World History Name:

Mr. Murray Date:

Athens Reading #3: Traditions and Innovations of Athens Block:

**Tradition and Innovation in Athens’s Golden Age**

Fifth-Century BC Athens hosted unprecedented accomplishments in architecture, art, drama, and intellectual life, but may central aspects of its social and religious life remained unchanged. The simultaneous love for innovation and for tradition created social tensions, especially concerning religion. Women’s role in public life did not change, and women continued to make essential contributions by managing the household, participating in religious ceremonies, and, if they were poor, working in commerce and agriculture to help support their families. The severest tension arose from the startling ideas of teachers called *sophists* and the ethical views of philosopher Socrates. The most visible response to the tension produced by new developments was the increased importance of tragic and comedic drama as publicly supported art forms examining problems in city-state life.

**Women, Slaves, and Metics in Traditional Society**

The power and status of Athenian women came from their roles in the family and in religion. Upper-class women devoted their lives to running their households, meeting female friends, and participating in the city-state’s religious cults. Poorer women helped support themselves and their families, often as small-scale merchants and crafts producers.

Women’s exclusion from politics meant that their contributions to the city-state might be overlooked by men. In his play *Medea* of 431 B.C., the Athenian dramatist Euripides had his heroine insist that women who bear children are owed respect at least commensurate with that granted hoplites, a plausible claim given the high risks of childbirth under the medical conditions of antiquity:

*People say that we women lead a safe life at home, while men have to go to war. What fools they are! I would much rather fight in the army three times than give birth to a child even once.*

Women, like men, could own property, including land (the most valued possession in Greek society), and they were supposed to preserve it to hand down to their children. A daughter’s share in her father’s estate usually came to her in her dowry at marriage. Husband and wife co-owned the household’s common property, which was apportioned to its separate owners if the marriage dissolved. The husband was legally responsible for preserving the dowry and using it for the support and comfort of his wife and any children she bore. Upon her death, her children inherited the dowry.

Athenian laws concerning heiresses reveal society’s goal of enabling males to establish and maintain households. If a father died leaving only a daughter, his property went to her, but she could not dispose of it as she pleased. Instead, her father’s closest male relative- her official guardian after her father’s death- was required to marry her, with the aim of producing a son. This rule applied regardless of whether the heiress was already married (without any sons) or whether the male relative already had a wife. The heiress and the male relative were both supposed to divorce their present spouses and marry each other (although in practice the rule could be circumvented by legal subterfuge) to preserve the father’s line and keep the property in his family.

Athenian women from the urban propertied class were expected to avoid close contact with men who were not family members or good friends. They were supposed to spend much of their time in their own homes or the homes of women friends. Women dressed and slept in rooms set aside for them, which opened onto a walled courtyard where they could walk in the open air, talk, supervise the family’s slaves, and interact with other members of the household, male and female. Here in her “territory” a woman would spin wool for clothing while chatting with visiting friends, play with her children, and give her opinions on various matters to the men of the house as they came and went. Poor women had little time for such activities because they, like their husbands, sons, and brothers, has to leave their homes, usually crowded rental apartments, to work. They often set small stalls to sell bread, vegetables, simple clothing, or trinkets.

A woman with servants who answered the door herself would be reproached as careless of her reputation. A proper woman left her home only for an appropriate reason. Fortunately, Athenian life offered many occasions for women to get out: religious festivals, funerals, childbirths at the houses of relatives and friends, and trips to workshops to buy shoes or other domestic articles. Sometimes her husband escorted her, but more often a woman was accompanied only by a servant and could act independently. Social protocol required men not to speak the names of respectable women in public conversations or in court speeches unless absolutely necessary.

Because rich women stayed out of the sun, they maintained pale complexions. This pallor was much admired as a sign of an enviable life of leisure and wealth. Women regularly used powdered white lead to give themselves a suitably pallid look. Presumably, many upper-class women viewed their limited contact with men outside the household as a badge of superior social status. In a gender-segregated society such as that of upper-class Athens, a women’s primary personal relationships were probably with her children and other women.

