Pierre Brulé’s Women of Ancient Greece

Working within the context and constraints of a civilization that allowed the vast majority of its women to be omitted from history, Pierre Brulé has written an engaging and interesting account of the lives of women in ancient Greece. Brulé is a Professor of Greek History at the University of Haute-Bretagne in Rennes, and the book was originally published in French as Les Femmes grecques à l’époque classique before being translated into English by Antonia Nevill in 2003. In the prologue, “Which paths will lead us to them?”, the author reveals the main object of the book, which is “to breathe fresh life into the accounts of Greek women which have come down to us through more than two millenia” (4). Brulé admirably fulfills this aim by taking the reader on a journey through the masculine discourse of the culture that disregarded these women. Brulé has organized his interpretation into six distinctive chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of what it meant to be a woman in Greek society.

The first of these is called “The feminine and the sacred.” It begins with an overview of some of the important Greek goddesses, their functions, and their stories. The role of priestesses are then discussed at some length before the chapter moves into its central focus, the Dionysian festivals attended by Greek women. Brulé provides an intriguing look at the essentially feminine ritual, and then explains the customary interpretation. The “safety valve” theory, as he calls it,
says the celebrations and dances were a permissible way for women and other subordinated
groups to escape the ‘house’ and participate in a sort of cathartic release.

However, this, the author asserts, is not enough of an explanation and fails to adequately
take into account the aspect of male domination in Greek society. While the “behavioral safety
valve” theory must be true to some extent, he claims, it would still be sensible to assume that
there must have been another reason for husbands to tolerate this practice. Indeed, men would
have wanted Dionysus to be properly worshiped and celebrated for all the typical reasons--he
was seen as a generous, yet terrible god--and he seemed to be particularly susceptible to the
voices of women. Therefore, returning to the main theme of the chapter, the author makes the
case that even when women were involved in Greek religion, they were allowed to be so only
because of the political and social needs of men. In other words, “to absolve Greek culture of the
sin of misogyny by pleading the existence of goddesses and priestesses is to bow to appearances”
(Brulé 30). While some could fault Brulé for his near obsession with detecting misogyny in
every page of history, his logic is well-founded. Because these ancient women are known almost
exclusively through the writings of men, it is necessary to look through this extreme lens in order
to see omissions or motives that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In the second chapter, “Women of the Epics,” Brulé delves into an analysis of Briseis and
Chryseis of the Iliad as well as Nausicaa and Penelope of the Odyssey, and includes an extensive
examination of the Homeric vocabulary of the feminine. The author apparently does this to
illustrate a point about female anonymity, which offers insight into the way Greek men viewed
women. Certainly, the women of the epics were defined only in relation to men (by their sexual
and marital status), but this is not a new or startling revelation by any means. This ends up
feeling like a preparatory chapter, and indeed, it is frequently referenced later on. Still, one could assume that this section of the book is, at least in part, what Page DuBois meant when she called it “sometimes pedestrian” in *The American Historical Review* (531).

Next, Brulé gives a truly redeeming survey of what ancient authors had to say on the topics of physiology, love, and sex in the chapter titled “On the body and sexuality.” Utilizing Aristotle’s zoological treatises and the Hippocratic corpus, a fair amount of time is spent on Greek biological knowledge and the way it contributed to the dichotomy of sex roles. From there, the chapter moves into a discussion on sexual behaviors. Male sexuality is revealed to be extremely versatile--“something that seems very Greek to us and very human to them” (Brulé 90). Men had a “political” sexuality within marriage for procreative purposes, as well as a “recreational” sexuality with prostitutes, hetairai (educated female courtesans sometimes hired by men for sexual and intellectual pleasure), and young boys.

It may seem strange that Brulé chooses to analyze the sexuality of men to explore how Greek women might have conceptualized *their* sexuality. However, he does this due to the lack of authoritative or self-authored accounts written by women of the time. He does not give the male accounts undue weight; instead, he draws inferences about the lives of women based on the behaviors and writings of men. While it would be unrealistic to attempt to reach any conclusions about Greek women’s sexuality based on these sources, Brulé is still able to extract meaning regarding their living conditions.

