did not marry until eighteen and thus had more time for education. Girls lived at home with their mothers until they were married, so mothers could pass on to their daughters the cultural education they had received.

Instead of overlooking women’s education due to their perceived inferiority, Spartans worked to elevate women to the apparent superiority of men. With his educational programs, Lycurgus hoped to instill in men and women alike a love for Sparta and her virtues and to train strong hoplites and mothers of hoplites, churning out citizens who would serve Sparta on the field and in the state assembly.

At the time of Xenophon, although marriage still involved the family (*oikos*), it also served Lycurgus’ overarching concern for good hoplite breeding. In the *gymnopaideiai*, the procession of nude youth, the girls went nude to excite the men and inspire thoughts of marriage.<sup>9</sup> There, nudity was not merely for sensa-

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tional purposes, because old, confirmed bachelors were not allowed to look on the *gymnopaideiai*. Between the time of a man's noticing a girl at public functions and actually marrying her, the family would arrange a betrothal and prepare the girl for the marriage ceremony.

The marriage ceremony further exemplifies the de-feminizing nature of policy towards women under Lycurgus' reforms. According to Plutarch, the ceremony began when the woman was seized by the man and passed off to someone who prepared her for the wedding. The woman would then be dressed like a young boy, shorn of her long hair, and left on a mattress in the dark. The groom would come in after *syssitia* and rape her, after which he would leave.<sup>10</sup> The bride's male garb was obviously a manner of making her more man-like. The shaving of the head was meant to be permanent, because married women were not permitted to wear their hair long. Men also changed their hairstyles upon marriage, growing their hair long as a sign of having achieved manhood. While long hair became a sign of manliness after marriage, short hair remained associated with the young boys of the agoge, even after the hairstyle was adopted by married women. Beyond the hair, what was the purpose of dressing brides like men? Many scholars believe that it was a way to ease the groom into a heterosexual relationship after years of young male companionship.<sup>11</sup> Others think that it was symbolic of the woman entering the citizen body and thereby becoming more man-like.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps once women were married and became potential mothers, Sparta finally recognized them as citizens, a masculine role in the society.<sup>13</sup>

If the groom was under thirty, which he generally was, the marriage remained a clandestine affair for two reasons. First, the groom was finishing the agoge and living with the other males. Second, public visits to his wife drew shame from the community, so such visits were secretly made in the night (although such secrecy seems difficult to maintain). However, it was worthwhile for Spartans, since the families could pretend the marriage had never happened if the woman did not become pregnant.<sup>14</sup> As for the woman, her shaved head would be an automatic sign of

marriage, so she most likely was not seen in public until she was pregnant.<sup>15</sup> Plutarch's explanation for the secrecy was that, since the couple spent so little time together, they would devote that time to vigorous intercourse, thereby producing strong children.

Even after the marriage was established and the groom graduated from the agoge, the marriage was not one of companionship, despite the spouses' similar age and education. The men spent their time serving the state, whether it was in the assembly, hoplite training, educating in the agoge, or *syssitia*. The women were left alone to manage the households, exercise, and educate their daughters.<sup>16</sup> Such independence and isolation from men allowed for the atrophy of the aspect of femininity effected by frequent male-female interaction.

Spartan families also took part in wife-sharing. The idea behind this practice was that a husband might share his neighbor's wife in order to produce potential hoplites if his own wife were infertile. It is argued that the women preferred this; if their children were part of several different households, mothers had more husbands to help with child-raising and the furthering of their own genetic legacies.<sup>17</sup> This tradition shows that the Spartans had few pretences about the sanctity of marriage, which was about procreation, not companionship.

Spartan traditions and laws regarding women attempted to masculinize them both actively and passively. In the educational system, women were trained as the men were, in hopes that they might pass on to their children the Spartan virtues that they had learned. In marriage their femininity was discouraged by the lack of male company and by the marginalization of their roles as wives. All these things were done to benefit the Spartan state. Spartan women were socialized to be mothers, vessels of future hoplites and nothing else.

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Spartan Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.
- 2 Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plutarch/lycurgus.html>).
- 3 Anton Powell, "Dining Groups, Marriage, Homosexuality," *Sparta*, ed. Michael Whitby. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2002), 95.
- 4 Stephen Hodkinson, "Social Order and the Conflict of Values in Classical Sparta," *Sparta*, ed. Michael Whitby. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2002), 109.
- 5 Pomeroy 14.
- 6 Plutarch.
- 7 Pomeroy 8.
- 8 Paul Cartledge, "Spartan Wives: Liberation or License?" *Sparta*, ed. Michael Whitby. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2002), 143.
- 9 Plutarch.
- 10 Plutarch.
- 11 Cartledge 155.
- 12 Pomeroy 43.
- 13 However, there are no records of woman citizens participating in the assembly or the phalanx, so it was more of a title than an actual bestowment of civil rights.
- 14 W.K. Lacey, *The Family in Classical Greece*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 198.
- 15 Lacey 200.
- 16 Pomeroy 60.
- 17 Pomeroy 37-38.