



Manliness Hanging in the Balance: Expressions of Gendered Behaviour in Classical Greek Literature

1. Introduction

Classical Greek literature was mainly produced by men for a male audience. Recent research has made a great effort to discern the female voice and women's reality between the male dominated lines, but what is chiefly reached is the male image of women and gender in general.¹ Literature can be seen as one of the arenas where masculine identity was created and tested. Therefore I argue that the role which women and female characters often played was the "other" against whom the identity was mirrored. It seems that it was especially typical for the Greeks to construct their identity through several mutually exclusive and antithetical poles of which the male–female opposition is just one example.² In the narrow sense, the assumed audience of literature consisted of free adult Greek citizen-males, and in respect of them, we can distinguish different out-groups such as barbarians, slaves, non-citizens, youths and the aged. My thesis is that in creating a self-image, these out-groups embodied the idea of the other. Furthermore, I suggest that they also came to represent unwanted characteristics which were projected on the others and excluded from the self-image of the Greek men.³

In this paper I will examine the construction of male identity through certain forms of behaviour that were presented in the literature as gender-bound, and, thus, as corner stones of being a proper Greek man. My focus will be on two key concepts associated

with masculinity, *andreia* or “courage” and *sophrosunē* or “self-restraint”, and how they were in turn employed to mark a variety of groups supposedly lacking those qualities as “others”. Furthermore, I will pay attention to how narrow a concept the ideal male was and how masculinity was defined on a sliding scale so that the man was in constant danger of falling outside the accepted parameters of behaviour.

2. *Andreia* or “Manliness”

Perhaps the most important defining characteristic of men in Greek ideology was *andreia*, “courage”, or more accurately “manliness”. One of the most explicit definitions of this masculine virtue is offered by Aristotle, who discusses the subject of vices and virtues in several writings. The philosopher defines *andreia* as a characteristic in man which makes him face dangers and ultimately death without fear. However, according to Aristotle, it is important to be courageous for the right reasons; a brave man endures the right perils and hardships but also duly fears some things. For example, it is honourable to fear disgrace, and, on the contrary, fearlessness that originates from ignorance is not true bravery. This kind of courageous manliness also includes stout-heartedness, confidence, endurance and the love of labour.⁴ The opposite of *andreia* is *deilia*, cowardice, which accordingly means fear in the face of dangers and desire rather to save one’s life than to meet an honourable death. Not surprisingly, Aristotle denounces this kind of behaviour as unmanly, soft and submissive.⁵ Courage, again, is one of the rhetorical tools of a speaker when he is aiming to bring himself out in a good light. The usefulness of different virtues should be judged according to their benefits, and in this comparison Aristotle deems courage along with justice as the most valued qualities.⁶

In the archaic epic, contrary to the Aristotelian ideal, fear was no stranger even to the manliest of men – the heroes trembled and wept facing the dangers, but their true courage was attested by overcoming the fright.⁷ In the classical literature *andreia* was still a concept most appropriate to describe the epic heroes,⁸ but fear was not an option for them anymore. In the classical period manliness was, above all, the virtue of citizen warriors,⁹ who, as Greek Demaratus explains the Persian king Xerxes, will stand firm facing the enemy no matter how outnumbered, and who will either win or die fighting.¹⁰ The same virtuous valour of those who have fought and died for their country is also reflected, for example, in the funeral speech of the Athenian leader Pericles.¹¹ However, the philosopher Plato challenges this consensus by proclaiming that a philosopher alone is truly courageous because he loves knowledge instead of bodily pleasures, and because of this, he is not afraid of death.¹² Whether it be a brave soldier or fearless philosopher, the criteria for manliness remained the same: to meet one's destiny without fear.

