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CHAPTER 1

Gender and the study of classical antiquity

1 INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time the history of the ancient classical world was primarily the story of great men and their battles. We have come a long way since then, with the realization that the inclusive concept of gender is one of the key principles upon which all societies are organized in some way and to some extent. Gender is now central to our understanding of antiquity, as it is to the world around us today. The past and the present are engaged in a complex conversation in this domain. Classical antiquity has long been evoked to justify specific constructions of gender in later times, and our modern and post-modern rediscovery of gender in the past has been stimulated in large part by revolutionary changes in our own society in the latter part of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries.

In this chapter I will sketch out how the subject of gender in classical antiquity has been approached in the past, and why perspectives have changed. Most of these changes have occurred as gender has come to be understood in new ways and incorporated into new frameworks of social theory. Gender theory is a huge and complex topic, crossing a wide range of disciplinary domains, and it would be impossible to explore it here in depth. Instead, I will introduce this short history of approaches to gender in classical antiquity with an overview of why gender is so hard to study, to show why it demands a theoretical framework. I will then consider whether the study of gender, and gender in the past in particular, remains important today, and, if so, why.

These theoretical and intellectual frameworks are essential for embarking on the next section of this introduction, a brief review of our available sources and some consideration of how we can and cannot expect to find gender through them. Finally, I will explain how I have structured the book and why I chose the necessarily selective collection of themes presented in subsequent chapters.

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2 WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT GENDER?

Gender is one of the most difficult objects of historical study, since it is almost impossible to detach ourselves from it even a little bit. At the same time it is also one of the most fascinating aspects of the ancient world, indeed of the past more generally, which often feels particularly accessible because gender is a core part of all of our social lives as well as our personal identities. The fact that gender has a biological element, the 'male' and 'female' of physical bodies, means that there is something relatively fixed and shared about gender across human history. However, that is not, of course, the whole story. The extent to which gender is built into human biology, evolution and behaviour is passionately debated, but even the most die-hard sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists who prioritize this aspect recognize that learning, socialization and acculturation play very important roles as well; humans may be animals, but we are very complicated ones (Dunbar and Barrett 2007a: 3, 5). Many anthropologists and social theorists, on the other hand, privilege the social and cultural elements of sex and gender over the biological, and some would even deny the significance of the biological aspects altogether. Current 'post-feminist' and 'third-wave' feminist perspectives for the most part deny the validity and utility of any essentialist definitions of gender categories (Lee 2010: 4–6; Showden 2009: 182), i.e. the idea that 'man' or 'woman' might be self-evident, fixed or even coherent categories. And yet it is interesting to see that, when in 2008 the Hungarian internet journal *i.c.a.* ran a series of contributions on 'What is it like to be a woman', all of the responses, in different ways, were framed in terms of bodily experience (Barát 2009: 401–2).

The crux of the argument focuses on the extent to which gendered behaviour is 'innate' in humans, and behaving in 'masculine' or 'feminine' ways is built into our biological fabric. For example, evolutionary psychology has suggested that humans use biological signals to choose mates with 'good genes' and that 'extra-pair copulation' (adultery) of women in 'social pairs' (monogamous relationships) is hormonally embedded into the reproductive cycle because of potential evolutionary advantages (Gangestad 2007). Similarly, Campbell (2007: 376) suggests that tendencies towards aggression are biologically inbuilt along gendered lines: 'gender stereotypes of aggression, rather than being the cause of sex differences, appear to be a reflection of them'. Even apparently non-gendered behaviours have been 'biologically' linked to gender traits, for example, Baron-Cohen's argument (2003) that autism is an 'extreme form' of male

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brain because female brains are 'hard-wired' for empathy but male brains for understanding and building systems. In response, social scientists who privilege the role of social environment and acculturation in forming the expectations, conventions and behaviours of gender would point to the rather rigid and culture-bound definitions of 'male' and 'female' that many of these studies take for granted, the gendered social-cultural contexts in which scientists formulate their questions, and the lack of attention to variability in gendered behaviour even within our own society (Walter 2010: 180–8, 195–230; Butler: 1999: 144–50).

