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DIATRIBE

DIATRIBE IS A WEEKLY OPINIONATIVE COLUMN BY DEAN KALIMNIOU, WHICH IS PUBLISHED IN MELBOURNE'S NEOS KOSMOS ENGLISH EDITION NEWSPAPER. IT DEALS GENERALLY WITH ISSUES OF INTEREST TO THE GREEK COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA.

MONDAY, MARCH 17, 2008

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY (HELLENIC)



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"Women are meant to be loved, not understood"

Oscar Wilde

The primary event that established the cosmic order, according to ancient Greek thought, was the emasculation of Uranus by Cronus, at the instigation of his mother, Gaea. Since that time, though Greek males have come to love and honour their female counterparts, much mistrust remains, especially vis a vis, strong and powerful women, for to tolerate the existence of such a woman is tantamount to tacitly accepting that the cosmogonic emasculation is fated to recur. Thus in Greek mythology, the 'good' or at least 'worthy of sympathy' women tend to be either passive characters, like Heracles' wife Deinareia and mother Alcmene, damsels in distress such as Alcestis, victims of men's pigheadedness, like Iphigeneia or more heinously, victims of men's lust, such as Leda, Danae, Helen and Oenoe, both entranced and then dumped by Paris or Daphne, who had to change herself into a laurel

bush in order to escape the unwelcome advances of Apollo. Whereas male lust in ancient Greek thought was considered a natural phenomenon, just how natural its female counterpart was considered is evidenced by the fate of the hapless Pasiphae of Crete. Her divinely induced lust caused her to fall madly in love with Zeus in the guise of a bull. The monstrous outcome of this bestial lust was of course, the Minotaur.

Rarely do we find strong or powerful women portrayed in a non-malevolent light. Clytemnestra, the powerful wife of Agamemnon, is an adulterer and a regicide. Catharsis for her iniquities can only be achieved through death, at the hands of her son. Media, wife of Jason, is something worse than a woman. She is also a foreigner, providing Jason with license to freely exploit her sexually and emotionally, before wondering, as he sees his wife, having murdered her children in jealous rage, escaping to Colchis on a winged dragon, whether it truly is as Jules Michelet holds, that: "*Woman is a miracle of divine contradictions.*"

Not only does there appear to be a fear of dominant women in general, but also a specific fear of female sexuality. Teiresias, the famous blind prophet of Greece once had a debate with Zeus as to which of the sexes was able to enjoy the carnal act more. At Zeus' instigation, the prophet was transformed into a woman and spent seven years in this guise. Having completed his inquiries, Teiresias reported to Zeus that women enjoy the act tenfold as compared to men, only to be struck blind by Hera, Queen of the Gods, who was incensed at the revelation of this trade secret. This is a telling symbol of the way the subjection of female sexuality has often traditionally been instigated by females themselves in Greece. Nonetheless, instances of strong, capable ancient Greek women who changed the course of world history abound: Aspasia, companion of Pericles, Olympias, mother of Alexander the Great and Cleopatra, to name but a few. Further, the fact that the divinities who were considered to personify the two most precious gifts of human existence, love and wisdom, Aphrodite and Athena respectively, were women, should be overlooked only at one's peril. As a parting shot to the ancient world of women, consider that the first women's lib movement emerges out of Aristophanes' comedy "Lysistrata." The exasperated women of Athens, incensed at the senseless continuation of the Peloponnesian War, refuse to sleep with their menfolk until such time as they decided to down their weapons. On the flipside, modern scholarship inclines to the view that the comedic effect of the play for ancient Athenians lies in their conviction that women had no self-restraint, especially in wine and sex.

When we get to Byzantium, we find that despite the prevalent

prejudice against the female sex, strong women are generally revered, though feared and quite often resented, as in the case of Theodora, the wife of emperor Justinian, the empress Zoë and the empress Irene, whose right to rule the most sophisticated multi-ethnic empire in the world was considered undisputed by their subjects, at a time when the west was only begin to understand that women could in certain circumstances, actually have rights. This was a world where women could be dangerous intellectuals and political subversives. For example, Cassiane, the famous poet, hymnographer and composer, whose troparion is sung in Orthodox churches during Holy Week on Great and Holy Wednesday was able during a beauty/bride contest, to retort to the Emperor Theophilus when he remarked to her that women were the source of all evil, that *"But by the birth of a woman was the birth of a new nation,"* referring to the blessings resulting from the Incarnation of Christ. Further, women, especially the Empress Theodora (who was the ultimate winner of the aforementioned beauty contest) were the main instigators of the campaign to abolish iconoclasm, thus ending a century old political and religious rift through Byzantium. Underlying the Byzantine attitude towards women, which was never able to rid itself of its ancient undertones, was the veneration, above all others, of the Theotokos, the Mother of God. Thus the ideal woman actually existed. She was ever pure and chaste and brought the Divine Logos into the world, the reason for our own existence. What then could be more symbolic of the paradoxical Byzantine conception of women than Mt Athos, the Orchard of the Panagia, a community dedicated to Panagia Theotokos, blessed and revered above all women, to which women are denied entry?

