

HOW RESTRICTED WERE THE WOMEN OF ANCIENT ATHENS?

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

ACTIVITY

EXTENSION

The evidence about the restrictions placed on Athenian women is difficult to interpret and, at times, contradictory. Different scholars have reached quite varied conclusions about women's lives depending on how they make sense of the evidence. For example, some believe that society saw the restriction of women as an ideal, but only the rich could afford to make it a reality. Others think that some texts indicate how men thought women *should* behave, but that this was very different from the reality of women's actual lives. Consider the following sources and answer the questions below.

ETEOCLES IN AESCHYLUS' *SEVEN AGAINST THEBES*

It is for the man to take care of business outside the house; let no woman make decrees in those matters. Keep inside and do no harm!

← SOURCE 1

Aeschylus, Seven against Thebes 200-201, trans. Herbert Weir Smyth (London: William Heinemann, 1928).

ANDROMACHE IN EURIPIDES' *TROJAN WOMEN* 645-656

For all that stamps the wife a woman chaste, I strove to do in [my husband] Hector's home. In the first place, whether there is a slur upon a woman, or whether there is not, the very fact of her not staying at home brings in its train an evil name; therefore I gave up any longing to do so, and stayed within my house; nor would I admit indoors the clever gossip women love, but conscious of a heart that told an honest tale I was content. And ever would I keep a silent tongue and modest eye before my husband; and well I knew where I might rule him, and where it was best to yield.

← SOURCE 2

Euripides, Trojan Women 645-656 in The Plays of Euripides, trans. E. P. Coleridge (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891).

CHORUS OF WOMEN IN ARISTOPHANES, *WOMEN AT THESMOPHORIA FESTIVAL* 789-799

If the men are to be believed, we are a plague to them; through us come all their troubles, quarrels, disputes, sedition, griefs and wars. But if we are truly such a pest, why marry us? Why forbid us to go out or show ourselves at the window? You want to keep this pest, and take a thousand cares to do it. If your wife goes out and you meet her away from the house, you fly into a fury. Ought you not rather to rejoice and give thanks to the gods? for if the pest has disappeared, you will no longer find it at home. If we fall asleep at friends' houses from the fatigue of playing and sporting, each of you comes prowling round the bed to contemplate the features of this pest. If we seat ourselves at the window, each one wants to see the pest, and if we withdraw through modesty, each wants all the more to see the pest perch herself there again.

← SOURCE 3

Aristophanes, Women at Thesmophoria Festival 789-799, trans. Eugene O'Neill, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1938).

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HISTORIAN COHEN ON WOMEN'S SECLUSION

Women's activities which took them out of the house were not exclusively economic of course. They might include going to their favourite soothsayer (Theophrastus 11.9-10 and 16.12), participating in a sacrifice (Aristophanes, Ach. 253), or in religious festivals. Indeed women met to organize the Thesmophoria (Isaeus 8.19-20; 3.80; 6.49) and historians tend to underestimate what is implied by the fact that the organization (including election of officials, and the like) of this major festival was solely carried out by the women. As is the rule in Mediterranean communities women not from wealthy families were also responsible for bringing water from the well and washing clothes in the fountain (Aristophanes, Lys. 327-31; Euripides, El. 109-11, Hipp. 130). They visited husbands or relatives in prison (Andocides 1,48; Lysias 13.39-41; Plato, Phaedo 60a), participated in funeral processions (Demosthenes 43.63; Lysias 1.8), appeared before arbitrators (Demosthenes 40.11), attended the public funeral orations (Thucydides 2.46), and were brought by their fathers, husbands, or sons into court to rouse the sympathy of the judges (Aeschines 2.148,152; Plato, Apology 34c-35b; Demosthenes 19.310, 21.99 and 186, 25.85, 54.35; Aristophanes, Wasps 568-9, Plutus 380). They participated in wedding feasts where bridesmaids danced and male guests might talk with the bride (Hyperides, Lycophron 3-4; Isaeus 8.18; Aristophanes, Ach. 1056,1067-8; Euripides, I.T. 1140). Husbands expected their wives to go out and those wealthy enough gave them slaves to accompany them (Theophrastus 22.10-11). ... As men had their circle of friends, there is considerable evidence to indicate that women formed intimate friendships, particularly with neighbours, and visited one another frequently - whether to borrow salt or a dress (Theophrastus 10.13; Aristophanes, Eccles. 460) or simply to chat (Aristophanes, Lys. 300; Demosthenes 55. 23-24, 53.4, 58.40; Lysias 32.10; Euripides, El. 1130, Andr. 950ff., which in its condemnation of such visiting implies that it is a common occurrence).

← SOURCE 4

David Cohen, 'Seclusion, Separation, and the Status of Women in Classical Athens', Greece & Rome 36.1 (1989), 8-9.

HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Using Sources 1-4 and your own knowledge, respond to the following:

1. Based on Sources 1 and 2, what did the Athenians see as the appropriate behaviour for a wife?

2. How does this fit with Source 3.33 in the textbook?

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3. How does this vision of what is appropriate for a woman compare to the activities which women are described as doing in Sources 3 and 4?

4. In Sources 1 and 3, the male characters want women to stay inside the home. But in Source 1, Eteocles is addressing women who are *outside the home* when he meets them. In Source 3, the men get angry at their wives *when they meet them outside the house*. What does this suggest about the effectiveness of the men's expectations about women staying indoors?

5. Considering all of the evidence, how secluded do you think Athenian women were?
