

A COMPANION
TO GREEK
RELIGION

In memoriam

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symbol of the family. Both hearth and wife locate the family; they reflect and ensure its continuity. The link between them is utilized by playwrights to create fearful images of female behavior and the perversion of normal familial ties. Medea kills her brother at the hearth (Euripides, *Medea* 133) while Clytemnestra makes nightly offerings to the Furies, female spirits of vengeance, at her hearth (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 106–9). These women use the hearth for personal gain; their actions divide rather than unite the family. The connection between women, hearth, and fertility further allows playwrights to create parodies and images of a more sexual nature: as with the concept of home, the hearth is intimately linked to the female body. Clytemnestra's statement "as long as Aegisthus lights the fire on my hearth" offers a highly sexualized image of her appropriation of the symbol of rule and perversion of the normal process of royal heredity (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1435). Similarly, Sophocles has Agamemnon thrust his staff into the center of the hearth of the Atreidae in order to bring his revenge: the result is Orestes and Electra, child saviors of his hearth (*Electra* 419–21). Aristophanes uses a range of links between hearths and fire to express ideas of male sexual penetration or refer to female genitalia to comic effect. In *Peace* Trygaeus refers to keeping a *hetaira* and poking the coals (439–40), while in *Knights* a sex act is referred to as "stirring up the hearths" (1286). The intimate textual connection between citizen wife and cult hearth has less to do with actual religious practices, but can be explained as the result of their shared role as symbols of fertility, the means by which the family line is both defined and perpetuated.

Festivals and Female Movement

Texts do not generally present the life of a citizen wife as a happy one: confined within her house, her movements watched and controlled by her male relatives, she has no political power and little freedom. Modern views about the lives of citizen women often carry an air of pity about them. Detienne's suggestion that women neither ate meat nor shared in public sacrifices essentially condemns women to a silent and invisible life in the house (Detienne 1989b). Even here, Sourvinou-Inwood sees them as powerless and subordinate (1995b:111). The drudgery of their daily lives is mitigated only by participation in religious festivals. As Plato's criticisms at the start of this chapter reveal, women are active and enthusiastic participants in the religious sphere. Religion allows women to break free from domestic constraint. It brings women into the streets of the city and makes them visible. At religious occasions they may meet other women, feast, and enjoy themselves (Lefkowitz and Fant 1992:273; Versnel 1996:187; Zeitlin 1982:129). This view of the relationship between women and festivals is particularly evident in comic writing: Lysistrata complains that women are slow to meet for political reasons but would have come quickly if called to a religious event (Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* 1–5). Sostratos notes the zeal with which his mother leaves her house each day to make offerings to the gods in her local district (Menander, *Dyscolus* 259–63).

The comic connection between women and religious festivals reinforces the male ideology that a wife belongs at home. Yet, in examining this ideological projection of women's restricted lives, we must be cautious that we do not allow our own values

and beliefs about the importance of gender equality to interact with the ancient evidence. Goff's investigation into female ritual practices is delivered through a feminist perspective (Goff 2004:20). This type of approach judges the position of women in Athenian society rather than seeking to understand it: it sets their lives against a western model and finds them lacking. Recent studies of women's lives in ancient Greece have pointed out that women do not always seek to cross beyond the boundaries of their socio-cultural environment (Lefkowitz 1996c; Llewellyn-Jones 2003). They are content to carve out roles for themselves within the prevailing social system. An absence of women in textual sources and an ideology that links them to the home does not necessarily mean that the female contribution to society was undervalued, or that women led unhappy lives from which modern scholarship can emancipate them.

Women become especially visible in our textual sources at festivals and rites in honor of Demeter and Dionysus. The festivals of Demeter share certain common features: women separate themselves from men, they perform secret rites, they handle sacred artifacts, and they laugh, blaspheme, or abuse each other (Dillon 2002:109). Unfortunately, our ability to understand the rites performed by women here is constrained by their secret nature and by the lack of contemporary evidence. For most information, we are reliant on the interpretations of much later commentators who struggle to bring sense to the acts allegedly performed by the women (Lowe 1998). As a result, we interpret the actions of women at Demeter festivals through a lens of fertility ritual (Burkert 1985:244; Pomeroy 1975:77; Winkler 1990b:194). Women are the symbols of fertility in the city and perform actions that encourage fecundity in both city and household. At the Thesmophoria women descend into subterranean chambers, remove decayed offerings from the earth, and spread them across altars. They fast while seated on herbs that reduced sexual desire and celebrate birth (Burkert 1985:242–6). Similar rites are performed at other Demeter festivals such as the Stenia, Haloa, and Skira (Dillon 2002:109, 120–4; Winkler 1990b; Zeitlin 1982).