Modern Greek women also seem to be made of stuff as stern than as that of their progenitors. The valiant women of Souli, who fought alongside their menfolk and defied their would-be Turco-Albanian defilers by dancing off the cliff at Zalongo find their counterparts in our grandparents' and great-grandparents' age: the superhuman women of Pindus, who scaled immense heights under appalling conditions, in order to convey provisions and ammunition to the soldiers combating the Italian invasion of 1940. Recently, a member of the Greek community suggested that funds should be raised for the erection of a statue in Greece dedicated to the female migrant, or as he put it, the "migrant mother." Surely we are in dire need of such a monument here, in the migrant female and/or mother's natural habitat. What our historical experience tells us, is that though sexism, often in its most crass and derogatory form has historically formed part of our experience, this has always been coupled with the admission

that women are remarkable, capable of things that far surpass the achievements of men.

Indeed, given the recent celebration of International Women's Day in a year which also marks the centenary of women's suffrage in Victoria, it is worthwhile to pause and consider not only how much of the complexity of our heritage of gender relations we have transported with us to this country, not only how this has defined and formed our community but also how this was for many the primary reason for migration to this country.

That being said, if there is one thing we can be proud of as a community, it is the fact that the ratio of female writers far exceeds that of men. In their mostly autobiographical works, time and time again they refer to the parlous state of gender relations in their villages as one of the major reasons for their emigration. They wanted to be free to fall in love and marry whoever they chose – not someone with whom their financial circumstances were commensurate. In the vast majority of cases, free and open socialising with members of the opposite sex was forbidden, flouters of these norms of social conformity having their morals questioned. Australia was for them then, not just an economic paradise, it was a social paradise whereby they could fulfil their social aspirations on an equal basis with men. This took a while and the works of these authors are replete with tales of repression of Greek females by their male counterparts in Australia, but as a whole, our community is well on the way to achieving the archetypal dream.

There have been hiccups. In a recent excellent speech at a Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria function to commemorate International Women's Day, in which she summarised the progress and the importance of the Women's movement, Jenny Mikakos, the State Member for the Northern Metropolitan Region gave an excellent speech, mentioned:

“Even in voluntary community organisations, like the many in the Greek community, most of the leadership positions continue to be held by men. I encourage more women to step forward to these roles, as all organisations benefit from a wide range of skills and experiences.”

This is true. I have been to annual general meetings of organisations, where female board members have been subject to cat-calls, obscenities and down-right sexual harassment. Yet as far back as 1982, when the Panepirotic Federation of Australia consciously included women on its board, we can see that formidable and inspirational women have in many cases arrested what would have been the terminal decline of many a community organisation. During the 1990's Dimitra Iatrou, a second-generation lawyer, presided over the

golden years of the Pansamian Brotherhood. The remarkable achievements of single-minded in their determination to preserve Pontian Hellenism in Australia, Litsa Athanasiadis and Roma Siachou, for Pontiaki Estia and the Pontiaki Koinotita respectively, are an example to all those who would enter the communal domain. Varvara Ioannou, in thinking outside the square to form Food for Thought, a network that informs and empowers women on a multitude of subjects pertinent to life in the modern world is proof that our community is mature and resourced enough to support activism that breaks away from the traditional mould. This is because in Australia, the great social leveller, Greek women have been able to permeate all spheres of life. There are Greek journalists and newsreaders, Greek epistimones, (which in Greek tends to be anyone with a degree but notable such pioneers as Dr Vasso Apostolopoulos,) Greek businesswomen and of course Greek politicians, such as Jenny Mikakos and Maria Vamvakinou. What is remarkable about these MP's is the manner in which, despite their heavy workloads, they remain committed to the interests of the Greek community. Jenny Mikakos unwavering defence of 'Greek,' essentially humanitarian issues, sometimes on the face of howling criticism, speak volumes for the pivotal role that powerful, determined and socially responsible women play in our community, often with us taking this for granted.

Jenny Mikakos went on to observe humbly: *"For many of us, it is the women around us who support us daily – our mothers, our grandmothers and our sisters who are our biggest source of inspiration and encouragement, more so than the high profile women we read about or even see on television."* This I think, is the crux of the manner in which Greek-Australian women should be perceived. At a recent wedding of her fifth or six children, an acquaintance of mine clasped her hands above her head in the manner of a boxing champion. She had every right to. Arriving in this country at a young age and burying herself in the factories, she found the resources and the strength to bear six children and bring them up. In this, she is not alone. She is Everywoman – from the yiayia, steeped in fasoli-lore, to the modern mother struggling to juggle and reconcile a career with inherited, traditional conceptions of the Greek family, to the young third generation Greek student, approaching hybrid or synthesised stands of Greek-Australian culture with optimism and awe. And though Marcelene Cox may believe that *"The quickest way to get to know a woman is to go shopping with her,"* I would venture to paraphrase the words of Nancy Reagan, who wisely pointed out: *"A [Greek] woman is like a tea bag. You never know just how strong she is until you have put her in hot water."* In our experience, there has

been hot water enough.

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