The very expression for bravery derived from the word *aner*, denoting a man; and, thus, it clearly pointed out that courage was seen as a sex-based virtue. Most obviously this excluded all women and practically denied them the possibility of acting in a truly courageous way, though in some instances the term was also applied to women. To begin with, Aristotle considers that the virtues of men and women should be judged separately: a man would appear a coward if he was only as brave as a brave woman.¹³ The orator Demosthenes seems to be addressing the subject in a less biased way when he recalls a story of the daughters of Leo who displayed true courageousness by offering themselves as a sacrifice for their country. However, this only serves as a background story, the purpose of which was to encourage men to show even

greater manliness, since it would be dreadful to turn out to be less worthy than women.¹⁴

In Sophocles' tragedy, *Electra*, the protagonist is describing to her sister how people would celebrate them and praise their manly courage if they were to kill Aegisthus, the usurper and killer of their father.¹⁵ However, Electra's plan to take action was based on the false presumption that her brother and rightful avenger, Orestes, had died. As so often in drama, the initiative for women to step forward and cross the boundaries of their social roles and domestic sphere arises through a failure on men's part to act properly and perform their duties.¹⁶ This is also the case in Aristophanes' comedy *Ecclesiazusae* where men's inability to perform economically and in politics drive the women to take over the assembly and the whole city.¹⁷ After the successful coup, Praxagora praises her fellow revolutionaries by calling them "most manly and true".¹⁸ Here Aristophanes exploits the feminine superlative *andreiotatai* to create a comic effect with his seemingly paradoxical use of the word "manly" in connection with women.

Though it could be established that, occasionally, women also displayed some kind of courage, it was seen mainly as an exception that proved the general rule of genuine masculine courage. Thus the virile men could shine even brighter against the faint background of female bravery. On the other hand, should a man fail to meet the demands of courage, he was readily paralleled with women, and thus seen as an unfit man.¹⁹ However, women were not the only group against whom the identity of Greek men was mirrored in relation to courage. In the course of the 5th century BCE, as a result of the Persian Wars, the rather neutral image of foreigners started to evolve into

a negative stereotype of inferior barbarians. As the barbarians came to play the opposite pole of the Greek male, their image was endowed with antithetical characteristics to the ideal.²⁰ Thus, cowardice and a general lack of virility were common features attached to the barbarians. The writer of the Hippocratic treatise, *Airs, Waters, Places*, sets out to show how the nations and the people of Europe (namely Greece) and Asia Minor differ from each other in every respect. He especially emphasises the lack of manly courage and spirit among the Asiatics, which he explains by the uniformity of the seasons and the natural abundance of the land that does not toughen people but makes them soft and feeble. For the opposite reasons, then, Europeans are more courageous. The writer also recognizes the importance of the institutions in creating manliness. Even if a man, brave and stout-hearted by nature is born in Asia, his spirit is soon broken down by the despotic rule, whereas in Europe, the reign of law produces these qualities by itself.²¹ In tragedy, accordingly, barbarians were presented either as timid cowards or as over-confident hotheads.²²

3. *Sophrosunē*, or “Self-Control”

A close ally of *andreia* in the Greek imagery was *sophrosunē*, literally sobriety of mind, which, for the Greeks, stood for self-control or temperance. It was *par excellence*, a virtue required of free, autonomous and self-governing men who were able to control themselves and, thereby, rule the city. Since *sophrosunē* was a virtue especially linked with political rights, it is easy to see that all who lacked those rights were seen to lack the required self-restraint. In his survey of virtues, Aristotle defines self-control as the ability to restrain oneself from bodily pleasures and enjoyments, or better yet, not to desire or value those at all, while the opposite quality is licentiousness or extravagance.²³ Temperance was also understood as the reign of reason over the

emotions and bodily appetites. As Plato defines it, everyone has in them two ruling principles, the instinctive desire for pleasures, and the acquired opinion which guides for the best in life. When, through reason, the guidance of opinion proves to be stronger, it is called self-control, but when the yearning for pleasures is leading irrationally, it is called licentiousness.²⁴ Thus, rationality, as well, is closely associated with self-control.