In reality this 'nature/nurture' debate surrounding gender, which has been bubbling away since at least the 1960s, and in various forms from much earlier, is neither helpful nor resolvable. We now know that there are genuine physiological and biochemical differences between men and women which go well beyond X and Y chromosomes. However, many of these differences in biological make-up have no impact on huge portions of our lives, minds and identities, and there is very much more to gender as it is performed in any historically situated socio-political context than a simple male/female dichotomy. What is important for historians and archaeologists, though, is that the very existence of those biological elements of gender, whatever precisely they turn out to be, constructs a dimension of apparent continuity between ourselves and people in the past, however differently gender might have operated in these societies. Men and women in the past looked physically 'male, and 'female', in the same basic ways as we do today (which is why we can almost always identify as male and female bodies represented in ancient art, even though the artistic and representational conventions may be quite different from ours). So, for example, the large majority of women have bodies which after puberty are capable of bearing children, even if they never actually have children, while the bodies of men are not, at least without the intervention of futuristic medical techniques. At the same time, bodies are highly subject to social and cultural manipulation: they are social entities as much as they are biological organisms (see Chapter 4). Nonetheless, the materiality of the body can create a perceived link between the past, present and future lives of men and women which reaches beyond history.

The other important thing about the biological and physical aspects of gender is that they underpinned the widespread belief in the classical world that gender was innate and part of the 'natural' order of things. People in the societies of Greece and Rome did not generally understand gender as most of us do now, as in large part a social phenomenon open to the possibility of variation at every level. This ancient, essentialist belief is

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crucial when gender becomes a metaphor important for categorizing and hierarchizing other aspects of social and political life in realms beyond the actual maleness and femaleness of human bodies. This is not to say that gender was never a contested realm; there was always plenty of space for interpretation, discourse and challenge, but such contests were set against the backdrop of these essentialist principles.

That we are linked to past men and women by our shared biology, and that we cannot detach ourselves from gender as we live it ourselves in our own time and place, means that we must always be interpreting gender in the past through the filter of our own present, however hard we try to be scholarly and objective. Consequently, through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ideas about gender in classical antiquity have changed radically in tandem with changing views about gender in modern and post-modern western societies.

3 THE DISCOVERY OF GENDER IN THE PAST

Before the early twentieth century, attitudes towards gender hierarchies, notably the assumed superiority of men over women, was sufficiently embedded in western culture that scholars simply accepted the information provided by ancient writers about women, such as it was, at face value. Women's lack of importance for the development of classical civilization and their absence from Greek and Roman history seemed 'natural', and remained largely unquestioned. Such attitudes persevered remarkably late in some quarters, well into the mid-twentieth century. Jérôme Carcopino's (1940) *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, written in French in 1939 (*La vie quotidienne à Rome à l'apogée de l'empire* [Paris: Hachette]) was rapidly translated into English with expanded notes, and remained in use in university Classics and Ancient History curricula at least into the 1980s. Carcopino, wholeheartedly adopting the viewpoint of many of his elite male sources, and framing his account in terms of the issues of his own times, portrays Roman women either as strong and virtuous ladies (Carcopino 1940: 85–6) or as disgraceful selfish harridans whose uncontrolled behaviour shook the foundations of Roman society by contributing to the breakdown of family values:

> In our own days we have seen the French legislator first minimise and finally abolish all obstacles to the triumphant wishes of a marrying couple. All remnants of parental authority disappeared with the parents' right to oppose a match desired by their children. The same phenomenon occurred in the Roman empire. Having shaken off the authority of her husband by adopting marriage

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sine manu, the Roman matron was freed from the leading strings of guardianship by the free choice the times allowed her in contracting a union. She entered her husband's home of her own free will and lived in it as his equal. (Carcopino 1940: 84–5)

Carcopino starts his section headed 'Feminism and demoralisation' as follows:

Alongside the heroines of the imperial aristocracy, the irreproachable wives and excellent mothers who were still found within its ranks, it is easy to cite 'emancipated' or rather 'unbridled' wives who were the various product of the new conditions of Roman marriage. Some evaded the duties of maternity for fear of losing their good looks; some took a pride in being behind their husbands in no sphere of activity, and vied with them in tests of strength which their sex would have seemed to forbid; some were not content to live their lives by their husband's side but carried on another life without him at the price of betrayals and surrenders for which they did not even trouble to blush. (Carcopino 1940: 90)

As discussed below in Chapter 2, the accuracy of this account of Roman marriage is highly dubious on many points, but these passages offer an excellent example of how ancient women were regularly represented in the context of the moral and ideological frameworks of the writer's own contemporary setting.