For instance, various primary sources are cited to illustrate a picture of the health troubles supposedly suffered by women, including personality disorders, loss of self-control, and hysteria. Men believed their wives were highly susceptible to seduction and prone to “abandonment to
lust.” Women were thought to have an inadequate mastery of the body, at least in part because of their uncontrollable uterus. According to Plato, it was literally an animal, “possessed with the desire to create children” (Brulé 96). The apparent feminine lack of sexual control vindicated the practice of Greek men keeping their wives and daughters locked away within the ‘house’.

With this last thought in place, the book segues into a further exploration on the “Joys and miseries of married life.” It begins by piecing together the life of an unnamed woman, perhaps best known as the wife of Pericles. Referred to only as D., Brulé traces her likely ancestry (she was the granddaughter of Cleisthenes) and her three marriages. He does this to demonstrate the movement--or circulation--of women in the upper rungs of Greek society, where a sort of aristocratic social endogamy took place. D. married into three prominent ‘houses’ and birthed sons in all of them, thereby fulfilling her duty as a woman.

Also from this chapter comes an interesting theory regarding the reason for the prepubescent marriage of girls. After an exhaustive look at ancient writings on pederasty, the conclusion is reached: “The enigma of the marriage of girl-children with very mature men here finds its solution in the nature of the aesthetic and erogenous qualities of the prepubescent of both sexes” (Brulé 135). The author’s analysis here may seem self-evident, but actually it illustrates Greek sexuality quite uniquely from other historical perspectives. Pederasty is defined as an exclusively homosexual relationship between a man and a child, but Brulé’s interpretation seeks to acknowledge the sensuality that surrounded children’s bodies (male or female), and gives the modern reader a practical context in which to function. The case is thoroughly presented, and as a result this section ends up being one of the more compelling pieces of Brulé’s work.
“The woman in the ‘house’” exposes some interesting contrasts between the life of women and men in Ancient Greece. Marriage was the focal point of a young woman’s life, and she knew of little else; contrarily, boys underwent military training, learned the ropes of politics, and did not typically begin a household until the age of thirty. Once married, the Greek woman’s life was concerned only with bearing her husband’s children and overseeing the ‘house’. This ‘house’, however, was only a small part of her husband’s complete life.

This chapter also sheds light on the ancient Greek woman’s work life and the way in which it is often overlooked by historians. Brulé draws attention to the not insignificant contribution of citizen’s wives (and their house staff) to the economy of the poleis. It is noted that the ability to assiduously carry out high-quality work was one of the most desired elements in a wife. Particular attention in this chapter is paid to the textile workrooms inside the ‘house’, where free women and slaves of all ages worked communally. This, the author suggests, could have produced an environment of “feminine sociability” within the ‘house’ (178).

In “The women on the outside,” the final chapter of the book, free women outside of the realm of the ‘house’ are discussed. A helpful summary of the vocabulary of prostitution is provided, although hetairai take center stage. Following a brief description of what could be expected from them, the majority of the chapter is spent detailing the lives of a few of the more famous hetairai. This includes, of course, Aspasia, companion of Pericles. Brulé addresses her occupation as one who runs a “house” or brothel, the rumors that she wrote Pericles’ speeches, and the citizenship with which her son was granted. Overall, the comprehensive biographies make the sixth chapter another fascinating one, albeit not the strongest.
Women of Ancient Greece offers a rare glimpse of Greek women, at least partially extricated from the masculine screen that conceals them. It is a digestible read, and is accessible to a general audience. Primary sources play heavily into this work, which is well organized and presents its arguments convincingly, if not exactly in a straightforward manner. Brulé appears to be influenced by modern feminist thought--in the epilogue, he admits that he is sympathetic to his subjects and his book lacks a critical apparatus (221). In spite of this, his expertise and competence illuminate the subject matter with well-researched points at every turn. The strongest aspect of the book is the engaging and passionate voice Brulé manages to extend, even through a translation. One of the main weaknesses is his way of building up to a certain revelation without giving the reader any sense of direction. A bit of foreshadowing would have made the details easier to digest upon first reading. Brulé closes Women of Ancient Greece with a few fragmentary verses of Sappho, the Greek poetess. Given the fragmented nature of what is known of ancient Greek women, the lines are sadly appropriate.

Note: Following the author's example, the word 'house' in this paper refers to the concept of the Greek house (oikos). When written as “house”, it refers to “houses” of prostitution.
Works Cited