Again, two main polarized oppositions emerge as a contrast to the supposed temperance and rationality of Greek men: women and barbarians. Women, especially, were seen to be ruled by their emotions and bodily appetites, in other words, by their irrational side. As noted above about courageousness, an open display of emotions seems to have been more accepted for the men in Homeric epic than it was during the Classical period.²⁵ The most severe argument against the harmful effects of poetry that Plato presents is the emotionality of epic and tragic heroes, which, according to him, would be considered shameful behaviour. Men take pride in being able to stay calm, whereas lack of self-control is regarded womanish.²⁶ In drama, the many depictions of women, prone to sex and inebriation, were a manifestation of the feminine excess and lack of rational self-restraint.²⁷ This emotionality of women had also attained an institutionalized form in the funeral rituals where it was women's duty to openly display grief and mourning.²⁸ The same could also be claimed about different cults with ecstatic or emotional features, which in literature were especially associated with women.²⁹ Women possessed by gods like Dionysus, Sabazius or Cybele, or women mourning the death of Adonis, gave more proof to the Greek men of the excessive and unrestrained female nature. The image was further enhanced by the medical literature

which explained women's susceptibility to uncontrolled emotions and divine possession by their physiology.³⁰

The barbarians were also seen to display inadequate self-restraint in comparison to Greek men. This could be manifested as barbarians' inclination to sexual pleasures and luxury or their wildness and bestiality.³¹ Since self-control was seen as freedom from desires, the opposite was considered to be a form of slavery. Thus to be subject to one's bodily appetites was to act slavishly. As Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* deduced, the incontinent are not free, and to be ruled by bodily pleasures is the worst kind of slavery.³² In his theory of natural slavery Aristotle combined these two ideas. According to him, people are divided by nature into rulers and subjects. The difference between the former and the latter is the exercise of reason. As the male is by nature superior to the female, so is the (Greek) male superior to (barbarian) slaves, who should, for their own best interest, submit themselves to be ruled by the rational, self-governing men.³³

Women and slaves were not, however, the only ones that Greek writers found to be in need of rational supervision. In *Politics*, Aristotle discerns three classes of rulers and ruled: the free and slave, the male and female, and the man and (male) child. In all cases the argument for the domination by the free, adult man is his superior rational capacity.³⁴ Though male children were to become sovereign men, they were not fully developed yet. They were seen, without sufficient rational self-control, to give in easily to the bodily pleasures, though Aristotle stresses that this is not solely a question of age, for immature incontinence is also found among the adults.³⁵ Thus, in many ways, adolescents were paralleled with women. As if to overcome their femi-

nine flaws, transvestism was often included in the transitional rites of the youths,³⁶ and also the legendary hero Achilles had to shake off his feminine disguise before he could become a warrior and gain immortal glory.³⁷ The young men in drama are seen making fatal misjudgements, not unlike many women. For example, in Euripides' *Bacchants* King Pentheus, whose young age is emphasized, fails to recognize the divinity of Dionysus; and in resisting him, he dooms his town. Also Euripides' young Hippolytus stubbornly refuses to recognize the power of Aphrodite and is thereby doomed.

The early years of manhood were seen as immature and undeveloped in terms of manly virtues, whereas the elderly were seen to be in decline, and equally imperfect. According to Xenophon, Socrates was fortunate to die in his prime showing great manliness, and thus escaped the troublesome old age and the inevitable decay.³⁸ In the *Bacchants*, besides the young Pentheus, Euripides describes the two old men, King Cadmus and seer Teiresias, acting foolishly, dressing themselves as maenads and joining the Dionysiac revels.³⁹ Also the emotional gestures in Athenian funerary depictions reveal that the youths and the elders were not expected to restrain themselves in the same manner as adult men, or, vice versa, the mature men had better control themselves unless they wanted to appear childish, senile, or womanly.⁴⁰

