



Historically Speaking

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Male Dominance in Ancient Greece



Reign of the Phallus:

Sexual Politics of Ancient Athens
by Eva C. Keuls

This book is a thorough treatment of the extent of male dominance in ancient Athens. It is the first book to draw together all the elements that made up the "reign of the phallus"—men's blatant claim to general dominance, the myths of rape and conquest of women, and the reduction of sex to a game of dominance and submission, both of women by men and of men by men.

In her elegant and lucid text Eva Keuls not only examines the ideology and practices that underlay the reign of the phallus, but also uncovers an intense counter-movement—the earliest expressions of feminism and antimilitarism.

I will frequently refer to my years of teaching Classical Mythology in these newsletters. I had several themes that I included in those classes including justice, pride and hubris, heroism, fate, beauty and gender equity. Of course, the classes focused first on the myths of ancient Greece and Rome, but beyond that I included a culture-based look at history, philosophy, poetry, drama, art and architecture. Generally speaking the students really appreciated the class, and often came back after graduating to tell me that. It surprised me how many ways it helped in collegiate studies.

On the first day of class, when I was covering the course syllabus, I would point out the themes mentioned above. Without fail, when I brought up the issue of male dominance, there would be some young man (usually more than one), who would make a celebratory comment or two. I would immediately point out the theme would be dealing with the indictment not the endorsement of male dominance in modern society. We would cover the historical events leading up to the extremity of male dominance among the ancient Greeks. This would include the transitions through the various cultures that inhabited the country, and the significance of moving from agrarian societies that tended to be matriarchal to hunter societies that tended to be patriarchal.

My primary source for the discussion of the male dominant ancient Greeks is *Reign of the Phallus; Sexual Politics of Ancient Athens* by Eva C. Keuls (see sidebar). The book goes into great detail including pottery painting graphics, and I stayed away from those elements. The general presentation made by Keuls, provided an opportunity to properly address the issue of the source of male dominance in modern western society. Of course there are many others who address the issue as well. Joseph Campbell was one of my favorite authorities on mythology, and some of this work deals with this theme.

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