Other gendered behaviours of the Greeks in particular, especially male homoerotic relationships and pederasty, encountered a more mixed response among nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century scholars: from their point of view, at least the Romans had the good grace to say they disapproved of such sexual encounters, even if it was clear that many Romans actually engaged in them. However, a minority of scholarly commentators, some at the forefront of the 'discovery' of homosexuality, found in Greek homoeroticism an attractive historical precedent for the 'normality', indeed the nobility, of sexual relationships between men. But the social censure, and indeed illegality, attached to same-sex relationships prevented such scholars from publishing their ideas freely. As late as 1930, the editor of *Classical Quarterly* was forced by the journal's management board to withdraw an article on sexual acts between Roman men, written in Latin because of its explicit nature, by A. E. Housman, who was himself gay. It was published (still in Latin) in the German journal *Hermes* in 1931 (Halperin 1990: 3).

Despite the activities of a number of energetic women scholars, especially archaeologists (Gill 2002), emerging from the relatively new women's colleges in Britain and America to investigate the classical world in the earlier

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part of the twentieth century, none seems to have taken any special interest in the lives of women in the past. Similarly, the few women classicists took no special interest in or different line on gender than their male colleagues. Although Jane Harrison studied many aspects of Greek religion which concerned women, for example Pandora's box (J. Harrison 1900) and Athene Ergane (J. Harrison 1894), she was fundamentally interested in Greek religion, not women or gender. Though this was the time when women struggled as suffragettes to get the vote, and began to be taken seriously as academics, they did so, understandably, by pursuing the same themes and topics in the same terms as their male colleagues (J. Harrison 1965).

Women began to enter ancient history writing in France through two doorways. One was the social history developed out of the *Annales* school of history which brought under-represented groups such as the urban poor, the rural peasantry, women and children, along with new themes such as population and the family, onto the historical stage. Articles by the French male scholars Flacelière and Grimal on Greek and Roman women respectively were published in 1965 as part of a much larger project: *Histoire mondiale de la femme* (Grimal 1974), of which volume I was dedicated to prehistory and antiquity. The second entry point was the budding feminist philosophy of such writers as Simone de Beauvoir, whose famous book *The Second Sex* (1949, English translation 1953) reaches straight back to the prehistoric and classical pasts as part of her identifying and articulating a much greater social and political issue. De Beauvoir also had a huge impact on the 'second-wave' feminist writers of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in France (Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray) and in the anglophone world (Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Gloria Steinem).

The widespread discovery of women in antiquity in the Anglo-American world belongs mostly to the 1970s and 1980s, following on the rise of the women's movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the atmosphere of so-called 'second-wave' feminism. A key feature of the scholarship that arose in the wake of this feminism was its interdisciplinarity: scholars in all academic fields had discovered it as a political and social movement, shared ideas with one another and drew heavily on the same core body of literary and social theory. One of the first endeavours in the area of classical antiquity was a special issue of the American journal *Arethusa* (6.1) in 1973 dedicated to the investigation of women in antiquity from a feminist perspective (Sullivan 1973: 5):

> A great many *facts* about the condition, social, legal and personal, of women in classical antiquity have long been known. But books and articles dealing with the subject have been essentially detailing of *Realien*, except for the occasional

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Marxist or Freudian critic. Attempts to explore systematically the underlying roots of the lowly status of women have been few and much work remains to be done. (Sullivan 1973: 5–6).