4. The Difficulty of Being a Man

Since the political rights were tied to the possession of manly virtues, women and slaves were excluded entirely from the decision-making; and the participation of the young was restricted, as well.⁴¹ But also adult men could be denied their rights should they fall short of these high standards. Orator Aeschines lists, in his speech, causes

defined by the lawgiver Solon to forbid someone from addressing the assembly at Athens. One was failure to perform military service or to flee from battle, in other words, not to display *andreia*; another, as an ultimate offence against the self-governing, was to prostitute oneself. The latter contradicted with the requirement of both self-control and autonomy, thus dropping a man to the rank of women.⁴²

As it has become evident above, the male sex alone was not enough to assure the status of a proper man in the classical Greek thought. The young had not yet developed the acquired qualities, and the elderly had already lost their prime. Foreigners were altogether denied the appropriate masculinity, and they were paralleled with the women or labelled as slaves. But also Greek men were in constant risk of falling behind the high standards of masculinity set by *andreia* and *sophrosunē*. To act fearful or to display one's emotions excessively was to be womanish, childish or senile. Furthermore, to indulge oneself in pleasures was to become slavish.

Not only were most men practically denied the proper masculinity, while the rest were in constant risk of losing their rank, but women, no matter how manly they acted, could never climb up to the rank of man. I will offer two examples. The most famous case of women behaving like men in Greek imagination is the case of the Amazons. In the outskirts of the known world, they formed a society of fearless female warriors, self-sufficient without men. Historians emphasize the sharp contrast between their way of life and that of the Greek women.⁴³ Though worthy opponents even for the greatest heroes, already in the epic, the praise of the Amazons often served the purpose of underlining the valour and achievements of the Greek male heroes who, one after another, successfully tested their strength against them.⁴⁴ In the Classical period,

the speaker Lysias put the Amazons in their place as mere women even more explicitly. In his *Funeral Oration*, Lysias describes how the Amazons, considered rather as men for their stoutness of heart, attempted to invade Athens. However, once they had to fight against the real men, their spirit after all proved womanish thus matching with their female nature.⁴⁵

In addition, the women possessed by Dionysus were often described by masculine rhetoric, performing masculine deeds. In the *Bacchantes*, the women of Thebes abandon their domestic duties and run to the mountains to celebrate the deity. There they form the army of Dionysus which, in good order and self-controlled, defeat the men.⁴⁶ Agave, as the leader of the maenads, also leads a hunt, whose prey she then proudly carries into the town presenting it to her father like a virtuous son. However, this manifestation of her bravery⁴⁷ does not give Agave equality with a man, but instead makes her a complete failure as a woman: the lion she boasts to have killed with her bare hands turns out to be her son.⁴⁸ The disastrous outcome of the events only serves to reaffirm the established, proper sex-roles.

5. Conclusion

Bravery and self-restraint were the two most important characteristics defining the proper male behaviour in classical Greek literature. To face one's destiny without fear and to master one's desires depending on reason were the main indicators of masculinity and, respectively, anybody unable to live up to these ideals was seen as a less of a man. While literature drew a picture of brave, temperate and rational men, the others were in turn employed to represent the opposite qualities. As I suggested in the beginning, women, slaves and foreigners, as well as youngsters and old men were portrayed

as a reverse self-image in order to confirm the natural superiority of the free adult Greek men. Due to their role as an antithetical pole the different groups of others tended to appear in literature as rather homogenous. Although men who failed to realize the ideals of masculinity were readily labelled as womanish, women could never reach the status of men despite their acts of bravery. In classical Greece manliness was truly hard to come by.

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¹ Gender, here, is defined not as a mere biological or anatomical quality but as a complex ideological construction of male and female nature as opposite and hierarchically related to each other.

² Cf. Paul Cartledge, *The Greeks. A Portrait of Self and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4, 12–13, and *passim*.