Men restricted women’s freedom of movement partly to reduce uncertainty about the paternity of their children and to protect their daughter’s virginity from seducers and rapists. Since citizenship guaranteed the city-state’s political structure and a man’s personal freedom, Greeks felt it crucial to ensure that a boy truly was his father’s son and not the offspring of a foreigner or slave. Women who bore legitimate children earned higher status and greater freedom in the family, as an Athenian man explained in this excerpt from a court case:

*When I decided to marry and I had brought a wife home, at first my attitude towards her was this: I did not wish to annoy her but neither was she to have too much of her own way… I kept an eye on her as was proper. But later, after my child had been born, I came to trust her. And I handed all my possessions over to her, believing that this was the greatest possible proof of affection.*

Bearing male children brought special honor to a woman because sons meant security for parents. Sons could appear in court in support of their parents in lawsuits and protect them in the streets of Athens, which, for most of it’s history, had no police force. By law, sons were required to support elderly parents. So intense was the pressure to produce sons that stories of women who smuggled in male babies born to slaves and passed them off as their own were common. Such tales, whose truth is hard to gauge, were credible because husbands customarily stayed away at childbirth.

A small number of Athenian women were able to flaunt traditional restrictions because they gave us the usual expectations of marrying or were too rich to be cowed by men. The most renowned of the former group were called companions. Often foreigners, they were physically attractive, witty in conversation, and able to sing and play musical instruments. Thy often entertained at a symposium (a male dinner party without wives), and sometimes, they sold sexual favors for a high price. Their independent existence distinguished companions from citizen women as did the freedom to control their own sexuality. Equally distinctive was their ability to converse with men in public. Companions charmed men with their witty, bantering conversation. Their characteristic skill at clever taunts and verbal snubs allowed companions a freedom of speech denied to “proper women”.

Some companions lived precarious lives subject to exploitation and even violence at the hands of their male customers, but the most accomplished could attract lovers from the highest levels of society and live in luxury on their own. The most famous such woman was Aspasia from Miletus, who became Pericles’ lover and bore him a son. She dazzled Athens’s upper class males with her brilliant conversation and confidence. Ironically, Pericles’ desire to marry her was blocked by his own law in 451 BC restricting citizenship.

Only the very wealthiest citizen women could speak to men publicly with the frankness of companions. One such was Elpinike, A member of a super-rich Athenian family of great military distinction. She once penly rebuked Pericles for having boasted about the Athenian conquest of a rebellious ally. When some other Athenian woman praised Pericles for his success, Elpinike sarcastically remarked, “This really is wonderful, Pericles, …that you have caused the loss of many good citizens, not in battle against Phoenicians or Persians, like my brother Cimon, but in suppressing an allied city of fellow Greeks.” Ancient sources confirm that ordinary women, too, remained engaged and interested in issues affecting the city –state as a whole. They often had strong opinions on politics and public policy, but they had to express their views privately to their husbands, children, and relatives.

In contrast to citizen women, slaves and metics (foreigners granted permanent residency) had no political influence because they were “outsiders” living inside Greek society. Individuals and the city state alike owned slaves, who could be purchased from traders or bred in the household. Unwanted newborns abandoned by their parents ( the practice called infant exposure) were often picked up by other and raised as slaves. Athens’s commercial growth in this period increased the demand for slaves. Although no reliable statistics survive, slaves probably made up 100,000 or more of the city-states’s estimated 250,000 residents in Pericles’ time. Slaves worked in homes, on farms, in crafts shops, and , if they were truly unfortunate, the cramped and dangerous silver mines who’s riches boosted Athens’s prosperity. Unlike Sparta’s helots, Athens’s slaves never rebelled, probably because they originated from too many different places to be able to unite.

Golden Age Athens wealth and cultural vitality attracted numerous metics, who flocked to the city as importers, crafts producers, entertainers, and laborers. By the start of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BC, they constituted perhaps half the free population. Metics had to pay for the privilege of working in Athens through a special foreigners’ tax and military service. Citizens had ambivalent feelings about metics, valuing their contributions to the city’s prosperity but almost never offering them citizenship.

Metics therefore sometimes found themselves relegated to ways of life outside the mainstream, such as prostitution. Men, unlike women, were not penalized for sexual activity outside of marriage. “Certainly you don’t think men beget children out of sexual desire?” wrote the upper class author Xenophon. “Streets and brothels are swarming with ways to take care of that.” Men could have sex with females or male slaves, who could not refuse their masters, or they could patronize various classes of prostitutes, depending on how much money they wanted to spend.