The *Arethusa* volume contained articles covering early Greek history, Platonic philosophy, Roman literature, Greek sexual morality, Etruscan women, a review article on ancient abortion and a bibliography on women in antiquity to date, along with sample syllabuses for teaching a 'women in antiquity' course both as part of 'women's history' and as part of Classics. Several of the papers were explicitly aiming to discover the place of women in the ancient world within the larger history of women and to create a rigorous scholarship around these ideals. Marilyn Arthur's initial questions make this larger political and historical aim very clear:

can we seek to discover in classical antiquity an understanding of our present historical moment and a perspective on our own values, and yet remain both free from ideological compulsion and unburdened by the tyranny of raw data? The impulse given to the study of women's position throughout history by the recent women's liberation movement, invites us to do just that. (Arthur 1973: 7)

Shortly afterwards, there appeared one of the first books published in English on the new 'women's history' of any period: Sarah Pomeroy's (1975) *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: women in classical antiquity*. At the time this work was revolutionary. Adopting a feminist perspective, Pomeroy chose as an object of study women, deliberating constructing them as a part of history in their own right. Although the book may appear dated, focusing as it does entirely on women in a broad-brush sweep through classical antiquity, using largely classical literary sources, and considering gender relations only in what now seem to be very black-and-white terms, if we look at the roughly contemporary 'revised' edition of Dacre Balsdon's *Roman Women: their history and habits* (1974, first edn. 1962) or Charles Seltman's (1956) *Women in Antiquity*, it is clear what a major step forward Pomeroy and other second-wave feminist scholars made in terms of the sophistication of their historical methodologies and theoretical frameworks.

Nonetheless, it took a surprisingly long time for research on women, let alone gender or sexuality, to appear in the mainstream scholarly journals. As late as 1970, Sappho's sexuality could still be treated as a clinically pathological 'inversion' in a *Classical Quarterly* article (Devereux 1970; cf. Davidson 2007: 129–30). A quick sweep through three mainstream classical journals, the *American Journal of Philology*, *Classical Quarterly*

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(British) and *Historia* (German), between 1970 and 1985 indicates this slow and bumpy take-off very clearly. Despite a few articles touching on women and sex in the 1970s (most unaffected by feminism), research influenced by second-wave feminist perspectives did not generally start to appear before 1980, and even then sparsely, with remarkably few women authors publishing (Table 1.1). There is a particularly remarkable upsurge of articles focused on women, gender and families in *Historia* from 1982, with nothing at all before this date.

The research of the 1970s through the early 1980s inspired by feminism set out initially both to demonstrate the significance and to document the oppression of women (as they saw it) in the ancient world. It led many scholars, including a number who did not think of themselves as 'feminists', to consider ancient sources more critically in a new light. Ultimately, it completely changed the course and the character of research forever. Much of this work focused on literary texts and approaches, but scholars began to unearth women from a wide range of different kinds of written sources. In contrast, the study of classical art and archaeology, with a few notable exceptions, engaged much less with these new feminist approaches. Although Bonfante attempted a feminist approach to Etruscan women in *Arethusa* 6 (Bonfante 1973), it was not until 1983 that Susan Walker first attempted to locate women (and men) in the space of the Greek house (Walker 1983). Although most of this scholarship was good, and some has withstood the test of time and remains useful today, there were also some dead ends.

One example of such a dead end was the longevity of 'matriarchy', a theory developed by the Swiss scholar Johann Jakob Bachofen in 1861, which claimed that societies ruled by women and worshipping 'chthonic' female deities were one of the developmental stages of cultural evolution on the road to 'civilization' (Bachofen 1975). This idea had proven attractive to Engels and Marx in the development of their own evolutionist approach to the stages of human history leading ultimately to capitalism followed by proletarian revolution, and, sometimes indirectly, later to Marxist ancient historians such as George Thomson (1949; cf. de Beauvoir 1953: 96–7). Almost certainly under the influence of Bachofen's work and the more widespread cultural evolutionist ideas of his time, Arthur Evans suggested that the Minoan society he discovered at Knossos retained in its worship of a Great Mother goddess a legacy of an earlier matriarchal stage (Evans 1902/1903: 74–87; 1921: 51–2; 1928: 249–52, 277; 1930: 457, 466–76). Such views were attractive to many of his contemporary colleagues, such as Jane