³ “If men hold the monopoly of power then it might be expected that they should appropriate the monopoly of virtue. Thus women are not only “naturally” different; they are also “naturally” inferior. Roger Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life* (London: Routledge, 1989), 154. I postulate that this observation of “natural” inferiority can be generalized to include also the other polar oppositions I mentioned above.

⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Arist. *EN*) 1107b2, 1115a23–1117b7; Aristotle, *On Virtues and Vices* (Arist. *VV*) 1250ab. Cf. Plato, *Laches* 197a–b.

⁵ Arist. *VV* 1251a

⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (Arist. *Rh.*) 1366a1, 1366b5–6.

⁷ See Nicole Loraux, “The Warriors Fear and Trembling,” in N. Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias. The Feminine and the Greek Men* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 75–87.

⁸ E.g. Aeschylus, *The Seven against Thebes* 53; Euripides, *Troades* 674 (of Hector); Euripides, *Hercules Furens* 475.

⁹ The manliness, however, is not a virtue equally shared by all the soldiers, or even citizen soldiers. In the Athenian discourse, cavalry and hoplites represented the manly self-image, whereas the light-armed troops were systematically marginalized and portrayed as fighters of lesser value. Robin Osborne, “An Other View: An Essay in Political History,” in *Not the Classical Ideal. Athens and the Construction of the Other in Greek Art*, ed. Beth Cohen (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 33–34, 38, 41–42. See also Paul Cartledge, “The *Machismo* of the Athenian Empire – or the Reign of the *Phaulus*?” in *When Men Were Men. Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (London: Routledge, 1998), 62–63.

¹⁰ Herodotus (Hdt.) 7.104. According to Demaratus, the bravest of all are the Lacedaemonians. See also Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias*, 63–65, 70–71.

¹¹ Thucydides 2.40.3; 2.42.2–4; 2.43.4–6.

¹² Plato, *Phaedo* (Pl. *Phd.*) 68c–e, 69b, 82c, 83e. Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias*, 152, 154–157.

¹³ Aristotle, *Politics* (Arist. *Pol.*) 1259b–1260a, 1277b. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* (Pl. *Ti.*) 90e where the philosopher mentions that all men found to be cowardly and wrongful will be reborn as women.

¹⁴ Demosthenes 60,29.

¹⁵ Sophocles, *Electra* 977–983.

¹⁶ See Helene P. Foley, “The “Female Intruder” Reconsidered: Women in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and *Ecclesiazusae*,” *Classical Philology* 77 (1982).

¹⁷ Foley, “The “Female Intruder” Reconsidered,” 14–16.

¹⁸ Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusae* (Ar. *Ec.*) 519. Translation by Benjamin Bickley Rogers in the Loeb edition.

¹⁹ Cf. John J. Winkler, “Laying down the Law: The Oversight of Men’s Sexual Behavior in Classical Athens,” in John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire. The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 47: “The logic of zero-sum calculus underlies many of the

most characteristic predicates and formulae that were applied to issues of sex and gender. Thus, not to display bravery [--] lays a man open to symbolic demotion from the ranks of the brave/manly to the opposite class of women.” See also *ibid.*, 50.

²⁰ On the development of the negative barbarian image in general see Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Cartledge, *The Greeks*, 38–62.

²¹ Hippocrates, *Airs, Waters, Places* 12.41–43; 16.3–6, 14–17, 31–33; 23.23–25, 40–41; 24.19–22, 45–53.

²² Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 124–125.

²³ Arist. *EN* 1107b3, 1117b7–1119b10; Arist. *IV* 1250a–1251a; Arist. *Rh.* 1366b9.

²⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus* 237e–238a; *Symposium* 196c. Cf. *Pl. Ti.* 69c–70a; Arist. *IV* 1250b, 1251a. See also Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 181–183; Cartledge, *The Greeks*, 124.

²⁵ Hans van Wees, “A Brief History of Tears: Gender Differentiation in Archaic Greece,” in *When Men Were Men*, 11–12.