Yet female fertility is not the only explanation for the importance of wives in festivals of Demeter. The Demeter festivals share a common feature in drawing wives out of the house and requiring them to become visible in the city. This movement stands in direct opposition to the textual ideology that locates the wife within the home: for the duration of the festival, wives abandon their houses. The women move out of the house and into the public spaces of the city: in Athens, they camp in the Pnyx (Isaeus 8.18–21; Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 295–570). Women are not political creatures but they occupy political ground, symbolically assuming the roles of men (Zeitlin 1982:143). In order to understand why, we must focus more closely on the role of the goddess Demeter. While she is a goddess of crops and fertility, agriculture is only one aspect of Demeter's nature. Settlement or civilization and its institutions, including laws and marriage, are all consequences of agriculture (Lowe 1998:155; Zeitlin 1982:138). This is reflected in Demeter's epithets: Thesmophoros, bringer of law, and also Epoikidia, Demeter of the household. Demeter is concerned with the structure of communities and the maintenance of order within them. These concerns are reflected in the behavior of citizen wives at her festivals. In moving out of the house and into public spaces the women dissolve the boundaries between private and public, house and city, family and community:

the traditional order is broken down. In assuming the roles of men, the women also explore and define their own role in the community. The drama of their abandonment of home, their movement out of the house and into the political space of the city, reminds the male city of their importance. Without wives, there is no city and no structure or order in the community. As the women return to their houses, the traditional order is renewed and restored.

A closer examination of the festival calendar reinforces the links between female religious behavior and the ideology of civilization, community, and household. The Stenia and Thesmophoria take place within a short time of each other and both in the month of Pyanepsion (September/October). There are a number of other festivals taking place this month and, while there is a link to agriculture in many of them, there is also a balance of male and female participation (Foxhall 1995:107). The Oschophoria has a procession where two young men wear women's clothes and citizen wives bring the food and serve the meal (Parke 1977:77). At the Pyanepsia, the houses are blessed and marked by the *eiresiōne*, the sacred olive branch, which brings luck to the household for the coming year. At the Apatouria, young male children are enrolled in the political groups of their fathers; they are recognized by the political community. The festivals of this month have themes that are designed to explore and reflect the role of the family and its members in the community. It is a month of change, an opportunity to explore and reassert the social, gender, and age boundaries of the different groups in society, to renew and re-form the community. Women also come out of the house at rites in honor of the god Dionysus (Jameson 1993). Again, their movement is normally explained as an opportunity for women to gain release from the burdens of their lives (Dillon 2002:148). Yet the behavior of the maenad does not offer an excuse for a party, it reinforces the importance of women in their community. The cult of Dionysus is littered with ambiguities. He is an asexual god who is happily married (Jameson 1993). The wine of Dionysus brings madness, yet it also civilizes. Rituals concerned with the sharing of wine cement bonds between social, political, and religious groups (Murray 1990b). Wine libations provide a means to honor the gods, or dishonor the individual when taken to excess. Dionysus can represent destruction but can also create community. As the god comes into the house and draws its women out to the wilds, the boundaries between home and community are broken down. For Seaford (1993) mythical tales of Dionysus and the maenads show that if women fail to follow Dionysus or are prevented by men, Dionysus will destroy their house and family. Yet if they are permitted to dance with the god, the madness of the women will not be a permanent state. As the ecstasy abates, the women return to their homes. The movement away from home reflects the role of Dionysus and women in destroying and building communities: as women move away from the home, family and society collapse; as they return, order and civilization are renewed.

Women cross the path of male writers most vividly on religious occasions where they are required to come out of the house (Demosthenes 55.23-4, 57.30-1; Cohen 1996:140). Their exit from the house is an important part of the ritual; they emerge as a symbol of their household rather than as an individual. The women's religious behavior breaks down the boundaries between city and home, man and woman, human and deity. As they move back into the house at the end of the rituals the community is redefined and order is restored.