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Table 1.1. *Articles in* American Journal of Philology, Classical Quarterly *and* Historia *on women and gender, 1970–85*

***AJP* (USA)**			
1970	Baldwin, Barry	'Horace on sex'	*AJP* 91: 460–5
1980	Gilleland, Michael	'Female speech in Greek and Latin'	*AJP* 101: 180–3
1981	Bremmer, Jan	'Plutarch and the naming of Greek women'	*AJP* 102: 425–6
1985	Marquardt, Patricia	'Penelope polutropos'	*AJP* 106: 32–48
***Classical Quarterly* (UK)**			
1970	Devereux, George	'The nature of Sappho's seizure in Fr 31 LP as evidence of her inversion'	*CQ* 20: 17–31
1972	Marcovich, M.	'Sappho fr. 31. Anxiety attack or love declaration?'	*CQ* 22: 19–32
1975	Schaps, David	'Women in Greek inheritance law'	*CQ* 25: 53–7
1977	Schaps, David	'The woman least mentioned: etiquette and women's names'	*CQ* 27: 323–30
1981	Cartledge, Paul	'Spartan wives: liberation or licence?'	*CQ* 31: 84–105
1982	Muecke, Frances	'A portrait of the artist as a young woman'	*CQ* 32: 41–55
1982	Harris, William	'The theoretical possibility of extensive female infanticide in the Graeco-Roman world'	*CQ* 34: 195–205
1983	Cassio, Albio	'Post-classical λέσβιαι'	*CQ* 33: 296–7
1984	Saller, Richard	'Roman dowry and the devolution of property in the principate'	*CQ* 34: 195–205
1985	Gardner, Jane	'The recovery of dowry in Roman law'	*CQ* 35: 449–53
***Historia* (Germany)**			
1982	Raepsaet-Charlier, Marie-Thérèse	'Éspouses et famille de magistrats dans les provinces romaines aux deux premiers siècles de l'empire'	*Historia* 31: 56–69
1982	McMullen, Ramsey	'Roman attitudes to Greek love'	*Historia* 31: 484–502

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Table 1.1. (*cont.*)

1983	Herzig, H.	'Frauen in Ostia: ein Beitrag zur Sozialgeschichte der Hafenstadt Roms'	*Historia* 32: 77–92
1984	Uchitel, Alexander	'Women at work'	*Historia* 33: 257–82
1984	Flory, Marleen Bourdreau	'*Sic exempla parantur*: Livia's shrine to Concordia and the Porticus Liviae'	*Historia* 33: 309–30
1985	Shaw, Brent	'Latin funerary epigraphy and family life in the later Roman Empire'	*Historia* 33: 457–97

Harrison. George Thomson's (1949: 149–203) Marxist beliefs that early societies were largely matriarchical and that changing relations of production which arose with agricultural sedentism created sexual inequality strongly influenced scholars such as Ronald Willetts, who published the Great Code of Gortyn, a fifth-century BC collection of laws inscribed on stone. Willetts (1967), in consequence, interpreted Gortynian society of archaic and classical times as underpinned by 'matriarchal' principles. It is easy to see why these views, still current in the 1970s, were attractive to second-wave feminist thinkers. In 1973 Carol Thomas was still citing Thomson to justify the existence of prehistoric matriarchy or matriliny in Crete and the supposed vestiges of its survival in archaic and classical times (C. Thomas 1973), Bonfante (1973) suggested that matriliny was behind the elevated position of Etruscan women, and Pomeroy's bibliography on women in antiquity in the same year devoted a substantial section to matriarchy, leaving open the question of its historical existence as a social form (Pomeroy 1973: 129–33). The idea had a long afterlife, particularly in the influential prehistoric archaeological work of Marija Gimbutas (in her *Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, 1974, revised 1982), and was still surfacing in the mid-1990s in the writing of Elizabeth Barber (1994: 119–20). Meskell's (1995) critique of Gimbutas documents how feminist scholars and thinkers came to adopt these unsupported and now discredited theories as a vision of a prehistoric utopia before men's oppression spoilt this women's paradise. However, Budin (2011) indicates that these are still live issues.

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