²⁶ Plato, *Republic* 605c–e; cf. *Pl. Phd.* 117d–e. Wees, “A Brief History of Tears,” 16–17.

²⁷ E.g. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* (Ar. *Lys.*) *passim*; Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousae* 392–397, 478–496, 626–631, 730–738; Euripides, *Bacchantes* (E. *Ba.*) 221–225, 314–318. Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 162–163, 186–187; Wees, “A Brief History of Tears,” 17–18.

²⁸ Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 156; Wees, “A Brief History of Tears,” 16, 33–34.

²⁹ E.g. E. *Ba.* 32–38, 56–63, 114–119 and *passim*; Euripides, *Hippolytus* (E. *Hipp.*) 141–144; Ar. *Lys.* 390–397; Demosthenes 18, 259–260.

³⁰ Hippocrates, *About Virgins*; Ruth Padel, “Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons,” in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt. (London: Croom Helm, 1983), 11–12; Helen King, *Hippocrates’ Woman. Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998), 77–81.

³¹ Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian*, 125–129; Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 187–188.

³² Xenophon, *Memorabilia* (X. *Mem.*) 4.5.3–5. Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 170–173, 184.

Aristophanes, for his part, entertains his audience with a slave character, whose thoughts revolve solely around food instead of more noble causes. Aristophanes, *The Plutus* 190–192.

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- ³³ Arist. *Pol.* 1252a, 1254b. Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 187; Cartledge, *The Greeks*, 122, 125.
- ³⁴ Arist. *Pol.* 1259a–1260a
- ³⁵ Arist. *EN* 1095a; cf. E. *Hipp.* 966–970. Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 186.
- ³⁶ Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias*, 8; Monica Silveira Cyrino, “Heroes in D(u)ress: Transvestism and Power in the Myths of Heracles and Achilles,” *Artehusa* 31 (1998): 211.
- ³⁷ Cyrino, “Heroes in D(u)ress,” 213–214, 227–228.
- ³⁸ X. *Mem.* 4.8.1.
- ³⁹ E. *Ba.* 170–209. It has to be noticed however, as Mikalson points out, that even though their behaviour is denounced as ridiculous, in the end, they are right in their recognition of Dionysus’ divine power. Jon D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods. Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 147, 281 n. 71.
- ⁴⁰ Timothy J. McNiven, “Behaving Like an Other: Telltale Gestures in Athenian Vase Painting,” in *Not the Classical Ideal*, 72–75.
- ⁴¹ See e.g. Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life*, 178, 185, 187, Wees, “A Brief History of Tears”, 44.
- ⁴² Aeschines (Aeschin.) 1,28–29; 1,160; 1,185. See also Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire*, 46, 56–57, 63; Barbara E. Goff, *Citizen Bacchae: Women’s Ritual Practice in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 175.
- ⁴³ Hdt. 4.114; Felix Jacoby, *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* I, 4 F 167 (Hellanicus of Lesbos).
- ⁴⁴ Lorna Hardwick, “Ancient Amazons – Heroes, Outsiders or Women?” *Greece and Rome* 37 (1990): 16–17, 23. Cf. Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 627–628.
- ⁴⁵ Lysias 2.4–5. Hardwick, “Ancient Amazons,” 20.
- ⁴⁶ E. *Ba.* 52, 686, 693, 762–764. See also Charles Segal, “The Menace of Dionysus: Sex Roles and Reversals in Euripides’ Bacchae,” in *Women in the Ancient World. The Arethusa Papers*, ed. John Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984),” 204–205. Cf. McNiven, “Behaving Like an Other”, 82–83.
- ⁴⁷ Euripides never employs the term *andreia* in describing her deeds, but uses the word *tolmē*, “daring”. E. *Ba.* 1222.
- ⁴⁸ E. *Ba.* 1169 ff. Segal, ”The Menace of Dionysus,” 206–208.